

An analysis of Chinese military reform – towards the US model?

Yoon, Sukjoon

2024

Yoon, S. (2024). An analysis of Chinese military reform – towards the US model?. RSIS Commentaries, 144-24.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/180928>

Nanyang Technological University

Downloaded on 28 Apr 2025 05:05:34 SGT

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

An Analysis of Chinese Military Reform – Towards the US Model?

By Sukjoon Yoon

SYNOPSIS

Since coming to power in 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping has thoroughly reformed the People's Liberation Army. His intention was to reduce corruption and centralise control. The result of his reforms is that the command and control structure of the Chinese military is now modelled closely after that of the United States.

COMMENTARY

Chinese President Xi Jinping is a traditionalist Chinese leader in the mould of Mao Zedong. His rhetoric is, therefore, frequently laced with references to "Chinese characteristics". Despite this inclination, his military reforms seem to have borrowed ideas from the United States armed forces. Xi understands that existing US military structures represent current best practices for a superpower. Xi hopes to avoid a major conflict with the US, but if a war does break out, the reforms will improve the chances of China prevailing.

People's Liberation Army Reforms

Since 2012, Xi Jinping has taken firm control of China's three pillars of power: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the State and the military. From the beginning, he understood that China's regional and global ambitions would require a reform of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). However, he has pursued a somewhat surprising approach to this project.

The PLA that Xi inherited was a primarily defence-oriented and ineffective military organisation, with lines of command and responsibility often not clearly demarcated between regional PLA commanders and the CCP. The PLA had also engaged in

commercial activities, including the provision of goods and services to the civilian economy, which offered opportunities for graft.

Xi was concerned that the PLA lacked operational experience and could not match the United States armed forces, despite having invested in advanced platforms and systems, including stealth fighter planes, aircraft carriers, and long-range aircraft for strategic lift. Xi focused on enhancing the PLA's capabilities to counter US forward-deployable expeditionary forces, primarily within the so-called "first island chain".

The PLA of the Future

Although Xi Jinping, like Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, lacks the revolutionary credentials of previous chairmen of the Central Military Commission (CMC), he has emphasised that his "China Dream" includes the "dream of strong armed forces". Xi has proposed 2035 as the year when the PLA reforms should be "basically" completed.

Xi's reforms have emphasised so-called "Chinese characteristics", but his military programme borrows extensively from US military structures. Besides increasing defence industrial production and developing advanced military technologies, he has already begun replacing the PLA's obsolete command structures with agile and flexible systems more capable of joint operations, the goal being to achieve a "world-class" Chinese military by 2049.

Command-to-Command Comparison Between PLA and US Forces

In late 2015, Xi Jinping, acting as commander-in-chief of the PLA rather than as chairman of the CMC, announced an ambitious PLA reform plan. The CMC's previous four General Departments (Staff, Political, Logistics, and Armaments) were reorganised into 15 commissions and offices. His aim was to limit their power.

The changes adopted some aspects of the US theatre command model by creating, for example, a Strategic Planning Office, a Joint Staff Department, and a Science and Technology Commission. However, the PLA's shift from the Soviet model was incomplete since the Political Work Department was retained, and a CMC Discipline and Inspection Commission was created.

Xi Jinping disbanded the unified combatant commands of the seven Military Regions, replacing them with five Theatre Commands, analogous to the six geographic unified combatant commands of the US, namely, the US European Command, Central Command, Indo-Pacific Command, Africa Command, Northern Command, and Southern Command.

The Five Theatre Commands of the PLA



Source: Wikipedia

Xi believed that under the previous structure, the leaders of the Military Regions had become too powerful. Through his reforms, he has successfully centralised his control over the PLA's operational commanders, effectively securing greater compliance. Like the US geographic commands, each of the five Theatre Commands comprises and exercises operational command authority for their different elements and combinations of the PLA (Army), PLA Navy (PLAN), PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and PLA Rocket Force (PLARF).

