

# China's Military Reorganization – and America's Window of Opportunity

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In September 2015, as part of the festivities marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory in World War II, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would cut 300,000 troops. A spokesman for the country's Ministry of National Defense (MND) described the cuts as “fully showing China's sincerity and aspiration to join hands with the rest of the world to maintain peace, pursue development and share prosperity. And also demonstrates China's active and responsible attitude toward the [sic] international arms control and disarmament.”

### Fewer Cooks, More Cruise Missiles

The spokesman's subsequent comments, however, seemed to indicate that the reforms aimed less at demonstrating China's sincerity toward peace and disarmament and more toward producing a leaner and meaner fighting force: he noted that even with its size reduced, the PRC would still have the world's largest military, be fully prepared to cope with risks to the nation's security, and would result in a better and more efficient military. The cuts, meant to streamline the PLA, would mainly target troops equipped with outdated armaments, office staff, and personnel of non-combat operations. China would maintain an “appropriate” scale of defense expenditure, to be accompanied by many reform initiatives.



These changes, which have been described as tectonic, do not bode well for global security. Foreshadowed by a vaguely worded statement by Xi at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Plenum of the party's 18th Central Committee in November 2013 about the need for reform, they were fleshed out in a far-reaching reorganization that was announced on New Year's Eve, 2015. The country's seven military regions have been replaced by five theater commands---the

latter sometimes translated as combat zones--one each for east, west, north, south, and central China. According to Chinese sources,<sup>[1]</sup> areas of responsibility for the respective commands are:

<b>Eastern Theater Command</b>	Taiwan and the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands
<b>Western Theater Command</b>	Central Asia (exercising vigilance against infiltration by radical and separatist elements)
<b>Northern Theater Command</b>	Northeast Asia (Japan, Korea)
<b>Southern Theater Command</b>	South China Sea and Southeast Asia
<b>Central Theater Command</b>	Defense of the central authorities and the “great rear for delivering reinforcement and support to the other four theaters”

The decision was motivated by a conviction that the previous military region organization was ill-equipped to meet the demands of joint war-fighting. According to the official state news agency *Xinhua*, the previous system was characterized by institutional barriers to winning wars such as unclear functions and ineffective joint command systems. The four general departments had developed autonomous tendencies that were inappropriate to the demands of future informationized war, a term that has become a mantra in PLA literature over the past decade.<sup>[2]</sup> Command and control is henceforth to go directly from the CMC to these five zones.<sup>[3]</sup>

A second major component of the reorganization involves replacing the PLA's four military departments--the General Command, General Political, General Logistics, and General Equipment departments—with fifteen groups, dispersing their functions and placing the successor groups under the direct control of the party's Central Military Commission (CMC), headed by President Xi Jinping. The impetus for this change was concern that the four departments had been behaving independently of one another. A Japanese newspaper, the conservative *Sankei Shimbun*, advanced yet another reason: to weaken the power of Chief of the General Staff Fang Fengfei. Fang had been appointed to his position by previous president and head of the CMC Hu Jintao just before Hu left office and hence Xi regarded him as loyal to Hu rather than himself.<sup>[4]</sup>

At the same time, new services have been inaugurated. The PLA Rocket Force, which will take over from the Second Artillery Corps, will henceforth have parity with a newly constituted PLA Land Army, Navy, and Air Force. The Rocket Force is charged with responsibility for the nation's increasingly powerful nuclear arsenal, while official sources describe the Strategic Support Force rather vaguely as “a new-type combat force to maintain national security and an important growth point of the PLA's combat capabilities.”<sup>[5]</sup> Non-Chinese sources believe that it will deal with high-technology warfare in space and cyberwar.

The intelligence community, including the former Second Department of the General Staff Department and the intelligence services of the National Security Commission, Ministry of Public Security, Liaison Office of the party's Central Committee, and the party's United Front Work Department, is also scheduled for a major reorganization. One source reports that the General Staff's First Department will be incorporated into the new Joint Staff Department, while the Third and Fourth Departments will join the new Strategic Support Force, The

intent, similar to plans for the PLA, is to centralize intelligence gathering and analysis and to place them firmly under the control of Xi Jinping.[6]

