



# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 50

March 2015

## Military Reforms in China



Commissioned in the Madras Regiment, Brigadier **V Mahalingam** (Retired) is a strategic and a defence analyst.

In pursuit of its vision to transform itself into a major world power, China has been restructuring its armed forces to shape these into a modern military force capable of fighting a joint network-centric, coordinated digitised war. Given that China is India's neighbour with whom India has a long standing border dispute, it would be appropriate to study the transformations that have been brought about in its military.

"Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) with Chinese characteristics" is the latest phrase of Marxist thought in China which gives a clear indication of the direction of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) modernisation drive. Writing on defence policy, China's Ministry of National Defence states, "China is stepping up the composite development of mechanization and informationization. Persisting in strengthening the military by means of science and technology, China is working to develop new and high-tech weaponry and equipment, carry out the

### *Key Points*

1. The Chinese armed Forces are being modernised to fight an integrated digitised war. Areas of renovation include development and induction of high technology weapons and equipment, training commanders for joint operations and crafting a modern and a flexible logistic system.
2. The higher command structure is being redesigned to fulfill modern warfare's compulsions. The 7 Military Regions (MR) with Army as main stay force are being reformed to form 5 Joint Commands. Joint Military Commands in turn are expected to establish Joint Operational Command System, equivalent to Theater Commands.
3. The Army has been reoriented from theater defense to trans-theater mobility. PLA Air Force commands the 15<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps, the PLA's primary strategic Rapid Deployment Force.
4. PLA Navy's submarine arm has been hardened with strategic deterrence capabilities.
5. The overall strength of the Chinese Army has been brought down from 6.27 million in 1951 to the present 2.3 million.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

## Military Reforms ...

strategic project of training talented people, conduct military training in conditions of informationization, and build a modern logistics system in an all-round way, so as to change the mode of formation of war-fighting capabilities”<sup>1</sup>.

China’s military is being upgraded in a holistic manner to fight a digitised war. Its research, development and manufacture of military hardware and equipment are being guided to meet the technology requirements for the type of war-fighting that is envisaged. The military’s force structure is being reformed to make the military lean, effectual and joint with its higher command structure being redesigned to fulfill the compulsions of modern warfare. Infrastructure development in the country is being customised and adapted to meet the military’s strategic and operational needs.

### Higher Defence Management Apparatus

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is the armed instrument of the Communist Party of China (CPC) also referred to as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and is subordinate to the party machinery. The military’s highest decision-making body, the Central Military Commission (CMC), which in effect functions like India’s Ministry of Defence (MoD), exercises command and control over the PLA. It is a department of the CCP’s Central Committee and is staffed almost exclusively by military officers. The CMC’s Chairman is a civilian, usually serving concurrently as the General Secretary of the CCP and the President of the country. Other members of the CMC include several Vice Chairmen, the Commanders of the Services, and the Directors of the four General Headquarters Departments.

China’s Ministry of National Defence (MND), unlike India’s MoD, is a small office coordinating matters with the civilian government concerning the armed forces which include foreign military relations, mobilisation, recruitment, national defence education, and civil support to military operations. The Minister of Defence is a uniformed military officer, a member of the State Council (the country’s chief administrative authority), and also a CMC member.

### PLA Headquarters

China has made nine major efforts to streamline and reorganise the PLA since 1949.<sup>2</sup> The PLA Headquarters in the last two decades has undergone substantial changes. The PLA’s reforms have been focussing on the need to structure a force capable of performing its missions and tasks, besides building an “informationised” military. Accordingly, the command and control system of the General Headquarters and departments has been improved by redistributing the functions of various departments.

