

# A Smaller, Nimblener Chinese Military: Xi Jinping Takes Control

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**President Xi Jinping is attempting to modernise China's military through wide-ranging reforms. But the reforms are also intended to once again bring the military under the absolute rule of the Communist Party.**

A sweeping reform of the Chinese military is turning the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a much smaller, nimblener force, replacing the old, clunky, Soviet model. But the reform may be undermined by the desire of China's leaders to reassert absolute control over the military and to quell internal dissent.

Announced by President Xi Jinping in 2015, and referred to as the 'above the neck' and 'below the neck' reforms, they place the Communist Party of China (CPC) – and crucially Xi himself – firmly in control of the PLA. In doing so, Chinese generals are now having to re-learn lessons from the days of Mao Zedong, particularly his view that 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun ... the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party'.

Xi officially announced the start of the reforms in November 2015. According to *Xinhua*, China's official media channel, he addressed a meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC) – of which he is chairman – and spoke of the need for military reform:

*Under the leadership of the [Communist] Party, our military has gone from small to big, from weak to strong, from victory to victory. On this road, reform and innovation steps have never stopped.*

*Now, as the country progresses from a large country to a large and powerful one, defense and military development stands at a newed [sic] and historic starting line.*

Under the reform, there will be a three-tier 'CMC – theatre commands –

troops' structure and an administration system that runs from the CMC through various services to the troops. At a ceremony on 1 January 2016, Xi made it clear that troops will follow the direction of the CPC's Central Committee, the CMC and Xi. They must be absolutely 'loyal, pure and reliable'. As if to drive home the point in the bluntest way possible, Xi declared that the reforms are designed to strengthen the principle that the 'Communist Party of China has absolute leadership of the armed forces'.

The first phase of the reforms, which took place last year, has been the streamlining of the PLA's command structure, replacing the seven military regions into five theatre commands: Central, North, South, East and West. The four headquarters – General Staff, General Political Department, General Logistics Department and General Armaments Department – have been dissolved, with only the General Staff remaining. The functions of the other three departments are to be merged into the General Staff and Ministry of National Defense.

In their place are four new headquarters for the army, navy, air force and a newly created national guard – which replaces the armed police and will take care of homeland security, disaster relief and counterterrorism. These are under the direct command of the CMC.

The branch headquarters will be in charge of force management while the theatre commands are responsible for the operations.

In addition, a Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force were established

on 31 December, 2015. The Rocket Force – China's missile forces – grew out of the 2nd Artillery Corps, which had implicitly been responsible for this role before, and is now officially upgraded from a branch to an independent service, alongside the PLA's army, navy and air force. As a global major power, the duty of this strategic nuclear missile force will no longer be a secret to the public. On 26 August 2016, when inspecting the Rocket Force unit, Xi declared that it was the core of China's strategic intimidating power and the cornerstone of its national security. The Strategic Support Force is a new independent branch that combines all support forces, including high-tech operations such as space, cyberspace and electronic warfare operations.

The reforms are part of what Xi has described as the 'Chinese Dream', first put forward in 2012–13 – the modernisation reform is 'a major policy decision to realise the Chinese dream of a strong army'.

The Chinese leadership believes the reforms will simplify command mechanisms and enhance the PLA's joint operational command and control capability. Defense Ministry spokesman Yang Yujun said the reforms 'will focus on removing systematic barriers that had constrained military development in order to boost modernisation of the military as well as cultivate the fighting capacity of troops'.

The reforms also include the setting up of a new discipline inspection committee, which will closely monitor various departments and theatre commands. The move is part of a nationwide crackdown on corruption,



Xu Caihou, a former vice chairman of the CMC, was sacked from the PLA after accusations of corruption. Xu was denounced as ‘pathetic and shameful’ by the military after he died of cancer while awaiting his trial. *Courtesy of Wikimedia/Robert D Ward.*

which is rampant in both civilian and military life. The crackdown has already claimed two top commanders, Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, both of whom served as vice chairman of the CMC. They were sacked from the PLA and Guo was sentenced to life imprisonment for corruption by a military court. Xu was denounced as ‘pathetic and shameful’ by the military after he died of cancer while awaiting his own trial for corruption.

Guo and Xu had been in Xi’s sights for quite some time. Xi had seen how his predecessor Hu Jintao had effectively been made a mere figurehead by the two generals. Guo and Xu were hangovers from the days of former President Jiang Zemin and were his proxies on the CMC. Xi did not want to go the way of Hu.

On 2–3 December 2016, a year after the first phase of reform, Xi held the

second session for the military structural reform in Beijing. He announced the second phase of the reform, the three-year ‘below the neck’ process that aims to downsize and streamline units below theatre command level, starting in January 2017 and finishing in 2019. This phase of the reform will see an overall decrease in manpower within the PLA from 2.3 million to 2 million. The numbers of military officers will reduce from 600,000 to 400,000. Most of the cuts will come from non-combatant units, including administration, logistics, schools and medical organisations.

