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Could China Be About to Transform Its Military?

There has been talk of radical reform of decades. Finally, it looks like it might happen.

By John Costello
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The PLA is long overdue for a complete overhaul. We've been saying it for years, and so has the PLA. Leading China military scholars of today all agree. The PLA is an outdated, unwieldy force that belies a growing technical prowess. I am not the first to note the PLA's glaring issues vis-à-vis fighting and winning wars; Dennis Blasko has already made many excellent points in his article earlier this year.

The chief issues can be boiled down to this: If the PLA wants to fight and be effective, it needs to enable a joint operational command environment, reform defense acquisition, reduce the role of its ground forces, and rein in regional parochialism. Of course, this premise is based not on its often vague and tepid stated goals – “defend Chinese sovereign interests.” Rather, we should look deeper to the strategic signaling indicating its military intent over the last ten years. Greater global power projection, humanitarian aid, anti-piracy participation, among other objectives (the creation of the carrier notwithstanding). If the PLA wants to do the things it seems to want to do, it needs to change.

Aside from the ground forces issue, the United States faced similar problems (albeit of a different degree and scale) before the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act (or the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, or, “GNA”).

Until 1986, each service maintained their own logistics, doctrine, and planning apparatus independent of the others, causing a costly redundancy and duplication of effort. Operational authority was directed from the president, through the Secretary of Defense, down through the services to operational units, mired in a bureaucratic game of telephone resulting in a grossly unwieldy military. GNA abolished the operational distinctions between different services and allowed national command authorities – the president and secretary of defense – to exercise direct operational control over combatant commands, regional or mission-defined areas of responsibility. To put it bluntly, GNA cut out the operational middle-man, simplified the chain of command, and allowed the defense establish to benefit from a more centralized acquisition and logistics structure.

China watchers have long been expecting a structural reform of the Chinese military à la GNA since the revolution in military affairs (RMA). PLA scholars have called for it, and have publicly debated the merits of instituting a true joint operational command modeled on the United States and GNA. It's no surprise that PLA scholars hold this model as an end-goal, it has proven its effectiveness through three wars, countless humanitarian aid operations, and in power projection and deterrence. It is occasionally hinted at in the Chinese press, and every year or so one China analyst or another will claim that it will happen “in the next few years.” It's been the “next few years” for the last ten. It only takes a mere hint of military reform to engender a flurry of articles and mass speculation, and almost without exception every article will mention a GNA-like PLA reform on the horizon, stating “this time will be different!” And disappointment often follows.

This time could be different.

In many ways, the process of “Goldwater-Nicholizing” the Chinese military began in earnest two decades ago, likely an intended side-effect of “informatization.” A vaguely defined Chinese military term that is part “network-centric warfare” and “integrated C4ISR,” “informatization”

has been a rallying cry for the PLA since the mid-nineties. Executed as a series of technical modernization and policy initiatives, informatization is responsible in large part for the profusion of spectrum management, communications, network, telecom, and space-based communications research undertaken presumably in striving for better integrated joint operations. Under the auspices of better integration and command and control between regions and services, the PLA has laid the groundwork necessary to enable joint command, even if it did not yet have the political will to make it a *de jure* reality.

Political Will

China has slowly been attempting to garner the political will to make these changes. One of the key obstacles to any sort of deep reform is resistance from the primary stakeholders. Getting buy-in from top generals, admirals, and the semi-independent military regions is a critical factor in any Chinese military reform effort, but much more so when you are talking about the kind of deeper restructuring a GNA-like effort would require. As many potential reforms primarily aim to reduce the size and influence of the army and, as a consequence, reduce the number of billets for general officers, any deep-seated reforms will undoubtedly meet powerful resistance from the PLA.

The PLA does not conform to American notions of a civilian-led military. China analysts would do well to keep in mind that the Chinese military is a division of the Chinese national leadership structure, existing alongside but not necessarily equal to the Chinese government and the communist party, the other two divisions.

In that regard, to the PRC paramount leader Xi Jinping, support of the military is essential, and to lose that support would be a serious limit to if not a total check on power. To quote Mao, “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” That rings as true in modern China as it did in 1949. One could make a strong case that the full legitimacy of the president of China is not complete until he officially chairs the central military commission. Jiang Zemin held on to it after the supposed power transfer to Hu Jintao in 2002, and Deng Xiaoping maintained the status of paramount leader in part by maintaining that position. To that end, upsetting middle and senior-level officers, many of whom are far more familiar with military region superiors, local militias, and local party officials, is a dangerous move. Parochialism, in that regard, is also a serious obstacle to reform. It is also a potential threat. The *shantouzhu*yi, or “mountain top-ism,” the phenomena of Chinese officers and soldiers owing loyalty more to individuals than the paramount leader, state, or party, is still rife within the PLA. The fractured military region system, where officers and soldiers can spend their entire career within a small geographic area, amplifies this trend. Xi surely knows to tread lightly where the PLA is concerned and exercising caution against changing too much, too fast is the most prudent course of action. This requires a unique blend of “salami slicing” shifts in capability and organization with punctuated periods of broader change.

