



**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Restructuring of Military Regions by China and its Implications for India**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Restructuring of Military Regions by China entails both structural and personal adjustments in response to changing security and geo political environment. The Chinese military reform would initiate a real top-to-bottom transformation from the Central Military Commission (CMC) to the company level. It will affect the military's institutional structure such as the General Staff HQ, similar to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, enabled with the capability to fight and win modern high tech wars having a more centralised command and control structure. The geopolitical implications of this restructuring will have far reaching consequences, especially in the neighborhood. The military restructuring enables China in preparing to fight modern wars which today have become a more high-tech being fought at the five dimensions of Land, Air, Sea, Space and Cyber. The restructuring of its military regions is much more than to simply ensure a more efficient command and control system. The fact that this military reform would make the People Liberation Army (PLA) a more agile, combat ready and a leaner force with the capabilities to fight and win modern high-tech wars. India needs to step-up the pace of its own military reforms and it becomes vital for India to build its military capabilities against any unforeseen future conflict with China.*

**Key words:** Military Regions, China, India

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**INTRODUCTION**

With the objective to bring about a change in the thinking and re-orient the People's Liberation (PLA) Army to win wars, China established five new "theatre commands" of its military and called them "zhan qu" in Chinese, or literally "battle zones". The reorganization is one of the biggest military change after reorganisation of various units and reducing the strength of forces. The new restructuring will entail both structural and personal adjustments in response to changing security and geopolitical environment. This restructuring is in pursuance of china's active and aggressive global strategy and its military modernization programme.

The new military commands are based on the functions and structure of the military regions they will replace, with improved mechanisms for command and logistics. The reforms will increase China's capability to undertake joint military campaigns of all the services. This military reform is also aimed at strengthening the Communist Party control over the military. The objective for the major restructuring is to ensure that PLA is "absolutely loyal, resourceful in fighting, efficient in commanding and courageous and capable of winning wars" with enhanced training in joint operations. These reforms are not only for PLA but also for People's Armed Police Force (PAPF), China's militias and reserve forces.

