

# China: Military Modernization in Xi Jinping Era – Implications for Foreign Policy

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Eurasia Review (Oregon)  
October 12, 2015

Nations like Russia and China have been pursuing military modernization programs to close the technology gap with the United States. They're developing platforms designed to thwart our traditional advantages of power projection and freedom of movement." - US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter (Washington, September 16, 2015).

Coming soon after the September 3, 2015 military parade in Beijing when China exhibited advanced missiles and fighter aircraft and prior to the start of the first state visit to the US by the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Xi Jinping, the statement above made by Ashton Carter, brings the ongoing military modernization drive in China into sharp focus. Indicating a fresh momentum to that drive has been Xi Jinping's announcement while addressing that parade, held to mark the "70th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War", of a cut of 300,000 from the present estimated PLA strength of 2.3 million. Xi stressed on the cut's 'upholding peace' purpose; so did his government's Defence Ministry spokesman Col. Yang Yujun who listed other purposes of the cut as well—achieving common development and sharing prosperity with other nations and pushing forward the international arms control and disarmament.

In the past, there had been a debate in China on Men Vs Weapons, with Mao's People's War Strategy emphasizing the manpower aspect. Importance to weapons in the interest of modern warfare steadily grew in the country in subsequent stages and the latest cut symbolizes the same. The latest troop reduction is not new; military reforms in the PRC had been happening in intervals since 1949 depending on the nature of the needed military strategy at each stage. The total PLA strength in 1949 was around 6 million. The military reforms in the 1949-78 period were meant to build armed forces capable of countering a foreign invasion. The subsequent cut by one million troops took place in mid-80s, a period which saw the veteran leader Deng Xiaoping assessing that the probability of a major or nuclear war has become low. This resulted in the need to make the military capable of waging 'local wars under hi-tech conditions'. The consequence was reduction in the number of MRs from 11 to 7, and in the number of the then existing field armies from 37 to 24, along with their conversion as corps level organizations called Group Army. [1] A further reduction by 400,000 (from 3.23 to 3.19 million) occurred by 1990. From mid-90s till now, taking into account the end of the Cold War and the progress in Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), a stress on the military's 'winning local wars under information conditions' is being seen; the 500,000-troop reduction in 1997, another 200,000 troops cut between 2003 and 2005 reducing the PLA strength from 2.5 to 2.3 million and the latest one, need to be understood in this angle.

The display of armaments in the September 3, 2015 parade symbolized Xi regime's importance to the aspect of weapon systems, rather than to manpower. The PRC's state media (Xinhua, September 3, 2015), highlighted the exhibition during the parade of intercontinental ballistic missiles (Dong Feng-5B carrying nuclear warheads and the Dong Feng-21D 'carrier killer' anti-ship ballistic missiles), DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missiles, medium-long range bomber aircraft (H-6K bombers) and carrier-based fighter jets (J-15). The State media linked the display with the nation's military strategy of "Active Defense", which as being seen in the PRC serves the purposes of "defense, self-defense and post-emptive strikes", in contrast to the 'pre-emptive strategies' of other countries[2].

The latest cut would naturally result in reduction of China's military personnel to the figure of two million; even then China's military will remain as the world's largest. No doubt the PRC's effort is towards overemphasizing the cut's significance for protecting world peace, but from what Chinese military officials said, **it looks beyond doubt that the real purpose is something else, i.e to accelerate the PLA's modernisation. The cut indeed marks the beginning of a new round of military reforms in the PRC to achieve that purpose. It does not mean a fall in the military's fighting capabilities and there will be adequate budget allocations to support military modernization process.** Worth noting is that process is now to progress "under a new situation"; as perceived by the Xi administration (China's Military Strategy, May 2015), the new situation is one in which China is already in an important period of strategic opportunities for its development, the country's comprehensive national strength, core competitiveness and risk-resistance capacity have increased and the PRC's international standing and influence have grown.

