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XI JINPING AND PLA TRANSFORMATION THROUGH REFORMS

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**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
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Abstract

China's five-year plan of PLA reform marked a new page in the history of PLA transformation. This article will analyse two major aspects of this round of unprecedented PLA reforms: (i) the politics of the military reform; and (ii) the PLA's efforts to reshape its force establishments, organisational structure, and command chains. The first concerns Xi's political leadership and the second draws a roadmap to remould the PLA by 2020. By now the reform has yielded substantial achievements: (i) the overhaul of the apex of power; (ii) the reshaping of the mid-level command chains of the war zone and service; and (iii) the restructuring of the overall force establishments. It has also created some transitional uncertainties as well.

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Introduction

On 23 November 2015, Xi Jinping announced a new five-year plan of People's Liberation Army (PLA) reform. This marked a new page in the history of PLA transformation through a revolutionary programme to remould China's armed forces. This article will analyse two major aspects of this round of unprecedented PLA reforms: (i) the politics of the military reform; and (ii) the PLA's efforts to reshape its force establishments, organisational structure, and command chains. The first concerns Xi's political leadership broadly with the primary ingredients of power centralisation and personalisation in the chair responsibility system of the Central Military Commission (CMC). The second is extremely rich in content. Under a roadmap drawn by Xi in the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, the reform process goes through three stages: the overhaul of the apex of power; the reshaping of the mid-level command chains of the war zone and service; and the restructuring of the overall force establishments.

Once it is fully implemented in 2020, the PLA will take on a completely new look. So this article is a brief political and military assessment of the PLA's fundamental changes in strategic and institutional perspectives. As with all militaries of major powers, the PLA will also have to deal with many political and organisational uncertainties in cycles of reformations.¹ Some transitional dislocations have taken place because of the thoroughness and promptness of the translation of such a reform programme into practice. This may adversely affect the PLA's routine administration and operations. More importantly, it will impact on China's civil–military relations, readiness for action, internal redistribution of power and interests, and the PLA's overseas operations.

Politics in Command of PLA Reforms

On the surface, the latest round of PLA reform aims at enhancing the PLA's capabilities and efficiency to fight and win the next war. More strategically, however, it is politically centred and driven. The immediate political goal of military reforms is to enhance Xi's authority to control the gun on behalf of the Party. The abolition of the two-term limit of the state presidency in the 13th National People's Congress in March 2018 serves the same purpose. Although state presidency is largely ceremonial, it does carry a good level of legitimacy for the office-holder to represent the country in the world stage. Deng Xiaoping created the trinity of powers (general party secretary, state presidency, and CMC chair in one person of the top leader) to protect his weak successor.² The term-limit for the presidency may, however, have generated some discrepancies in the power arrangement: i.e., tenured CMC chair *vis-à-vis* two-termed presidency that is foundational for the chairship of the State Military Commission (SMC). The constitutional revision may have finally bridged the gap. However, the removal of the term-limit may not lead to the evolution of his life-tenure in office. Xi's exit at the right time is

¹ On this latest round of PLA reforms, see, for instance, Cheng Li. "Promoting "Young Guards": The Recent High Turnover in the PLA Leadership." *China Leadership Monitor* 49 (2016): 1–12.

² Robert Kuhn. *The Man Who Changed China: Life and Legacy of Jiang Zeming*. New York: Crown, 2003, p. 123.

predictable but depends much on the currently unpredictable preconditions such as domestic and international situations and the availability of a capable successor who can command elite support and national cohesion. Now the term-unity of CMC chairship and SMC chairship visibly enhances Xi's civilian control of the military, but it may have also cast clouds on power institutionalisation — the central theme of post-Mao reforms of the country's political system.

