

# People's Liberation Army - Western Theatre Command: Role, Structure and Concept of Employment

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## Abstract

*The People's Republic of China has periodically reorganized the defence forces to prosecute its war fighting doctrines. The process of on-going path breaking military reforms was initiated by President Xi Jinping in 2013, wherein 'Central Military Commission' was revamped and erstwhile military regions restructured into 'Theatre Commands'. The 'Western Theatre Command' is responsible for the defence of complete border with India. Its primary role is to maintain dominant posture along the 'line of actual control'; secondary to keep restive states of Tibet and Xinjiang under effective check to ensure conducive periphery. Given the strategic importance, Western Theatre has a well-balanced orbat and its formations are suitably equipped for high altitude warfare. It is feverishly engaged in scaling up its war waging potential for contingencies along our Northern borders. There is need for to decrypt PLA's grand design in the Western Theatre and formulate holistic plans to meet the current and future challenges.*

## Background

The strategic community of 'People's Republic of China' (PRC) has periodically reviewed its war fighting strategies in consonance with the emerging security environment and evolving national interests. The Chinese military underwent major reorganization post 1979 Sino-Vietnam War as sequel to its poor performance. '1992 Gulf War' provided further impetus towards transformation of People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a modern fighting force.<sup>1</sup>

The recent phenomenon of path-breaking military reforms commenced in 2013, after President Xi Jinping assumed power. There was visible sense of urgency due to geo political considerations; US strategy of rebalancing towards Asia being the key factor<sup>2</sup>. The underlying rationale behind radical reforms was two- fold; prepare the PLA for China's expanding strategic interests and establish firm control of 'Communist Party of China' (CPC) over the military. To this end, Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest defence body with President Xi as its Chairman was revamped and armed forces underwent major restructuring.

Xi's grand design seeks to usher China into 'new era', advocating greater role in the world affairs.<sup>3</sup> To realise its global ambitions, PRC has formulated a long drawn strategy with well- defined national objectives. These are safe guarding 'sovereignty' which entails territorial integrity, ensuring 'stability' implies unchallenged authority of CPC and 'modernity' connotes sustained economic progress. Towards achieving the above objectives, Cdefence forces are envisioned to play a critical role. At the Third Plenum of 19<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the CPC held in October 2020, one of the 'developmental goals' was building of modern Army by 2027 (coinciding with PLA's Centenary) at par with

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US Army.<sup>4</sup> Taiwan, Tibet and East Turkestan alongside territorial cum maritime disputes in South and East China Seas remain PRC's major security concerns. Consequently, PLA has suitably refined its war fighting doctrines and reorganized erstwhile 'Military Regions' into 'Theatre Commands' (TCs) to meet the emerging challenges.

### **PLA-Doctrinal Shift and Restructuring**

The Chinese strategic culture advocates that the best way to deal with threat is to eliminate it. Hence, PRC's repeated use of force in pursuit of its strategic intent comes as no surprise. Its current military doctrine of 'Local Wars under Informationised Conditions' envisions swift military engagements to achieve crucial political objectives.

During President Xi's first term, 'White Paper on National Defence' titled 'China's Military Strategy' was published in 2015, the theme being 'Active Defence'. It entailed major doctrinal shift; change of naval strategy from 'off shore water defence' to combined strategy of 'off shore water defence and open sea protection' and Army was to orient from 'theatre defence' to 'trans- theatre mobility missions.'<sup>5</sup> China's future war fighting was to draw balance between 'war preparation' and 'war prevention'. Salient facets to operationalize the strategic guidelines of 'Active Defence' were: <sup>6</sup>

- Respond to multiple security threats ensuring flexibility, mobility and self-dependence.
- Employ integrated combat forces to prevail in 'system-vs-system' operations; featuring information dominance, precision strikes and joint operations.
- Undertake strategic deployment and military disposition.
- Constantly modernise and enhance capabilities with 'Chinese Characteristics'.