Retired Major General Xu Guangyu, now a senior army arms control advisor, rationalized the cut by observing that "our country's military needs to take the path of modernization ... These force reductions are an effort to stay on this path and increase quality not numbers[3]." Col.Yang (see above) on his part was more specific by identifying the **troops to be disbanded as those "equipped with outdated armaments and office staff and personnel of non-combat organizations."** On future plans, what Xi himself said has been notable. As he puts it, the reforms will have four main objectives - **adjust China's military leadership and command system; optimize structure and function, reform policies and systems; and promote deeper civil-military integration[4].** Col.Yang has been more articulate by telling that "in the next step, we will roll out new reform measures one after another, actively and steadily advancing reform of national defense and the military. China's defense budget will be kept on a proper level to meet various needs including expenditure on new armaments, information technology and soldiers' salaries. The PLA would further adjust and optimize its scale and structure and improve the quality of informatization construction leading to the establishment of a **modern military force system with Chinese characteristics**". Yang with no ambiguity felt that a modernized PLA can fulfill its assigned charter of duties - safeguarding national unity and territorial integrity, undertaking non-military missions such as disaster relief, peacekeeping and international rescue and coping up with the threat of terrorism, separatism and extremism."

The fresh round of military cut is to be completed by 2017, the deadline officially set. The military reforms are to continue beyond that year to meet the officially declared targets - accomplishment of mechanization and making major progress toward informationization by 2020 and building a modern armed force by mid-century[5].

China's fundamental policy direction is that national defence building in the country should be in the 'service of and subordinated to' the country's overall development. Against such interlocking of development and defence building, it would be important to note the PRC's declared overall strategic vision, say the 'Chinese dream', as Xi puts it. That vision demands doubling the 2010 GDP and per capita income of the Chinese and completing the building of a moderately prosperous society by 2020, the year marking 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and to build a prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious modern socialist country and realize the great renewal of the Chinese nation by 2050, the year signifying the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishment of the PRC.

Specific official details on how the fresh round of military reforms will affect the PLA organizationally are still lacking. However, from reports appearing in the knowledgeable overseas Chinese, Hong Kong and Taiwanese media, the PLA restructuring can be expected to happen as follows:

- Replacing the present 7 Military Regions (MRs) with 4 Theater Commands ( a Northeast theater command including Shenyang and Beijing MRs ; a Northwest theater

- command based on Lanzhou MR; a Southwest theater command based on Chengdu MR and a Southeast theater command formed from the Guangzhou, Nanjing and Jinan MRs).
- Reorganizing the four PLA General Departments and the Ministry of National Defense. A decision has already reportedly been taken to merge the General Logistics Department and General Armaments Department into one body- the Logistics Department. The General Staff Headquarters is to be upgraded and modeled on the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, including in it high-ranking officers from all service branches of the military. It will provide planning and consulting to the Chairman of the Central Military Commission.
- Reducing the services strength- the ground forces to 360,000 personnel.
- Transforming the People's Armed Police into a National Guard.
- Cutting down the present 150 military academies to 29.
- Demobilizing some existing corps-level organizations, i.e Group Armies (GAs) in MRs (27th GA of Beijing MR, 40<sup>th</sup> GA of Shenyang MR, 47th GA of Lanzhou MR, 20<sup>th</sup> GA of Jinan MR, and 14th GA of Chengdu MR). The troop strengths in South West facing India, Southeast facing Taiwan, the South China Sea and areas facing Vietnam may not undergo major cuts.
- Increasing the Navy and Air Force strengths.

China seems to be aware that there could be challenges as the fresh round of military reforms progresses further. A Liberation Army Daily article[6] cautioned that “the troop cuts and other military reforms Xi wished to undertake would require an assault on fortified positions to change mindsets and root out vested interests, and that the difficulties expected would be unprecedented. If these reforms failed, measures still to come would be nothing more than an empty sheet of paper”. Another write up in the same daily[7] contributed by an official of the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), warned remarked that as the reform advances, “there could be significant structural contradictions and an accumulation of institutional obstacles”. Quoting Xi, it said that to realize its strong military dream, China must exploit a rare window of opportunity to seize the strategic high ground in the ocean depths, outer and cyber space, the poles and other emerging areas. This requires overcoming entrenched obstacles to achieving major reforms, most importantly modernizing China’s form of military organization.

