

The honor guards of China's People's Liberation Army's Navy, Army, and Air Force march in Russia's May 2015 Victory Day parade in Moscow. (Photo courtesy of the *Global Times*)

Xi Jinping's PLA Reforms and Redefining "Active Defense"

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At the November 2013 Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a mere one year after assuming the role of chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), President Xi Jinping, through official party communiqués, announced plans for major reforms of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).¹ Though initially vague in its undertakings, Xi further refined the goals of the reforms at the 19th National Congress, stating, “We will modernize our military across the board in terms of theory, organizational structure, service personnel, and weaponry” so that “by the mid-21st century our people’s armed forces will have been fully transformed into world-class forces.”² The reforms, which began in earnest in 2015, manifested over subsequent years as sweeping concurrent efforts to downsize, professionalize, restructure existing command relationships, and enable joint operations within the PLA.

To date, the PLA has overhauled its structure, geographic alignment, and interservice relationships

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to enable joint command and control of PLA forces in what came to be known as “above-the-neck” reforms. Simultaneous to these top-level reforms, the PLA significantly downsized the PLA Army (PLAA, also referred to as the PLA Ground Force) and increased the budgets and influence of the PLA Navy (PLAN), PLA Air Force (PLAAF), PLA Rocket Force (formerly the Second Artillery Force), and, particularly, the newly created Strategic Support Force (SSF).³ Experts have likened the scope and magnitude of the above-the-neck

structural reforms to the U.S. Goldwater-Nichols Reorganization Act of 1986, which drastically overhauled the American civilian-military relationship and placed all operational control of military forces under the control of joint geographic combatant commanders.⁴ Subsequent to top-level reforms, the PLA shifted to “below-the-neck” reforms focused on service-level force structure changes and standardization, professionalization of the officer corps, and doctrinal and regulatory revisions to include joint operations.

Concurrent with the structural reforms, a doctrinal shift, likely a result of shifting Chinese perception of the global balance of power, appears to be a major driver behind the reforms. The structural reforms are a means to enable the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to project an increasingly offensive posture regionally, particularly around Taiwan and the South China Sea, and have accompanied an equally important strategic shift in PLA strategic outlines. The 2015 PLA white paper, *China’s Military Strategy*, alluded to a shift in strategic outlook in which the CCP views American unipolarity as waning, stating, “In today’s world, the global trends toward multi-polarity and economic globalization are intensifying. ... Profound changes are taking place in the international situation, as manifested in the historic changes in the balance of power.”⁵ The reforms mark a potentially momentous shift from the PLA’s strategically active defense posture to a PLA capable of operating outside of China’s immediate periphery. The overarching objective of this strategic shift is to project strategically offensive regional and, eventually, global power in a multipolar world. If a strategic shift by the PRC embodies the ends, the ongoing PLA reforms and redefining active defense are the primary means.

The success of the reforms, the ability of the PLA to conduct joint operations, and the shift in active defense doctrine will determine the PLA’s ability and willingness to conduct increasingly aggressive military operations outside its borders. This poses serious consideration for a Taiwan contingency, which many reforms appear geared toward enabling. To measure the potential success of the reforms and their likely global implications, three components of the reforms must be analyzed: the shift in active defense doctrine, the top-level reforms to the PLA, and the below-the-neck

reforms. The success of these three components will likely determine the nature of the PLA for decades to come and determine the PRC and PLA's willingness to conduct increasingly aggressive offensive military operations such as a Taiwan contingency in the future.

Drivers of Reform: Global Power Competition and Chinese Rejuvenation

Large structural reforms and strategic revisions are nothing new to the PLA, which has undergone nine distinct reformations—either structural, strategic, or a combination of both—since the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949.⁶ The PLA has historically attempted to adapt and revise its strategy in response to changes in its strategic situation, such as the Sino-Soviet split, and military technological advances, such as the unprecedented supremacy of military technology exhibited by the United States in the Gulf War.⁷ A separate and, on occasion, greater driver of past reforms in the PLA has been internal party politics, an influence to which the PLA is particularly prone given its status as the party's military and not the nation's.⁸ Like past reforms, internal party politics contributed to Xi's calculus when introducing and implementing reform. What sets the most recent reforms apart from previous reforms is that it is expressly not a reaction to a technological or strategic shift but rather a proactive action preceding a perceived strategic shift by the CCP.