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In pursuit of strategic guidance, modernization of armament has been designed to achieve domination in the field of information warfare, anti-radiation missiles, electronic attack drones, direct energy weapons, airborne early warning control system and anti-satellite weapons. Towards reengineering systems and revamping organizational structures across the spectrum, deep rooted changes have been instituted, with focus on civil-military fusion, jointness and decision making process.

As per the latest defence White Paper titled "China's Defence in New Era" released in July 2019, the CMC is responsible for formulation of the national defence policies and strategies as also higher direction of war. Erstwhile 17 odd single service military regions were reorganised into five Theatres Commands (TCs) reporting directly to the CMC. In addition, 84 corps level organizations were created including 13 Group Armies (GAs) as well as training and logistics installations. Broad 'areas of responsibility' of the reorganised TCs is as under:<sup>8</sup>

- Eastern (Nanjing) - Taiwan, East China Sea
- Southern (Guangzhou)- Vietnam, South China Sea
- Western (Chengdu)- India, Internal Security
- Northern (Shenyang) - Korean Peninsula and Russia
- Central (Beijing)-Reserve and Internal Security



(Adapted from <https://googleweblight.com>)

### Western Theatre Command

The Western Theatre Command (WTC) is most expansive, created by amalgamating erstwhile Chengdu and Lanzhou Military Regions.<sup>9</sup> Its ‘Area of Responsibility’ (AOR) covers almost 40 percent of China’s landmass; includes the sensitive border regions of Tibet and Xinjiang, besides provinces of Sichuan, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai and Chongqing; accounting for 22 percent of population. The terrain in the AOR is generally rugged, characterised by high mountains and desert. WTC is responsible for entire 4057 km Sino-Indian border, starting from Siachen Glacier to the Tri Junction-Diphu Pass in Arunachal Pradesh.

General Zhang Xudong assumed the command of WTC towards end December 2020. He is known to be mechanised warfare expert and rising star, having been appointed commander of a sensitive Theatre at a young age of 58. Even the Political Commissar Gen Wu is especially selected. The other key commanders include Lt Gen Xu Qiling-Ground Forces, Lt Gen Haijiang Wang-Tibet Military District (TMD), Lt Gen Liu Wanglong-Xinjiang Military District (XMD), Major General Liu Lin-South Xinjiang Military Region (SXMR) and Lt Gen Wang Qiang-head of Air Force.<sup>10</sup>

### Mission/Tasks

The WTC’s operational role is primarily India specific. Its envisaged key tasks encompass the following:<sup>11</sup>

- Ensure sanctity of the border with India by maintaining aggressive posture.
- Launch limited offensive to secure claimed areas along the LAC.
- Undertake coordinated operations along with Pakistan Army in POK-Ladakh.

## External Security: Pakistan–China Strategic Challenges

- Maintain high state operational preparedness through combined arms training in ‘High Altitude Warfare’ and capacity building to facilitate speedy employment of combat potential.
- Respond to contingencies in the ‘Central Asian Republics’ under the auspices of Shanghai Corporation Organization (SCO).
- Undertake trans-theatre contingencies
- Maintain internal stability in Tibet and Xinjiang regions by supporting ‘People’s Armed Police Force’.
- Organize disaster relief operations in conjunction with the civil administration.

### Organizational Structure

The organizational structure of WTC is based on combined arms concept, with vast in- built resources, lending flexibility to take on multiple tasks at a short notice. In terms of equipment it is on high priority, evident from the high tech systems like Type 15 tanks, PCL-181 howitzers, multi barrel 370 mm rocket systems, Z-20 helicopters and GJ-2 drones.

