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The Logic Behind China's Military Reforms

By reforming its military, China hopes to catch up to global security trends.

By Mu Chunshan
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China announced plans for sweeping military reforms this week. Though details are scarce right now, as the reforms are implemented, clearer policies will be introduced. Like continuing economic reform, military reform will also become a revolutionary event in Chinese development during the Xi Jinping era.

Chinese military reform is not only about surface changes, but about changing the inner workings of the military. China wants to catch up with the changes occurring in other militaries worldwide. Xi Jinping mentioned during the military reform working conference that China's military organization structure must be modernized by placing the Central Military in direct control and creating new battle zone commands. These changes all have a subtext – reform of the military region system.

Outsiders often make analogies to the military organizational systems of the United States and Russia. In fact, although the military systems of the United States and Russia are different, their division of battle zones under joint strategic commands is similar. These “battle zones” (as China's will be called), are set up to execute strategic missions and maintain readiness. They are designed to allow all branches of the military within the zone effectively perform their role to ensure the strategic interests of their country.

Even the United States and Russia, which have advanced military weapons, have reformed their military divisions in the past decade – Russia by establish the Arctic Joint Strategic Command in 2014 and the United States by setting up Africa Command in 2007. Chinese military reform is also necessary, and long overdue. The last division of military regions in China was made in the 1950s, there have been no strategic adjustments for more than 60 years. China’s military has not adapted to the modern era.

Chinese military reform is not using the United States or Russia as a model, but is following the mainstream development of world militaries, with the purpose of enhancing battle effectiveness and defense capability.

President Xi Jinping has laid the groundwork for these reforms carefully. Chinese military reform has been under way since 2013. The National Security Commission was established during the third plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC in 2013. The creation of the NSC is not only a military reform, but also an important step forward in China’s overall security reform strategy. The military will inevitably have to undergo some structural changes under these reforms.

China’s establishment of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in 2013 is also a part of military reform. The ADIZ marks a major, concrete turning point in the PLA’s offshore military defense policy, with a significance both for geopolitics and China’s domestic military reforms.

Then in August 2014, China’s Politburo held a “specially organized” meeting on “collective learning” on military issues. Xi Jinping mentioned “military innovation” and four problems regarding conceptual change at the conference. According to Xi Jinping, getting rid of set patterns of thinking requires “great ideological emancipation” – a clear signal to prepare public opinion for future military reform.

Xi also mentioned the need to change the thought patterns behind seeking benefit for specific branches, opting instead for “coordinating all the activities of the whole military and the nation like moves in a chess game.” He also called for changing the emphasis on single-service operations in order to “establish the idea of joint operations integrating multiple services.” Again, these comments are highly consistent with military reforms announced this week.

In addition, the famous military magazine *Kanwa Defense Review* revealed that China established a Joint Operation Command Center of the Central Military Commission last year. Geng Yansheng, the spokesman of the Ministry of Defense, didn’t deny the report when asked. Instead, he pointed out that China was actively exploring and would “take the road of joint operational command system reform with Chinese characteristics,” which coincides with Xi’s idea of “coordinating all the activities of the whole military and the nation.”

The military’s task is essentially to prevent foreign invasions and protect the security of national territory. Thus, the essence of the military is closely intertwined with foreign affairs and diplomacy. Military reform in any country certainly has a outward-focused element, and the same is true of China.

At the working conference on military reform, Xi emphasized the need to “make efforts to build a modern military power system with Chinese characteristics that can win information-based wars and effectively fulfill its mission.”

“Informatization” is the core of modern military development and the reality of the world military revolution to which the Chinese military must adapt. Cyber and aerospace have become the new global frontiers. During the era of Jiang Zemin, especially after NATO’s bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999 and the Hainan EP-3 incident in 2001, China began to speed up development in the field of military innovation. Recently, China and the United States have clashed over alleged hackers in the PLA – this is actually a form of information war.

“Information-based war” also brings great challenge to national security. Xi has emphasized that China shall maintain comprehensive security on many occasions, in the wake of increasing seriously terrorist attacks and the tense situation in the South China Sea. The military bears the most important responsibility for security assurance. Therefore, it is necessary to change the military mission and let the military reform and adapt to global changes.

In essence, Xi’s speech outlines the internal changes that are needed in the Chinese military system so that it can respond to external changes. But the focus starts at home, as we can also see from Xi’s strict military anti-corruption campaign. The core of the reform is the great strategic adjustment from military passivity to military initiative after 30 years in which the Chinese military has not engaged in a battle. The flare-ups in the South China Sea dispute and increased terrorist attacks only deepen Xi’s understanding of the urgency of military reform. The fundamental purpose of introducing military reform is to maintain a stable environment for China’s development, both domestically and abroad.