Though internal party politics certainly offer a convenient means of consolidating and ensuring party power under Xi and undoubtedly is an important factor, the PLA reforms are primarily driven by Xi's goal to achieve the "Chinese dream of national rejuvenation."⁹ This goal is central as a justification and driver of PLA reform, and it serves the dual purpose of advancing Xi and the party's legitimacy to the Chinese people at home and advancing the CCP's foreign policy abroad. The concept of Chinese rejuvenation harkens sentiment to Imperial China (221 BCE–1912 CE), when the country, as the metaphorical center of the world, reigned as the central power in the known world surrounded by tributary states. Equally important to a rejuvenation of China's former greatness, the CCP "bases its claim to continue ruling China in part on having rescued the country from a century of

humiliation at the hands of foreign imperialism that lasted from the middle of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century."¹⁰ For the CCP, foreign policy and domestic politics are inextricably linked. A revitalization of China's economic centrality in the world and indisputable military capability to protect China's sovereignty is required to achieve rejuvenation and to prevent a repeat of foreign interventions and unequal treatment by the major powers seen during the century of humiliation.

China, the second largest economy in the world, has largely overcome its historical economic and industrial woes, but it has yet to rectify its military shortcomings. Metaphorically, China still punches well below its weight militarily as a global power on the international stage. The PLA reforms under Xi mark an attempt to achieve military parity with strategic competitors and secure China's standing as a military power on the global stage to prevent foreign encroachment of what China considers its sovereignty. Xi outlined the PLA reforms as a component of Chinese rejuvenation in his speech to the 19th National Congress of the CPC in 2017, stating, "With a view to realizing the Chinese Dream (of national rejuvenation) and the dream of building a powerful military, we have developed a strategy for the military under new circumstances, and have made every effort to modernize national defense and the armed forces."¹¹

Taking Xi's address a step further, the 2015 PLA white paper, which served as the strategic accompaniment to the structural and organizational reforms, stated, "In today's world, the global trend toward multipolarity and economic globalization are intensifying. ... Profound changes are taking place in the international situation, as manifested in the historic changes in the balance of power, global governance structure, Asia-Pacific geostrategic landscape, and international competition."¹² Though not explicitly asserted, the white paper alludes toward a sentiment amongst the PLA and party at large that American unipolarity, which has defined and shaped the international order since the end of the Cold War, is coming to an end. In its place, the CCP envisions a future characterized by a multipolar international order in which the CCP and PLA can maneuver to advance its strategic position.¹³ To this end, a strategic shift was required for the PLA to position itself to achieve this long-term goal.

Shifting Definitions: “Active Defense” for the Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation

Historically, the PLA has adopted a strategy of active defense, a term which, despite its constant use throughout the PLA's history, has had a multitude of shifting meanings. First coined by Mao Zedong during the Chinese Civil War for the strategy of the Red Army (the precursor to the PLA), the term emphasized a strategically defensive posture characterized by tactically and operationally offensive actions, primarily within the confines of China's geographic borders.¹⁴ More simply, the PLA adopted a strategy of mobile warfare in which ground forces would conduct a strategic defense before transitioning to a counterattack to overwhelm an adversary with numerically superior forces.¹⁵ Rather than a dogmatic doctrine, the strategy of active defense went through a series of revisions dependent upon the strategic position the PRC and military technological advances that has shaped both the PLA's force structure and the PRC's national policy and strategic intent.

Despite strategic guideline changes, the PLA active defense strategy was primarily focused on an invasion of mainland China by the United States following the Korean War and the Soviet Union following the Sino-Soviet split.¹⁶ However, this would drastically change in 1993 when the PLA revised its strategic guidelines and redefined active defense in reaction to the disappearance of a Soviet threat with its collapse in 1991 and, more importantly, the overwhelming ease with which the United States defeated the formidable Iraqi military in the Gulf War.¹⁷ As a result of the Gulf War, the PLA's emphasis on active defense would shift from “luring the enemy in deep” of the 1960s to 1980s and overwhelming an enemy with numerically superior forces to focusing on fighting local wars under high-technology conditions along China's periphery, marking the first drastic shift in the PLA toward a quality-over-quantity force.¹⁸

With the looming threat of a conventional ground invasion of China gone and the obsolescence of numerically superior ground forces exhibited during the Gulf War, the PLA shifted its structural focus toward modernizing and downsizing while shifting its strategic focus to its periphery, notably Taiwan. As a first step, then CMC Chairman Jiang Zemin downsized the

PLA's force strength by nearly five hundred thousand personnel and another two hundred thousand were further reduced in 2005 by Hu Jintao.¹⁹ A 2005 RAND report outlined the then ongoing PLA's modernization efforts, stating, “The PLA is currently transitioning from a continental military requiring large land forces for ‘in-depth’ defense to a combined continental-maritime force primarily consisting of smaller, more mobile and sophisticated military forces” primarily focused on a Taiwan contingency.²⁰ These reforms, however, fell short of achieving a modern or joint fighting force capable of conducting operations outside of China's borders in any meaningful manner.