### Ground Forces

Almost 30 percent of the PLA’s ground forces are on the orbat of WTC. 76 and 77 GAs constitute the main offensive component of the ground forces, headquartered at Xining and Chengdu respectively.<sup>12</sup> These are organized into heavy, medium, light combined arms brigades besides special operations, artillery, air defence, engineers and service support brigades. TMD and XMD are both corps size formations organized into infantry/mechanised divisions and border regiments. These are primarily meant for defensive role and internal security duties wherein exercise operational control over the sensitive Tibet and Xinjiang regions respectively. XMD is sub- divided into North and South Xinjiang Military Regions. Orbat of major formations is as below.<sup>13</sup>

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76 GA (Xining)	77 GA (Chengdu)	TMD	XMD
12, 17 & 62 Heavy Combined Arms Brigades, 149 Medium Combined Arms Brigade, 56 & 182 Light Brigades, 76 Special Operations Brigade, 76 Army Air Force Brigade, 76 Arty Brigade, 76 Engineering Chemical Prevention Brigade, 76 Service Support Brigade	139 Heavy Combined Arms Brigade, 181 Medium Combined Arms Brigade, 39 Medium Brigade, 40 Mountain Combined Arms Brigade, 150 Light Combined Arms Brigade, 77 Special Operations Brigade, 77 Air Defense Brigade, 77 Engineering Chemical Prevention Brigade, 77 Service Support Brigade	52 & 53 Mountain Infantry Brigades, 54 Mechanized Infantry Brigade, 308 Artillery Brigade, 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 Independent Battalions, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 & 9 Border Defense Regiments	6 Mechanized Infantry Division*, 4 Motorized Infantry Division*, 8 Motorized Infantry Division, 11 Motorized Infantry Division  *Part of SXMR

### Air Force

PLA Air Force (PLAAF) formations on the orbat of WTC are 6, 33 & 37 Fighter Divisions located at Yinchuan-Ningxia, Dazu and Urumqi respectively. Besides there is 36 Bomber Division at Lintong-Shaanxi, 4 Transport Division at Qionglai-Sichuan and 109<sup>th</sup> Aviation Brigade at Urumqi.<sup>14</sup> The air infrastructure in WTC has witnessed sharp increase

especially after the 2017 Doklam stand-off. It includes building and upgrading airfields and helipads at Xigaze, Lhasa-Gonggar, Qamdo- Bamda, Nyingchi and Urumqi. New heliports have been built at Lhasa- Gonggar and Ngari. An airstrip has also been constructed East of Doklam. As per the satellite imagery reports, the air assets based at various airfields are as below:<sup>15</sup>

- Lhasa- Gonggar: KJ-500 AEW aircrafts, J-11, J10, SU 27 Fighters and MI17-IV helicopters.
- Xigaze - J10, J11 Fighters, EA -03 UAVs,
- Ngari Guns-a-J11, SU 27 Fighters
- Hotan-J10, J11 Fighters.

**56<sup>th</sup> Rocket Force Base** is at Xining (Qinghai); reported to house 12xDF-21 (2150 km)/DF-31(7000 km) missiles.<sup>16</sup>

### Training and Logistics

WTC has vast 'combined arms tactical training bases' (CATTB) in Xichang and Qingtongxia for conducting live fire drills. Qingtongxia CATTB besides urban warfare training village also has mock-up of Aksai Chin (1:500 scale and dimensions 900mX700m).<sup>17</sup> Frequency of PLA's joint exercises has increased over the years, generally scheduled during January-February. The new 'Strategic Logistics Support Force' of PLA has one 'Joint Logistics Support Centre' in each theatre; in respect of WTC it is at Xining.<sup>18</sup> Considerable infrastructure development is taking place in the AOR of WTC including underground oil storage facility coming up at Golmud. Construction work Chengdu-Lhasa railway line has also started. Once completed by end of this decade, it will take only 15 hours to cover the 1629 km distance.<sup>19</sup> Significant road building and infrastructure upgrade is underway in the Karakoram Pass area as well.

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### Concept of Employment: Vis-à-vis India

The basic concept of employment of force in the WTC is in consonance with its designated role and PLA's ways of war fighting. Given the terrain advantage, well developed infrastructure and integrated organizational framework, the strategy adopted by WTC has been of 'offensive defence' to further China's expansionist policy. It entails aggressive posturing through pre-emptive deployment to gain initiative by well-planned actions.

