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## AN ANALYSIS ON THE PLA REFORM UNDER XI JINPING AND THE POTENTIAL OF INTENSIFYING COMPETITION

Lieutenant-Commander Haekeun Kim, ROKN

**JCSP 46**

**Solo Flight**

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## AN ANALYSIS ON THE PLA REFORM UNDER XI JINPING AND THE POTENTIAL OF INTENSIFYING COMPETITION

Since adopting Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening-Up Policy, China has rapidly achieved a significant step forward in military modernization in terms of weapons and equipment by significantly increasing the military budget every year.<sup>1</sup> However, when it comes to military structure and organization, China's military reform attempts have proceeded mainly focusing on the reduction in terms of the number and size rather than adopting a revolutionary restructuring despite 13 attempts so far. Since the reform of eleven Military Regions into seven in 1985, the Chinese military system has been maintained with only a reduction of its personnel numbers and unit size over time. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), which stood at four million personnel in 1985, cut one million personnel in 1985-87, a half million in 1997-2000, and 200,000 in 2003-05 and currently maintains 2.3 million troops. The PLA has fundamentally kept an army-centered organization, which has perpetuated the hindering development of modern joint military operations.<sup>2</sup>

However, the military reform which has been carried out since late 2015, is unprecedented and the most immense in its military history. President Xi Jinping visited PLA troops of the PLA Navy (PLAN), PLA Air Force (PLAAF), Second Artillery, and Armed Police within two and half months after his inauguration as chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2012.<sup>3</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup> Seonghan Kim, "Rise of China and Great Power Politics," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 59, no. 1(2013): 9.; Dongryul Lee, "China's defense spending growth, implications, and prospects," *Journal of National Defense Studies* 60, no. 2 (2017): 29.

<sup>2</sup> Jaseon Koo, *Status and Prospective of China's Defense and Military Reform: Focused on Organizational Structure* (Seoul: The Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, 2016): 1, <http://policy.nl.go.kr/cmmn/FileDown.do?atchFileId=160350&fileSn=39450>.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur S. Ding, "The PLA and Taiwan Policy under Xi Jinping: One Joint Actor without Its Own Agenda," *Issues & Studies: A Social Science Quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian Affairs* 53, no.2 (June 2017): 7.

professed that 'The Chinese Dream' of the 'Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese' can only come from the 'Dream of Strong-Armed Forces'.<sup>4</sup> In addition to a massive anti-corruption campaign, Xi emphasized the build-up of a strong military worthy of a great power, which could be assumed a win by pushing ahead with the biggest military reform.<sup>5</sup>

In late 2015 and early 2016, Xi announced a wide range of military reform plans. On 31 December 2015, he declared the establishment of a new ground force headquarters, Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), and Rocket Force (promoted from Second Artillery as an independent branch into Rocket Force as a full service), thereby establishing a five force system including; PLA, PALN, PLAAF as well as new Rocket Force (PLARF) and PLASSF. On 11 January 2016, four major departments (the General Staff, Political, Logistics, and Armaments Department) of the CMC were dismantled and 15 departments, commissions, offices, and bureaus were newly established. Xi presiding over the ceremony in Beijing on 1 February, announced that the existing seven Military Regions were merged together for the establishment of five theater commands.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, China has strengthened its military power and is increasingly challenging the military predominance of the United States (US), especially its power projection capability. The US has made efforts to counter Chinese military gains in the region. The US military is currently developing the Joint Access and Maneuver in Global Commons (JAM-GC) and Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) concept, with an aim to ensure its joint force projection capabilities in response to an adversary's Anti-Access and

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<sup>4</sup> China Daily, "Chinese Dream includes strong PLA," last modified 08 October 2013, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-10/08/content\\_17012886.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-10/08/content_17012886.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Dongwon Yoo, "China's Military Reforms and Countermeasures," *Journal of Koreanology* 61 (November 2016): 2-5.

<sup>6</sup> Jaseon Koo, *Status and Prospective . . .*, 8-10.

Areal-Denial (A2AD) threats.<sup>7</sup> These are intended to project power beyond each force's respective battlefield areas including land, air, sea, cyber, and space domains.