From the rationale for the latest military cut being provided by Chinese leaders, officials and policy documents, it can clearly be seen that **from now on the PLA's Navy and Air Force rather than the ground forces, will play a greater role in China's defence**. The PRC's Military Strategy document (May 2015) has already hinted at an enhanced role for the Chinese Navy; it has envisaged ‘gradual’ shift of China’s naval focus from “offshore waters defense” to the combination of “offshore waters defense” with “**open seas protection**” and laid stress on building a ‘**modern maritime military force** structure commensurate with its national security and development interests’ and preparing for Maritime Military Struggle (Maritime PMS). According to Major General Xu Guangyu (see above), troop reduction could help pave the way for a **rebalancing in China's military**, allowing for China’s air force and navy to be proportionately larger parts of the overall PLA[8] and adjusting the ratio of ground, air and naval forces to better cope with modern warfare, as 2:1:1, as against the current estimate of about 4:2:1[9].

In a nutshell, it would be right to reiterate that the latest cut is a part of ongoing military reforms in the PRC **which aim at completing military modernization in the country by the stipulated time schedule of mid century**. At this juncture, the savings from the cut are certain to get diverted to meet the costs of modernizing the Navy, Air Force and missile forces. Secondly, the reforms may not affect the PRC’s defence budgets. Confirming this is the Chinese comment (see above) that the defence budgets will be kept on a proper level to meet various needs. As such, the steady increase being seen in China in the levels of defence allocations is likely to continue; the budget for 2015 showed a rise by 10.1%, lowest in last 5 years, reaching more than US\$ 144.2 billion, making China the second largest military spender in

the world (The US defence budget in 2013 was to the tune of US\$ 600.4 billion).[10] China's defense budget was around \$10 billion in 1997.

There can be no doubt about the implications of China's latest military modernization drive for the country's foreign policy which underwent a shift in focus in 2009. Admitting a recalibration in that year of strategic focus in diplomacy to 'core interests', on which China will make no compromises and protect them even by military means, experts in China provided the rationale[11] – "China is going global and its international influence is becoming more visible and assertive and the international environment and domestic conditions are changing". Evolving 'multi-polarity' and 'multilateralism' as well as global challenges including climate change and energy security, marked the changes in the external conditions, according to the then Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi. Identifying China's "core interests", Dai Bingguo, who played a major role in the country's foreign policy making, identifying core interests, said in end July 2009 that "the PRC's first core interest is maintaining its fundamental system and state security, second is state sovereignty and territorial integrity and the third is the continued stable development of the economy and society." In specific terms, Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan and South China Sea Islands as well as strategic resources and trade routes were listed under the 'core interest' category.[12] On his part, the Chinese Foreign Minister explained his country's new foreign policy direction by saying (Beijing, 8.3.2014) that the PRC "will play the international role of a responsible, big country". This signaled a firm shift in the direction so far existed of the PRC's external course - 'hiding one's capacities and biding one's time' (veteran leader Deng Xiaoping's famous 24-character maxim of tao guang yang hui).

The post-2009 core interests-based foreign policy continues till today, resulting in assertive international behavior of China , for which a variety of factors can be traced as given below: (i) China's confidence gained through its ability to achieve a sustained growth leading to a build-up of the country's 'comprehensive national strength', (ii) China's feeling that an opportunity has arisen for itself to increase its influence globally as the world balance of power shifts from the West to East and a multi-polar world gradually emerges, (iii) the PRC's growing need to protect land and sea trade routes in the interest of the much needed import of resources from abroad , (iv) deepening Chinese fears concerning sovereignty over Tibet and Xinjiang and (v) rising suspicions on the purpose of the US Asia-Pacific strategy.