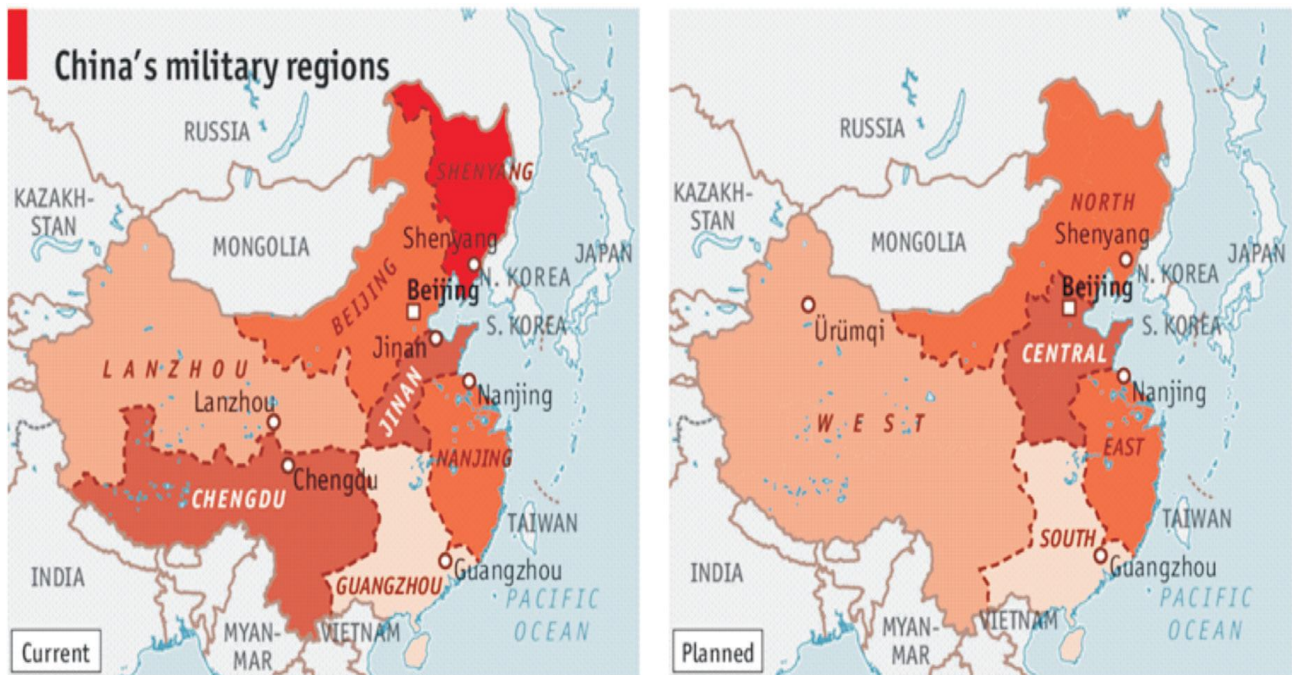
**NEW MILITARY REGIONS**

The military regions under the old system were in charge of personnel and administration, but the new structure frees them of that responsibility. The continued principle of the newly implemented structure is that the Central Military Commission (CMC) takes charge of the overall military administration and the new theatre commands zones are just in charge of combat, and the different military services pursue their own development. The People's Liberation Army will use a system of following five theatre commands :

1. Eastern Theatre Command with headquarters in Nanjing.

2. Southern Theatre Command with headquarters in Guangzhou.
3. Western Theatre Command with headquarters in Chengdu.
4. Northern Theatre Command with headquarters in Shenyang.
5. Central Theatre Command with headquarters in Beijing.

**Fig. 1:** China's Military Regions (A)- Current (B)- Planned



Source: South China Morning Post

These five commands have replaced the erstwhile seven military regions of Beijing, Shenyang, Jinan, Lanzhou, Nanjing, Chengdu and Guangzhou. The earlier military regions were focused on the threat along the borders with different nations and were defensive in nature. The most important Military Region is Beijing, the nation's Political Capital where the National Command is located in a secret nuclear hardened bunker at a location in the Western Hills of Beijing known as the Mountain with the Jade Tower. The military regions in turn are divided into military districts, the borders of which are usually contiguous with provinces. The third and last level of organization is the division of Military Commands into sub-districts.

The new emblems of the five new theatre commands also capture the integration of the PLA's services. A traditionally land-based army, the old emblem had only the symbol of rifles, which represents the army. The new one, however, also includes wings, an anchor and a missile, meant to represent the air force, navy and rocket force respectively. The other services are expected to play increasingly important roles for the PLA, as it seeks to expand its areas of influence beyond its shores.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The erstwhile six military regions of China were reorganised into twelve regions in December 1954, namely Shenyang, Beijing, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou Kunming, Wuhan (forms Hubei MR), Chengdu, Lanzhou, Tibet, Xinxiang and Inner Magnolia. Fuzhou Military region was established in 1956 including provincial military districts of Fujian and Jiangsu, formerly under Nanjing MR. Fuzhou MR was established after tension in Taiwan Straits.

The thirteen MRs established in 1956 were reduced to eleven in late 1960 and further reduced to seven by 1985-88. These seven MR included Lanzhou, Chengdu, Nanjing, Beijing, Shenyang, Guangzhou and Jinan. The reorganization has been necessitated by planned change in their concept of operations from primarily ground-oriented defence to mobile and coordinated movement of all

services and enhanced offensive air and naval capabilities in East and South China sea. The theatre commands will have joint command with ground, naval, air and Second Artillery Corps Forces. The coastal Jinan, Nanjing and Guangzhou regions will be turned into three MR, each with a joint operations command, for projecting power into the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea. The four other military regions will be streamlined into two MR mainly for organising forces operations. These changes are likely to be completed by 2020.

#### **HIGHER DEFENCE MANAGEMENT SETUP**

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the armed instrument of the Communist Party of China (CPC) also referred to as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and is subordinate to the party machinery. The military's highest decision-making body, the Central Military Commission (CMC), akin to India's Ministry of Defence (MoD), exercises command and control over the PLA and is staffed by military officers. The CMC's Chairman is a civilian, usually serving concurrently as the General Secretary of the CCP and the President of the country. Other members of the CMC include several Vice Chairmen, the Commanders of the Services, and the Directors of the four General Headquarters Departments.

China's Ministry of National Defence (MND), is a small office coordinating matters with the civilian government concerning the armed forces which include foreign military relations, mobilisation, recruitment, national defence, education, and civil support to military operations. The Minister of Defence is a uniformed military officer, a member of the State Council (the country's chief administrative authority), and also a CMC member.