This paper will review the major themes of China's recent military reform and will argue that Xi Jinping's military reform was to reinforce his influence and control over an effective joint military force. Furthermore, implications and the expected influence of this move will be dealt with. This essay will focus principally on the organizational and structural reform plan announced between 2015 and 2016 under the authority of Xi Jinping. Military modernization or military build-up will not be discussed in this essay, although could be part of further researches.

## **REINFORCEMENT OF THE CCP'S INFLUENCE AND DIRECT LEADERSHIP**

### **Reform of the CMC**

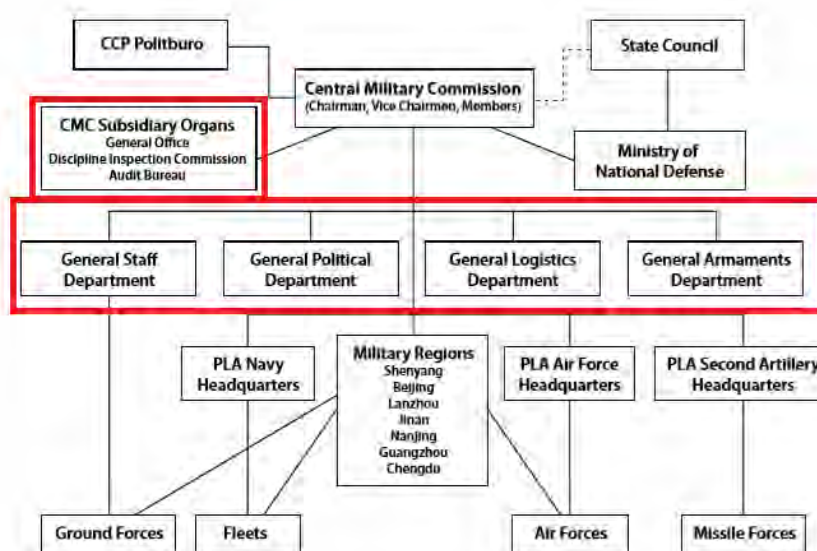
The key to military reform is to extensively shake up an outdated military system, particularly the command and control system including leadership, and the joint operations command and control structure. Xi clearly understands that reinforcing CCP control over the military is crucial before any reform can be made, because in case that the military leadership group resists the reform, it would only inject enormous expense and eventually fail.<sup>8</sup> This Reform to the CMC affiliated organizations was carried out in late 2015.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael E. Hutchens, et al, "Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons: A New Joint Operational Concept," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 84 (1st Quarter 2017): 134-139.; Congressional Research Service, "Defense Primer: Army Multi-Domain Operations (MDO)," last accessed 23 April 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/IF11409.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> The Economist, "Xi's New Model Army," last accessed 3 April 2020, <https://www.economist.com/china/2016/01/16/xis-new-model-army>.

In the past, as mentioned above, the four General Departments of the CMC operated independently as depicted in Figure 1. Prior to the reform, four General Departments under the CMC were in charge of all operations and managements including personnel, logistics, military support as well as troop information and education, and their major posts were predominantly held by the Army.<sup>9</sup> In this design, the CMC was unable to exercise its actual influence due to the four general departments. Most notably, its poor management system resulted in corruption among occupation soldiers. In particular, the General Staff served as the headquarter of the PLA and further the headquarters of the China's military.