Some sections of the PLA will be more affected by this stage of the reform than others. The PLA Army will see its numbers reduce from 1.15 million to 910,000. By contrast, the PLA Navy is expected to see an increase in

personnel from 230,000 to 300,000. The PLA Air force will have a moderate growth of manpower, but will maintain approximately 400,000 personnel. The Rocket Force will increase its personnel from 120,000 to 140,000, and the Strategic Support Force will maintain its 100,000 personnel.

Below theatre command level, the group armies – the highest exclusively military command level, which comprises a mix of divisions and brigades – will be reduced from eighteen to thirteen. According to China’s military observers, the group armies that will be dismantled are the 14th group army of the South Theatre Command, the 16th group army of the North Theatre Command, the 20th and 27th group armies of the Central Theatre Command and the 47th group army of the West Theatre Command.

All this emphasis on air, naval and rocket forces at the expense of the 'Big Army' doctrine – introduced in 1949 – will especially affect high-ranking and retiring officers. So far, there is no specific plan to help the large numbers of retiring personnel. At the same time, many high-ranking officers have been demoted, while others have been promised jobs in the government which have not yet materialised. This has led to a certain reluctance on the part of some within the PLA to accept the reform; although, of course, they cannot freely express such anti-government views.

Despite this, different voices have come out publicly against the reform. As far back as November 2015, several high ranking officers claimed that the reform was being implemented too hastily and suggested that all aspects be taken into consideration, even if this takes more time. [According to Chinese media](#), this sparked a three-day – rather than the usual one-day – debate, at the end of which Xi urged the PLA to maintain a 'correct political direction' through 'a series of designs and arrangements' to consolidate the basic principle that 'the Communist Party of China has absolute leadership of the armed forces'.

In the same month the PLA's Daily Newspaper published an article written by two officers of the PLA National Defense University who said that if the reform did not take into account low salary and pensions, the reform might cause the instability of both the PLA and society. However, this article was soon removed.

Recently, PLA veterans have been gathering in Beijing to protest against the poverty they face and the ill health they have suffered as a consequence. On 11 October 2016, more than 1,000 veterans [gathered](#) in front of the National Defense Ministry to protest against the government. There was a similar [protest](#) in January and February this year. These protests are a sign of the unrest and the lack of backing that the reform has in the PLA.

These protests may fall on deaf ears, since Xi now appears to have full control of the PLA. The Sixth Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC, held in October 2016, [declared](#)

that the CPC Central Committee had 'Comrade Xi Jinping as the core'. It [issued](#) a communiqué demanding unity, calling on all members to unite closely around the CPC Central Committee, while underlining the importance of collective leadership.

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The importance of Xi was underlined in March at the annual meeting – known as the 'two sessions' – of China's top political advisory body, the *Lianghui*, which is comprised of the National People's Congress (NPC), the country's top legislature, and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. [Xinhua reported](#) that Zhang Dejiang, chairman of the NPC Standing Committee, hailed the achievements made under the leadership of the CPC Central Committee 'with Xi as the core'. He said this endorsement of Xi as the core 'reflects the will of all members of the Party, all members of the armed forces and all the people of China'.

However, if military reform is based on winning a political power struggle, it is unlikely to last beyond the installation of Xi's successor. And that is the biggest potential risk for the development of the PLA.

Even if Xi earnestly attempts to establish a military force able to win modern wars in the great power game, it is still difficult to see the PLA's first allegiance being to the CMC chairman, to the exclusion of everything else. One of the main planks of the reform is that the PLA will adopt a US-style joint command mechanism – but it will still have the Chinese mechanism of centralisation of authorities at the top. The make-up of the CMC is not going to change. This small group of eleven men – a chairman, two vice chairmen and eight members – has control over the largest and fastest growing military force in the world.

China's military reform is decided, approved and implemented by the CMC. According to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the CMC leads the armed forces of the nation and, in theory, its members are elected and approved by the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the NPC. However, in practice, the members of the CMC are chosen by the chairman – Xi – and follow his guidance. Membership needs to be 'confirmed' at the NPC, but this is just a formality. They are not accountable to either the Central Committee of the Communist Party or the NPC.

Despite Xi's seemingly absolute control, the PLA is still a giant machine, and it will not work properly and efficiently without the full cooperation of the senior ranks. Yet Xi seems intent on changing this too. In a major reshuffle of personnel, announced on 1 January by the CMC, 47 high ranking officers, including eighteen generals and 29 lieutenant generals, were relieved of command. Between 17–20 January 2017, 29 colonels were promoted to major generals in four days.

One aspect of the PLA not being reformed is the structure and the function of the Ministry of National Defense. Unlike most other countries, the Ministry of National Defense of China is a shell department that is subordinate to the CMC, and whose minister is a member of the CMC.

Most of the ministry's functions have been replaced by the fifteen administrative sections under the CMC. The ministry really acts only as a liaison office with foreign militaries. This outmoded mechanism is the product of Communist Party rule. Even the Russian Ministry of Defense exercises actual administrative and operational authority over the armed forces nowadays.

As long as the armed forces serve merely one person or a small group of people, it will be subject to the vicissitudes of political struggle. It is difficult to predict whether, once Xi steps down, the armed forces he is reforming in his image will pledge loyalty to his successor.

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