The Key Reform Measures with Significant Political Implications

The reform package is very rich. Among other things, consolidation of Xi Jinping's power as the core of the Party and the military leadership tops all other reform agendas. The following major changes have been introduced with tremendous political implications in both CCP (Chinese Communist Party)/PLA relations and in the PLA decision-making process:

- (i) Power centralisation in the CMC. Following Xi's guiding principle for the reform — the CMC takes the overall charge in unifying the PLA's operational and administrative command — the new CMC is now an all-powerful body as China's highest civil–military authority.
- (ii) The CMC chair's one-man-rule system has been substantially personalised in Xi, a political act that empowers his domination in both party politics and military command, and served as an institutional insurance for realizing his blueprints of the CCP's 19th Party Congress.
- (iii) Rebalancing the civilian control of commander-in-chief over professional soldiers and the latter's autonomy in PLA administration and operations, in favour of the former.
- (iv) The force overhaul paved the way for CMC leadership reshuffle in the 19th Congress. Now, the 19th CMC is composed of a core Xi grouping, ensuring Xi's firm control of the gun.
- (v) The reform has deepened the anti-corruption campaign in the armed forces. In coupling settlement of the “old accounts” of the corrupt deeds by senior officers and personnel changes necessitated by the reforms, huge pressure has been put on PLA officers at all levels to comply with Xi's command and reform measures.
- (vi) Re-adjusting the military's internal and external functions. For instance, the PLA's provincial military district system has been largely stripped of the operational authority in

daily military affairs in localities, e.g., the border defence. The PLA is now more operationally focused on international matters of defence mobilisation.³

- (vii) Similar to the point above, the People's Armed Police (PAP), which previously assumed the primary role of state control in the State Council's administrative chain, is now placed under the direct CMC operational and organisational command. The military's weight in China's domestic politics is on the rise.

The political significance of these reforms is profound. The effect of overhauling the PLA's "head" and "nerve" system is more political than administrative and operational and is now institutionalised in the new CMC system with a new personnel line-up, a new managerial structure, and altered bureaucratic procedures in place to implement Xi's orders. Thus, the CMC's authority in the daily management of PLA affairs has been maximised and so has Xi's own, with his CMC chair becoming a symbol of the ultimate power.

CMC Chair and Xi's Personalised Domination of the Professional Soldiers

A key objective of the military reform is to centralise CMC control over the whole armed forces.⁴ This strategic move was much politically motivated in response to the weakened CMC power under the previous CMC chair. Until November 2015, the PLA had carried out a combined CMC-headquarters command system, with the four central departments holding sway over the PLA's daily and strategic management for seven decades: the General Staff Department (GSD), the General Political Affairs Department, the General Logistical Department, and the General Armament Department. Although the CMC was the ultimate locus of policy approval, the four departments were entrusted with major decision-making power in running PLA affairs. They routinely issued policies and orders to PLA units in the CMC's name and on its behalf. Institutionally, they could be barriers separating the CMC chair and leading PLA agencies. Often and especially under hands-off CMC chairs, the CMC's control could be circumvented when the four departments took over the policy initiatives and processes, although all the major decisions still bore the CMC name. And these departments were army entities, suppressing the authorities of services. These were the reasons why when the CMC collected inputs for the design of the new PLA command chains in 2015, 90% of senior officers surveyed expressed their views that without altering the status of the four headquarters, this round of reforms would not go anywhere.⁵ Xi's decision to downgrade them from being autonomous power holders to functional CMC offices was one of most far-reaching in this round of PLA reforms.

³ Huang Jinming. "Improving the National Defense Mobilizational System." *China National Defense Newspaper*, 1 February 2018, p. 3.

⁴ Zhao Jianshi, et al. *The Basic Course of Military Theory*. Shanghai: Shanghai Jiaotong University Press, 2016, p. 20.

⁵ "Carry the Reforms to the End", the CCP Publicity Department and the PLA Political Affairs Department, Series Number 7, CCTV-1, November 2017.

This change is one stone killing two birds. First, when the CMC becomes the sole authority to make strategic decisions, the goal of power centralisation can be realised with greater ease. The level of authorisation granted to generals below the CMC is greatly lowered and so is the space for their abuse of power. Second, the CMC's chair has been institutionally enabled to conduct more detailed controls over the central agencies that are now regrouped into 15 smaller administrative bodies and placed directly under the CMC. In this regrouping, over 200 central agencies at or above the divisional level were streamlined from the headquarters structure, with one-third personnel being reduced.⁶ This favourably compares with the CMC chair's previously hard job of handling four giant central departments.

The key to CMC power centralisation is to reinstate the supreme authority of CMC chair, which symbolises civilian control of the military. Institutionally, this is about reinforcing the personalised power of CMC chair in the CMC chair responsibility system in running PLA affairs, guaranteed by the PRC Constitution, CCP/PLA norms, and traditions.⁷ This authority of CMC chair was visibly eroded by Hu Jintao's *reign-without-rule* leadership style that stimulated top soldiers to abuse power without fear. Since Xi came to power, the CCP Politburo has repeatedly issued directives stressing inviolability of the CMC Chair responsibility system and equated it with the Party's absolute control of the PLA. The current most popular euphoria of senior officers is to follow and protect Xi's authority as CMC chair, as reflected by the words of former deputy commander-in-chief Fan Changlong: "firmly safeguarding and implementing CMC chair one-man rule system is the crux and primary mission of the PLA reforms. It is concrete criteria to measure PLA loyalty to the Party and embodiment of the PLA's iron discipline."⁸

Enhancing the CMC chair responsibility system is always a political act, and it was emphasised each time Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping perceived an internal challenge to their leadership. Therefore, Xi's reiteration of this mechanism of control is not new and is more political than military/managerial. In this one-man rule system, CMC power centralisation is made embedded in Xi's power personalisation, which can in turn be extended to his control of Party agenda and CCP factional activities, especially when there is major elite disagreement on his political line, personnel arrangement (i.e., choice of the successor), and strategic policies.

One specific move to personalise Xi's PLA leadership is to let him take practical charge of PLA operational command, which is the ultimate personal authority any leader can receive. Culturally and traditionally in China, the operational command is absolutely exclusive. Organisationally only with the CMC chair's personal signature can war be declared, troops deployed, and nuclear button pressed. Mao's unchallengeable power could be traced to his direct command of generals and campaigns in wartime. In peacetime, CMC chairs normally delegate operational aspect of PLA management to his

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ You Ji. *China's Military Transformation: Politics and War Preparation*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, p. 48.

⁸ "Plenary session of the PLA delegation to the 16th NPC Conference." *The PLA Daily*, 8 March 2016, p. 1.

trusted deputies, as they spend more time on other top political issues. That Xi made himself chief of the CMC Supreme Joint Command Centre can be interpreted as his hands-on style of combat command, even in peacetime. His two inspection trips to the Centre in 2016 and 2017 highlighted not only his emphasis on war preparation but his role of being the PLA's operational chief, which further substantiates his position as CMC chair. As both commander-in-chief and chair of joint chief of staff in the American system, the list of PLA tasks requiring his personal approval now becomes significantly longer, a concrete measure to enhance the CMC chair system and the CMC chair's personal grip on strategic PLA activities.⁹

Party Control over the PLA Still Fragmented?

Interestingly, despite the claim that the PLA's new reform has tightened Party control of the gun, the long-standing fragmented CCP organisational leadership over the PLA has remained unimproved. Xi continues to uphold Mao's formula: "The Politburo runs political affairs and the CMC military affairs", which shields the civilians from intruding the PLA affairs. By CCP/PLA norms and procedures no other civilian Politburo member except for the CMC chair is authorised to handle PLA affairs and no party organs are allowed to interfere with PLA management, i.e., the personnel appointments. The CMC continues to pursue the anti-corruption campaign autonomously. Therefore, the CCP control is mainly in the form of political leadership without effective organisational teeth.¹⁰