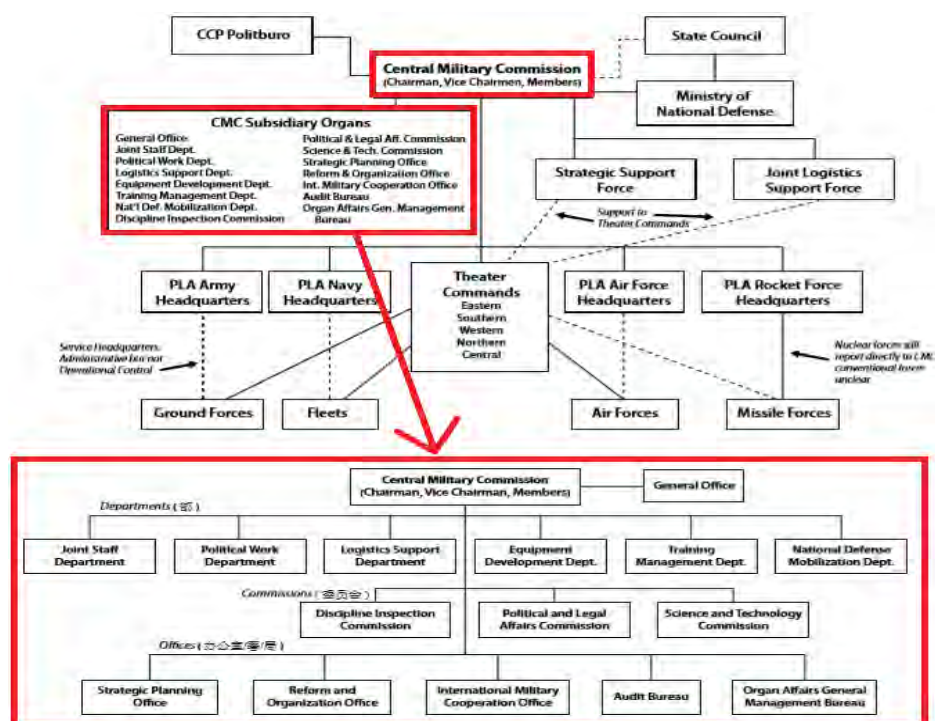
**Figure 1 – PLA Structure Prior to Reforms**

Source: Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, *Chinese Military Reform in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications*, 7.

With the reform, the four major General Departments were reorganized, absorbed and divided into 15 organizations in order to increase professionalism and effectiveness within the CMC and affiliated organizations as Figure 2 shows. These new subsidiary

<sup>9</sup> Yoo, "China's Military Reforms . . .", 12.

organs of the CMC now consist of; six departments, three Commissions, and six Offices.<sup>10</sup> This means that by dismantling huge departments that held formidable authority, and by setting up a number of independent organizations with decentralized power, practical influence and control authority over the military by the CMC, especially Xi Jinping as the chairman, is strengthened.<sup>11</sup> The CMC General Office has a uniquely and important position since it principally supervises the information flow on behalf of the CMC and takes responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the reform and ensuring that Xi's and CCP's directives are followed across the expanded CMC bureaucracy.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 2 – PLA Structure and New CMC Organizations after Reforms**

Source: Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, *Chinese Military Reform in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications*, 10-11.

<sup>10</sup> Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, "Chinese Military Reform in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications," *China Strategic Perspectives* 10 (March 2017): 10-13.

<sup>11</sup> Yoo, "China's Military Reforms . . .", 13.

<sup>12</sup> Wuthnow and Saunders, "Chinese Military Reform . . .", 13.



### **Reinforcement of monitoring functions to military discipline and corruption**

Under the CMC, there are three new organizations that are responsible for military discipline and corruption issues. The Discipline Inspection Commission (DIC), the Political and Legal Affairs Commission (PLAC), and the Audit Bureau were established to strengthen the monitoring of these functions. The DIC, prior to the reform, was under the General Political Department (GPD) and had difficulty conducting investigations due to its low positional authorities. However, the reform ensured its independent status by gaining independence from the GDP. The PLCA, that was transformed from the GDP's law enforcement functions, has oversight of military courts, criminal investigations, and military counterintelligence.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, the Audit Bureau, formerly affiliated under the General Logistics Department (GLD), was elevated to a bureau under the direct control of the CMC, which supports audit and inspection functions and now reports directly to the CMC. The Audit Bureau will carry out inspection to all units throughout the PLA.<sup>14</sup> Prior to the reform, corruption was likely high in the GLD due to the concentration of large budgets and interests, and its control over all military logistics and supply. Therefore, audit and monitoring functions were inevitably weak as subordinate to the GLD.<sup>15</sup> The elevation of all these organizations clearly supports CMC oversight of all military operations and activities, reinforcing as such Xi's control as the chairman of the CMC.

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<sup>13</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman and Joseph Kendall, "China Military Organization and Reform," *Centre for Strategic & International Studies* (August 2016): 10, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinese-military-organization-and-reform>.

<sup>14</sup> Wuthnow and Saunders, "Chinese Military Reform . . .", 65.

<sup>15</sup> Yoo, "China's Military Reforms . . .", 13.