Xi's Theatre Commands have general missions analogous to the Areas of Operational Responsibility (AORs) of US geographic commands:

- The Central Theatre Command defends Beijing and the region surrounding the Chinese capital.
- The Northern Theatre Command oversees contingencies in the direction of Russia and the Korean Peninsula.
- The Western Theatre Command covers Xinjiang and Tibet and defends against India.
- The Eastern and Southern Theatre Commands safeguard China's strategic interests in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

At the same time, Xi established the now-defunct PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), which was in charge of network warfare, cyber warfare, and space operations. This was functionally equivalent to the US Cyber, Space, and Strategic Commands, albeit with a distinct organisational structure.

Xi also established the PLA Joint Logistics Support Force (PLAJLSF), which provides similar mission support services to the five Theatre Commands as the US Transportation Command does to the six US geographic commands. With China's overseas interests expanding, the PLA likely intends ultimately to have global AORs, so the PLAJLSF requires agile and flexible platforms, such as the Y-20 aircraft, Type 071 amphibious transport docks, and Type 901 supply vessels. China now has an overseas base in Djibouti and owns long leases on harbours in various countries involved in its Belt and Road Initiative. Those projects may require protection by Chinese expeditionary forces in contingencies.

Xi also restructured the PLA's eighteen garrison-based Group Armies, which previously had close links with the political leadership of China's local governments. These Group Armies have since been reduced to thirteen and renamed.

The Group Armies' heavy divisions were reorganised into six combined arms brigades, becoming more agile, organic, and capable of rapid reaction. These brigades are divided into heavy/medium/light land combat capabilities, with each battalion having appropriate levels of combat, service, and support companies. The resulting structure is again similar to the US Army's recently established Multi-Domain Task Force, which aims to synchronise its response to potential Russian and Chinese military provocations, providing multi-domain combat readiness through new operational concepts, technologies, and weapons.

In April 2024, Xi Jinping enacted further reforms. He replaced the PLASSF with the PLA Aerospace Force, PLA Cyberspace Force, and PLA Information Support Force, matching US structures even more closely.

With this China-US command-to-command equivalence, China is keeping up to date with the changing character of war and planning for various crises and contingencies, which may include the prospect of a future war with the US.

The PLA now comprises four separate services, the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force; as well as four arms, the Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, the Joint Logistics Support Force, and Information Support Force. These arms link strategic and operational levels of command and control with the hierarchy of the CMC. Each Theatre Command manages military units within its AOR, including group armies, fleets, air bases and brigades, and joint logistics support centres.

Together, these reforms were meant to change the operational command practices and strategic mindset of the PLA inner circle in order to improve the military's joint fighting concepts, operational experience and combat readiness. Previously, its roles and missions were compromised by the lack of oversight and corruption, whereas in the new structures, there should be a clearer understanding of Theatre Command duties and functions.

Will the Reforms Change PLA Elites' Strategic Mindset?

Previously, PLA commanders lacked professional development and were overly politicised compared to those of other advanced militaries. PLA elites have traditionally

followed the principles enunciated in Sun Tzu's Art of War and Mao Zedong's military writings, although they have also studied the operational concepts of foreign militaries.

The new structures should help the PLA to become more professionally focused on its proper roles and functions. Besides these organisational reforms, there is also a new emphasis on the development of weapon systems with support from the scientific and technological research community, in line with Xi's Military-Civil Fusion strategy.

Xi Jinping's comprehensive reforms have aligned the PLA's military structure with the US geographic unified combatant commands and unified functional commands. This command-to-command comparison should facilitate another angle for understanding what PLA commanders may be concerned about in their day-to-day operations and functional support tasks.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping has recast the PLA in the style of the US military, with geographic unified combatant commands and unified functional commands. He knows that the PLA's recent combat experience is limited to border clashes with India and occasional encounters with foreign navies in China's local waters. Nevertheless, he has set a target for the PLA to be "world-class" by 2049.

Captain Sukjoon Yoon, ROKN retired, is a senior fellow of The Korea Institute for Military Affairs.