A Department of Strategic Planning has been created in the PLA in order to strengthen research, planning and cooperation on major strategic issues. The Headquarters of the General Staff (GSH) Communications Department was reorganised as the GSH Informationisation Department. The GSH Training and Arms Department was restructured as the GSH Training Department. The PLA is in the process of building new types of combat forces. It aims to optimise the size and structure of various arms and services, restructure organisations so as to make its fighting forces trim, joint, multi-functional and efficient. It is in the process of further developing new and hi-

tech weapons and equipment to build a modern military force with Chinese characteristics.<sup>3 4</sup>

### PLA Army

The PLA Army (PLAA) consists of mobile operational units, border and coastal defence units, guard and garrison units. It is primarily responsible for military operations on land. In line with the strategic requirements of mobile operations and multi-dimensional offence and defence, the PLAA has been reoriented from theatre defence to trans-theatre mobility. It is speeding up the reorganisation of Army Aviation troops, light mechanised units and special operations forces, and transforming them as digitalised units. Its units are being remodelled to make them compact, modular and multi-functional so as to make them suitable for air-ground integrated operations, long-distance manoeuvres, rapid assaults and special operations.

The PLAA mobile operational units include 18 combined corps, plus additional independent combined operational divisions (brigades), and have a total strength of 850,000. The combined corps, composed of divisions and brigades, are respectively under the seven Military Area Commands (MACs), also called Military Regions (MR): Shenyang (16th, 39th and 40th Combined Corps), Beijing (27th, 38th and 65th Combined Corps), Lanzhou (21st and 47th Combined Corps), Jinan (20th, 26th and 54th Combined Corps), Nanjing (1st, 12th and 31st Combined Corps), Guangzhou (41st and 42nd Combined Corps) and Chengdu (13th and 14th Combined Corps).<sup>5</sup>

These MRs were established in 1985 with the Army as the mainstay force. Presently, they are being reorganised to form five Joint Commands. The progress in this field has been rather tardy

which made Xi Jinping state at the conference of the CMC in December 2013, “We should have a sense of urgency to advance the joint command system in the levels of [the] CMC and military regions and can’t defer this any longer.”<sup>6</sup>

The Joint Military Commands, in turn, are expected to establish the Joint Operational Command System, equivalent to Theatre Commands. “Setting up the system is a basic requirement in an era of information, and the military has launched positive pilot programs in this regard”, the Ministry of National Defence of China has been quoted as having told *China Daily*<sup>7</sup>. Ouyang Wei, a Professor at the National Defence University of the People’s Liberation Army, has said that a joint operational command system highlights unified command and information sharing across at least two different military forces<sup>8</sup>.

### PLA Navy

The PLA Navy (PLAN) consists of the submarine, surface vessel, naval aviation, Marine Corps and coastal defence arms. In line with the requirements of its offshore defence strategy, the PLAN endeavours to accelerate the modernisation of its forces for comprehensive offshore operations, develop advanced submarines, destroyers and frigates, and improve integrated electronic and information systems. It is in the process of fine-tuning the blue-water capabilities for conducting mobile operations, carrying out international cooperation, and countering non-traditional security threats besides enhancing its capabilities of strategic deterrence and counter-attack.

The PLAN has a total strength of 235,000 officers and men, and commands three fleets, namely, the Beihai Fleet, the Donghai Fleet

and the Nanhai Fleet. Each fleet has fleet aviation headquarters, support bases, flotillas and maritime garrison commands, as well as aviation divisions and marine brigades. In September 2012, China's first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, was commissioned into the PLAN. China's development of an aircraft carrier has had a profound impact on building a strong PLAN and enhancing maritime security. The Chinese Navy has cut out the Naval Aviation Department and has converted its naval bases into support ones.<sup>9</sup> As per the latest reports, China now has three impossible to detect JIN class submarines and is likely to add more by 2020. Each of these submarines carries 12 JL-2 missiles with a range of about 4,598 miles<sup>10</sup>.

### PLA Air Force

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) comprises aviation, ground air defence, radar, airborne and Electronic Counter-Measures (ECM) arms. In line with the strategic requirements of conducting both offensive and defensive operations, the PLAAF is strengthening the development of a combat force structure that focusses on reconnaissance and early warning, air strike, air and missile defence, and strategic projection. It is developing new-generation fighters and a new variety of ground-to-air missiles and radar systems, improving its early warning, command and communications networks, and raising its strategic early warning, strategic deterrence and long-distance air strike capabilities.

