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Military Theory System with Chinese Characteristics: Impact in the People's Liberation Army's Western Theatre Command

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Abstract

The October 2024 Chinese 'Military Theory Work Conference' was personally chaired by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xi Jinping. His directions during the conference and subsequent military visits indicate an attempt to accelerate the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) modernisation with focus on 2027 when the PLA completes 100 years of its existence. The conduct of the Russia-Ukraine War including Operation Spider Web in June 2025, the India-Pakistan air-missile-drones standoff during Operation Sindoor in May 2025, over four years of the Sino-India standoff along the India-Tibet border and the PLA's multiple Taiwan-oriented exercises have shown that PLA needs to incorporate many of the resulting lessons in its military doctrine. Xi and CMC Vice Chairman Gen. Zhang Youxia have called for military reforms across the breadth and depth of the military to grasp new technologies and the revolution in modern warfare doctrine. While the PLA's latest reforms and those planned span all battlespace domains across all theatre commands, the terrain, geography, internal command structure and ethnographic profile of Tibet and Xinjiang are unique challenges for PLA's Western Theatre Command. This issue brief analyses Xi's key guidelines during the Military Theory Work Conference, follow up actions undertaken by PLA and the relevant implications for the PLA's Western Theatre Command opposite India.

Keywords: military modernization; military doctrine; combat preparedness; joint operations; Xi Jinping Thought; India-China Line of Actual Control (LAC); China-Pakistan military cooperation

The General Secretary of Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Xi Jinping, chaired the Military Theory Work Conference of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) from 14 to 15 October 2024 in Beijing (*Xinhua Daily Telegraph* 2024). He gave clear instructions to strengthen military theory comprehensively for the 'new era' and build a modern military theory system with Chinese characteristics. Building a world class military urgently is an important part of Xi's 'Chinese Dream' of 2049. Xi has emphasised the requirement of comprehensive modernization of military theory as an essential component of PLA's modernization and has sought to accelerate this process to achieve many of the desired milestones by 2027, which marks the centennial year of PLA. The emphasis on 2027 makes it amply clear to all senior military commanders on the need to accelerate PLA's modernisation process (*Xinhua Daily Telegraph* 2024). A March 2023 *Qiushi* article amplifies this saying,

"To achieve the goal of the centenary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army by 2027 and comprehensively improve the strategic capabilities to defend national sovereignty, security, and development interests is the central task of our military construction" (Jun Zheng 2023)

Key Guidelines

Xi's description of the new era acknowledges an accelerated military revolution the world over and the rapidly evolving security and development needs of the People's Republic of China (PRC). His instructions incorporated several key guidelines amplifying his Strong Military Thought.

Party Commands the Gun

This Maoist-era guideline coherently exemplifies 'Xi Jinping's Strong Military Thought' which insists on employing Marxist concepts to examine contemporary PLA issues of fighting battles in the modern era (*Qiushi* 2023). It requires implementing the new era's military strategic guidelines by adherence to the combination of the CPC's basic principles of Marxism for building the PLA and the evolving battlespace. As per Xi, "Our army is an armed group that implements the party's political tasks." Hence, 'absolute loyalty' to the CPC and Xi personally, particularly at the level of the senior PLA leadership, has been projected as the paramount Chinese characteristic and the "great cognitive tool" for strengthening the military and winning battles in the new era. Xi has asked the PLA to develop deep insights into the contradictory actions in the combat battlespace of the new era which affect major relationships between military and politics – wherein the PLA is subordinate to the CPC – with the objective of stabilizing the situation and shaping momentum, people, and weapons, and armament (*Xinhua Daily Telegraph* 2024; *Qiushi* 2023).

"Dare to Fight and Win"

Xi urged the PLA to absorb the spirit of "excellent Chinese traditional military culture". His call to "dare to fight and win" highlights the PLA's history of having defeated the US-supported and -equipped Kuomintang Army in 1949 and its assessment of having defeated the US Army itself during Korean War despite being weaker. To psychologically strengthen PLA troops to fight and win the modern battle, Xi and his CMC members have continuously reiterated that military power must match the economic strength. The following quote summarises Xi's thought process,

"In the past, we had less steel and more spirit, but now we have more steel, more spirit and harder bones... (PLA) must carry forward the fighting spirit of not fearing hardship and not fearing death, dare to overcome all difficulties, dare to defeat all enemies." (*Xinhua Daily Telegraph* 2024).

In the PRC's Defence White Paper 2019, there is a hint of who these 'enemies' are with references to the UK, France, Germany, Japan and India apart from those to the US' pursuit of absolute military superiority and Russia's New Look military reforms (The State Council 2019). Thus, the additional words, 'hardship', 'death' 'all difficulties' 'all enemies' used during the Military Theory Work Conference suggest that the focus is not on US and Taiwan alone but on India, too (*Xinhua Daily Telegraph* 2024; *Qiushi* 2023).