## **Establishment of the Joint Operations Command Centres**

Prior to the reform, although the General Staff Department (GSD) under the CMC was functionalized as the head command of the entire military, PLA, PLAN, PLAAF, and Second Artillery affiliated in Military Regions in peacetime, belonged to a separated command system. The navy and air force in each Military Regions were integrated into the Military Regions command structure, however, they were practically controlled by service headquarters respectively.<sup>16</sup>

The reform includes the establishment of the Joint Operations Command Centre (JOCC) of both the CMC and each theatre command. The JOCCs are organizations to command the PLA, PLAN, PLAAF, PLARF, and PLASSF, and are similar to the US' Unified combatant command system in which the chain of command for operational purpose goes from the President through the Secretary of Defense to the combatant commands.<sup>17</sup> The JOCC of the CMC was opened to public view in April 2016 and has taken the prime role for in terms of operational command authority over the PLA. President Xi Jinping visited the CMC JOCC in combat uniform for the first time on 20 April 2016, and also used the title "Commander-in-Chief of the Joint Operations Command Center."<sup>18</sup> As the paramount operational body of China's military in both wartime and peacetime, the CMC JOCC is in charge of all combined and joint operations over all PLA, and each theater command JOCC is responsible to command joint operations within each theater of responsibility in conjunction with CMC JOCC. At this

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<sup>16</sup> Wuthnow and Saunders, "Chinese Military Reform . . . , 7.

<sup>17</sup> US Department of Defense, "US Department of Defense Organization Charts," last accessed 25 April 2020, <http://www.netage.com/economics/gov/USDefense-chart-top.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Yasuyuki Sugiura, "The Joint Operation Structure of the Chinese People's Liberation Army with Focus on the Reorganization of the Chain of Command and Control under the Xi Jinping Administration," *NIDS Security Studies* 19, no. 1 (March 2017): 14.

point, the JOCCs of the CMC and each theater command have been vigorously operated, and Xi is in charge of the CMC JOCC.

In other words, President Xi Jinping has consolidated power of command over the military by holding both military command and administration authority through his posts as the Chairman of the CMC as well as the Commander-in-Chief of the JOCC. The CMC oversees management, administration, and building of the military, and the JOCC deals with all operations and associated strategy. While in the former reform system the GSD was primarily responsible for military command and reported to the Chairman of the CMC via the Vice chairman of the CMC, under the current system Xi, as the Commander-in-Chief of the CMC JOCC, has control over the whole military. This means that Xi Jinping holds all power over the PLA administration and its command, as well as China's political and government leadership.

## **IMPROVEMENT OF ABILITY FOR JOINT OPERATIONS**

### **Changing Military Region System to Theater Command System**

On 1 February 2016, Xi's military reform completed drawing a big picture with change of its Military Region system into a theater command system. This was a revolutionary and huge-scale reform conducted for the first time since the foundation of PLA in 1927. Prior to the reform, a commander of Military Region was not only in charge of operational command authority across all military services including, PLA, PLAN, PLAAF, and Second Artillery, but also was in charge of training, administration, management, logistics, supply, mobilization, and recruiting, which are a tremendously wide range of authorities. That was the legacy of the 'People's War' from the time of Mao, which was the concept that war against any aggressor invading the Chinese

mainland should be fought not only by the PLA, but also by all the people together. The Chinese military had maintained the strategy and system that was established in the era with no concept of joint operations with the PLA and PLAAF using advanced technology. This is no longer an effective strategy since China's strategic space for the military has expanded off the Asian continent with an off-shore defense strategy and the advance to far oceans.

As figure 3 shows, with the reform, the seven Military Regions system were changed to a five Theater Commands system. Theater Commands, which replaced Military Regions, have changed the focus of warfighting. The authority of Theater Commanders lies at the operational command, which leads to the conduct and integration of joint operations of the PLA, PLAN, PLAAF, as well as the newly established PLARF belonging to the theater. Except for operational command, command authorities still belong to the service commanders. Through the establishment of theater commands, separation of authority between operations and administrations was eventually accomplished. While a Military Region System was suitable for conventional warfare, the Theater Command System, which is similar to the concept of the US exercising operational chain of command, is expected to be more appropriate to modern warfare. Through Xi's order, he stressed that all theaters should concentrate on warfighting, pay attention to study the winning mechanism of modern warfare, and actively take the initiative in any future war.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The SINA Mail, "The Five Major Theaters of the People's Liberation Army Established Xi Jinping and Awarded Military Flags to Issue Training Orders," last accessed 10 April 2020, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/sz/2016-02-01/doc-ifxnzanh0519593.shtml>.



