

## China shifts gears to combat strong rivals

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On course: The Chinese military is developing so that it could challenge the US. Reuters

THE Chinese military is shifting its focus to winning wars against stronger opponents amid mounting challenges. According to a South China Morning Post report, President Xi Jinping, who is also the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), China's highest defence body, has directed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to enhance its strategic capabilities to defend the country's sovereignty and developmental interests.

Xi unveiled the new directive while commemorating Deng Xiaoping's 120th birth anniversary on August 22. He highlighted Deng's vision for the PLA — which was instrumental in developing it into a strong, modernised and well-organised

force — emphasising the importance of ‘fewer but better troops’. General Miao Hua, a member of the CMC, stated while commenting on the strategic shift, “In the new journey, we should focus on strengthening capabilities to defeat strong enemies and opponents.”

A recent article in the PLA Daily, while referring to Deng’s 1980 strategic judgement that “a world war can be postponed or avoided”, noted that China now faces great changes unseen in a century. It asserted the need for the armed forces to remain vigilant and maintain strategic clarity on the possible risk of war, make full preparations for military struggle, effectively deter war and resolutely win it.

The Chinese leadership has refined its warfighting doctrines of winning local wars since the 1990s through white papers and strategic guidelines. The first ‘White Paper on National Defence’ was published in 1998. Following the release of ‘White Paper on National Defence (2006)’, the PLA adopted the ‘local wars under informationised conditions’ doctrine to match technologically superior adversaries. Through the ‘informationised war’ doctrine, China sought to impose high costs on conventionally superior opponents by targeting command, control, communication, computer, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) networks.

The recent directive to the military to prepare for wars against strong enemies marks another strategic shift, primarily as a response to the challenges China is facing, both in the maritime domain and on the land borders. Incidentally, Xi, on assuming power in 2012, had initiated a slew of deep-rooted military reforms as he had envisioned the PLA to play a key role in realising the ‘China Dream’ of a prosperous and powerful China by the middle of the century. Sovereignty was identified as one of the key national objectives. Besides fostering nationalism, it was to ensure the security of periphery and the integration of Taiwan and all claimed territories with the motherland.

To provide strategic direction to implement Xi's vision, the 'White Paper on National Defence, 2015' (China's Military Strategy) was released. Its theme was 'active defence', and its focus was on winning 'local wars under conditions of modern technology'. It implied a major transition in the naval strategy from 'offshore waters defence' to a combined strategy of 'offshore waters defence and open sea protection' to secure China's maritime interests.

To operationalise the new doctrine, the CMC was restructured and military regions reorganised into theatre commands. A number of measures were instituted to enhance military capabilities across the spectrum. PLA navy (PLAN), numerically the biggest navy today with more than 350 ships, is expected to reach a strength of 450, including six aircraft carriers, in the next few years. The Chinese Coast Guard is the largest in the world, with over 100 vessels. The PLA air force is in the process of building an 'air space defence force' to enhance its power projection capabilities. It is expected to have a fleet of over 1,000 stealth and fifth-generation fighter aircraft by around 2035. Besides, the Rocket Force arsenal is anticipated to go up to 700 before the end of the decade, duly complemented by hypersonic glide vehicles and cruise missiles.

Under Xi, the 'White Paper on National Defence, 2019' (Defence in the New Era) was published; it was US-specific. It flagged the fact that America and China are competing superpowers and the latter's military is developing to the point that it could challenge the US. China further revised the 'limited war fighting doctrine' based on 'informatisation and intelligentisation'; the thrust was on information technology, artificial intelligence (AI) and digitisation. Through informatised warfare, China plans to take on opponents superior in conventional terms by targeting the C4ISR systems.

The rationale behind China's recent doctrinal shift is the possibility of confrontation with the US and its allies due to the ongoing maritime disputes in South and East China seas and Beijing's persistent claims over Taiwan. Hence,

to get the better of its powerful opponents, China plans to increase its strategic capabilities significantly by leveraging disruptive technologies, including the weaponisation of AI by building networks of unmanned weapon systems. The 'grey zone warfare' is a force multiplier that encompasses the concept of 'Three Warfares' (psychological, media and legal warfare). It is already being effectively waged by the Chinese Coast Guard and PLAN in the South China Sea.

China does not consider India as a major threat, considering the prevailing asymmetry in the Comprehensive National Power between the two, which distinctly favours the former. Ironically, the divide is set to widen, given the PLA's fast pace of reforms and modernisation. China remains unrelenting when it comes to de-escalation on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh, despite a number of meetings of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination and Corps Commanders, besides numerous ministerial-level interactions. Given the massive military build-up across the LAC in Tibet opposite Arunachal Pradesh, the enactment of the new border law in 2022 and the Beijing-Islamabad collusion, China apparently has no design to resolve the border issue anytime soon. India must be fully prepared for possible escalations.

China's periodic pronouncements of new military doctrines serve a dual purpose: it ensures strategic clarity for the defence planners and subtle messaging to the global polity. While the Chinese leadership foresees stability and a peaceful environment, it makes no bones about its intent of using force in pursuit of its national interests. China's recent doctrinal shift merits a realistic analysis to unravel the Dragon's grand design and its implications.