The latest reforms implemented by Xi exhibit potential to revise and, more importantly, expand the scope and nature of active defense and alleviate and fix the shortcomings of the 1993 reforms. While the language in the 2015 PLA white paper does not overtly promote aggressive military action, it does allude to expanding its scope outside a strategically defensive nature. The white paper states, “The PLAA will continue to reorient from theater defense to trans-theater mobility. ... The PLAN will gradually shift its focus from ‘offshore waters defense’ to the combination of ‘offshore waters defense’ with ‘open seas protection.’ ... The PLAAF will endeavor to shift its focus from territorial air defense to both defense and offense.”²¹ This language, though subtle as party and PLA statements often are, suggests an expanding geographic reach of PLA forces and a reorientation of military forces toward a more offensive posture of active defense.

The shift in active defense and emphasis on joint operations was formalized in November 2020 with the “Outline of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Joint Operations (Trial).” The outline “highlights the guiding principles, focuses on macro-guidance, outlines the guidelines for overall regulation, focuses on clarifying the basic issues of joint combat organization and implementation, and focuses on unifying combat thinking.”²² Though the “top-level” regulation is classified and a “trial,” it will likely guide many of the changes to the upcoming PLA white paper and shape future PLA doctrine.²³ Vital to this implementation is reforming, reorganizing, and restructuring the PLA to enable such joint military operations capable of fighting outside of the Chinese mainland and its immediate periphery. To understand the likelihood of this goal succeeding,



(Map by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*; information courtesy of the Office of Naval Intelligence)

China's Three Defensive Layers

the specifics of Xi's PLA reforms will be examined at top-level and below-the-neck reforms.

PLA "Above-the-Neck" Reforms

In the wake of the Korean War, the PLA modeled itself after the Soviet military, focusing largely on low-tech ground forces.²⁴ The PLA has, despite past reforms, downsizing, and reorganization, retained this ground force-centric, low-tech organization and doctrine until recent decades. While the PLA has undoubtedly made impressive advances in modernizing its forces technologically since early 1990s, as an organization the PLA remains antiquated, amounting to little more than "a collection of institutional relationships and practices, some of which are poorly suited to its current requirements for historical or political reasons. As a result, the very structure itself can create a system riddled with inefficiencies, stovepiped information, and lack of oversight."²⁵ The latest 2015 PLA reforms appear to be an

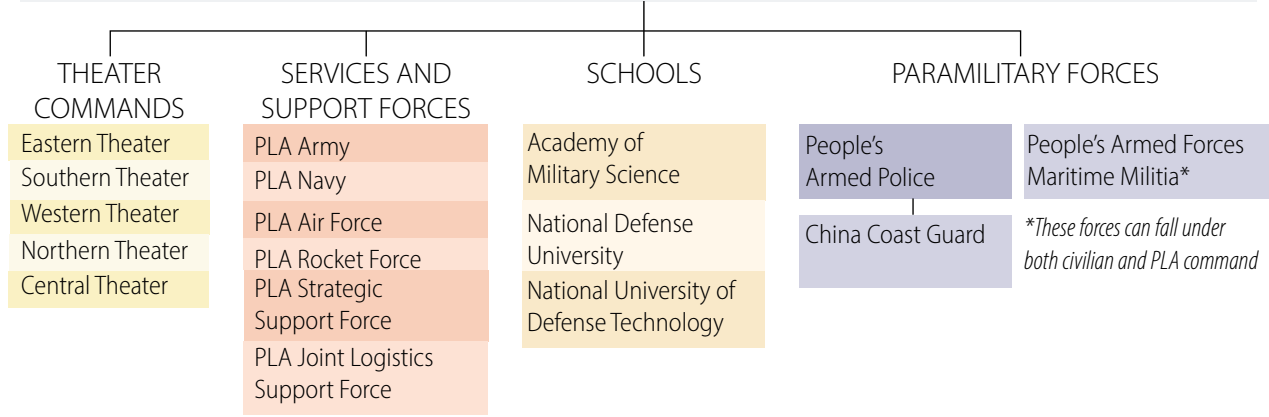
attempt to overcome this shortcoming, divorcing the PLA from its traditional ground-based Soviet model and moving the PLA toward a joint force-oriented organization more similar to the post-Goldwater-Nichols U.S. military.

The first formal structural impacts of the reforms were announced in September 2015 in the form of a force reduction of three hundred thousand personnel within the PLA.²⁶ Since the announcement, the majority of the force reductions have occurred within the PLAA, while the PLAN, PLAAF, PLA Rocket Force, and SSF have seen either few reductions or even increases in force and budgetary allocations from the CMC.²⁷ This initial shift in force allocation and alignment represents a fundamental shift within the PLA away from a PLAA-centric force toward a joint capable force.