**Figure 3 – Change of MR to TC**

Source: Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2016), 2.

### **Changes of Force Composition of China’s Military**

The establishment of the ground force headquarter, which did not exist previously, could be interpreted as reshaping the Army-centered military structure and weakening the PLA’s status to make it the same as the PLAN and PLAAF.<sup>20</sup> The PLARF’s mission primarily lies in its nuclear and missile capabilities, much like that of the former Second Artillery and partly includes a space portion related to nuclear and missile.<sup>21</sup> The President Xi declared that the establishment of the Rocket Force is the milestone of military modernization, and made it clear that the mission of the PLARF is to consolidate a credible reliable nuclear-deterrence and nuclear counterattack capability in all regional and preemptive wars, and to reinforce mid-range and long-range expeditionary strike capability.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Koo, *Status and Prospective* . . . , 17.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman and Joseph Kendall, “The PLA Rocket Force: Evolving Beyond the Second Artillery Corps (SAC) and Nuclear Dimension,” *Centre for Strategic & International Studies* (13 October 2016): 3. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pla-rocket-force-evolving-beyond-second-artillery-corps-sac-and-nuclear-dimension>.

<sup>22</sup> The People’s Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, “China establishes Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force,” last accessed 26 April 2020, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/ArmedForces/second.htm>.

The Strategic Support Force is expected to take charge in electronic, intelligence, cyber, surveillance, reconnaissance, and other support missions. The existing intelligence function was reorganized to comprehensively handle and lead military intelligence in the information age, as well as to support the PLARF's nuclear and space task. There are a number of analyses that the Strategic Support Force (SSF) is an organization that prepares for wars expected to be contested in the future in areas such as cyber, space, and psychological warfare.<sup>23</sup> PLA Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo, member of the Expert Advisory Committee for Cybersecurity and Informatization, stated that SSF's main mission will be to enable the PLA to maintain local advantage in the space, aerospace, electromagnetic and cyber battlefield. In detail, it is said that the mission of SSF includes; target reconnaissance and tracking, daily operation of satellite navigation, operating Beidou Satellites, handling space-based assets, and defensive and offensive cyber and electromagnetic management.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the SSF will be responsible for a core capability of China's Information Warfare, which is central to China's strategy of pre-emptive and asymmetric warfare.<sup>25</sup> The PLA textbook, *The Science of Military Strategy*, mentions that prior to achieving air and sea dominance, information dominance is required in advance, and space, cyber, and electromagnetic warfare working together as a strategic weapon to paralyze an adversary's operational systems and to sabotage an enemy's command and control systems.<sup>26</sup> In so doing the PLASSF undoubtedly plays a key role.

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<sup>23</sup> Constello, John, "China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for New Era," *China Strategic Perspectives* 13, [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/china-perspectives\\_13.pdf](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/china-perspectives_13.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Constello, John, "The Strategic Support Force: China's Information Warfare Service," *China Brief a Journal of Analysis and Information* 16, no. 3 (February 2016): 16, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-strategic-support-force-chinas-information-warfare-service/>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

### **Keys Takeaways of the Reform**

The Reform has the means of building and renovating the PLA's foundation to efficiently operate its military power, which has been developed focusing on physical capabilities, while its structure and organization has lagged. On the other hand, however, behind the scene is the concentration of power at higher military command levels, and within the CCP's, and especially Xi's control over the military. Centralization of power over the military is reflected in the Chairman of CMC's responsibility of the system. In the previous administration, lots of routine tasks were handled by the Vice-Chairman of the CMC and the four General Departments oversaw almost all parts of the military. Unlike the past, all vital issues of national security and military modernization are now planned and decided by the Chairman of the CMC. The four dismantled General Departments authorities were transferred to the CMC, and President Xi assumed more authority as Commander-in-Chief of the CMC JOCC. Through these two key posts, as the Chairman of CMC and Commander-in-chief of the CMC JOCC, Xi has consolidated his power and influence over the military by holding the two main authorities of both operations and administrations. The CMC is completely in charge of the entire military, while theater commands will take charge of operations and each service will be in charge of management.

