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China's Military Regions Restructuring: Understanding Implications for India

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China's military and defence is undergoing a major structural reform in order to become more agile and combat ready through the incorporation of new high-tech equipment that would enable it to fight and win future wars. The reform push has been publicised through frequent announcements made by Chinese leaders on the need and the actions taken to this end. The most recent one was by President Xi during a meeting of the Chinese Military Commission (CMC) held from November 24-26, 2015, where he called for breakthroughs in reforms of the country's armed forces by 2020- enabling a deepening of defence and military reforms aimed at breaking down systemic, structural and policy barriers, modernizing the organisation of the military, further unleashing the combat capacity and vigour of the military. According to President Xi, this deepening of defence and military reforms is a crucial step for the Chinese military's future in realising the Chinese dream as well as its strong military dream. In order to achieve the full extent of its military reform President Xi emphasised on the need to have the CMC take charge of the overall administration of the PLA, the Chinese People's Armed Police and the militia and reserve forces. The CMC's centralised and

unified leadership should be strengthened to ensure that supreme administration and command status belong to the CMC and the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee. One of the major highlights of President Xi's speech was the measures which would be undertaken to integrate the administrative system and the joint battle command system, including a general command centre for land forces that would enable the CMC to directly administer and command various military departments. What this would do is that the current regional military commands would be adjusted and re-grouped into new battle zone commands, supervised by the CMC.¹

This lays down strong indication for the reduction of China's military regions (MRs) which has been doing the rounds for quite some time. Currently, China has seven military regions- Beijing Military Region for the Capital region and Northern China, Shenyang Military Region for North East China, Jinan military Region for Eastern China, Nanjing Military Region for South East China, Guangzhou Military Region for Southern China, Lanzhou Military Region for Western China and Chengdu military Region for South West China. The figure below shows China's proposed Military Regions.

Figure 1: China's Proposed Military Regions



Source: Inputs from "Military Regions", *Global Security*, November 26, 2015, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1991/plaaf-chap10-4.gif>. Accessed on December 7, 2015

The supposed military regions or the so called war theaters should look like the above detailed in the four different shades; by merging the current Beijing and Shenyang military regions in the North East and by merging Guangzhou, Nanjing and Jinan military regions in the South East.

The current military regions of Chengdu that faces the Tibet region and Lanzhou military region catering to the Xinjiang region of China would remain as they are. Earlier reports signalled on the emergence of four military regions, however, latest blueprints suggest the implementation of another strategic zone in central China to be located in Beijing - as encircled in the map- since it is the capital and it is also China's administrative and military nerve

The dismantling of the seven MRs and it being replaced by five new strategic zones or combat zones is part of China's wide-ranging restructuring being done with the intent to improve the command and control system under the CMC. This restructure is part of President Xi's massive military reorganisation, that aims to shift the PLA from an army-centric system towards a Western-style joint command, in which the army, navy and air force would have equal representation

centre. It is pertinent to mention that this reduction of China's military regions is not something new since there has been a constant fall in numbers since the 1990's from eleven to the current seven MRs. The dismantling of the seven MRs and it being replaced by five new strategic zones or combat zones is part of China's wide-ranging restructuring being done with the intent to improve the command and control system under the CMC. This restructure is part of President Xi's massive military reorganisation, that aims to shift the PLA from an army-centric system towards a Western-style joint command, in which the army, navy and air force would have equal representation; enabling the consolidation of power of the CMC and the party's control over the military.²

The military restructuring came into effect on January 1, 2016, during the first meeting of the new CMC's organs on January 11, 2016, China's

President Xi Jinping, stated that, "...this is a dramatic breakthrough made in the reform of the military leadership and command system, a symbolic achievement during the overall implementation of the strategy on conducting military reform and building a strong military, and a key step on the road of building a strong military with Chinese characteristics...". President Xi also urges the new reorganised military organs to focus on winning future wars.³ However, there have been other factors also which have contributed to this undertaking, one being China's involvement in the East and South China Sea, not forgetting its persisting issue with Taiwan. Also, China has had the good fortune of having a peaceful situation on its northern borders for over four decades which has enabled this revision of its military regions.