Central military commission reforms. Perhaps the most impactful structural reforms to the PLA

CENTRAL MILITARY COMMISSION				
Chairman	Xi Jinping			
Vice Chairman	Gen Xu Qiliang	Gen Zhang Youxia		
Members	Gen Wei Enghe	Gen Li Zuocheng	Adm Miao Hua	Gen Zhang Shengmin

DEPARTMENTS	COMMISSIONS	OFFICES
Joint Staff Department	Discipline Inspection Commission	Agency for Offices Administration
Political Work Department	Politics and Law Commission	Audit Office
Logistics Support Department	Science and Technology Commission	Office for International Military Cooperation
Equipment Development Department		Reform and Organization Office
Training and Administration Department		Strategic Planning Office
National Defense Mobilization Department		



Ministry of National Defense and general offices are not depicted in this chart.

(Graphic courtesy of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2021 Annual Report to Congress)

China's Military Leadership

were the changes implemented into the CMC and its bureaucratic changes between the 18th CMC (2012–2017) and the 19th CMC (2017–2022). Prior to the 2015 reforms, the CMC formed the central organ under the direct control of the chairman (always the CCP general secretary to ensure direct party control and political loyalty of the PLA) and ten other CMC members who shaped the PLA's structure and inter-service relationships.²⁸

The four general departments (General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armament Department) were PLAA-led departments serving as headquarters for their respective military functions.²⁹

These ground-centric departments had, by 2015, become highly stovepiped and the directors functioned with a high degree of autonomy from the CMC and, by extension, from the party.³⁰ Similarly, service commanders possessed operational and administrative control over their respective service forces independent of the geographical military region commander.³¹ The pre-reform CMC structure effectually created a stovepiped, compartmentalized, ground-centric PLA incapable of conducting effective joint operations inside or outside its borders.

As a major component of the reforms, the 19th CMC (formed in 2017) was reorganized from eleven members to seven.³² The most notable structural

changes within the CMC were the dismantling of the four general departments and reorganization of the various functions into fifteen CMC subsidiary organs under the direct control of the CMC and the removal of the PLAN, PLAAF, and Second Artillery (now the PLA Rocket Force) commanders' seats on the CMC.³³ Furthermore, service branches now only possess administrative control and no longer possess operational control over their respective forces, instead relegating operational control to the newly created five theater commands (from the previous seven military regions).³⁴

In place of the previous four general departments, fifteen CMC subsidiary organs were created, consisting of six departments, three commissions, and five offices under the direct control of the CMC, greatly reducing the autonomy of the former PLAA-controlled general departments and likewise increasing the CMC and party's control over the functions and day-to-day administration of the PLA. The dismantling of the General Staff Department and greater direct oversight of the CMC on PLA staff functions give the chairman and the party greater exercise of control over the PLA with less bureaucratic barricades and less PLAA control over the PLA at large. The PLA streamlined many top-level staff functions through these reforms and removed the entrenched PLAA control over stovepiped bureaucratic organizations.

Service-level reforms. Below the CMC, several sweeping structural changes were introduced and enacted to enhance joint warfighting capabilities within the PLA at the service and subservice level. Prior to the reforms, the PLAA, PLAN, and PLAAF below the CMC comprised the only three services under the general department and CMC structure, with the PLA Second Artillery as an independent branch under the PLAA but direct operational control of the CMC.³⁵ Following the reforms, the structure changed to include the PLAA (newly divorced from the general department structure), PLAN, PLAAF, and PLA Rocket Force (formerly the Second Artillery) as service-level headquarters and introduced both the Strategic Support Force and Joint Logistics Support Force as subservice headquarters reporting to the CMC.³⁶

On 31 December 2015, the PLA Second Artillery Force, the PLA's strategic missile force responsible