#### **CENTRAL MILITARY COMMISSION**

The previous four military departments– General Staff Department (GSD), General Political Department (GPD), General Logistics Department (GLD) and General Armaments Department (GAD) – have been dismantled and their functions and duties are now shared by 15 new agencies under the Central Military Commission. The new offices include the General Staff Department while creating six new departments-Joint Staff, Political Works, Logistical Support, Equipment Development, Training and National Defence mobilization. It has three commissions ie Discipline & Inspection, Politics & Law, and Science and Technology. Also five more divisions namely, administration, auditing, international cooperation, organisational structure and strategic planning have been formed. The CMC has essentially been given extended staff support.

#### **PLA ARMY**

The PLA Army (PLAA) consists of mobile operational units, border and coastal defence units, guard and garrison units. It is primarily responsible for military operations on land. In line with the strategic requirements of mobile operations and multi-dimensional offence and defence, the PLAA has been reoriented from theatre defence to trans-theatre mobility. It is speeding up the reorganisation of Army Aviation troops, light mechanised units and special operations forces, and transforming them as digitalised units. These units are being remodelled to make them compact, modular and multi-functional so as to make them suitable for air-ground integrated operations, long-distance manoeuvres, rapid assaults and special operations.

The PLAA mobile operational units include 18 combined corps, plus additional independent combined operational divisions (brigades), and have a total strength of approximately 850,000.

#### **PLA NAVY**

The PLA Navy (PLAN) consists of the submarine, surface vessel, naval aviation, Marine Corps and coastal defence arms. For the purpose of its offshore defence strategy, the PLAN is increasing the modernisation of its forces for comprehensive offshore operations, develop advanced submarines, destroyers and frigates, and improve integrated electronic and information systems. It is fine-tuning the blue-water capabilities for conducting mobile operations, carrying out international cooperation, and countering non-traditional security threats besides enhancing its capabilities of strategic deterrence and counter-attack.

The PLAN has a total strength of nearly 235,000 officers and men, and commands three fleets, namely, the Beihai Fleet, the Donghai Fleet and the Nanhai Fleet. Each fleet has fleet aviation headquarters, support bases, flotillas and maritime garrison commands, as well as aviation divisions and marine brigades. China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, was commissioned into the PLAN in 2012 which had a major impact on building a strong PLAN and enhancing maritime security. Naval Aviation Department has been converted into support base for Navy. China has difficult to detect JIN class submarines and is likely to add more in future. Each of these submarines carries twelve JL-2 missiles with a range of about 4,598 miles.

#### **PLA AIR FORCE**

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) comprises of aviation, ground air defence, radar, airborne and Electronic Counter-Measures (ECM) arms. In order to conduct both offensive and defensive operations, the PLAAF is strengthening the development of a combat force structure that focusses on reconnaissance and early warning, air strike, air and missile defence, and strategic projection. It is developing new-generation fighters and a new variety of ground-to-air missiles and radar systems, improving its early warning, command and communications networks, and raising its strategic early warning, strategic deterrence and long-distance air strike capabilities.

In addition, it commands the 15th Airborne Corps. Under each Air Command are bases, aviation divisions (brigades), ground-to-air missile divisions (brigades), radar brigades and other units. The PLA AF has a total strength of nearly 398,000 officers and men, and an Air Command in each of the seven MRs.

The Air Force has closed its corps (base) headquarters and has set up regional command posts. Following these adjustments, the combat troops of the Navy and Air Force are now directly under the respective fleets and the Air Commands of the military areas.

#### **EMPHASIS ON PLAN AND PLAAF**

An expeditionary capability requires a better force projection capability, jointness in command and control as also better technology for intelligence and surveillance all of which are being attempted in current reorganisation. China is moving from a doctrine of employing mass to a doctrine of harnessing technology. The bid to downsize headquarters, have independent brigades in place of divisions, theatre commands / zones, more emphasis on PLAN, PLAAF and the Rocket Force are all pointers in above mentioned direction. The prima donna status of PLA army was already over and gets cemented further with PLAAF and PLAN becoming independent services.

#### **PLA ROCKET FORCE**

China's Second Artillery Force has been renamed PLA Rocket Force. While this new entity retains its old characteristics, the significant part is that now the 'PLA Rocket Force' is considered the fourth service in China's armed forces, on an equal footing with the PLA Army, Navy, and Air Force and not just an extension of the army looking after the land missile forces. Secondly the conventional missiles will also be under the Rocket Force which confirms China's continuation of its strategy of 'Dual Deterrence' where China has tried to enmesh its conventional missile force to its strategic forces, thus strengthening the strategy of "Active Defence". This "Active Defence" is an important indicator of China's military thinking where the stated Chinese defensive posture (of attacking the adversary only when struck by it first) actually camouflages an offensive operational strategic posture. A large number of conventional tactical and cruise missiles would be integrated in this force. The new Rocket Force will continue to enhance China's nuclear deterrence and counter-strike capabilities.