There is no doubt that Xi's personal control over the PLA has been substantially enhanced but not necessarily that of the Party's. A clear proof of this argument is the total absence of civilian Politburo members in all those big events where Xi announced the giant PLA reforms. Official reportage of these occasions did not bother to mention the word Politburo, begging questions of whether the decisions were the Politburo's or the CMC's alone, although the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) had to endorse them as a Party procedure. For instance, the Overall Programme of Deepening National Defence and Military Reforms (深化国防和军队改革总体方案) was drafted and endorsed by the CMC's Deepening Reform Leadership Group in its third plenary session on 14 July 2015 and tabled to the CMC Standing Committee meeting for approval on 22 July. Then the CMC submitted this package officially to the PSC meeting and immediately received the green light.¹¹ This tight timetable showed that the PSC had only a week to assess such a complicated and strategically comprehensive reform programme. One has to wonder that this tight schedule simply testified the argument that Xi's civilian colleagues were not at all involved in the whole enterprise of PLA reforms and they simply rubber-stamped the programme: no one was willing to say no to a bill that was already endorsed by Xi. Another fact is that when Xi makes inspection tours to PLA camps he is not

⁹ See for instance, Helena Legarda. "Xi tightens grip on Central Military Commission." *China Global Security Tracker*, No. 2, 2017.

¹⁰ Kjek Erik Brodsgaard (editor). *Chinese Politics as Fragmented Authoritarianism*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, pp. 204–222.

¹¹ "Carry the Reforms to the End." the CCP Publicity Department and the PLA Political Affairs Department. Series 7, November 2017.

accompanied by any of his civilian colleagues. Apparently, under him, the CMC's operational and administrative authority is thus further shielded from the civilian reach. Consequently, Xi's firm control over the military directly boosts his overall power foundation over his civilian colleagues.

PLA Reform and Xi Jinping's Political Leadership

The ongoing PLA reform has reflected Xi's strong political leadership in running China and in deepening PLA transformations, facilitated by an assertive personal style that proves the admonition: "leadership matters." Xi's political leadership of taking bold and controversial initiatives has been in sharp contrast to his predecessor's technocratic leadership that valued more bureaucratic consensus and collegiality based on compromise (not to rock the boat 不折腾) than strategic innovation and necessary elite debate. This round of PLA reform provides an excellent case for an analysis of Xi's distinctive dialectics in wielding power by striking a subtle balance between initiating bold/controversial reforms with resolve and managing negativity/constraints with available means and amidst internal resistance, which is a rational way in prioritizing major policies within a limited range of options. Specifically, Xi's political leadership of China's armed forces is demonstrated by his personal traits listed below.

Calculated Risk-taking

It is amazing and to the surprise of all PLA watchers that there have been little open debates on how to reshape the PLA and the internal evaluation period was rather short, just over one year before the reform was announced. Moreover, no experimental trials and no transitional steps/phases for such a comprehensive reform were conducted. Xi's typical "completion-by-one-go" (一步到位) mentality may have reflected his anxiety over China's obsolete military system *vis-à-vis* contemporary warfare but is fundamentally at odds with the history and norms of CCP reforms based on gradualism and against the "big-bang" approach.

Xi may well recognise the risks of reform failures but still went ahead in a big way, as he believed that it was worth trying if the gains were larger than losses or if the cost was dearer than that of not doing it. Therefore, while pushing it relentlessly for breakthroughs in PLA transformation, he also warns his generals against committing errors of "sabotage" in selecting what to change. Being pro-active but steady is one of the four guiding principles for the reform.¹²

¹² Major General Ren Tianyou. *The Way to the Strengthening of the PLA through Reforms*, Beijing: The PLA National University Press, 2015, p. 13.