Interestingly, of late, the core interests identified with respect to China's foreign policy have also figured in the evolved national security guideline of the country; this has been , particularly so after the ruling CCP set up a new body known as National Security Commission (NSC) as per the decision taken in the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in November 2012 . The guideline, based on the concept of "**Integrated National Security**" provides for integration of national security in a wide range of aspects – political, territorial, military, economic, cultural, societal, scientific, information, ecological, resource, and nuclear. It describes the concept's principles as (i) fundamentally guaranteeing the long-term governing position of CCP and the enduring peace and stability of the country, with the CCP absolutely commanding

China's armed forces, (ii) in matters of guaranteeing security during development of the country, taking political security as core, economic security as its basis, military, cultural, and societal security as an important guarantee, and the furthering of global security as foundation and (iii) widen security management to include new fields like marine, space, and cyber security. The concept at the same time has a rider - "China's adherence to the path of peaceful development, in absolutely no way, means that it will give up its legitimate rights and interests or sacrifice its core national interests. No country should entertain the fantasy that China will allow its sovereignty, security, and development interests to be infringed. Should China's sovereignty and territorial integrity be challenged, we will mount a head-on struggle and fight for every last inch. Now that China is strong, we have no reason to submit to such external pressure. **We must safeguard China's core and key interests".**[13]

Significant is that the protection of 'core national interests' has emerged as a common element to both foreign and national security policies; this establishes that China has started the work for policy

coordination in the field of external relations between the NSC and the foreign ministry. As a consequence, a trend towards the foreign ministry using a strong and modernized military for further sharpening its assertiveness whenever necessary in matters of protecting the country's core interests abroad, can be expected. The implications of military reforms in progress for China's foreign policy thus become clear.

*The countries in the neighborhood having territorial disputes with China in particular, will therefore have reasons to view the progressing China's naval modernization with worry ; especially, the South China Sea and East China Sea littorals contesting China's maritime claims may feel the need to be cautious. So may be the case with the US as it pursues its Asia-Pivot policy in an atmosphere of increasing challenges emanating from China.*

*On its part, Beijing appears keen on doing some 'image' building externally; symbolizing the same are its efforts diplomatically to balance the use of its hard and soft powers. Beijing's building of artificial islands in South China Sea and declaration of Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in East China Sea, can be considered as examples of hard power use ; its 'Belt and Road' initiative emphasizing economic interests and the external line such as "New Type of Major Powers Relationship" can be viewed as China's soft course intended to create a favorable image to it internationally as a peace loving nation ( Such approach is visible in Xi Jinping's speech given at Seattle, on September 23,2015, during his first state visit to the US; it focused on the need for countries to "accommodate each other's core interests, seek common ground while reserving differences, show mutual respect and avoid strategic miscalculation"). Interesting however will be how the outside world will view China's such hard-soft mix in diplomacy.*

***Worth mentioning are the opinions of China's authoritative scholars[14] that China's foreign policy has been undergoing some positive changes. They have admitted that the country's use of 'hard power' allows it to assert itself on its sovereignty and maritime rights and interests particularly in the Asia-Pacific but at the same time felt that China should accord equal importance to its soft power, i.e the economic and financial power as a tough posture could leave China with little maneuvering room and increase the risk of confrontation with countries like the US and Japan. In the coming years, China should therefore accord equal importance to its "economic strategy" based on its economic and financial powers, as well as extensive diplomacy to balance its global image".***

India needs to carefully watch the ongoing military reforms in China. They are certain to lead to increase in capabilities of the PLA, especially the Navy which has now been assigned with an expanded role – i.e carrying out the task of 'open seas protection'. It should recognize that tensions in the contentious South China Sea and East China Sea are certain to rise, which may have negative implications of its Act East policy. New Delhi should also address the question as to how the "open seas protection" role of the Chinese Navy will impact on the situation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Reasons look obvious. The IOR already figures prominently in the China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative; this is forcing it to actively woo nations in India's neighborhood through extending economic and military aid. Examples are China's infrastructure projects in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and the proposal for China-Pakistan Economic corridor, passing through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. As China copes up with demands with respect to energy security and regional integration under the MSR initiative, its attention is going to be increasingly towards securing of the Indian Ocean sea lanes. It may thus view operation of its naval vessels including submarines in that region legitimate and desirable. The debate on the subject of having overseas naval bases has not died down in China, in spite of official denials. Potentials for an India-China competition in the IOR look therefore high.

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Source: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1876>