Since taking power, Xi has driven a massive and prominent anti-corruption campaign along with military reform. Generals Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, who were former Vice Chairmen of the CMC were both punished on charges of corruption, and had

been called the wolf in the northwest and the tiger in the northeast respectively.<sup>27</sup> They had built their careers based on their successes in the Lanzhou and Shenyang Military Regions respectively, and had formed a clique. Officers of the PLA generally get promoted within a single Military Region until they reach a very high rank.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, leaders of Military Regions exerted personnel authority, which created factions within it; as well as supporting corruption such as the practicing pay-off deals for appointive offices. Factions within the military are weakened by the reform because Theater Commands, which replaced the Military Region do not hold administrative authorities. Xi's preeminence, intentions and perspective will be forefront in all aspects of the PLA including, response, operations, administration, development, and strategy.

Improvement of joint operations capability, which is another key implication of the Reform, will underpin China's national and military interests. One of the most revolutionary product of the reform is the establishment of the JOCCs, which provide for the development of operational planning, the monitoring and control of joint operations, as well as the role of a communication hub between CMC, commanders of each theaters, and field commanders.<sup>29</sup> If the Reform is achieved by 2020 as intended, the PLA will build a joint operations command system which will be prepared, and capable, of conducting informational warfare as directed. These operations will be conducted in a simply two-stage command system led by the CMC and theater commands, and will be directly commanded by the highest level of leadership.

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<sup>27</sup> Koo, *Status and Prospective* . . . , 11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Saunders, Phillip C. and Wuthnow, Joel, "China's Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms," *STRATEGIC FORUM*, no. 294 (April 2016): 7-8, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=792179>.



Another key implication is that this Reform will make the PLA services more balanced. Ground force had taken a dominant position in the PLA, stemming from the fact that the main mission of the PLA in the past was to protect its territory in response to an enemy's ground force based invasion. However, since the threat from the Soviet Union disappeared after the late 1980s, China has started expanding its military interests in the South China Sea and beyond, and is now keeping an eye on the US Navy and Air Force in the Western Pacific. To meet these military demands, the PLA converted Military Regions into theaters, established new ground force headquarters, strengthened the role of PLAN, PLAAF, and formed the PLARF and the PLASSF. One of the major implications that should be focused on here is that the PLA has begun to break away from long-held Army-centered mindset. Establishment of ground force headquarter has meant that the status of the Army, which was formerly dominant, became equivalent to the other service arms, and it could be significant that the Second Artillery is promoted into the PLARF. The PLA is no longer part of the Army-centered military and by putting more weight on the PLAN, PLAAF, and PLARF which are the main forces of the Anti-Access and Aerial Denial (A2AD) strategy and power projection, greater results can be achieved. In particular, the PLARF reflects a strengthening capability to counter the US-Japan missile defense system, and its A2AD will against the US expeditionary forces in case of emergency as well as an active response to a nuclear arms race with the US. In addition, the SSF shows how importantly China deals with competition in recent and future contested areas such as information, electromagnetic, cyber, space, and psychological warfare. These are not only seen as a strategic military power build-up by a major state, but also as means to counter US measures and thus to take a predominant position in nuclear, cyber, space, and information areas. Therefore, competition in these areas

between the US and China will be significantly intensified. All efforts of the PLA will be directly led by the CMC, especially Xi Jinping through a concise two stage command in all areas of operations and administration.

### **Potential toward aggressiveness**

As previously mentioned, the status of the PLAN and PLAAF have been promoted through the reform, while the status of the PLA was degraded. Compared to the past, the PLA is displaying its aggressiveness especially in maritime affairs and operations. China has been stepping up a military response in the South/East China Sea. Since 2015, activities of PLAN vessels, armed patrol ships, and PLAAF fighters have increased rapidly around the Senkaku (Chinese: Diaoyudao) Islands, thus military tensions between China and Japan have been escalated.<sup>30</sup> Around the date of issue of the final award of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) regarding sovereignty issues in the South China Sea, the PLAN conducted a massive show of force in the area. In addition, in the same year, the PLAN conducted a large-scale exercise with organized around an Aircraft Carrier Strike Group composed of its first aircraft carrier ‘Liaoning’, three Destroyers, three Frigates, and one supply tanker in the West, East/South China Sea.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, China has fielded a DF-21 Anti-ship Ballistic Missile capable of striking vehicles in the entire South China Sea in the China’s northwestern plateau.<sup>32</sup> It also appointed a PLAN Admiral as the commander of the newly established Southern Theater

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<sup>30</sup> Byeongwha Bae, “A Study on Changes of Military System in China and Japan and Northeast Asian Regional Security,” *Korean Journal of Military Art and Science* 75, no. 3 (October 2018): 10.