#### **PLA STRATEGIC SUPPORT FORCE**

PLA Strategic Support Force will form the fifth leg of the armed forces. This is a new structure that has been created and will act as a force multiplier for the other four services. It will provide appropriate cyber and intelligence support during war as also facilitate space operations, Electronic Warfare etc. These asymmetric capabilities are intended to give its forces a force

multiplication effect as also develop capabilities to *defeat the enemy without fighting*. The downsizing of PLA in part is meant to release funds for enhancing asymmetric capabilities.

### **INTELLIGENCE CAPABILITIES**

The reforms are likely to pave the way for the integration of foreign intelligence capabilities of China. Foreign intelligence was formerly the responsibility of the second and third departments of General Staff Department (GSD), which handled human intelligence and electronic & Internet intelligence, respectively. The task has been re-assigned to army-led units, the Rocket Force and Strategic Support force (SSF), an integration of intelligence resources. The Liaison Department of the General Political Department (GPD) and General Armament Department (GAD) have their own intelligence-gathering units. Along with the extensive restructuring of GPD and GAD, the intelligence units under the two general departments could be merged into SSF, which would signify a reshuffle of the intelligence community. If the CMC in the future is to have intelligence units that directly report to it in a way similar to the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) of the US, it will enable a further integration of China's foreign intelligence capabilities.

### **LOGISTICS DEPARTMENT**

The Logistics Departments of the MRs were reorganised and integrated as the Joint Logistics Department (JLD) to manage all the administrative resources in year 2000. Under the 'joint logistics' scheme, the Air Force and the Navy transferred their general logistics support elements common to all services (such as hospital, supplies, equipment maintenance, etc.) to the JLD of the MR, while keeping to itself the specialised logistics support elements unique to its own service.

### **LEADERSHIP TRAINING**

The development of commanders for joint operations has been a priority of the restructuring process. The training curriculum was restructured to train commanders at the strategic and operational levels. It has improved the training system for joint operation commanders to develop commanders capable of undertaking joint operations. The frequency of post-rotation and cross-training for commanding officers have been modified to consolidate the emergency training of commanders for joint operations.

### **MANPOWER OPTIMISATION**

The present reform also include cutting troops from 2.3 million to 2 million, phasing out outdated armaments, developing new weapons systems and reducing the size of the militia. As the Chinese armed forces became progressively hi-tech, they have simultaneously been carrying out troop reduction.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA**

The Chinese military reform would initiate a real top-to-bottom transformation from the CMC to the company level. It will affect the military's institutional structure such as the General Staff HQ, similar to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, enabled with the capability to fight and win modern high tech wars having a more centralised command and control structure. The geopolitical implications of this restructuring will have far reaching consequences, especially in the neighborhood.

The three coastal military regions remain largely intact even as Chengdu and Beijing military regions are merged in other regions. The concentration of group armies are therefore likely to be more in the three coastal military commands/ zones, with them probably also commanding the three fleets.

The control of the People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) and the militia units will be under new military commands or their control will be with a separate chain. Should the latter happen, then that would signal the Communist Party of China's intention to control internal situation through PAPF, leaving the PLA to concentrate on external threats (akin to the Indian Model). If it happens it will be a major shift and will significantly reduce PLAs importance in maintaining the party regime. It is possible that the PAPF, likely renamed as National Guard, will assume a greater role. This may mean expansion of the PAPF role to shoulder all internal security responsibilities.

In all likelihood the three PLAN fleets are likely to remain under the three coastal military commands / zones.

The re-organisation of military regions does not give a clear indication of expeditionary capability as to a specific military command/zone is to be tasked with this responsibility or all military commands/ zones will now earmark a force component for expeditionary tasks.

The CPC will have greater control over the military and the military diplomacy function of the PLA could be put to better use by China. By using the PLA externally as a means for military deterrence, in modern gunboat diplomacy for instance, or as a gateway for making contributions to the international community, China is likely to use the carrot-and-stick approach.