In classic Chinese “bottom-up, top-down” strategy, the PLA has pursued a number of baseline capabilities over a wide front (bottom-up) while sporadically implementing centralized, structural changes to policy, leadership, and command (top-down). Chinese leaders have taken the long view for baseline capability development while taking a very short view for

organization structure. The “top-down, bottom-up” approach combines a substantive slow burn process with a series of showy front-pieces.

“Bottom-up” efforts, vis-à-vis military reform, have been defined by a series of technical initiatives such as informatization and integrated C4ISR, usually pushed through select CMC committees, funding programs like the 863 and 973 programs, and key research institutes. This technical foundation is intrinsically inclusive and integrative, acting as enabling factors that allow the administration a freer hand in implementing deeper reforms.

“Top-down” efforts, however, are more visible changes implemented within a shorter time frame. These efforts often serve more as strategic signaling than an earnest attempt at meaningful reform. Troop drawdowns, establishing an East China Sea ADIZ, anti-corruption purges, establishing a national security commission, creating a national military reform committee, and establishing new cyber units are all examples that have taken place in just the last few years alone. That is not to say that these actions don’t have any practical benefit or effect change, they clearly do, but they primarily act as a tool to reemphasize party control. All of this illustrates an indisputable fact: the Party controls the gun. The key question that remains is who the leadership intends as the audience.

Expeditionary Power

Many are clearly directed at foreign powers: Japan with the ADIZ, the United States with its cyber units. The anti-corruption purges, the NSC, and establishing the reform committee all seem to be directed at the PLA itself, however. Like Deng Xiaoping before him, Xi is asserting his authority over the military, thereby incentivizing compliance and commitment to compromise. Xi has made it very clear in his military actions that he intends to develop China as an expeditionary power, one that can project military force around the globe and can hold its own. Secondly, Xi means to remind the world that China controls neighboring maritime territory. To that end, “Goldwater-Nicholization” of the PLA is crucial, and the “top-down” efforts of the past few years may well be some of the painful methods to achieve it.

The process of transforming the PLA into the GNA model actually started decades ago. The slow process of informatization punctuated by occasional minor changes in structure have built an agonizingly slow roadmap to the present day. And one could make the case that the PLA is, in fact, already a joint-forces power, if in name only. The General Staff Department (equivalent to the U.S. Pentagon), maintains a “unified/joint command center” with bureaus designated for each service branch, information operations, and special operations. The military regions themselves, although headed by an army general, are staffed at the leadership level by PLAN fleet commanders and PLAAF officers. The PLA service-wide performs joint-service exercises on a routine basis, and many mid-career technical academies and service colleges are attended by personnel from every service.

In the PLA, there are no specifically designated “joint headquarters,” rather, the army HQ at the national and regional levels act as the *de facto* joint headquarters for relevant echelons. Like many things in China, however, there is the law, there is convention, and then there is reality, and they are seldom the same thing. The PLA acts as a joint force, under Chinese conventions,

with a Soviet structure, using American-derived doctrine. What looks like four services is in fact a bloated Army with seven petty kings in seven petty kingdoms, an underdeveloped Navy, an Air force with no clear purpose or direction, and an independent Army branch with a monopoly on nuclear missiles. This Frankenstein has grown in fits and starts, with policy mismatched to its technical capability, overall goals, and personnel proficiency. The upcoming reform is likely intended as a series of initiatives that when taken together form a dramatic “reboot,” where policy, doctrine, personnel, structure, and technical capability can be matched and managed far more easily as a coherent whole.

Any change equal to the magnitude of Goldwater-Nicholization of the PLA is like moving mountains and herding cats all at once. Contrary to the popular imagination, Xi does not rule China alone – at best it is an oligarchy with a cult of personality, at worst it is a series of feuding cliques. Although it may happen behind closed doors, there is likely massive debate, much handwringing, and shaking of fists with regards to large-scale military reform despite a seemingly unified consensus. Xi could very well be patient and is waiting out the current cadres that occupy senior positions, focusing his energy on the following generation. This is certainly possible. Given recent overseas aggression and a newfound international assertiveness, Chairman Xi is a leader with an international – and some would say expansionist – agenda, one that needs a strong military modeled on proven doctrine and capable of fulfilling key objectives. It is not likely that he will wait. Like many Chinese changes, though, it will happen almost painfully slow, likely in phases, applying the very familiar “salami slicing” strategy to organization change management.

If recent events are any indication, Xi is clearing the way for the deep reform that has been in the works for decades. This is no longer a “boy who cried wolf” scenario; this time the potential for China to Goldwater-Nicholize its military is real and imminent. The military transformation that has been whispered about for decades, that long-predicted military liberalization could very well be at hand.