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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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No. 013/2014 dated 21 January 2014

## Is Xi Jinping Reshaping the PLA?

By Sukjoon Yoon

### Synopsis

*Although Beijing denies it, Xi Jinping is attempting to reorganise the People's Liberation Army to enhance its joint warfare capability. This radical change is intended to allow the PLA to respond better to external threats, especially in disputed maritime domains. Its operational implementation will, however, not be straightforward.*

### Commentary

IS CHINESE President Xi Jinping reorganising the People's Liberation Army (PLA)? Although Beijing denies it, planned changes were revealed at the start of this year by Japan's Yomiuri Shimbun and then the China Daily. According to these newspapers the reorganisation is already underway.

The three coastal Military Regions (MRs) of Jinan, Nanjing and Guangzhou will be merged into a single Joint Forces Command (JFC) dealing with the maritime theatres of the Yellow, East China, and South China Seas. A further two JFCs will be created from the existing Shenyang, Beijing, Lanzhou and Chengdu MRs.

### Why Now?

The Chinese defence ministry has denied the formation of a joint operational command. This reorganisation, however, continues a trend of aggregation: the 13 MRs established in 1948 were reduced to 11 in 1969, and then to seven in 1987. The changes appear to follow from President Xi's Autumn 2013 directive to improve operational agility and develop combat synergies. The PLA is also trimming its numbers from 2.3 to two million, allowing funds to be reallocated to procurement and the operational demands of JFC missions.

The reorganisation of the PLA's operational structure is needed for four reasons. Firstly, new threats have shown existing methods of determining an appropriate military response to be complex and opaque, particularly now that the operational theatre has been extended beyond China's borders into the surrounding seas and airspace, including overlapping Exclusive Economic Zones and the controversial new Air Defence Identification Zone.

China cites as its "core interest" its maritime disputes with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei and is also confronting Japan --and potentially the United States - over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Indeed, Japan has recently announced major changes to its own strategic approach, the so-called 'integrated mobile defence'.

Secondly, the PLA has hitherto been primarily concerned with defending China's borders; so to become an agile force capable of mounting a rapid response to external threats, especially in the disputed waters, the PLA

must give less weight to the ideological requirements of the CCP and focus instead on innovative military technology to build a truly professional military.

Thirdly, the PLA's future operational concept is likely to be geared towards offensive joint warfare, rather than the current defensive tactics of 'Anti-Access and Area Denial' (AA/AD). In place of operations led by land forces, joint Air-Sea campaigns will become the norm in which force is projected beyond China's borders, thus demanding close co-ordination between commanders and personnel of the four services.

Fourthly, the formation of the State Security Council last year as the highest national command authority means developing a new command and control structure. Since the 1920s, the PLA has been directed by looser command structures between the state and the party. As the head of the Central Military Commission with its dual mandate, President Xi, as the civilian commander-in-chief, has a central role in integrating JFC capabilities and moving toward a joint warfare concept.

### **Implementation issues**

Making changes to PLA operational concepts also means redefining missions and organisational arrangements. This requires new doctrines, force structures and equipment, all of which entail training, and, most importantly, new combat capabilities.

There are, however, formidable complications to be overcome: the intricate civil-military relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the PLA makes it difficult to establish a truly professional military. The requisite conceptual frameworks and strategic, operational and tactical military practices to support joint warfare missions have not yet been developed. The disparate components of the newly established JFCs may also resist integration.

This top-down reorganisation of PLA operational configurations must also be accompanied by effective new strategic doctrines, force structures, and equipment, as well as operational training, and, most importantly, new combat capabilities.

Unless it is reformed, the unusual character of the command relationship between the CCP and the PLA may result in ambiguous directives or uncoordinated training programmes. These issues could undermine the effectiveness of the reorganisation, even if joint operational planning leads to apparent combat readiness.

A clear and concise grand strategic doctrine should specify how JFCs will be used, particularly for joint warfare campaigns beyond the territorial domain. President Xi has yet to issue any such grand doctrine for the PLA, which has had very little experience of conducting joint campaign operations; and of course the rest of the world is also concerned about the content of this doctrine.

### **Deeper difficulties**

There are some signs that the PLA is successfully developing new missions and operational concepts: its largest-ever joint fleet exercise, named 'Jidong 5' or 'Mobilisation 5' was conducted in October 2013 in the western Pacific. This was a campaign-level exercise involving a very significant portion of the surface combatants, aircraft and submarines from China's North, East and South Sea Fleets. It was also attempting to replace the heavily scripted scenarios of previous exercises with the more spontaneous manoeuvring necessary for rapid-reaction power projection.

The special relationship between the CCP and the PLA expresses Mao Zedong's military philosophy, the so-called 'People's War' doctrine, in place since the 1920s. This has produced incomplete or overlapping command and control structures, because the disposition and deployment of the MRs has been determined primarily by political rather than military considerations.

Xi's reorganisation implies a gradual transformation of the PLA from the army of the party into something closer to a 'true' state army, with JFC commanders granted more autonomy and less interference by the CCP. But within the military itself, most PLA officers still have to wear two hats for their military and party roles, and the tension between these 'two centres' has left the chain of command confused.

There are formidable obstacles to creating a single unified command and control structure at the national level. Indeed, the missions and responsibilities of the PLA have never had any standardised mechanisms of operational planning and procurement practices, and there is considerable organisational overlap.

Thus, the process of shaping new command structures, with the JFCs as force providers working together for a common purpose, entails much more than simply establishing a new national command authority. This is

merely the beginning of a long process which is conceptually and operationally complex.

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