The PLAAF now has a total strength of 398,000 officers and men, and an Air Command in each of the seven MRs. In addition, it commands the 15<sup>th</sup> Airborne Corps. Under each Air Command are bases, aviation divisions (brigades), ground-

to-air missile divisions (brigades), radar brigades and other units.<sup>11</sup>

The Air Force has closed its corps (base) headquarters and has set up regional command posts. Following these adjustments, the combat troops of the Navy and Air Force are now directly under the respective fleets and the Air Commands of the military areas.<sup>12</sup>

### PLA Second Artillery Force

The PLA Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) is China's strategic arm. Its capabilities of strategic deterrence, nuclear counter-attack and conventional precision strike are being upgraded. It has under its command missile bases, training bases, specialised support units, academies and research institutions. It has a series of "Dong Feng" ballistic missiles and "Chang Jian" cruise missiles.<sup>13</sup> It has optimised its force structure and developed its operating systems to cater for modern informationised warfare.

### PLA Logistics Department

In 2000, the Logistics Departments of the MRs were reorganised and integrated as the Joint Logistics Department (JLD) to manage all the administrative resources. Under the 'joint logistics' scheme, the Air Force and the Navy transferred their general logistics support elements common to all services (such as hospital, supplies, equipment maintenance, etc.) to the JLD of the MR, while keeping to itself the specialised logistics support elements unique to its own service.<sup>14</sup>

In 2003, towards further refining the logistic system, the Army dominant MR JLDs were further reorganised as Theatre Joint Logistics

Department (TJLD). This is a joint logistics headquarters manned by personnel of all the three Services. Joint Logistics Staff Officers who are familiar with the logistic requirements of the three Services were posted to the TJLD. Consequently, it appears that separate general and specialised logistics arrangements in the MRs have been done away with. The process of fashioning the TJLD started in April 2011 after the CMC officially approved the reforms suggested by the Jinan MR for setting up the TJLD in the region.<sup>15</sup> About 30 logistics sub-departments are subordinate to the MR which includes hospitals, warehouses, depots, transportation units, etc. Mobile support units of the Logistics Sub-Departments have been designed to accompany the combat forces in the field or at sea, away from their bases. As part of the reforms in PLA reserve units, each MR has established a Reserve Logistics Support Brigade.

### Leadership Training

As a part of the restructuring process, one of the priorities of the PLA has been the development of commanders for joint operations. The PLA has restructured its training curriculum to train commanders at the strategic and operational levels. It has improved the training system for joint operation commanders to develop commanders capable of undertaking joint operations. The frequency of post-rotation and cross-training for commanding officers have been suitably incorporated to consolidate the emergency training of commanders for joint operations.

### Effect of Reforms on Manpower

In 1951, the size of the Chinese Army had peaked at 6.27 million personnel<sup>16</sup>. This affected modernisation, besides placing a very heavy burden

on the exchequer without equivalent returns. Lack of technological upgradation had made China take up a manpower intense reform to the PLA. With the introduction of modern weapon systems and equipment, after nine rounds of streamlining, China's military strength now stands at 2.3 million.

### Conclusion

In contrast to the developments that have been taking place across the borders towards modernisation of the PLA, India has been reluctant to reform its military to meet the prerequisites of modern warfare. In most of the world's larger armies, the creation of the national security apparatus has followed military reorganisation. Consequent to the promulgation of the National Security Act of 1947 in the USA, the Department of Defence was unified, the National Security Council (NSC) created and the National Security Adviser (NSA) appointed.<sup>17</sup> In the UK, the NSC was set up only in 2010, years after military reorganisation, which included the appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in 1959. The unification of the Ministry of Defence was carried out in 1964<sup>18</sup>. In India, disregarding the restructuring of its armed forces, the NSC was first set up in 1989 during VP Singh's time. It remained dormant, opposed by the bureaucracy till it was revived in 1998, based on the KC Pant Committee recommendations. Following the nuclear explosion and the consequent diplomatic pressure, the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), an advisory body of experts, was set up on November 19, 1998, and, subsequently, the NSC was established on April 16, 1999. The military reforms, however, remained unattended to and continue to remain so.