Combat Readiness and Training

As per Xi's thought, the Cold War's shadow in the new era of great power competition has ensured that power politics and the law of the jungle are still prevalent. This has accentuated a high-risk period for both the CPC and the PRC. To exploit the key window period presenting unprecedented challenges and opportunities for the PLA's leapfrog development to world-class standards, Xi has called on the PLA to closely monitor the changes in warfare and the PRC's adversaries and thus undertake focussed research of major issues of combat readiness under new historical conditions. In accordance with the PRC's 'Active Defence Concept' and Chinese strategic culture, Xi has called on the PLA to maintain highest standards of combat readiness to exploit any possible opportunity provided by their adversaries. His differentiation of 'war and peace' and 'deterrence and actual combat' is exemplified by his military guideline wherein he states,

“only by being able to fight can we stop war, and only by being prepared to fight can we avoid fighting. The less able we are to fight, the more likely we are to be beaten... In the new era, the people's army insists on stopping war with force, which means that it must always maintain strategic clarity about the possible risks of war, be ready to fight at any time, fight based on existing conditions, not fight unprepared and uncertain battles, effectively deter and resolutely win wars” (*Qiushi 2023*).

Becoming a Science and Technology Powerhouse

Xi's Military Thought states that in the new era, rapid-paced scientific and technological revolution is accelerating the pace of military revolution itself, thereby rapidly and prominently altering the concepts, elements, and methods of winning wars. Xi states that “In the race of a hundred boats, the one who paddles hardest will be the first” (*Qiushi 2023*). Calling on the PLA to be pro-active, he declares the PLA,

“must be good at taking the initiative and fighting proactively, be good at finding opportunities in crises and turning crises into opportunities, strive to be proactive and avoid being passive, and strive for all possible victories on a solid and reliable basis.”

The enhanced aggressiveness and emphasis on being pro-active and taking the initiative in the CMC's military strategic guidance, highlights the CMC Chairman's sense of urgency about accelerated development of strategic, cutting-edge, and disruptive technologies. More importantly, as witnessed in Operation Sindoor – India's May 2025 military operation targeting terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir in response to a terrorist attack in Pahalgam – utilisation of advanced technology in a weapon is not sufficient but it must also meet the battlespace conditions of the new era. Chinese produced HQ9 Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) versions, under Pakistan Army have limited anti-ballistic missile capabilities as highlighted in a Chinese article from November 2024 (Liu 2024).

Thus, the failure to block Indian BrahMos cruise missile strikes on Pakistani air bases and terrorist camps, itself proves the need to accelerate the technological development to intercept supersonic cruise missiles in its advanced versions of integrated air-missile-drones defence technology. In this context, Ukraine's Operation Spider Web on 1 June 2025 – a drone attack targeting Russian long-range aviation assets – can also be termed as a technological Pearl Harbour where low-cost automated AI-driven First Person View (FPV) Drones from trucks could destroy much more expensive Russian bomber aircrafts more than 4,000 km away from the Russia-Ukraine border (Biggers 2025). Such operations will surely be examined in great detail by the PLA.

Focussed and Accelerated Doctrinal Development

Xi also called for the accelerated building of a modern, strengthened and transformed “military theory system with Chinese characteristics”. This is intended to provide scientific support and guidance for practical application through an in-depth study of the war and combat theory in the new era; optimize top-level design of military theory innovation; build an improved military theory research model encompassing a strong research force and an organizational management system; and most importantly, to pursue breakthroughs by constantly evolving as per the new military situation in theory work in the new era. These goals are in consonance with oft-expressed opinion by Chinese military analysts that the modern era has seen a transition from the concept of ‘tactics determines technology’ to a military concept where ‘technology determines tactics’.

Follow-up

The Military Theory Work Conference was attended by Zhang Youxia, CMC Vice Chairman, relevant representatives of all departments and directly affiliated agencies and units of the CMC, CMC's Joint Operations Centre, various theatre commands, all arms and services, and the People's Armed Police (PAP) force. Post Xi's speech, Zhang went on to reiterate the need for conscientious study and implementation of the spirit of Xi's instructions. The meeting additionally refined and clarified the division of tasks and implementation measures. The CMC Vice Chairman highlighted the need to improve joint training particularly its depth, combat realism, and the training mechanism itself.

While CPC leaders have historically emphasised various theories and leaders' thoughts on subjects ranging from the military to diplomacy to politics to the economy, Xi's challenges in the new era are different. Ongoing conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war, have highlighted the rapid disruptive pace of technological evolution in months and weeks. Every status quoist military theory and technology is being challenged. The depth of combined arms warfare and joint service integration required needs doctrinal concepts to be defined and practised in peacetime. As Xi pushes the PLA to tighten the noose around Taiwan, an unpredictable Donald Trump administration in the US both supports Russia in the Ukraine War and attempts to strengthen US-Japan cooperation against China. With Artificial Intelligence (AI) hastening the military decision loops and autonomising kill webs, Xi has repeatedly asked PLA to ensure that their military theory keeps pace with the three

simultaneous modernisations being undertaken by Chinese military – mechanisation, informatisation, and intelligentisation. Xi accordingly notes that,

“changes are accelerating, the new military revolution is developing rapidly, and our country’s security and development needs are changing profoundly. The task of achieving the goal of strengthening the army is more urgent, and it is necessary to comprehensively strengthen military theory work” (*Xinhua Daily Telegraph* 2024).

The CMC, post the Military Theory Work Conference, went on to issue the military theory pamphlet, ‘Understanding Key Military Theory Topics in 2024’ within just one week on 24 October 2024 in the *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao* 2024) which when read in conjunction with Xi’s Strong Military Thought and his guidelines during the Military Theory Work Conference, amplify certain critical issues. The unclassified issues declared in the media, are discussed below.

One, the PLA’s absolute loyalty to the CPC and its General Secretary Xi is highlighted as essential for achieving the basic modernization goal at the time of completion of PLA’s centennial goal in 2027. The CMC document amplifies that the advantages of the ‘socialist military system with Chinese characteristics’ can be accrued only by strictly implementing the system of responsibility of the CMC Chairman, improving the military governance system in accordance to the rule of law, with the desired end state of implementing the strategy of building the army politically in the new era.

Most Chinese military scholars emphasise this concept of ‘rule of law’ and methodical implementation of the Chairman of the Military Commission’s responsibility system by highlighting the need for investigating and dealing with serious violations of discipline and law by Guo Boxiong, Xu Caihou, Fang Fenghui, and Zhang Yang, (without counting the latest series of purges in 2024 and 2025) to systematically eliminate their malicious influence. The strict implementation of rule of law within the PLA, encompassing the “laws of national defence and army building, the laws of military struggle preparation, and the laws of war guidance”, it is claimed will facilitate systematic innovation (Jun Zheng 2023). In July 2024, the third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee studied and accepted the “Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reforms and Promoting Chinese-style Modernization”. It proposed to deepen reforms and promote Chinese-style modernization on the track of the rule of law, stating,

“The Supervision Law will be revised to further promote the standardization, legalization and regularization of supervision work; the Supervision Law will be revised to ensure that the Standing Committees of the People’s Congresses at all levels exercise their supervisory powers in accordance with the law, improve the supervision system and mechanism, and enhance the effectiveness of supervision” (Sun, Qi and Xu 2025).

When analysed in conjunction with the recent increased series of purges at the highest level, it highlights Xi’s concerns for accountability amidst PLA’s accelerated modernisation. While factionalism and corruption are the prime causes of the latest purges, the possible reasons

at least in few of the cases could also be non-performance, lack of accountability and delays in desired pace of reforms.

Two, the buildup of the PLA's strategic capabilities by 2027 is a core task. It is ultimately aimed towards reunification by force of Taiwan by comprehensively strengthening PLA's 'ability to fight' powerful enemies (US) and overcome containment. As the PLA significantly improves its hard-core combat capabilities, it is also responsible for taking the initiative "to shape the situation." With the aim of significantly strengthening combat effectiveness for full-spectrum deterrence, the PLA has been asked to prepare for war, through vigorous and practical military training. The CMC's note accepts that in the current scenario,

"problems like disconnect between combat structure, training and research, and the unrealistic training style and performance style still exist. It is necessary to deepen the structure of combat effectiveness, crack down on falsehoods, to ensure that the combat effectiveness shaped is real and reliable."

The accelerated focus has been further clarified by Xi's visits to strategically important units in October 2024. He first visited the PLARF's DF26 Ballistic Missile Brigade 611 (Unit 96711) at Chizhou in Anhui province and then visited PLAAF Airborne (AB) Corps Headquarters (HQ) at Xiaogan in Hubei province (*Xinhua* 2024). The PLAAF AB Corps HQ (Unit 95829) is co-located along with its two brigades – the Thor Special Operations Brigade (Unit 95848) and Aviation Brigade (Unit 95825). His emphasis on building a modernized Airborne Force was reiterated with the same guidelines of ensuring 'absolute loyalty,' enhancing combat readiness, and pursuance of the aim of becoming a science and technology powerhouse. The visits of CMC Vice Chairman Gen. Zhang Youxia to similar strategically important organisations like HQ Information Support Force (ISF) confirm the intentions of the Chinese military hierarchy to strengthen and personally check the capabilities of the strategically important military units.

Three, the PLA's comprehensive deep reforms for promoting Chinese-style modernization, reviewed, and approved at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee, will be progressed across the PLA's breadth and depth in the new era. The CMC's note specifies that this decision is not just a sequel to the comprehensive deepening of reforms initiated at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee. These reforms aim to ensure to usher in a novel chapter in the new era to achieve the PLA's centennial goal by 2027 and seize the strategic commanding heights of international military competition – space, cyberspace, electromagnetic and information/cognitive domains. The PLA had earlier trifurcated the Strategic Support Force into three separate arms – Aerospace Force (ASF), Cyberspace Force (CSF) and ISF in April 2024 to dominate these three global commons. It has also merged a few PLAN air assets within the PLAAF, is expanding PLA Navy Marine Corps, and raised the Long-Range Artillery Brigades within the PLA Ground Force (PLAGF) to undertake long-range precision strikes. As seen during the recent conflicts – the Russia-Ukraine War, Iran-Israel standoffs in 2024 and Operation Sindoor by India against Pakistan – precision strikes are the new normal of strategic signalling.

Further organisational structural reforms should, therefore, be expected within the PLA to incorporate latest technological advancements especially AI, modern equipment like the

latest aircrafts, ships, strategic air defence assets and even tactical equipment like robots, First Person View (FPV) and one-way attack kamikaze drones, and the latest upgrades in counter-drone systems. A PLA article on modernisation, following recent conflicts, aptly highlights the need for reforms to keep pace with technological changes on the modern battlespace. It states that,

“on the one hand, we must pay attention to the upgrading and transformation of traditional combat forces, adopt embedded and integrated methods of information and intelligent technologies, improve the operating efficiency of the intelligence chain, command chain, action chain, and support chain of traditional combat forces, and improve the speed and accuracy of strikes; on the other hand, we must focus on the development of new domains and new qualities of combat forces, demonstrate, test, build, and improve them, use emerging technologies in the military field before our opponents, and build a complete combat system that combines the old and the new and has both offensive and defensive capabilities” (Gao and You 2025).

Impact in the Western Theatre Command

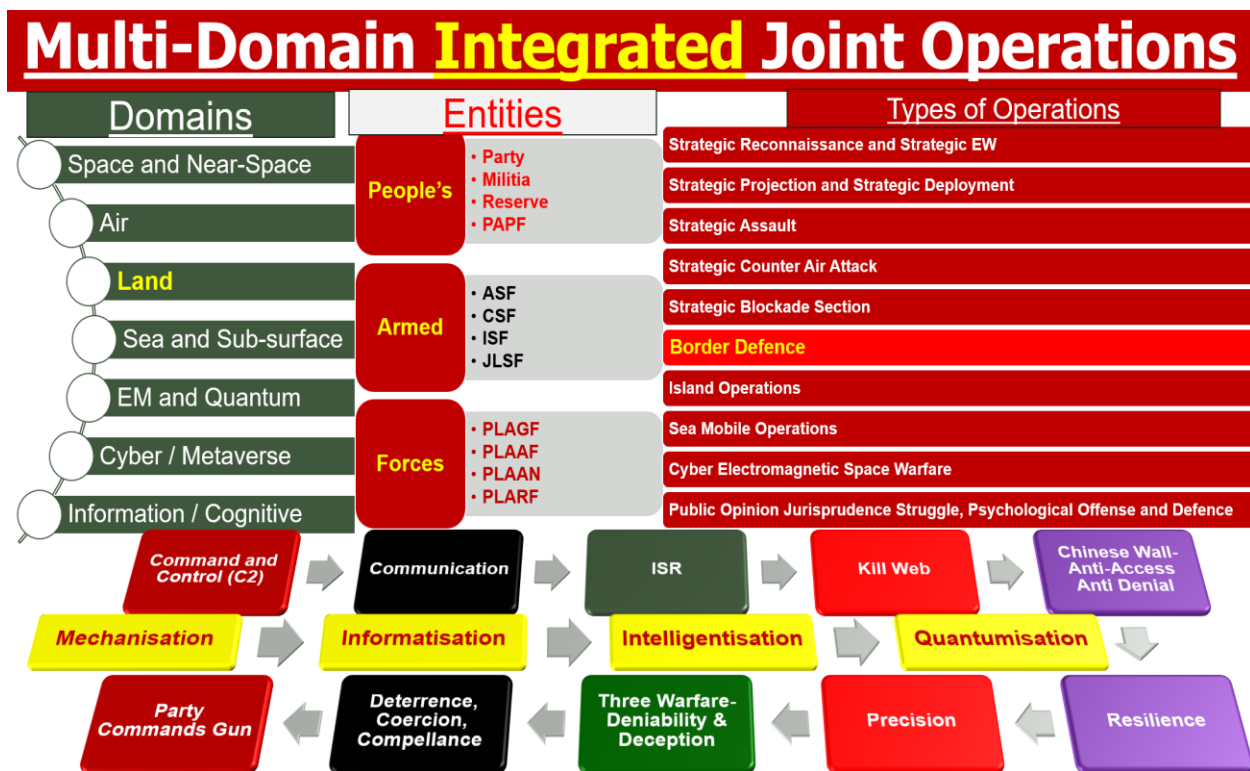
The PLA's *Science of Campaigns* lists five major types of campaigns for its Army – landing campaign, and offensive operations against smaller islands; urban offensive and defensive campaigns; mountain offensive campaign; border defence and counterattack campaign; high-altitude plateau campaign under special conditions (PLA National Defense University Press 2006). The last two listed campaigns are of particular significance with respect to India while the initial three seem Taiwan-focussed. With the PLA's Defence White Paper and 'Science of Military Strategy (SMS)' last issued in 2019 (SCIO 2019) and 2020 (PLA NDU 2020) respectively, it seems the latest Military Theory Work Conference might have been the finalisation of a new campaign or military strategy formulation. Within the document, the possible Western Theatre Command (WTC) strategy for fighting a border defence campaign against India in the new era would certainly have been discussed. The close Chinese military cooperation with Pakistan, in the period after the terrorist incident in Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir on 22 April 2025, would have provided many more essential lessons.

Despite the announcement of complete disengagement in eastern Ladakh in October 2024, India will remain a direction of focus for combat readiness, even if a secondary one. While the Eastern Theatre Command (ETC) with its series of Joint Sword Exercises 2024 A and B and the April 2025 joint Taiwan's "Strategic Blockade" rehearsals remains the centre of attraction, the series of exercises under PLA's WTC has also continued including the air defence integration exercise and the WTC's Counter Terrorism exercise with Pakistan Army in the last week of November 2024. Hence, the PLA's focus on joint training in realistic combat and difficult terrain conditions remains. While the PLA's 2020 edition of the SMS listed "Strategic Blockade" as the fifth type of military operation, the sixth type of operation is the "Border Defence" campaign which will most likely be executed by the WTC (PLA NDU 2020).

The other noticeable theoretical shift has been the transformation of PLA's basic form of operations from "Integrated Joint Operations" to "Multi-Domain Integrated Joint Operations

(MDIJO)” in the SMS 2020 edition as elucidated at Figure 2 below. While the quantum of the PLA’s joint entities tested in a MDIJO environment has surely increased from Joint Sword Exercise 2024 A in May 2024 to 2024 B in October 2024 and the latest round of blockade rehearsals in April 2025, a similar rise in joint entities in the WTC remains a major challenge. The PLA understands the complexities of a border defence operation; the SMS 2020 states, “the battlefield in the border area is remote, complex terrain, inconvenient transportation, difficult to support, and involves ethnic and religious issues, so combat operations are subject to many restrictions” (PLA NDU 2022).

Figure 1: PLA’s Concept of Multi-Domain Operations

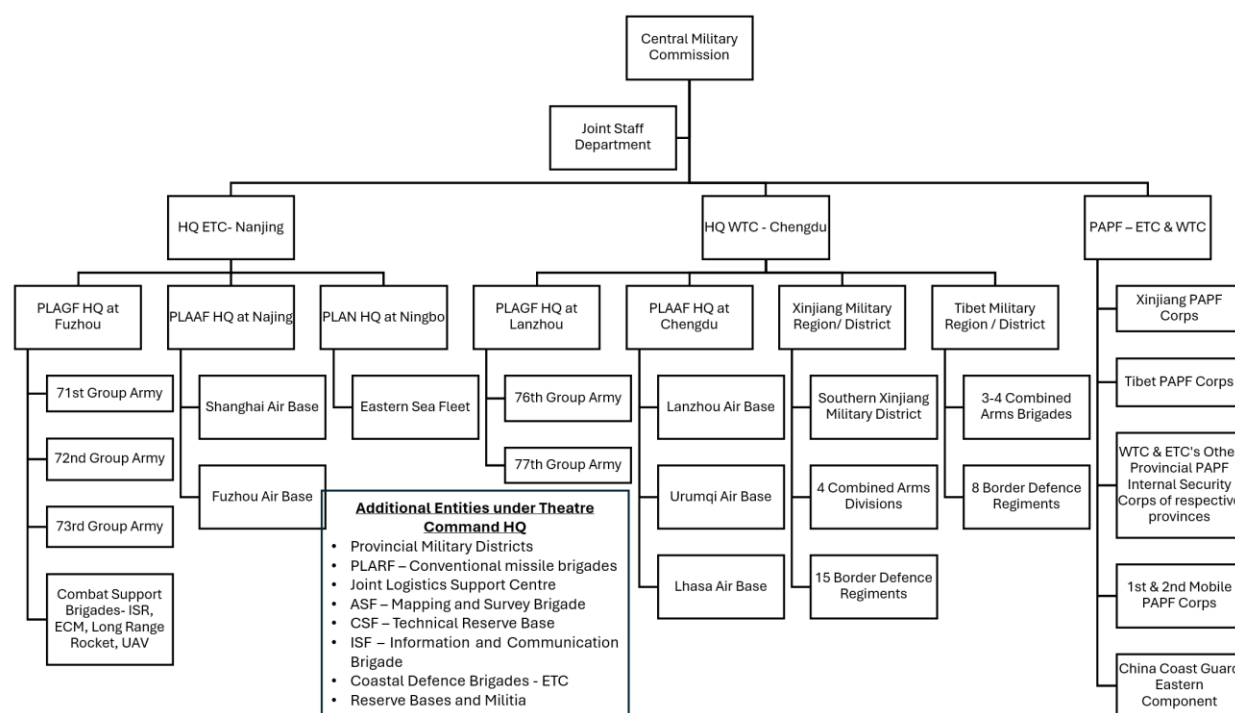


Source: Created by the author

The problems highlighted underline the theoretical complexities of executing border defence operations from the PLA’s perspective. These are further complicated by the complex Command and Control structures in the WTC. The Xinjiang and Tibet Military Region / Districts (XMD and TMD) have unique organisational structures compared to the PLA’s standard Group Armies and Provincial Military Districts in other Theatre Commands. Unlike other Provincial Military districts which primarily handle national defence mobilisation, TMD and XMD also handle combat tasks through their combined arms brigades and divisions like the standard group armies and also border defence which is handled by Theatre Command HQ Border Defence Bureau in other theatre commands. XMD is the only organisation in PLAGF to have Combined Arms Divisions as against the standard Combined Arms Brigades in other Group Armies and Theatre Commands (Narang 2022). The Deputy Theatre

Command grade for the Commanders XMD and TMD puts them at par with the PLAGF and PLAAF component commanders as illustrated below. Even within People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) organisational structures, Xinjiang and Tibet PAPF Corps are one grade higher since they play a key role in combating terrorism, separatism and extremism which is listed as the fourth important task in PRC's 2019 Defence White Paper (The State Council 2019). Thus, the intended establishment of joint campaign level groupings and joint task forces at operational and tactical levels within the WTC will be more complex than for the ETC. The major challenge is the establishment of a Multi-Domain Joint Task Force, below Theatre Command Headquarters, which can integrate all entities across domains for executing a wide array of tasks for any kind of assigned operational mission.

Figure 2: Comparative Complexities of Hierarchical Organisation Structures of Eastern and Western Theatre Commands



Source: Created by the author

The Eastern Ladakh standoff and the PLA's delayed response of tanks in the Kailash range (Regin Pass as per Chinese articles) incident has already possibly made the PLA draw out a "Layered Security Strategy" (Guancha 2020). The lessons from Eastern Ladakh Standoff, XMD's large frontage, and American and Russian partial reversion to Division structures made PLA create Combined Arms Divisions against Brigades in XMD (Sina 2021). Similarly, there is a likelihood of more reforms in the WTC like the Long-Range Artillery Brigade Unit 31622, already raised in Eastern Theatre Command, increase in number of J20 brigades with possible complete de-induction of J7 brigades. More importantly, informatisation attempts in high-altitude terrain increase reliance on communication satellites. This is

another challenge which PLA's ASF is trying to mitigate through accelerated launch of Low-Earth Orbit (LEO) communication constellation. The Chinese Qianfan communication satellite constellation's launches have already been accelerated with the fifth group's launch in March 2025 taking the total count to 90 satellites, they remain at least five years behind the American Starlink constellation as per the author's assessment on grounds of reusability of satellite launch rockets and limited load carrying capacities of Chinese heavy launchers.

With the PLA's overall theoretical and organisational reforms intended to surpass the US military, the WTC is widening the existing asymmetry with Indian military in technological and other military combat domains to overcome the two major shortcomings of an inferiority in infantry force ratios and the geographical challenges of both Himalayas and the Indian Ocean Region. In fact, the geographical proximity of India's Andaman and Nicobar island to chokepoints along Chinese shipping routes remains a major concern for the PLA, including for its Taiwan operations. The location of the PLARF's Base 62 in Yunnan and neighbouring provinces along with its transition to medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles overcomes these geographical challenges. It also meets the operational requirements of PLA's theoretical focus on exploiting medium and high-density long-range precision strikes as a key tool for controlling the escalation ladder in case of any crisis situation (National Defence University 2022).

While the PLA executed the medium-density theoretical postulate of limited and indirect missiles-rockets strike against Taiwan on 4 August 2022, it was higher-density direct missile-drones-rockets strikes that were witnessed in the Iran-Israel and Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan standoffs. However, Operation Sindoor saw the combat testing of partial Chinese kill chains and multitude of platforms and systems exported to Pakistan – HQ9 and HQ16 SAMs; J10 CE fighter aircrafts with PL15 Beyond Visual Range Air-to-Air Missiles (BVRAAM) and CM400AKG Air-to-Surface Missiles; SH15 self-propelled howitzers; and Chinese civilian and military satellites. Furthermore, Pakistan military's greater reliance on Turkish drones over Chinese imported drones against India enhances speculation about the failure of Chinese drones. The efficacy of Chinese Integrated Air Defence System (IADS) has been put to doubt with the failure of Chinese exported HQ9 long-range and HQ16 medium-range SAMs in defending Pakistan Air Force bases and terrorist camps on both 7 May and 10 May 2025 (Narang 2025).

The PLA would, thus, be reassessing its IADS integration and quality of indigenous drones, and integrated air-drones-missiles defences for both India and Taiwan scenarios. With its focus on long range strike capabilities by 2027, the PLA's emphasis on integration of its PLAGF's Long-Range Artillery Brigades with PLAAF bombers and fighters and PLARF surface-to-surface missile brigades enhances the scope of integration of services and arms across various domains theoretically and spatially across theatre commands to stitch a kill web.

A major implication is that the PLA's Southern Theatre Command (STC) is likely to play a pivotal role in both the Taiwan and India scenarios. With its unique geographical proximity to South China Sea, Taiwan Strait and India-Tibet border, it facilitates integration with both ETC and WTC in all domains of operations priority – sea, air, land, electromagnetic, etc. Thus, the Joint Staff Department (JSD) under CMC would have to develop organisations, strategies,

and military theories to handle multi-domain entities of all four services – PLAGF, PLAAF, PLAN and PLARF and four arms – ASF, ISF, CSF and JLSF under command or affiliated to two different theatre commands. A case in point is the various Combined Arms Brigades of 75th Group Army under the STC which undertake rotational operational deployments in Tibet Military Region mainly opposite India's Arunachal Pradesh. Among the challenges, is the integration of the STC PLAAF's Kunming Air Base and WTC PLAAF's Lhasa Air Base in order to deploy the STC's 20th Special Mission and 8th Bomber Division. Similarly, the PLARF would have to manage its vastly separated conventional missile and long-range artillery brigades in Xinjiang and Tibet Military Regions respectively under the operational responsibility of HQ WTC. The seamless integration of air defence, missile defence and counter-drone platforms across these theatre commands shall also be a major challenge for its acclaimed IADS grid.

The integration of PAPF units under a theatre command during wartime poses another major challenge for military theory development, training, combat readiness and integrating organisations in MDIJO environment. While the 2018 reforms placed the PAPF under CMC as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3 above, wartime integration remains a major challenge particularly in the WTC which is China's largest theatre encompassing seven provinces, autonomous regions and municipality. With a significant portion of PAPF's 2nd Mobile Corps located in WTC and two Group Army-level PAPF Corps of Xinjiang and Tibet, integrating these forces under WTC and its two Military Districts/Regions of Tibet and Xinjiang is a complex command-and-control challenge. The complexity of this challenge gets magnified when these forces must operate in a defensive role in conjunction with Border Defence Regiments under Military Districts/Sub-Districts and the Combined Arms Brigades of Group Armies. Hence, the expansion of depth of joint training across all entities under CMC is being accelerated. The employment of reserves and militia further complicates the problems of realistic training, command, and control.¹

The presence of Chinese militia fishing fleet in the Arabian Sea from the last week of March to the first week of May 2025, while beaming its position signals highlights the additional requirements of controlling these forces away from the mainland China (Narang 2025). The command of these assets near India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), while monitoring Indian Navy exercises in this period, may have been managed from any of the closest entities – the Djibouti Base, HQ WTC, HQ STC or may even have been coordinated by Pakistan Navy through a PLAN liaison officer.

The emphasis on combat readiness and effectiveness, and facing 'hardship', 'death', 'all difficulties', and 'all enemies' indicates the challenges which PLA was facing in rotating operational deployments along the India-Tibet-Xinjiang borders particularly in the years since the Galwan crisis. A high-altitude deployment for two years for any combat unit is generally considered the maximum time frame; at best, it may be extended to three years. Continuous deployment of troops increases both combat difficulties and health hazards.

The PLA's rapid-pace infrastructure development for combat readiness in the WTC is ensuring that actions through civil-military fusion are matching Xi's words. China's transportation powerhouse dreams are being achieved through rapid construction and expansion of railways, highways, airfields, heliports, and unmanned airports, etc, to connect Xinjiang and Tibet with further outward connectivity to Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu, and Yunnan

provinces. Furthermore, the PRC State Council's White Paper titled 'China's Rural Roads in the New Era' of November 2024 highlighted the transportation achievements in Tibet by end 2024. It states that,

"Between 2012 and 2024, Tibet made a fixed-asset investment of RMB 401.93 billion in major highway transportation projects. The total road length grew from 65,200 km in 2012 to 124,900 km by the end of 2024. Roads in rural and mountainous areas have seen overall improvement. By the end of 2024, all towns and townships had access to roads, with 97.99 percent connected by paved roads; all administrative villages had access to roads, with 86.05 percent connected by paved roads. The rural road length increased from 53,200 km in 2012 to 94,800 km in 2024, with the length of high-grade highways rising from 38 km to 1,196 km in the same period. All counties and equivalent administrative units are linked to bus networks, as are 623 towns and townships and 3,869 administrative villages" (The State Council 2024).

This clear focus on enhancing road connectivity to all Chinese border settlement villages is facilitating the WTC's combat readiness for deployment across all disputed areas. It is being further strengthened by provision of 5G connectivity, optical fibre connectivity, access to electricity as claimed by the State Council.

"Problems of access to electricity have also been largely resolved in Tibet...Lying at an average altitude of over 4,500 m, this project has unified the Tibet grid and ensured full electricity coverage for all the 74 county-level administrative units as well as major towns and townships in the region. In 2012, 1.75 million people in Tibet had access to electricity. By 2024, this figure stood at around 3.5 million, with an electricity supply reliability of 99.6 percent. The region's electricity consumption per capita in 2024 was 4,404.8 kWh, marking a 162.89 percent increase compared with 2012...Efforts have been made to turn Tibet into a digital and intelligent region. By 2024, all administrative villages had access to fibre optics and 4G connections...and fixed broadband internet services were accessed by over 1.59 million households. In addition, there were over 3.31 million mobile internet users in Tibet, served by 17,881 5G base stations that provide 5G access to every town and township and 70 percent of administrative villages. A total of 60.5 percent of the mobile phone users in the region, or 2.14 million, were 5G users. Both urban and rural residents have access to fast and reliable internet services, which promotes equal sharing of information" (SCIO PRC 2025).

With provision of a resilient transport network, information infrastructure and an efficient power grid, the PLA is focusing on its operational logistics infrastructure to sustain the increasing combat mass across the WTC, and having learnt lessons from recent conflicts also improving the PLA's survivability and defence preparedness. The development of Chinese border villages in or near disputed areas with good road connectivity has further enhanced the acclimatisation and billeting options of the PLA's offensive formations which are regularly training in areas much closer to the LAC and the international border.

Conclusion

With structural reforms and military policy reforms mainly over, military theory upgradation is a major task underway with the Chinese having realised the lessons of the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Iran-Hamas-Hezbollah conflicts (Xu and Qiu 2025). The Zhuhai Aero-show in November 2024 was clearly an indicator of PLA's accelerated focus on its technological progress to achieve basic modernisation by 2027. However, despite PRC's claims of the success of its weapons systems in Operation Sindoor, technological progress has not been converted into battlefield success. The recovery of completely intact PL15 AAM on Indian soil (*The Times of India* 2025) would surely have been a setback for the Chinese. The PLA will have realised the multitude of failures of its exported equipment and kill chain theories and systems incorporated in Pakistan's military and lessons from Operations Sindoor and Spider Web will also be suitably incorporated to strengthen their R&D, IADS grid including depth areas, doctrine and organisational structures and battle-performance of their weapons and equipment.

Actions always speak louder than words – the CPC's and CMC's military theory reforms are being backed by actions for both the Taiwan and Indian scenarios with Taiwan as the primary strategic direction and India, a secondary strategic direction. With 14th Five Year Plan nearly complete, the PLA's centennial goal of 2027 on the horizon, and an increase in incidents in South China Sea and prolonged border standoffs with India, Xi is stepping on the accelerator. The depth of integration and jointness in each exercise has been increasing across the organisation, spatially and temporally. The PLA is being closely audited by the CMC during all major exercises and Xi's personal focus remains on strategic units like the PLARF, ASF, ISF and PLAABF AB Corps which will be employed for all likely conflict scenarios.

Endnote

¹ PLA's SMS 2020 edition states that "Reserve forces refer to forces that make necessary preparations in peacetime and can directly participate in and support wars after being mobilized in wartime. They mainly include reserve forces, militias, pre commissioned forces and other personnel registered for reserve service." Furthermore, as per Article 2 of the PLA's Militia Work Regulations, "The militia is a mass armed organization led by the CPC that is not separated from production. It is a component of the armed forces of the PRC and an assistant and reserve force of the Chinese PLA. Joining the militia is the glorious duty of citizens of PRC" (PLA NDU 2020).

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