



Demystifying PLA and its long march

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August 19, 2020 3:23:56 am



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It is customary for a nation to have an army but extremely rare for a political party to have one. People's Liberation Army (PLA) is an exception as it owes allegiance to the Communist Party of China (CPC). This arrangement was formalised in December 1929 during the ninth meeting of CPC at Gutian in Fujian Province when Mao Zedong said the military's role is "to chiefly serve the political ends". Here on, the Communist Party's control over the Red Army became entrenched. Interestingly, 85 years later, on December 30, 2014 President Xi Jinping during his address to 'Military Political Work Conference' at Gutian reiterated, "PLA remains Party's Army and must maintain absolute loyalty to political masters".

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PLA-Party Symbiotic Relationship

PLA traces its roots to ‘Nanchang Uprising’ on August 1 1927; the day Communists led by stalwarts like Mao, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De rose against the Nationalist Forces. It played a key role in successful culmination of Communist revolution in 1949 and CPC coming to power. PLA’s commanders Mao and Deng Xiaoping led People’s Republic of China (PRC) for almost half century as the First and Second Generation leaders.

Given this relationship, PLA is well represented in the two apex governing bodies; Politburo (PLA has two members out of 25) and Central Committee (PLA accounts for 18-20 per cent of its 205 permanent and 171 alternate members). Central Committee elects the Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee (PSC); the highest political body currently composed of seven members. Till 1997, PLA even had representation in the PSC as well; General Liu Huaqing being the last one to hold that position.

Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest military body, is composed of PLA’s top brass, appointed by the PSC. The chairman of CMC is the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of PLA, usually the secretary general of the CPC, presently President Xi. Senior PLA officers are invariably members of the CPC. While commanders handle operational and training aspects, Political Commissars are responsible for personal matters, propaganda and indoctrination.

Barely a year after its creation, China jumped into the Korean War in 1950 to take on the US. Fighting the adversary to a stalemate, PLA suffered over half a million casualties, including Mao’s son Capt Anying. In 1962, it defeated the Indian Army in a limited conflict. However, PLA performed poorly against the Vietnamese Army in 1979. Subsequently, it went through sustained restructuring and modernization.

In 1993, President Jiang Zemin directed PLA to prepare for ‘local wars under modern conditions’ on observing US military power in the 1991 Gulf War. This paved the way for major doctrinal reforms in Chinese military. In 2004, President Hu Jintao laid down the revised mandate for PLA; ‘To win local wars under informationised conditions’.

PLA’s Long March

On assuming power as the ‘Fifth Generation’ leader in 2012, President Xi laid down his China Dream (Chong Meng) wherein a ‘powerful and prosperous’ PRC would acquire ‘great power status by 2049’. As per Xi Jinping, military reforms were critical for realisation of ‘China Dream’, besides achieving key national objectives, namely, stability, modernity, and integration of claimed territories with the motherland.

The strategic directions for military modernization have been spelled out in the white papers on national defence. The 2015 White Paper focussed on strategy of ‘active defence’ and that of 2019 delved into ‘defence in the new era’. It was decided to achieve mechanisation by 2020, basic modernization, including informationisation, by 2035 and transformation into world class military force by mid of the century .

The main thrust of military reforms has been on revamping systems and structures across the board. At the macro level, the focus was on civil-military integration, jointness and optimisation.

The CMC is now responsible for policy formulation, controlling all the military assets and higher direction of war through 15 offices and departments. Three additional headquarters—the Ground Forces, Rocket Force and Strategic Force—were created to ensure centralised control of these assets at the highest level. In the new command structure, the President as the C-in-C exercises direct operational control over the PLA.

The modernization process of PLA is doctrine driven — “winning local wars under informationised conditions”. While ‘local wars’ envision short swift engagements in pursuit of larger political aim, ‘informationised conditions’ refer to technology predominance in war fighting. Salient facets of China’s ways of war fighting are:-

- Adopt holistic approach to balance ‘war preparation’ and ‘war prevention’.
- Respond to multi-dimensional security threats by concentrating superior forces, ensuring self-dependence.
- Employ integrated combat forces to prevail in system-vs-system operations, featuring information dominance, precision strikes and joint operations.
- Reorient from ‘theatre’ to ‘trans-theatre operations’, shift to ‘off shore waters defence with open sea protection’, transit from territorial air defence to building air space capabilities including outer space and strengthen strategic deterrence.
- Pursue ‘Grey Zone Conflict’ strategy alongside ‘nibble and negotiate’ tactics.
- Expand military cooperation to establish regional security network.

At the operational level, the erstwhile 17 l-odd Army, Air Force and Naval commands have been organised into five Theatre Commands (TCs); Eastern, Western, Central, Northern and Southern. While Eastern TC is responsible for Taiwan Strait, Western TC looks after the entire Indian border. All the war fighting resources in each TC under one commander ensures seamless synergy and optimisation. In addition, 84 corps size formations have been created, which include 13 operational corps and air borne corps, besides dedicated training facilities and logistics installations in each theatre.

While PLA is reasonably well equipped, it lacks combat experience. To overcome this handicap, it trains under realistic conditions in well-organized combined training facilities. To support capacity building, adequate budgetary support has been provided. The defence budget for the year 2020 was \$179 bn (actual figures being much higher). However, its revenue expenditure is gradually rising due to the huge maintenance cost and provisioning for over 50 million veterans.

After claiming an elusive victory over Novel [Coronavirus](#) in April this year, Xi has gone on overdrive to consolidate his position at home and project a strongman image abroad, through aggressive posturing by PLA around the disputed territories in South China Sea and against India in Ladakh. It is part of Xi’s campaign to set the stage for 20th Party Congress due in 2022 during which there will reshuffle in leadership.

Western Theatre Command

PLA's aggression in Eastern Ladakh during May this year was well planned. Beijing's strategic aim apparently was to convey a strong message to Delhi to desist from building border infrastructure so as to maintain status quo. In tactical terms, twin objectives were to make territorial gains in the contested areas and seek to shift the '[Line of Actual Control](#)' (LAC) Westwards.

These operations have been undertaken by Western Theatre Command (WTC), the most expansive of the five TCs with Tibet and Xinjiang regions under its area of responsibility.

The incursions were undertaken with clear objectives: In [Pangong Tso](#) area, to dominate the Chushul Bowl; in the Galwan Valley, to dominate Durbuk-DBO road, and in Depsang Plateau to pose a threat to Siachen and enhance security of the Western Highway. Although PLA gained initial advantage, it did not expect stiff opposition from the Indian Army. Given PLA's intent to hold onto the gains coupled with current level of build-up by both sides and military level talks yielding little results, the de-escalation process is in for long haul.

In Retrospect

On the eve of PLA's 93rd Anniversary on August 1, 2020, President Xi Jinping while presiding over the 'group study session' of CPC Central Committee stated: "To develop 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and achieve national rejuvenation- efforts to make country prosperous and making military strong go hand in hand. Military capabilities must fit the national needs".

Calling for leapfrogging developments, Xi underscored the implementation of strategic guidelines in the 'new era', including drawing of scientific road map and cultivating high calibre military talent.

The on-going reforms in the PLA are well aligned with Xi's grand projects like the Belt-Road Initiative and 'Maritime Silk Route' to enlarge China's global footprint. The impact of rapid accretion in PLA's war waging potential is already being felt, given its growing aggressive behaviour.

China has ensured that border issue with India remains unresolved so as to retain the ability to mount tension on the LAC at will. Even the current aggression by PLA in Aksai Chin is part of grand design with multiple strategic and tactical objectives. The WTC is China's strategic theatre from the point of internal security and collusion with Pakistan against India.

To effectively cope with PRC's repeated misadventures, there is a requirement to reset our China Policy-from appeasement driven engagement to the one centred on our core interests. There is a need for realistic articulation of threat assessment and formulation of long term strategy to effectively safeguard national sovereignty and integrity. This demands transformational initiatives to restructure apex organizational frameworks. To this end, 'joint military doctrine' is sine qua non and 'integrated theatre commands' essential prerequisites. Border management

needs immediate reconfiguration. In the current situation, India must stand its ground and seek restoration of status quo; even if it implies upping the ante.

PLA enjoys a unique position in Chinese system and its identity as the military of the party remains sacrosanct. Despite PLA's transformation being on fast track, it will take time before the Chinese Armed Forces can claim to be at a par with the Western Armies capable of undertaking extended global missions. But PLA is undoubtedly poised for a 'long march' and is bound to alter the existing 'balance of power' with serious ramifications.

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