Political Resolve

Every reform entails a redistribution of vested interests, a source of zero-sum strife that requires the leader's tremendous personal resolve to carry it through. This is particularly true to the PLA, a conservative political institution in China, as generals recognise it themselves.¹³ In fact, a number of the changes in this round of reform were proposed several times before. In the PLA's 1984 restructuring, for instance, the substitution of the Military Region (MR) system by the war-zone system was already tabled. It was aborted, however, as even Deng had to yield to the pressure of PLA elders and MR commanders who would lose out in such a transition.¹⁴ One telling example is about the PLA's force redeployment. After Group Army (GA) 28 was disbanded no GA was deployed in Shanxi, a strategically important province to shield Beijing. The motion to transfer a GA to Shanxi was made a long time ago. As a result of the complicated matters concerning GA relocation, the 17th CMC simply shelved it. In November 2016, Xi just ordered GA 27 to move to Shanxi within one week. In 2017, several dozen similar transfers took place. The troops and their commanders (over 200 generals) had to be in new deployment within three days.¹⁵

Xi's assertive leadership style reflects his confidence to override resistance from affected PLA interests. Moreover, his resolve is a clear indicator that his power consolidation had reached such a level that he can tackle controversies with a free hand.¹⁶ In less than two years of the reforms, gone were over 200 quotas of generals; over 1,000 regimental units from the PLA table of combat establishments; and one-third of cadre positions from the officer's corps.¹⁷

Strong Sense of Responsibility and Urgency for PLA Transformation

Related to political resolve is a sense of responsibility and personal urge for change. The claim that without Xi's reform the PLA's survival would be at stake is an exaggeration in official propaganda. The fact is that the PLA will grow stronger with or without this round of reform and it would remain unknown how much Xi's reform would improve the PLA's combat efficiency. Regardless of whether such an exaggeration is part of a media campaign to promote Xi's personal image, Xi's bold move to bite the bullet is admirable and reflects his personal worry of the PLA's future when it is forced to be at a crossroads of global military transformation. He was right in judging that the PLA's command chains and force structure were unsuitable to its future war of joint operations, as he expressed his deep worry about "whether the PLA could win the victory, when the war erupts."¹⁸ At least Xi has shown that

¹³ Liu Yazhou, et al. *Strive to Strengthen the PLA*. Beijing, 2016, p. 7.

¹⁴ Ian Wilson and You Ji. "Leadership by 'Lines': China's Unresolved Succession." *Problems of Communism* 39 (1990), pp. 28–44.

¹⁵ "Adhere with the Initial Ideals and Uphold the Goal of PLA Strengthening." The CCP Publicity Department and the PLA Political Affairs Department, Documentary Series Number 5, CCTV-1, 8 October 2017.

¹⁶ According to Major General Zhang Yu, Deputy Director of CMC Reform and Establishment Office, whenever there were matters that the CMC members could not agree upon, they sought Xi's decisions and Xi made them on the spot with great courage and determination. As above.

¹⁷ "Carry the Reforms to the End." Series 8, November 2017.

¹⁸ General Liu Jixian's quote in Liu Yang. *The Combat Features of Political Work*. Beijing: The PLA Publishing House, 2015, p. 3.

he is catching up with the time with the evolution of military science and changed modes of war, which is helpful in setting long-term PLA development in a right direction of joint informatised warfare.

PLA Transformation through Reforms and War Preparation

If the PLA reform is analysed through the military angle, the keyword for understanding is “war preparation” that underlines all transformational innovations: new military establishments, operational/administrative chains, national defence strategy, force components and structure, weapons R&D, equipment policies, education/training, national defence mobilisational mechanisms, civil/military industrial integration, and creations of new services and joint combat control centres. Indeed, when the overall guidance for military transformation through reforms is to highlight war-fighting, it has been aligned with Xi’s shift of emphasis of war preparation from his predecessor’s on *preparation* to his own on *warring*. For instance, among the first things he did in assuming the commander-in-chief position was the termination of the 17th CMC’s emphasis on the PLA missions of military operations other than war (MOOTW).