### **What Does the Reorganization Mean for the United States?**

If imitation be the sincerest form of flattery, Washington should be pleased: the new command and control structure of the PLA replicate those of the U.S. military in significant ways. Unfortunately, there is little to be gained from having a weaker adversary become more powerful through emulating one's strengths. Though still acknowledged as the world's most powerful force, the American military has seen its edge over China erode over the past decade, with the PRC's impressive advances enabled by a combination of generous budget increases, hard work, and technology purloined from the U.S. As well as by the stringent U.S. defense budgets that were mandated by sequestration rules. In March, Air Force Chief of Staff General Mark Welsh told the Defense Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee that China's air power will overtake that of the United States by 2030; navy sources have made similar statements about the PRC's maritime buildup, since U.S. procurement has slowed due to budget cuts. Although the Obama administration's budget request for fiscal year 2017 includes a request for an additional \$2.8 billion in funding for research and development,[7] there is consensus among analysts that the technological gap between the United States and Chinese militaries may continue to narrow.

Meanwhile, the slowdown in Chinese economic growth has barely affected defense budgets, which have enjoyed a nearly unbroken string of double digit increases each year since 1979 although the country has no external enemy. The intended 2016 budget increase of 7.6 percent, though one of the lowest since 1989, is still above the projected growth rate of 6.5 to 7 percent for the economy as a whole--and far above the defense budget increases of any state that could remotely be considered a peer competitor of the PRC.

Generous budgets have enabled the purchase of more capable weapons, including the Dongfeng (DF)-26, dubbed the Guam killer, since it is the first ballistic missile capable of targeting the U.S. bases on that island with conventional warheads. The DF-26, on display for the first time at the parade to commemorate victory in World War II, was revealed to have anti-ship ballistic missile capabilities as well. Also on display for the first time were the DF-5B and DF-31A intercontinental ballistic missiles. The DF-21D, developed in order to counter U.S. aircraft carriers, is hence known as the "carrier killer," while the DF-5B is believed to be China's first nuclear-armed ICBM with multiple independent re-entry vehicles. According to the respected *Defense Week*, although officially the DF-5B can carry three nuclear warheads, there are suspicions it can carry as many as five. [8] Also of concern are stealthy planes, new submarines both nuclear and conventionally powered, hypersonic weapons, and increasing numbers of drones. There has been a marked increase in arms purchase from Russia, most recently of S-400 missiles, whose 400 kilometer range can reach New Delhi, Calcutta, Hanoi, Seoul, and anywhere on Taiwan as well as support the PRC's controversial Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea.[9] China is also acquiring Russia's highly regarded Su-35 fighter plane.

### **But Will All These Plans Be Fulfilled?**

Drawing up blueprints for progress toward a force that is leaner, more capable, efficient, and loyal to him that Xi Jinping wants is one thing; bringing it to completion is another. One major impediment is apt to be pushback from those whose personal interests are affected. The cuts are expected to fall disproportionately on the ground forces which, consonant with China's status as a major continental state, had traditionally comprised the bulk of its military establishment. However, Beijing clearly intends to enforce its claims to disputed areas in the East China and South China seas against the resistance of other claimants and American unwillingness to accede to the new regime the PRC seems to be imposing on its freedom of navigation.

The PRC's island creation activities in disputed areas and placement of military installations on the islands militate toward a force structure that is more geared to war at sea and in the air than on land. Hence the vested interests of the ground forces will be affected. Perhaps indicative of the difficulties the leadership faces is the fact that the commanders of all five of the newly created battle zones are from the ground forces. Military leaders who see their dominant position being undercut can defend the primacy of land-based power by pointing to an intermittently simmering border dispute with India as well as the danger of religious extremist

infiltration from Central Asia -- and, perhaps more effectively, by passive resistance.

Numerous hints in the official press indicate that the leadership is worried about exactly this. Xi's comments just preceding his announcement of the cuts, that all officers and troops must keep in mind their responsibility to serve the people whole-heartedly to carry out the noble mission of world peace may be taken as an admonition to accept the severance orders that will be forthcoming. According to an article in the military newspaper *Jiefang Junbao*, although General Scharnhorst, the leading proponent of 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussian military reform, faced many obstacles, he nonetheless managed to implement measures that resulted in the modernization of the Prussian military, thus enabling its stunning later successes.[10] Another opined that, although during the Long March Mao Zedong demoted General Sun Yi from division head to regiment leader due to the demands of the job, Sun obeyed unquestioningly and even requested that his pay be reduced. Hence today's officers should not say irresponsible words or act irresponsibly.[11]

Officers and troops must not, according to the military newspaper, be "two-faced people" who overtly support military reform but in fact work against it. A U.S.-based website with good connections in China reported that some members of the recently-disestablished General Staff Department's intelligence service were allegedly retaliating by launching investigations against some of Xi Jinping's trusted allies.[12] There is likely a good deal that investigations might find: according to other reports in the military newspaper, three years after Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign began, it is still a problem. Lest readers conclude that these past efforts were futile, a *Jiefang Junbao* commentator stated that although rampant corruption has been "contained," the deeper issue has not been completely dealt with. There are also complaints about the poor quality of personnel. Officers repeat Chairman Xi's call for more rigorous training but do not require it: "empty words" are far too common.[13] There are constant complaints about the poor quality of personnel and serious dereliction of duty.[14]

An additional problem involves how to absorb the 300,000 troops that are to be cut into a civilian economy that is less robust than in the past. State owned enterprises, SOEs, have been told to reserve five percent of their total recruitment for demobilized troops. One problem is that the SOEs themselves are scheduled for restructuring in order to make them leaner and more efficient, and hiring those without a professional background will not help their bottom line.[15]

Nor are the new weapons necessarily problem-free. One reason for purchases from Russia is China's difficulties in indigenous production. For example, despite charges that their designs were stolen from the United States, the J-20 and J-31 stealth fighters cannot fly at supersonic speeds without resorting to afterburners, thereby forfeiting the stealthiness that enables them to escape radar detection. There are also reliability problems. The air force's best engine, the WS-10, in development since the 1980s, is underpowered and reportedly lasts only 30 hours before it must be replaced.[16]

Russia has also sold S-400 missiles to two PRC adversaries: as many to Vietnam as to China, and twice as many to India. The S-35 agreement was the result of tortuous negotiations, with Russia wary of the Chinese penchant for buying only a few copies, then reverse engineering and producing its own. Only after falling oil prices and international sanctions sharply impacted the Russian economy did Putin agree to the sale of 24 planes---but, conspicuously, without any technology transfer or licensing permissions.[17]

### **The Bottom Line**

Foreign analysts believe that in time the military's mechanical and systems integration difficulties can be worked out, though its personnel problems may prove more intractable. Many of the planned changes are not expected to be completed until 2020. This provides the United States with a window of opportunity. It is incumbent on the next administration in Washington to make good use of what could be America's last opportunity to maintain its military primacy.

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[1] *Huanqiu Shibao*, February 2, 2016.

[2] Wu Ming, "Remolding the PLA Leadership and Command Structure," *Jiefang Junbao*, November 30, 2015.



- [3] *Xinhua*, February 2, 2016.
- [4] *Sankei Shimbun*, January 28, 2016.
- [5] Ministry of National Defense, People's Republic of China, January 1, 2016.
- [6] Bowen Press (Arizona), January 17, 2016. [http:// www.bowenpress.com](http://www.bowenpress.com)
- [7] United States Department of Defense, Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Request, [http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/documents/defbudget/FY2017/FY2017\\_Budget\\_Request\\_Overview\\_Book.pdf](http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/documents/defbudget/FY2017/FY2017_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf), p. 4-9.
- [8] Wendell Minnick, "China's Parade Puts U.S. Navy on Notice," *Defense Week*, September 3, 2016.
- [9] Wendell Minnick, "S-400 Strengthens China's Hand in the Skies," *Defense Week*, April 18, 2015.
- [10] Wang Xiaohui, "Military Reform Needs to be Carried Out Firmly," *Jiefang Junbao*, December 11, 2015. The author does not mention that the resistance came from Napoleon, not from the Prussian civilian or military leadership.
- [11] Zhao Kaili and Li Baoqun, "How To Regard Various Military Reform Plans," *Ibid.*, December 11, 2015.
- [12] Bowen Press, January 17, 2016. [http:// www.bowenpress.com](http://www.bowenpress.com)
- [13] Yao Shun, "Soldiers Should Question Their Capability More Often," *Jiefang Junbao* March 30 2015.
- [14] Peng Chengcai, "Monthly Review of Training: How Are Results Not Achieved On the Training Field?" *Jiefang Junbao*, March 30, 2015.
- [15] *Financial Times*, December 29, 2015.
- [16] *Asia Times*, September 25, 2015.
- [17] Miles Yu, "Russia, China Still Fierce Competitors Despite Recent Arms Deals," *Washington Times*, December 15, 2015.