Going by the pattern over last few of years, the PLA has pursued 'low cost-high dividend' approach i.e. tactical actions yielding strategic payoffs. Incidences of transgressions in disputed areas like Depsang-2013, Chumar-2014 and Doklam-2017 are cases in point. Even the incursions in early May 2020 leading to the recent standoff, although scaled up in size and scope, followed similar design. The 'nibbling tactics' to prosecute 'bullet less skirmishes' as part of its 'Grey Zone Warfare' will remain preferred option of the WTC to maintain ascendancy. Alongside, construction of habitats in the disputed areas as forward bases and change the demographics to legitimise territorial claims will continue to be actively pursued. Recent reports about newly constructed village in Tsari Chu River area in Arunachal is essential dimension of the border management modus operandi.<sup>20</sup>

The Chinese leadership does not intend to engage in a full scale war as it will take heavy political and economic toll which could prove cost prohibitive. Therefore, instead of major engagement, calibrated escalation and force projection through speedy posturing is likely to be the preferred option of WTC. In case situation does spin out of control, probability of limited confrontation can't be ruled out. In such an operation PLA is likely to resort to cyber warfare,

precision strikes by the ‘Rocket Force’ and employment of combined arms formations in a telescopic time frame to go in for quick tactical gains.

In the wake of growing collusion between China and Pakistan, the ‘two front scenario’ is a stark reality. There are reports of China building new road linking Karakoram Highway with Astor, in Pak occupied Gilgit-Baltistan.<sup>21</sup> Once this 33m wide road is complete, it will enable China to channel heavy artillery into Gilgit Baltistan, posing threat to Indian positions in Ladakh. The ‘New Defence Law’ (NDL) introduced wef from January 2021 has the provision to protect China’s overseas assets thus giving PLA an extended role.<sup>22</sup>

As regards the recent standoff in Eastern Ladakh, WTC team led by Major General Liu Lin has played out the old game of prolonged negotiations without yielding tangible ground. From the on-going disengagement process, it is evident that the Chinese side has reconciled to some trade off on the Northern bank of Pangong Tso in return for our pulling out from Kailash Ridge. PLA is expected to bargain hard against make major concessions in the Galwan and Depsang areas towards restoration of pre standoff status quo ante. The reports of the Chinese beefing up on the LAC by relocating troops and heavy equipment not only in Eastern Ladakh but also in other areas like Lipulekh in the Central Sector and Tri Junction in the Eastern Sector indicate Chinese larger design.<sup>23</sup>

### **Implications**

PRC has blatantly pursued policy of asymmetric coercion to settle territorial disputes. Large scale incursions undertaken by the formations of WTC in Eastern Ladakh last year, violating all the past agreements, were part larger political design. Even if the current crisis is diffused, it is not China’s to resolve the border issue any time soon.

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In view of the above, there is an urgent need to formulate national security policy and ‘joint military doctrine’ to prosecute ‘limited war’ based on realistic threat assessment, factoring the ‘two front scenario’. This requires rebalancing the deployment of military assets on our Western and Northern borders. Some measures appear to be in the offing. Process of structuring tri service ‘theatre commands’ ought to be fast tracked. Today, seven Army and Air Force commands are facing PLA’s single WTC, which is a serious lacuna.

In the wake of prevailing situation, top most priority needs to be accorded to strengthening own positions in the contested locations and vulnerable areas across the entire stretch of the LAC. Improvement of infrastructure and logistics management issues needs to be addressed simultaneously. Alongside, current complicated structure of border management with multi layered control involving numerous agencies requires to be streamlined with all elements being placed under the army control. Local militia units must be raised on priority and deployed on the border to effectively counter Chinese intrusions.

Given China’s expansionist policy and WTC aggressive posturing, active LAC is likely to be the new normal. Therefore, our Armed Forces need to be fully prepared to blunt any misadventure by PLA, which demands sustained capacity building and pro-active approach.

## Endnotes

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