Is the Indian military establishment destined to remain an outfit of the Field Marshal Montgomery era?



## ...in China

### Notes

1. Defence Policy, Ministry of National Defence, People's Republic of China, para 5, available at <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/DefensePolicy/index.htm#>. Accessed on November 10, 2014.
2. Shi Qingren, "China's Military Reform: Prospects and Challenge," *Asia Paper*, September 2014, published by the Institute of Security and Development Policy, p.12, para 3, line 9 and foot note 16 available at <http://www.isdp.eu/images/stories/isdp-main-pdf/2014-shi-qingren-chinas-military-reform-prospects-and-challenges.pdf>. Accessed on November 11, 2014.
3. Building and Development of China's Armed Forces ( Source: MoD), Ministry of National Defence, People's Republic of China, April 16, 2013 available at [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2013-04/16/content\\_4442757.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2013-04/16/content_4442757.htm). Accessed on November 10, 2014.
4. Li Xiang, "Military Transformation with Chinese Characteristics in the New Century," Institute for Security and Development Policy Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden, p.15, paragraph 2, available at <http://www.isdp.eu/publications/asia-papers.html?task=showbib&id=6184&return=>. Accessed on November 10, 2014.
5. n.3.
6. Qingren, n.2, p.16, paragraph 2, available at [http://www.isdp.eu/publications/index.php?option=com\\_jombib&task=showbib&id=6456](http://www.isdp.eu/publications/index.php?option=com_jombib&task=showbib&id=6456). Accessed on November 04, 2014.
7. ZHAO SHENG NAN (China Daily), "New Joint Command System 'On Way'", *China Daily USA*, January 03, 2014 available at [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-01/03/content\\_17212780.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-01/03/content_17212780.htm). Accessed on November 08, 2014.
8. Ibid.
9. Xiang, n.4, p.15, paragraph 2.
10. Bloomberg, December 09, 2014, David Tweed, "China Takes Nuclear Weapons Underwater Where Prying Eyes Can't See" available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-12-08/china-takes-nuclear-weapons-undersea-where-prying-eyes-can-t-see.html>. Accessed on December 14, 2014.
11. n.3.
12. Xiang, n.4, p.15, paragraph 2.
13. n.3.
14. Maj Gen SB Asthana, SM, VSM, "Transformation of PLA Logistics System: An Analysis," *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CXLI, No. 586, October-December 2011, available at <http://www.usiofindia.org/Article/Print/?pub=Journal&pubno=586&ano=856>. Accessed on January 10, 2015.
15. Virander Kumar Saini, "Theaterised Joint Logistics: A Caliberated Initiation", IDSA Monograph Series, No. 15, March 2013, pp. 37 and 38.
16. Qingren, n.2.
17. See Alan G Whittaker, Shannon A Brown, Frederik C Smith and Elizabeth McKune, "The National Security Process: The National Security Council and Interagency System," Research Report, August 15, 2011, Annual Update Washington D.C.: Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defence University, US Department of Defence.
18. See Robson Tansy, "The National Security Strategy: Towards a More Comprehensive View?" *RUSI News Brief*, September 04, 2012.

---

*The contents of this Issue Brief are based on the analysis of material accessed from open sources and are the personal views of the author. It may not be quoted as representing the views or policy of the Government of India or Integrated Headquarters of MoD (Army).*



**CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)**

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, Email: [landwarfare@gmail.com](mailto:landwarfare@gmail.com)

Website: [www.claws.in](http://www.claws.in)