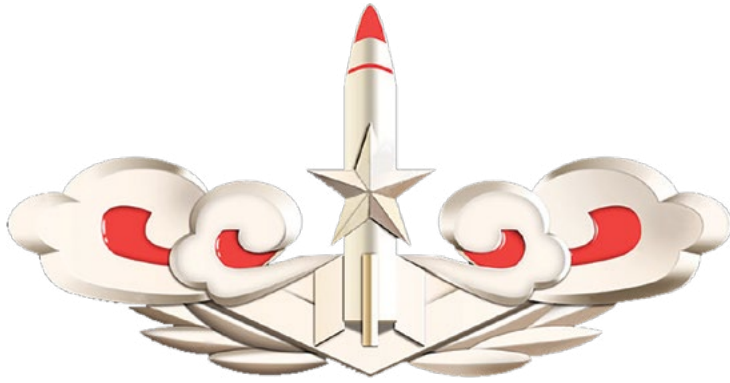


Emblem of the People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

for land-based ballistic and cruise missiles, was renamed the PLA Rocket Force.³⁷ Accompanying this name change was an elevation of the PLA Rocket Force from a branch reporting directly to the CMC to an independent service on par with the PLAA, PLAAF, and PLAN.³⁸ While all nuclear forces remained under the tight direct control of the CMC, the relationship between the PLA Rocket Force and the newly created theater commands is too unclear to draw definitive conclusions on where operational authority over ballistic and cruise missile forces rests. Whether the PLA Rocket Force national headquarters, the PLA Rocket Force theater base, the theater commander, or a combination thereof on a system-by-system basis maintain operational control over PLA Rocket Forces is uncertain.³⁹ Despite the unknowns, the elevation of the force to an independent service highlights the vital importance placed on its missile forces by the PLA.

The same month as the PLA Rocket Force was announced, the PLA formally stood up its newest independent service: the Strategic Support Force.⁴⁰ The SSF centralizes operational and administrative control of space, cyber, electronic, and information and psychological operations, and reports directly to the CMC, operationally independent of other service or theater commands.⁴¹

Rather than creating the force from scratch, the SSF is an amalgamation and consolidation of existing force structures consolidated under the centralized command of the SSF. Two distinct and subdivisions of the SSF exist: the Space Systems Department, responsible for all space operations, and the Network Systems Department, responsible for all cyber, electronic, information, and psychological operations, as semi-independent branches.⁴²



Emblem of People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

The creation of the SSF as an independent command that retains both operational and administrative control under direct control of the CMC gives the party greater authority in controlling the information, cyber, and psychological domains, which the party views as their “chief vulnerability” and “worry about the societal effects of an adversary undermining Chinese domestic information control.”⁴³ Unlike the

diffusion and decentralization of operational control to theaters of command across the other PLA services, the structure of the SSF highlights the CCP's priority of centralized party control of sensitive and potentially politically threatening matters over practical operational flexibility and of delegation and decentralization of authority and decision-making.

Geographic command reforms.

Accompanying the structural changes to the PLA hierarchy, a major restructuring of the PLA's geographic alignment, to an extent imitating the United States' combatant command system or, perhaps more aptly, Russia's military districts, was introduced to create unified commands with the resources, structure, and authority to conduct joint operations outside of China's immediate periphery. More than just a realignment of forces and force projection posture, the geographic reform of the PLA is the central mechanism of much of the structural and, particularly, the inter-service changes.



China's DF-17 missiles carrying DF-ZF hypersonic glide vehicles. (Video screenshot from China Central Television)

The PLA historically divided the geographic landmass of mainland China into varying numbers of military regions, with the most recent organization constituting seven military regions, each commanded by a PLAA commander who possessed operational control only over ground forces during peacetime.⁴⁴ Under this structure, other services (PLAN, PLAAF, Second Artillery Corps) were operationally independent of military region commanders during peacetime, making joint training or, if need be, wartime operations

importantly, external threats. The Northern Theater Command is primarily aligned to face Korea Peninsula contingencies. The Eastern Theater Command is assessed to be the primary operational force against Taiwan, Japan, and security contests in the East China Sea. The Southern Theater Command is oriented toward South China Sea, particularly focused on the nine-dash line, and Southeast Asia as well as supporting the Eastern Theater Command in the event of a Taiwan invasion. As somewhat of an outlier, the

“ The consolidation of operational control under theater commanders drastically changed the primary function of PLA services to a support and administrative role responsible for training, equipping, and manning forces supporting the joint theater commands. ”

extremely difficult to coordinate and execute.⁴⁵ While military region commander's notionally held authority within their geographic commands during contingency or wartime, the other services retained a high degree of autonomy and thus diffused command authority from a singular operational commander to several service commanders. To impose a higher degree of joint interoperability, simplification of the command-and-control structure within the PLA, and enablement of the CMC to exert more direct and coherent control over PLA forces, geographic reforms were utilized as a catalyst for overhauling interservice and command relationships within the PLA below the CMC.

The seven ground-centric military regions were replaced with five theater commands in 2016, greatly streamlining the number of commands and aligning geographic boundaries in a more strategically coherent manner.

The new theaters consist of the Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, and Central Theater Commands, which align along province and semiautonomous region borders.⁴⁶ Unlike the previous military regions, which were administrative and defensive in nature and reflected active defense doctrine in its more original interpretation, the new theater commands are operationally aligned to meet both internal and, more

Western Theater Command's primary function is to conduct “counterterrorism” and other security operations in the semiautonomous regions of Xinjiang and Tibet while simultaneously preparing for border issues with India. The Central Theater Command, surrounding Beijing, serves as capital defense for internal and external security purposes and supports other theaters as required.⁴⁷ This posturing of forces exhibits a more externally focused PLA, capable of conducting operations outside the CCP's sovereign territory and immediately periphery to encompass regional power projection, marking a shift in the strategic nature of active defense doctrine.