<sup>31</sup> Taesung Kim, Sanghyun Lee, “Strategic Response of Korea by China’s Military Power Strengthening - Korea by Focusing on Security Policy Direction and Military Response Strategy,” *The Korean Association of Northeast Asia Studies* 23, no. 3 (September 2019): 98.

<sup>32</sup> South China Morning Post, “China / Military Chinese army sends DF-26 ballistic missiles to northwest region,” last accessed 26 April 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2181773/chinese-army-sends-df-26-ballistic-missiles-northwest-region>.

Command, which is in charge of the South China Sea region, and assigned China's second aircraft carrier 'Shandong' to the Command.<sup>33</sup> These actions can be seen as a willingness to further strengthen effective Chinese control of the South China Sea and to prepare for military competition with neighboring countries, including the US.

In line with the reform, the PLA is strongly pushing ahead the transition to combined/joint operations in any 'Informationized Local War' in which informationization, pursuing local war, and improving joint operation capability would enhance its war fighting potential. Compared to the past, pursuing 'Local War' is an important change in the perception of the PLA. In the past, the PLA's primary goal was defending China's Mainland against an external enemy's invasion, but now it does presume local war rather than full-scale war.<sup>34</sup> This could be found not only in this new policy, but also in force building, part of which is the significant reduction of the PLA and the strengthening of the PLAN/PLAAF including an amphibious capability. The PLA reform reflects these points: joint operation capability of theater commands that will focus on regional conflicts and; the adjustment of the PLA composition will be noted for local warfare, especially the improvement of a power projection capability.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, China amended the National Security Act in June 2015 as a measure ensuring National Security Strategy through the Act, and improved related legislation for power projection in 2016.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> South China Morning Post, "First made-in-China aircraft carrier, the Shandong, officially enters service," last accessed 26 April 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3042469/chinas-second-aircraft-shandong-carrier-officially-enters>.

<sup>34</sup> Fravel M. Taylor, "China's New Military Strategy: Winning Informationized Local Wars," *China Brief* 15, no.13 (July 2015): 3-6.

<sup>35</sup> Hyunseop Shim, "A Study on the implication of the Chinese military reform of national defense in the Era of Xi Jinping," *Military History* 103 (Jun 2017): 166.

<sup>36</sup> Bae, "A Study on Changes of Military System . . .", 11.

Considering, that these movements of China and the PLA are being converged toward aggressiveness, China is expected to further expand its geographical and strategic range to implement and apply its Active Defense Strategy. In other words, China is building up conditions to mobilize military power for aggressive purposes to adjust the regional security order to its advantage, beyond simply maintaining and defending existing interests effectively.

### **Intensified probability for competition in the Western Pacific region**

Even though the US has put considerable efforts in the areas of counter-insurgency and stability operations since the “War on Terror”, it is now emphasizing the point that the military dominant superiority that it enjoyed heretofore has been eroded by its peer adversaries’ evolving A2AD strategy.<sup>37</sup> Perception of the threat to the US military ability of power projection has continued since it was explicitly presented in the National Security Strategy 2010 White House publication.<sup>38</sup> In particular, in the National Defense Strategy 2018 document, the US defined strategic competition with revisionist powers China and Russia as the most critical security challenge.<sup>39</sup> The US stresses the concept of A2AD as a key challenge to its security commitment.

To counter the A2AD challenge, the joint Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept was officially presented in the US Department of Defense Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2010.<sup>40</sup> However, several criticisms to the ASB had been raised. For instance,

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<sup>37</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1, 2018), 3. <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=807329>.

<sup>38</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, May, 2010), 50.

<sup>39</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*. . . , 2-3.