This 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, which post-reform, would look very similar to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, essentially resembling the US military, enabled with the capability to fight and win modern high tech wars having a more centralised command and control structure.⁴ The downsizing of 300,000 troops announced by President Xi in September 2015 is also a strong indication towards creating a leaner as well as a more lethal military force. India needs to observe these developments taking place in its vicinity, not forgetting the fact that there still lies the unresolved boundary dispute with its northern neighbour. As China's military continues to become more streamlined in its functioning and a more coherent entity, questions emerge on India's own capabilities and preparedness of its command and control structure to take on its adversaries.

The proposed reduction of military regions, if implemented, might not of any great significance to India since the two military regions that border India, would remain as they were, hence maintaining the status quo. The greater significance for India is that any reorganisation 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 current scenario is this; in the realms of Air Force capabilities against India, China still faces a serious disadvantage, mainly due to the lack of its airfield infrastructure capabilities and limitations, which can pose a serious obstacle towards any PLAAF fighter operations that are targeted towards India. PLAAF would have to improve its current airfield infrastructure (in TAR) in order to conduct any sustained air operation against India. New Delhi, in turn, needs to be watchful and continuously monitor any new developments since in case China starts to build infrastructure at airfields in close proximity to

the Indian borders, it is a strong indication about China's future intent against India. However, given the current state of China's airfield infrastructure in Tibet, PLAAF is not capable of achieving air superiority

against the IAF.⁵ Since its airfields in the Tibet region are at high altitude - some of which are more than 10,000 feet - this causes serious limitations for its jet aircraft's load carrying capacity, since high altitudes means a low density of air. Any new development happening near India's borders needs to be considered and India needs to be more observant since it indicates China building its capabilities to overcome this limitation.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is - India's missile capabilities vis- à-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. China's Second Artillery Force (SAF) 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 SAF 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 modernising 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.⁶ The

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military restructuring would further enable this division to become a more lethal entity within the PLA structure. The operational command authority of the SAF is already highly centralized following strict orders from the CMC to the SAF, missile bases to the missile brigades.⁷ Therefore, 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 through the purchase of new anti-missile defence capabilities such as, India's intent to purchase Russia's 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.

China's military region restructuring has been doing the rounds for quite some time- which means that there is a lot of debate and deliberations going on to this end within the various ranks of China's military setup. This has caused a lot of speculations amongst the international defence and strategic community and raised concerns in India. Through these military restructuring China is preparing to adapt in order to fight modern warfare which today has become a more high-tech war, being fought at the five dimensions of Land, Air, Sea, Space and Cyber. This restructuring of its military regions may well be to simply ensure a more efficient command and control system and imprint the paramount supremacy of the Communist Party

over the PLA. However, it also leaves room for concern for India given the fact that this military reform would make the PLA a more agile, combat ready force, 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 Air Force capabilities against any unforeseen future conflict with China.

Notes

¹"Xi Urges Breakthroughs in Military Structural Reforms", *Xinhua*, November 26, 2015, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-11/26/content_6787704.htm. Accessed on November 30, 2015.

²Minnie Chan, "PLA Restructure: China's Military Commands To Be Dismantled Rebuilt As New Strategic Zones In Dramatic Shake-Up", *South China Morning Post*, December 8, 2015, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1888202/pla-reform-chinas-top-brass-set-new-year-deadline>. Accessed on December 8, 2015.

³For details, see "China's New Central Military Commission Organ Established", Ministry of National Defence, The People's Republic of China, January 11, 2016, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2016-01/11/content_4636162.htm. Accessed on January 12, 2016.

⁴"PLA Reform: Seven Military Regions to be Combined into Four War Theaters", *Bowen News*, August 27, 2015, <http://en.boxun.com/2015/09/08/pla-reformseven-military-regions-to-be-combined-into-four-war-theaters/> Accessed on November 30, 2015.

⁵Ravinder Chhatwal, "Analysis of PLAAF Potential against India", *Air Power Journal*, vol. 8, no. 4, Winter 2013 (October-December), pp. 75-76, 88.

⁶Sean O' Connor, "PLA Second Artillery Corps", *Air Power Australia*, December 2009, <http://www.ausairpower.net/APA-PLA-Second-Artillery-Corps.html>. Accessed on December 8, 2015.

⁷"The Second Artillery Force of the PLA", *Ministry of National Defense, The People's Republic of China*, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/ArmedForces/second.htm>. Accessed on December 8, 2015.



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