More than just a geographic consolidation, the newly appointed theater commanders possess peacetime and wartime joint operational control over almost all conventional forces (PLAA, PLAAF, and PLAN) within each respective theater.⁴⁸ However, the CMC retains direct operational control independent of theater chain of command over all SSE, nuclear forces, and to date, an unknown composition of the PLA Rocket Force.⁴⁹ Unlike past military region commanders, which had been exclusively staffed with PLAA officers, theater commanders are assigned by the CMC from any service, with deputy theater commanders drawn from the other services.⁵⁰ In addition to promoting

“jointness” within theater commands, the dissolution of the PLAA’s monopoly on military region command further reduced the PLAA’s overwhelming primacy within the PLA and elevated the PLAAF and PLAN to more equal status.

The consolidation of operational control under theater commanders drastically changed the primary function of PLA services to a support and administrative role responsible for training, equipping, and manning forces supporting the joint theater commands.⁵¹ The bifurcation of authority for subordinate operational units now dictates that services possess administrative control over their service units while theater commanders possess operational control.⁵² To address cross-theater operations and training or units operating outside of a theater command’s area of responsibility, the Joint Staff Department of the CMC will directly coordinate cross-theater or far-reaching operations.⁵³ The feasibility and practicality of the Joint Staff Department’s control over distant or cross-theater operations has yet to be seen in practice, leaving a potential major gap in PLA capabilities.

PLA “Below-the-Neck” Reforms

Following the implementation of above-the-neck reforms, the PLA began a series of below-the-neck reforms beginning around 2017 with an initial target completion of 2020 but has been subsequently extended to the end of 2022 due to COVID-19 and other modernization shortcomings. These series of reforms are focused at the corps level and below on force restructuring and standardization, professionalization of the officer corps, updating service doctrine, and joint training.

“Brigadization” and force structure reform.

Similar to the U.S. Army’s shift in the early 2000s under Donald Rumsfeld from a division-centric to a brigade-centric force, the PLA is undergoing a “brigadization” process to create both a standardized and more agile fighting force.⁵⁴ From the top down, the PLAA reduced the number of corps-sized army groups from eighteen to thirteen, split all existing divisions or regiments into one or two brigades, and created standardized combined arms brigades as the backbone force of the PLAA. Under the new organization, each army group consists of six combined arms brigades, one artillery brigade, one air defense brigade, one special

operations brigade, one army aviation brigade, one engineer and chemical defense brigade, and one service support brigade.⁵⁵ The combined arms brigades consist of a tailored combination of five standardized variants: heavy, medium, light, amphibious, and mountain.⁵⁶

Like the PLAA, the PLAF has reorganized into a base-brigade organization for fighter, fighter-bomber, and attack units, though the division-regiment organization has been retained for bombers and transport. These newly formed base-brigade units oversee all aviation, surface-to-air missile, artillery, and radar units within their area of responsibility and directly coordinate with other PLA services.⁵⁷ This more agile PLAF will generate greater interoperability with other services and streamline air support.

Perhaps the greatest beneficiary of the below-the-neck reforms has been the PLAN’s Marine Corps, which has increased in size from just two brigades to eight, adding four new combined arms brigades, one special operations brigade, and a shipborne aviation brigade. Much of the forces for these new brigades were transferred from PLAA and PLAN aviation units.⁵⁸ This new expansion of the PLAN’s Marine Corps from approximately twelve thousand to nearly forty thousand marines demonstrates the PLA’s expanded expeditionary ambitions as well as providing a large enough amphibious force to secure a landing in the event of a Taiwan contingency.

Doctrinal and training reforms. To support this “brigadization” within the PLA and to promote joint force interoperability, the PLA has overhauled both its strategic guidelines and doctrine in the past several years and overhauled its convoluted rank and grade system to streamline and standardize officer promotions for a more professional officer corps.⁵⁹ In 2017, the PLA introduced revised “Military Training Regulations” and a new “Outline of Military Training” to focus training on realistic joint operations.⁶⁰ In 2019, the PLA released the latest edition of its white paper, *China’s National Defense in the New Era*, which shifted emphasis from regional defensive operations to joint offensive operations, stressed the integration the Joint Logistic Support Force into the PLA’s joint operations and explicitly identified the United States as the principal instigator on the global stage.⁶¹ The most impactful doctrine change came on 7 November 2020, when the PLA announced the release of the

“Outline of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Joint Operations (Trial).”⁶² This draft doctrine marks only the fifth time the PLA has changed its operational-level doctrine in its history, marking a potentially drastic shift in PLA operations. The document has not been released to the public and is still in draft form, but it will undoubtedly shape PLA training, operations, and subsequent doctrine over the next several years to implement the goals of the reforms at the operational and tactical levels.