<sup>40</sup> Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, February, 2010), 32.

there was criticism that the ASB only envisions the roles of the US Navy and Air Force, but lacked consideration for the jointness due to absence of the role of ground forces, and criticism of the probability and danger of any war escalating. Eventually, ASB was replaced by the new Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) in January 2015.<sup>41</sup> In the process of replacing ASB by JAM-GC, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) presented the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) in 2012 as a higher concept, which is a comprehensive concept to counter any A2AD environment. What needs to be highlighted is that Cross-Domain Synergy (XDS) appeared as the capstone concept for the JOAC.<sup>42</sup> US JCS had come up with how to implement XDS, which resulted in Multi-Domain Operation (MDO). By conducting MDO, US joint forces will be able to establish battlefield cross-maneuver capability that is semi-independent and able them to conduct deep operations through resilient formation.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, they will integrate and converge US military capabilities across all domains and in expanded time and space. This convergence of capabilities will integrate information throughout all battlefield and domains in real time for conveyance to combat units.

JAM-GC and MDO share an overlapping area in terms of dealing with XDS, and mainly aim to counter potential peer adversaries' A2AD capability. As such, the US has defined China's A2AD strategy as its formidable threat and has been preparing concrete and innovative military strategy for future competition. Indeed, the US is showing its effort to shape MDO into a regional strategy. Indo-Pacific command has been coming up

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<sup>41</sup> Michael E. Hutchens, et al, "Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons: A New Joint Operational Concept," *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 84 (1st Quarter 2017): 134-139.

<sup>42</sup> Department of Defense, *Joint Operational Access Concept* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, January 17, 2012), 14-17.

<sup>43</sup> Paul C. Hurley Jr, Tracie M. Henry-Neill, and Rebecca s. Brashears, "Sustainment Innovation for Multi-Domain Battle," *Army sustainment*, January-February (2018): 5-6.

with how to realize MDO in terms of US' Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>44</sup> In the context, recent US efforts such as the improvement of relationships with China's neighboring countries, especially India, and Taiwan, by enacting Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative.

In summary, both China and the US are strengthening their capabilities with each other in mind, which has the potential of intensifying competition in the Western Pacific region. Considering the recent situation, such as the change in the stand of Chinese diplomacy in Xi's era, and increasing aggressiveness and assertiveness in the region including the South/East China Sea, and the US striving to maintain superiority and influence in the region, it may be able to be predicted that the Western Pacific region will become the fiercest arena of competition in the future.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION TO THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA MILITARY**

So far, this paper discussed the PLA's latest military reforms which are the most massive since the foundation of the PLA. Through these reforms, China is seen to reinforce the CCP's, and especially Xi Jinping's, political control over the PLA, and to consider the significant probability of future competition against the US. From an operational perspective, the PLA is going forward, breaking away from the original Army-centered mindset, improving its joint operational capability through the establishment of JOCCs and theater commands, promoting the status of major forces for A2AD and power projection, and the establishment of the SSF to support expected

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<sup>44</sup> Robert B. Brown, "The Indo-Asia Pacific and the Multi-Domain Battle Concept," *Military Review* (September-October 2017): 15.

competition in future contested area. The US also considers China an apparent threat and is preparing for future competition.

This emerging competition will directly impact on the Republic of Korea (ROK) due to geographically close contested areas as well as its relationships with its neighbors. How should the ROK military be prepared? First, it is necessary to be prepared for the possibility of intensifying military competition between the US and China. The ROC should devise a strategy in advance of any increased competition in in order to respond properly to minimize the negative impact on its own security. Second, it should be prepared to recognize and understand that the US may employ an off-shore balancing strategy that emphasizes the primary role of its allies while reducing cost burden of the US in conducting MDO in the Indo-Pacific region.

It is required for the ROK military to keep an eye on evolving MDO and to consider the impact of Chinese force development. In this case, the ROK may be asked to increase its role in securing peace and stability in the region. The MDO is expected to be a key issue not only for the US joint force but also in the coalition force with allies. In other words, how to implement MDO in terms of the coalition force is key to the future alliance strategy of the US. To conduct MDO with coalition forces, a common understanding of the concept between the US and its allies will be essential, and the need to build a high degree of interoperability among coalition force will be critical. Considering the expectation that any future warfare will be primarily led by the US, and although the ROK military cannot fully apply to MDO, it is necessary to move toward strengthening jointness more actively. Regardless of whether armed conflicts occur in the region, it could be a leverage for the future.

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