Xi’s reforms have presented a detailed roadmap of reform to facilitate the PLA’s overall transformation. He has set the transitional stages and objectives for both, embodied in two timetables. The first is a schedule for the reforms to proceed to 2020, starting from reconstructing a new leadership/command apparatus at the apex and in the war zones, followed by regrouping the PLA force establishments and structure, and then settled down with a series of matching policy systems. Simultaneously, a three-phase plan was announced for PLA transformation in the Party’s 19th Congress, which set 2050 as the deadline for the transformation to reach a relatively final mode. By then, the PLA will fulfil its strategic objective for transformation: to become a first-class military in the world.¹⁹

The Reform Agenda and Primary Contents

In November 2015, Xi set the year of 2020 as one to put the overall thrusts of PLA reforms in place. Generally speaking, the timetable reads like the following: it would take a year or so to rebuild the PLA’s “head,” and another year the “body.” The end of 2017 would see the bulk of the reform measures implemented. Then, it will take two years to consolidate the new systems, readjust organisational incompatibilities and overcome the transitional void: a process of reforming the reforms to fit all changes in the new realities in PLA administration and operations. By 2020, the whole of the reform designs would be translated into a new PLA force that meets the basic organic requirements as a top and modern military of the world.²⁰ At the time of writing, most of the PLA’s reform blueprints have been in place with the exception of the delayed PAP reform. Except for the transfer of its

¹⁹ “Xi Jinping’s Political Report to the 19th Party Congress.” *The PLA Daily*, October 2017, p. 1.

²⁰ “Xi Jinping’s Speech to CMC Enlarged Conference on Deepening PLA Reforms.” *The PLA Daily*, 25 November 2015, p. 1.

command to the CMC in January 2018 the PAP regrouping has just begun. Organisationally, the following are the highlights of the reforms in the “head”:

- (i) In abolishing the central headquarters system, 15 functional departments have been erected inside the CMC to service its administration of the PLA.
- (ii) Operationally, the newly established CMC Supreme Joint Command Centre now exercises the ultimate combat command of all PLA troops for both peacetime war preparation and wartime campaigns.
- (iii) Creation of the Army headquarters. In the past, the Army dominated the central headquarters, especially the GSD, and thus were above the Navy, Air Force, and the Rocket Force. As a result, any joint command system would be hampered by the Army centrality, not suitable for the future joint warfare. Now, the Army has been made equal to the status of other services in the top decision-making process, despite the fact that the 19th CMC is overwhelmingly composed of foot soldiers.
- (iv) A new national defence mobilisation system has absorbed regional military administrative authorities that no longer assume any operational functions, except for Beijing, Tibet, and Xinjiang, which traditionally commanded substantial combat troops. But they are now placed under the organisational control of the theatre commandants.
- (v) In 2016, the Strategic Support Force (FSS) was established with a service-equivalent status. Once in full operations, it will integrate all “new types of fighting components” in modern warfare, such as those for “star wars,” cyber warfare, internet warfare, unmanned warfare, and so on.
- (vi) A CMC DARPA was established in addition to the new National Civil–Military Industrial/Defence Integration Commission. It will be responsible for the R&D of China’s most advanced and futurist weapons systems, both hardware and software.
- (vii) To enhance the PLA’s internal checks-and-balances system, the military legal and disciplinary authority was separated from the PLA Political Affairs Department. It is now an independent organ of power with its head being a CMC member and its organisational status above that of each PLA service.

Below the “neck” of the PLA “body,” a good number of reconstructive programmes have been carried out and a new force foundation has been laid for the military to transform. The following are the key reform measures of great significance:

- (i) Swapping the MR system (seven MRs) with a war-zone system (five theatre commandants) that has reduced the PLA’s operational command from five levels to three. This has effectively streamlined the tiers of command structure and information relays to suit the new types of informatised warfare.
- (ii) Separation of operational and administrative functions between the theatre commandants and service headquarters. The former is responsible for operations and the combat-oriented training according to pre-set real war scenarios (targeted enemies) in their strategic war directions. The latter undertakes the administrative and bureaucratic management of the services, including general training of the soldiers. This is a far-reaching reform on China’s domestic politics. The previous MR system combined both administration and operation functions, with the former also taking internal control missions. Now, the theatre commandant system is designed to concentrate on operations only to tighten efficiency on strategic and campaign command. This is similar to the US commandant system.²¹ At the same time, as the services are now dropped from the chains of combat command, they concentrate on daily force administration and coordinate war-preparation activities of each service now embedded in the theatre commandants.
- (iii) With the internal functions of the PLA shifted to the PAP, the combat forces are basically oriented towards external threats.
- (iv) The PLA’s 18 GAs were regrouped into 13 with substantial reorganisation among them. A new map of their redeployment has been drawn highlighting their catered combat missions in the strategic war directions.
- (v) Within the organic structure of the Army, the GAs still serve as the basic campaign-level force. However, under the GAs, with exception of a couple of heavy-mechanized divisions remaining, the previous advanced tactical unit of divisions was replaced by the basic tactic unit of brigades, and the tactical force structure — brigade-battalion — is no longer based on the traditional infantry composition, but on that of functional arms clusters.
- (vi) The PLA’s 77 institutions of higher learning were amalgamated into 43 with the creation of a three-tiered tertiary education system: the advanced commanding courses for

²¹ Liu Yazhou, et al., et al. *Strive to Strengthen the PLA*. Beijing, 2016, p. 23.

officers at the campaign level and above, offered by comprehensive and joint warfare universities; the basic courses for cadet and specialty training for technical professionals, provided by the universities of the services; and general military education, offered mainly by civilian/military universities.²²

- (vii) A new combat logistics system was created, consisting one trans-service army-rank supply base in Wuhan, central China, and five sub-centres in each theatre commandant, leaving the CMC Joint Logistics Department largely to take care of the administrative work.
- (viii) With the reduction of 300,000 personnel, the force restructuring has redressed a number of crucial ratios to align the PLA with standardisation of the world's top military powers. These include a new ratio between the army and other services. Now, the manpower of the ground force has dropped below one million and below 50% of the four services for the first time in PLA history. The ratio between officers and soldiers has been formulated in favour of the latter, over 1 to 10, with the total number of officers being reduced by one-third. The same is true for the cases of staff officers *vis-à-vis* technical officers and of volunteer soldiers *vis-à-vis* non-commissioned officers, both in favour of the latter. The ratio between combat troops and service units has been re-adjusted to streamline the latter, and so have the heavy-equipped divisions been reduced to increase lightly equipped, more mobile brigades. Changes in ratios also include a visible drop of combat units *vis-à-vis* supporting units; and supporting units *vis-à-vis* technological supporting units.²³ After these ratios are re-set, the PLA has removed over 1,000 organic units at the regiment and above from the force structure, and personnel in non-combat agencies was cut by half.²⁴
- (ix) Substantial enhancement of the amphibious force from only two brigades of special operations to a dozen for generic amphibious purposes, e.g., catering to the security challenges in the Taiwan Strait, the South and East China Seas, and in the Yellow Sea cross the Korean Peninsula.
- (x) Elimination of all PLA activities for profit generation, especially in the areas of real estate, commercial lease of airport and naval ports, and fee-charged medical services.

²² "Carry the Reforms to the End." Series 8, November 2017.

²³ Ren Tianyou, *The Way to the Strengthening of the PLA through Reforms*, 2015, p. 57.

²⁴ "Carry the Reforms to the End." Series 8, November 2017.

Initial Assessment as Concluding Remarks

Seeing from the political perspectives, the ongoing PLA reform has accelerated the tempo of Xi's power consolidation, centralisation, and personalisation. In a way, Xi's assertiveness may have compensated for inadequacies of post-Deng power institutionalisation inherent in the PSC's collective leadership that could give rise to a zero-sum power struggle at the centre. China's mobilisational political system requires a tough leader who can help maintain civil–military stability by whatever means and translate his authority into smooth policy-making, punishing corrupt officials, tackling vested interest groups, and so on. Granting Xi unprecedented personal power has been CCP and PLA consensus to deal with the structural problems in the reform, such as the PLA's conservatism. Yet this consensus is a means, not an end. However, it is unpredictable whether the means turns into the end. A top leader with huge personal authority can be a source of instability himself, as seen from the following trends of development as the result of the ongoing PLA reform:

- (i) The emphasis on CMC chair one-man rule along the lines of Maoist Politburo/CMC divide may further fragment civilian oversight of PLA activities when other civilians are not authorized to handle PLA affairs.
- (ii) Xi's military reform has narrowed the scope of civilian primacy over PLA affairs, e.g., with the State Council surrendering large proportions of leadership over matters of national defence to the CMC, i.e., national mobilisation and PAP administration.
- (iii) Xi's hands-on approach will rebalance commander-in-chief's routine intervention and PLA autonomy in daily management. The PLA professional weight in military policy-making and operational command may be affected.

This list of challenges derived from a particular Xi style of military leadership through changes is not exhausted. Uncertainty is inherent in Xi's political leadership that may come at odds with some of the existing Party and PLA norms and time-honoured practices, e.g., the post-Deng norms of the Party General Secretary staying in office for two terms in office, even if no such term-limit is prescribed in the Party Charter.

Militarily, there is little doubt that the ongoing reforms will eventually enhance the PLA's combat readiness through restructuring the PLA according to the newest development of military science, military technologies, and, above all, the new modes of combat engagement. However, the risks are also definite, as the transitional dislocations may temporarily undermine the PLA's force coherence and command effectiveness at various levels. For instance, the Sino-Indian Doclam standoff exposed the danger of belittling the crucial role of the ground force in China's national defence. Nowadays, a trendy thing for PLA interlocutors to do is to criticise the so-called Grand-Army-mentality when they highlight the importance of special services such as the Navy in the future integrated joint operations.

After all, China is a continental power with very long land borders under militarised disputes, e.g., in the tense Sino-DPRK borders. A land war involving China is no smaller than that of a maritime one.

The separation of the military operations system and administration system at the levels below the CMC has created confusion in command and control. For instance, the authority of the war zone command is horizontally allocated. It is operationally and organisationally above all the troops of the services in the theatre, similar to America's commandant command. The service headquarters are basically vertical administrative agencies whose power is now more functional and managerial, such as taking care of the daily training of the units in the services. Yet, they are still in charge of financial resources and personnel appointment of senior officers in the war zone who are operationally placed under the commanders there. Contradictions are bound to emerge. At this moment of change, the conflicts between the vertical and horizontal control mechanisms are wide-spread, affecting both troop stability and combat readiness.²⁵

As all major reforms are a process of redistribution of power among involved parties, this round of PLA reform has also created winners and losers. For instance, the bureaucratic ranks of the second-degree departments were downgraded from full corps to deputy corps, adversely affecting the chances of promotion of over 100 generals. The lost power of the services to the theatre commandants in terms of influence and resource allocation generates discontent among service commanders. The dismissed officers in the process of force reduction would leave the PLA with bitter feelings and this has a negative impact on their remaining colleagues. Clearly, Xi Jinping and his CMC subordinates have to work hard to restore the morale of the affected rank-and-file members of the armed forces, but this is not easy in the short term.

More profoundly, China is in peacetime but the persistent emphasis on warfighting and subjecting the armed forces to constant war games may eat into national resources at a time when the country's economic growth and vigour have been weakened. Promotion of an under-siege idea shapes people's mentality of crisis that in turn drives a militarist thinking among the population. Last but not the least emphasis on war further lifts the military's social and political status in domestic politics and in the decision-making process over foreign policy and territorial disputes.²⁶

²⁵ Senior Colonel Zhang Yunfei. "How can the War Zone Commandants Command the Troops When They do not have Power over Financial Resources and Personnel Authority." *The PLA Daily*, 15 April 2016.

²⁶ You Ji. "Xi Jinping and PLA Centrality in Beijing's South China Sea Dispute Management." *China: An International Journal* 15 (2017): 4–24.

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