In conjunction with doctrinal changes, the PLA has increased the frequency, size, and complexity of joint training to support an integrated joint force. The restructuring of under the above-the-neck reforms gave joint theater commanders the authority and ability to conduct joint training more easily within their areas of responsibility without interference or hindrance from the services that had previously plagued the PLA prior to the reforms. Despite early setbacks due to COVID-19 and delayed modernization fielding to newly reorganized units, combined arms and joint training exercises increased from 2019 to 2020.⁶³ This trend continued in subsequent years, with, for example, the number of joint amphibious island-capture training scenarios increasing from thirteen in 2020 to twenty in 2021.⁶⁴ This trend will undoubtedly continue in coming years as modernization fielding completes and doctrinal changes are tested and implemented at the tactical and operational levels.

People’s Armed Police. Concurrent to the PLA below-the-neck reforms, the CMC also reorganized the structure and command relationship of the People’s Armed Police (PAP), the party’s paramilitary force charged with internal and domestic security missions. Though separate from the PLA, the PAP has always maintained the notional, albeit seldom exercised, secondary mission of conducting rear area support for the PLA during wartime.⁶⁵ Announced in 2017, the PAP’s reforms, following on the heel of the announcement and commencement of the PLA’s reform, saw the CMC, and by extension the party, exert increasingly direct control over the PAP.⁶⁶ Under the new command structure, the PAP, which had formerly been placed under the authority of both the CMC and the State Council, and by extension the Ministry of Public Security, was placed solely under the operational and administrative control of the

CMC. This reform removed the party premier as the head of the State Council and the Minister of Public Security from any command or oversight role, placing the PAP solely under the CMC chairman’s control.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the Coast Guard, which was previously under dual command of the Ministry of Public Security and the State Oceanic Administration, was placed solely within the structure of the PAP.⁶⁸ The consolidation of the PAP under the direct sole control of the CMC serves to increase cooperation between the PAP and the PLA and between the Coast Guard and the PLAN.

While the below-the-neck reforms have been delayed due to COVID-19 and lagging modernization of reorganized units, the PLA has made tremendous progress in reorganizing such a large force in a relatively short period. With Xi’s confirmation of an unprecedented third term at the 20th Party Congress in fall 2022, the successes of his reforms of the PLA have been touted as a major triumph of his first decade as the CMC chairman. The question remains of how successful both the above-the-neck and below-the-neck reforms have been in achieving a joint PLA capable of conducting operations under this newly conceptualized active defense and how will these successes or failures impact the PLA’s posture and willingness to conduct aggressive military operations in coming years.

Limited Success: Measuring the Effectiveness of Reform

The changes implemented thus far to the PLA under Xi’s reforms have, from the top down, drastically changed the composition and nature of the PLA to create a modern joint force capable of conducting operations. Both the above-the-neck and below-the-neck reforms complement each other to provide a top-level command-and-control structure designed to enable joint operations and an operational and tactical force structure capable of operating under such a joint framework. The accomplishment of achieving these goals in such a relatively short period of time with a force as large and a bureaucracy as entrenched as the PLA cannot be understated. The progress of the reforms, which were announced and implemented at the beginning of Xi’s tenure and scheduled to be completed before the Party Congress, were touted as a

major success for both the party and Xi. The question remains, however, of whether the reforms can help achieve the “Chinese dream of national rejuvenation,” and it must be answered by analyzing the progress of the reforms, whether they are achieving their intended effects, and what long-term effect the reforms will have on the PLA’s future operations.

In theory, the PLA successfully accomplished all its major goals for its above-the-neck reforms: reorganizing the CMC, implementing a new joint geographic command structure, and overhauling the service and command-and-control relationships. In practice it has yet to be seen whether the PLA can overcome its entrenched bureaucracy and service rivalry, and successfully adapt to its new command-and-control structure.

The dismantling of the powerful and highly independent general departments into subsidiary organs directly under the CMC gives the chairman of the CMC an unprecedented degree of direct authority over the PLA and PAP, providing a streamlined and efficient chain of command and emphasizing far greater operational focus for the PLA and joint commanders.⁶⁹ However, the PLA remains the party’s and not the nation’s military force, despite muted past calls for nationalization, which will continue to hamper its military professionalism and external force projection as the party under Xi shifts focus of national security to increasingly “attach equal importance to internal and external security.”⁷⁰ Internal security, therefore, will continue to hamstring the PLA with additional security requirements that would otherwise be assigned to other departments and agencies in most other nations.

The geographic reforms, while undoubtedly a significant step toward moving to a joint force, lacks a reach beyond a regional scope. Unlike the U.S. combatant command system, which spans the globe, the PLA’s theater command system encompasses only the PRC’s sovereign territory with peripheral areas of responsibility for each theater. Outside of this immediate periphery, cross-theater operational coordination under the Joint Staff Department is vague, uncertain, and untested. The ability of the PRC to conduct large-scale operations globally is, both technologically and logistically under the new PLA geographic alignment, unrealistic at present.

The above-the-neck reforms concretely achieved their intended goals in restructuring, but the success

of desired cultural and professional changes and cooperative interservice coordination during training, contingency, and war will not come to fruition, if at all, for years until new officers rise through the newly established system. Furthermore, whether the bifurcation of administrative and operational control succeeds or whether theater commanders will, in practice, possess adequate authority independent of the services to conduct successful joint operations may largely depend on personal, PLA, and internal party politics.

The below-the-neck reforms, hampered by COVID-19 and modernization delays, have been met with less short-term success and have decreased the readiness of the PLA in the immediate term as units reorganize, reoutfit, and retrain. The restructuring of divisions and regiments into brigades disrupted unit training, and equipment modernization efforts have lagged far behind expected scheduled. According to the 2021 *China Military Power Report*, approximately 40 percent of the PLAA’s main battle tank arsenal is between twenty and forty years old, and infantry brigades suffer from antiquated equipment.⁷¹ The slow modernization and fielding of equipment means that many PLAA brigades are not functionally as capable as on paper. Likewise, the PLAMC has similarly suffered from inadequate fielding of required equipment for its newly formed brigades and will only reach full capability by 2030.⁷² This will continue to hamper the PLA’s ability to achieve a necessary level of readiness in both equipment and training on new equipment for conducting combined arms operations.

Conclusion

While the PLA has either accomplished or is on track to accomplish all its structural goals of the reforms, translating these structural changes into a cultural change within the PLA is an entirely separate matter. The implementation of draft joint doctrine, effective management of bifurcated lines of command between theaters and services, and the conduct of joint expeditionary training and operations all require a major cultural and professional shift within the PLA. For the reforms to succeed, the PLAA will have to willingly relinquish much of its former precedence within the new PLA structure. This professional and cultural shift within the PLA could likely to take a decade as junior

officers rise through the ranks and will likely outlast Xi's tenure as the CMC chairman, however long that may continue past his unprecedented third term. Therefore, the long-term success of the reforms may largely depend on Xi's successor and successive senior-level PLA officers continuing to emphasize joint operations and redefining active defense.

The success of the reforms, however, may prove less important than the PLA and CCP's perception of its success. Emboldened by the reforms, either founded or not, the party may employ the PLA more aggressively in contentious regional hot spots in the future, such as the South China Sea, the disputed Sino-Indian border, and, most importantly and consequentially, against Taiwan. With the rhetoric of "active defense" becoming increasingly aggressive and belligerent, confidence in a capable joint force, whether it is adequately prepared for such operations or not, can give the CCP newfound confidence to challenge its regional and increasingly global competitors. Perhaps more dangerous to escalation of regional conflicts than a capable PLA is the perception of a capable of PLA by the party.

While Xi's reforms and the shifting definition of active defense will not establish the PLA as a global military power in the short term, its importance and potential impact can also not be understated. The reforms, if successfully carried out, would strengthen the PLA's burgeoning ability to conduct expeditionary

operations and threaten the current geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific region, allowing the PLA to act according to its redefined strategic guideline of active defense. The rise of a militarily aggressive and capable PRC backed by the world's second largest economy, interdependent with the international community, could have disastrous unforeseen consequences. Growing tensions in the South China Sea, cross-strait relations, and Sino-Japanese relations all become more contentious with an expeditionary PLA capable of challenging rivals in the region.

As the PRC views American retrenchment and global multipolarity as an inevitability, the future may find an emboldened PLA conducting operations regionally.⁷³ Though the PRC does not seek to supplant the U.S. as a global power, it does seek to challenge the established international order and maneuver to advance its own interests on the global stage. While the PLA certainly has numerous technological shortfalls to overcome to make successful expeditionary operations a reality, the current ongoing reforms and redefined active defense strategic guidelines may prove sufficient in providing the force structure, organization, and doctrinal foundation to enable such activities in the future. Xi's reforms, therefore, may prove to be a vital first step to realizing the "Chinese dream of national rejuvenation" by achieving the goal of transforming the PLA into a world-class force by the mid-twenty-first century.⁷⁴ ■

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