In the restructuring of the second and third departments of General Staff Department (GSD), the latter used to control the majority of the components of China's cyber force, which is mainly devoted to computer hacking, while the former specializes in human intelligence and intelligence analysis. If the two departments are to merge, the attacks launched by the cyber force would become even more ferocious. So the integration of intelligence resources will only encourage China's cyber force to be more aggressive toward target countries like India and Taiwan.

As China's military continues to become more streamlined and integrated with modern capabilities, India's military capabilities and preparedness of its command and control and archaic organizational structures to take on its adversaries are under scanner. The proposed reduction of military regions will have great significance to India since the two military regions that border India, would remain as they were, but the military resources are likely to be reinforced alongwith synergy in command and control of all forces.

The greater significance for India is that any reorganization which makes the PLA more lethal increases the security challenge for India. This calls for India to up the ante in its own military reform process in order to counter these future uncertainties.

The reallocation of group armies will be of particular interest to India as that is likely to dictate the quantum of reserves available to the military region opposite us. Moreover the attempted reduction of 300000 troops may entail some downsizing of fighting units. Mere reduction in headquarters may not result in such massive reduction.

Primarily there are three land borders of military significance – i.e. With India, Russia and Vietnam. All three are grouped with different military zones. The Western Zone which merged the erstwhile Lanzhou and Chengdu MRs will have largest swathe of territory, as also the responsibilities for the longest land borders. They may also have the trouble prone regions of Xinxiang and Tibet under them. The Western Zone with more than one third of China's land based military, represents a highly strengthened military formation.

Indian land borders are now only with Western military zone. This will be probably more efficient from a Chinese perspective as they can have better synergy and orchestrate interplay between application of forces on our Western and Eastern sectors. This particularly is of relevance as the Chinese are strategically on interior lines. India on the other hand, has limited strategic synergy between its Western and Eastern Sectors, being on exterior lines.

There is considerable emphasis on development of asymmetrical capabilities such as space, missile capabilities, nuclear deterrence, cyber warfare etc. The creation of the PLA Rocket Force gives further fillip to this effort and ensures synergy of resources. China has already tested capabilities such as anti-satellite weapons. The status of a service also gives the rocket force more autonomy to develop concepts and doctrines. It also signals China's reliance on this service as a battle winning factor. The conventional missile deterrence will also become more effective as warheads can be interchanged as per requirement. Thus, the delivery means become common under a single agency. As far as India is concerned by bringing the Qinghai region in the Western zone, PLA has facilitated the rapid induction and deployment of high altitude acclimatised and trained troops not only into Tibet but possibly into Ladakh for any contingencies. India needs to factor this aspect also into its mobilisation / operational plans. Should the Western Zone get involved in protecting the Chinese assets in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, then its troops will be ranged across India's Western, Northern and Eastern Commands. This issue needs detailed analysis as it has major implications for India.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is India's missile capabilities vis-s-vis China's. In this area India faces a serious drawback not only in terms of its offensives but in terms of its defensive capabilities as well. PLA's Rocket Force is well endowed to counter as well as surge against India in case of any military combat and is also a serious threat to the Indian Air Force (IAF). The PLA Rocket Force possesses one of the largest land-based missile forces in the world, which includes both ballistic and cruise missiles with varying ranges and differing payloads. This rapidly modernizing division of the PLA has become a far more viable international deterrent force in the world, capable of inundating the region around China's vicinity and beyond with hundreds, if not thousands of conventional and nuclear armed missiles.

There is an urgent need for India to step-up its ballistic as well as its cruise missile programmes in order to ensure deterrence against any Chinese offensive operations. The need is to establish an offensive as well as a defensive missile capability for use during any future military conflict. The IAF needs to enhance its air defence capabilities to defend against these missiles with new anti-missile defence capabilities like Russian S-400 which is capable in countering against air strikes including ballistic missiles. Furthermore, there is a need to enhance the IAF's passive air defence in order to absorb any air offensive strikes which may get through India's air defence capabilities.

## CONCLUSION

The military restructuring enables China in preparing to fight modern wars which today have become a more high-tech being fought at the five dimensions of Land, Air, Sea, Space and Cyber. The restructuring of its military regions is much more than to simply ensure a more efficient command and control system. The fact that this military reform would make the PLA a more agile, combat ready and a leaner force with the capabilities to fight and win modern high-tech wars. India needs to step-up the pace of its own military reforms and it becomes vital for India to build its military capabilities against any unforeseen future conflict with China.

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