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PLA Under Xi Jinping: New Direction in Strategic Thinking?

By James Char and Richard A. Bitzinger

Synopsis

Following Xi Jinping's consolidation of power at the 19th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) congress, he appears to have a free hand in reforming the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This will require continuing the PLA's modernisation of its hardware, but also of its 'heartware,' that is, operational culture, military ethos, and professionalism.

Commentary

IN THE period leading up to the recently concluded 19th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) congress, civil-military relations in post-reform China had previously been viewed under the lens of Party-army relations. More recently, however, such a paradigm – following Xi Jinping's consolidation of the trident of Party-state-military power – no longer seems true, with some People's Liberation Army (PLA) watchers alluding to a shift towards a model of Xi Jinping-PLA relations.

Notwithstanding, the PLA has supported its commander-in-chief in his consolidation of power to attain his present unassailable position. It is, however, open to debate as to the extent to which the CCP's coercive forces can count on China's new paramount leader to fully translate his considerable political clout into the CCP's growing professionalisation.

Upgrading PLA Hardware

The PLA's latest modernisation drive has seen it initiate a nascent transition from an unwieldy Soviet-style model of command and control to a more flexible system entailing a more network-centric force that emphasises the linkages between platforms, as opposed to the platforms themselves.

While it is still too early to gauge whether the PLA will successfully transform into a modern and networked-enabled force capable of projecting power across the Asia-Pacific, the reforms instituted by Xi, as well as his recently proposed enhancements to military theory and organisational structure, have undeniably moved China's military closer towards that goal.

In accordance with Xi's vision for his troops, as enunciated at the 19th Party Congress, that the PLA modernise itself by 2035 and be transformed into a world-class armed force by 2050, the PLA has embraced the new operational concept of 'informationised warfare,' as well as continuing to physically upgrade its forces to be on par with the world's most advanced militaries.

Xi also intends to limit the power and autonomy of PLA elites vis-à-vis the office of the Central Military Commission (CMC) chairman, in order to encourage military professionalism and to enable more efficient and effective joint integrated operations. Consequently, his reforms have begun to dismantle and reorganise the general headquarters, military regions and services, recent reforms, as well as compressed the layers of command and administrative bureaucracy.

It is expected that increased mechanisation and informationisation, on top of decades of strong economic growth and greater civil-military integration, will result in a better-equipped force, kitted out with upgraded in communications and computing, as well as more advanced surveillance and reconnaissance systems. In sum, this means that the PLA will be able to be deployed to combat theatres more expeditiously than in the past.

Enhancing the PLA's 'Heartware'

As the PLA transitions towards a more joint and informationised force, it becomes equally crucial, if not more important, that it also upgrades its 'heartware' – the more intangible aspects of modernisation, including its operational culture and military ethos. This is to effect complementary changes to its organisation and doctrine, as well as the training of its officers and members of the rank-and-file.

With authoritative commentaries in the *PLA Daily* stipulating that the key source of resistance to the military reforms 'comes from within', it becomes clear that the indictments of military 'tigers' were partly to punish PLA leaders who had compromised CCP authority, but more importantly, to serve as a warning to the rest not to stand in the way of reforms.

In the near- to medium-term, however, the PLA may well be confronted with even greater challenges to carry out the deeper 'below-the-neck' reforms that extend beyond simply revising its operational and administrative structures. Indeed, any fundamental change to Chinese military 'heartware' may well take a few generations to accomplish.

Problems and Prospects

Xi Jinping's ability to reject established Party succession norms can be attributed to

the fact that the PLA has thrown its weight behind its civilian commander-in-chief in asserting himself against other Party elites – with Xi also having centralised politico-military power in himself. In return, the CMC chairman has appealed to the PLA's corporate interests by enhancing the status of the military profession and by according the PLA pride of place in the Party-state regime.

Following the crisis of legitimacy that had plagued the PLA in the “period of decadence” – when some of China's top soldiers went as far as disobeying legitimate commands of the previous commander-in-chief – Xi has since reshaped the Party-state-military establishment to exercise decisive influence.

Breaking traditions and military routines is a formidable task. Moreover, further game-changing upgrades of PLA hardware may also be retarded, with slowing economic growth rates threatening to undermine the previous robustness of China's military-industrial development and expansion. The PLA is now at a critical phase of its evolution. Its success or failure in effecting qualitative changes to both its hardware and ‘heartware’ will determine whether Beijing will be able to deal with a greater number of contingencies and new missions further away from Chinese shores.

James Char is an Associate Research Fellow with the China Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Richard A. Bitzinger is a Senior Fellow and Programme Coordinator of the Military Transformations Programme at RSIS. They are co-editors of a special issue of The China Quarterly, “A New Direction in the People's Liberation Army's Emergent Strategic Thinking, Roles and Missions.”

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Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg