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People's Liberation Army at Ninety-Five : Transformation Imperatives and Ramifications

Major General (Dr) GG Dwivedi (Retd)[@]

Abstract

At Ninety-Five, PLA is on track to emerge as a modern military at par with the Western Armies by mid of the Century. As the 'Army of the Party', PLA is well represented in the nation's governance structure. Communist leadership has accorded priority to the defence modernisation. However, after President Xi Jinping took over in 2012-13, he initiated path breaking defence reforms to transform PLA into a modern military, in keeping with China's expanding global role. White papers and vision documents redefine the role of PLA in sync with nation's strategic objectives. The doctrinal and structural changes aim to prepare the PLA to fight and win 'limited wars under the conditions of Informatisation and Intelligentisation'. Double digit increase in the budgetary allocations to defence provide requisite monetary support towards modernisation of PLA. Significant accretion in China's war waging potential has far reaching implications for the global polity, particularly for India given the disputed borders and divergent national interests. Hence, a holistic review of national security by our policy makers is no more an option but an urgent imperative.

[@]**Major General (Dr.) GG Dwivedi, SM, VSM & Bar (Retd)** is *an Infantry officer with 38 years of distinguished service in the Army. A veteran of 1971 Bangladesh War, he has commanded a Battalion in the Siachen Glacier, Brigade in the Kashmir Valley, and Division in the North East. He served as Defence Attaché in China. An alumnus of National Defence College and Harvard Kennedy, he has a PhD from JNU, besides MBA and Interpreter ship in Chinese. He is presently a Professor Strategic-IR, Management Studies, and is an acclaimed writer and speaker.*

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Introduction

The two million strong 'People's Liberation Army' (PLA) — the world's largest standing armed force — marked its 95th anniversary on 01 August 2022, with show of its military prowess. The PLA traces its roots to 'Nanchang Uprising' of 01 August 1927; the day the Communist revolutionaries like Mao Zedong, Chen Yi, Lin Biao, and Zhou Enlai revolted against the Kuomintang (KMT) National Forces. Subsequently, the Communist Party of China (CPC) gained 'heavenly mandate' to rule through the 'barrel of the gun'. It was during the 'Ninth Meeting of Building the Party and Army' held at Gutian, Fujian Province, in December 1929, that Mao defined the role of PLA, "to chiefly serve the political ends".[1] Here on, absolute control of the Communist Party over the Red Army became entrenched, adhering to the dictum 'Party controls the Gun'. Mao and Deng Xiaoping — PLA stalwarts, as First and Second-Generation Leaders of the CPC respectively — steered the 'People's Republic of China' (PRC) since its establishment in 1949 for almost half a century.

CPC and PLA, the two key pillars of PRC's organisational structure, share a unique symbiotic relationship. PLA is well represented in the two apex governing bodies namely, Politburo (has 2 members out of 25) and Central Committee (accounts for around 20 percent of 205 permanent and 171 alternate members).[2] Incidentally, it is the Central Committee which elects the Politburo and 'Politburo Standing Committee' (PSC), the highest body which currently is composed of seven members. Until 1997, PLA had representation even in the PSC as well; General Liu Huaqing was the last one to hold the position. The PLA played a key role during the Communist Revolution and has frequently intervened in crucial domestic events like Cultural Revolution (1964-76) and Tiananmen protests (1989). It performed creditably during the Korean War (1950-53) against the US led UN Forces. In 1962, PLA inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Indian Army. However, it performed poorly against Vietnam in 1979, as a sequel to which commenced the process of its restructuring and modernisation.

The Communist Party has accorded high priority to defence modernisation as military is seen to be a vital component of state's 'Comprehensive National Power' (CNP). In 1993, the then President, Jiang Zemin, directed the PLA to prepare for 'local

wars under modern conditions', on observing US military power during the Gulf War. It entailed a major doctrinal shift from 'People's War'. In 2004, the then President, Hu Jintao, laid down the revised mandate for the PLA to 'win limited wars under informationised conditions'.[3] The PLA's transition from a guerrilla force to a modern army makes a unique case. Under the present dispensation, the scale and pace at which the transformation process is being driven has no precedence. This has serious ramifications, both, in the regional and global context.

PLA Transformation: Key Imperatives

On assuming the mantle of 'Fifth Generation Leadership' in 2012-13, President Xi Jinping initiated the process of transforming the military with twin objectives; prepare the Armed Forces for China's expanding global role; and establish firm control of the Party over the PLA. Interestingly, on 30 October 2014, Xi visited Gutian and addressed the 'Military Political Work Conference' and reiterated the principle of 'Party leading Military'; reaffirming Mao's tenet eight and half decades on.[4] The process of revolutionary reforms entailed holistic review of the role, revision of war fighting doctrines, organisational restructuring including civil-military integration, command and control, especially higher direction of war, and jointness in operations.

For the strategic direction, 'White Paper on National Defence 2015' was issued with focus on 'active defence' and shift in the naval strategy from 'coastal defence' to 'off shore waters defence with open sea protection'.[5] In 2017, during the 19th CPC National Congress, timelines for PLA's reorganisation were formalised i.e., achieve mechanisation by 2020, basic modernisation by 2035 and transformation into the world class force by 2050.[6] According to 'White Paper on National Defence 2019', the thrust was on the 'defence in the new era'. The 14th Five Year Plan and Vision 2035 envisaged; firstly, creation of high-level strategic deterrence, joint operations systems, and joint training support structures to achieve integrated employment of armed forces potential; secondly, cultivate 'three in one' new type of military talent; which entailed modernisation, intelligentisation of weapons and equipment alongside innovation in defence, Science &Technology (S&T) and cutting-edge technologies.[7]

China's strategic culture believes in exploiting 'strategic configuration of power' by gaining position of advantage to achieve the stated objectives. Its ways of war fighting have adopted comprehensive approach which entails balancing 'war preparation' and 'war prevention', responding to multi dimension threats by concentrating superior forces with ability to undertake 'trans-theatre' operations, and expand military cooperation to establish military security network.[8] The 'Grey Zone Warfare' has been conceptualised in the form 'Three Warfares' (Propaganda, Psychological, and Legal dimensions) to be concurrently waged along with the conventional operations.

As per 'China's Science of Military 2020', PLA perceives that 'competition continuum' (mixture of cooperation and competition below armed conflict) has widened and strategic thinking favours compellence vis-à-vis coercion. PLA strategy of 'active defence' entails seizing moral high ground and gaining politico-diplomatic advantage to justify 'use of force to stop war'. Keeping disputes 'hot and active' facilitates the Communist Regime to achieve multiple objectives; raising the nationalism pitch at home, constraining adversaries, and sensitising the international community about PRC concerns.

PLA has gone in a big way to harness disruptive technologies, especially Information Warfare (IW), integration of strategic space, cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare capabilities under the single umbrella — 'Strategic Support Force' (SSF). This now forms the foundation of its new war fighting doctrine based on 'Informatisation and Intelligentisation'. It reflects the centrality of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robotic technologies.[9] Incidentally, China is amongst the top tier of nations to develop quantum, nano, hypersonic, and directed energy weapons technologies.

To implement the doctrines, Central Military Commission (CMC), the apex defence body, was streamlined; Xi Jinping, the Chairman, formally designating himself as 'Commander in Chief' to exercise direct control over the PLA. At the operational level, erstwhile 17 odd army, air force, and navy military regions were reorganised in to five Theatre Commands (TCs), with all the war fighting resources placed under a single commander 6 including logistics and training facilities, thus ensuring seamless synergy. In addition, 84 corps size formations were created which included 13

operational corps. These were further organised into combined arms brigades with agile and adaptable structures lending to rapid deployment. The 'Western Theatre Command' (WTC) responsible for complete border with India, most expansive of the five TCs, includes the sensitive regions of Tibet and Xinjiang in its geographic area.

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) was assigned specific strategic roles and restructured. Its revised mission entailed shift from 'territorial air defence' to encompass both 'defence and offence', besides building 'air space defence force' and power projection capabilities to meet the requirements of 'Informatised Operations'.[10] It has been organised into corps (including airborne corps), divisions, regiments, and battalions, deployed in 150 airbases. The PLAAF is expected to have around 1300 fighters ($4^{th}/5^{th}$ Generation), including few squadrons of J 20 and F 31/J stealth fighter in its inventory, over next couple of years.

PRC has adopted 'Mahanian' approach to achieve global supremacy by mid of the century. PLA Navy (PLAN) is in quest to acquire outreach to 'far seas' in a bid to acquire maritime dominance in the Indo-Pacific. PLAN ships now regularly sail in the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea and in the waters around Europe. It is also turning attention to the Arctic (Polar Silk Road), the next maritime frontier. Numerically, China already has the largest navy in the world with more than 350 ships including 3 aircraft carriers though it lags behind the US in terms of capability. By 2035, PLAN plans to have over 450 ships, a third being blue water capable.[11] The PLAN is ably complemented by the Chinese Coast Guard; the largest in the world with over 100 ocean going platforms.

China's 'Rocket Force' (RF), erstwhile 'Second Artillery', consisting of both conventional and nuclear assets, has been revamped to provide greater range, mobility, warhead capability, and precision. PRC's earlier nuclear weapon arsenal, estimated to be 250-300, is expected to reach a figure of around 700 by 2027.[12] China has nearly 100 'Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles' (ICBMs) including DF 41, capable of delivering up to 10 warheads with a range of over 12,000 km. The number of DF 21 and DF 26, medium range missiles, has increased from mere 16 to 200 launchers during last few years. China is also known to have developed 'Hypersonic Glide Vehicle' (HGV) / 'Hypersonic Cruise Missile' (HCM).

China's military budget has kept pace with its growing economic profile, defence spending rising almost ten times in last two decades, from $ 22.93 billion in 2000 to $ 230 billion in 2022.[13] Given that China has historically under reported its military expenditure, actual spending is estimated to be far higher.

Ramifications

The magnitude of on-going defence reforms in PRC tantamounts to the biggest ever military shake up witnessed in generations. Two years back, on PLA's Ninety Third Anniversary, Xi Jinping, while presiding over the CPC Central Committee, had stated, "To develop socialism with Chinese characteristics and achieve national rejuvenation, efforts to make country prosperous and military strong go hand in hand". Xi also underscored the implementation of strategic guidelines in the 'New Era'; and stressed on drawing a road map and cultivating high calibre militant talent.[14]

On 28 July 2022, speaking at a 'Study Session', on the eve of PLA's 95th anniversary, Xi stated, "Chinese Military should be led by 'reliable people' loyal to the ruling Communist Party".[15] Reiterating that ultimate goal is to build Armed Forces that are able to 'fight and win', Xi called for efforts to enhance the supply of personnel with strong combat readiness.[16] Xi has instituted a number of measures to expand the role of the Chinese Armed Forces. The amended 'Chinese Defence Law' which came into force on 01 January 2021, empowers the state government to mobilise manpower and resources to counter any threat to national security and developmental interests. It lends to greater 'military-civil fusion', facilitating dual use of resources. Further, a new 'border law' applicable from 01 January 2022 seeks to erect boundary markers and legalise the transgressions and incursions.

As per the state media, Chairman Xi has signed off on 59 articles to issue guidelines on 'military operations other than war' which standardise and provide legal basis for troops to carryout missions like disaster relief, humanitarian aid, escort and peacekeeping.[17] This has raised eyebrows as this move comes just months after Putin's invasion of Ukraine, termed as 'special military operation'. Apparently, it will become part of PLA's 'Grey Zone' warfare strategy and could be used to justify future missions aimed at unification of Taiwan with the mainland. It may also be linked to the recent security pact which Beijing has signed with

the Solomon Islands. The ongoing PLA's overhaul is well aligned to Xi's grand ventures like the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), 'Maritime Silk Route', and 'Digitised Highway' project. With the accretion of its military potential, Beijing's growing aggressiveness, especially after Xi came to power, is evident from the activities in South China Sea, across the Taiwan Strait, and on the LAC against India. Cognisant of PLA's lack of operational experience, Communist leadership is using these forays to battle harden its military.

Conclusion

Given the divergent geo political interests, disputed borders and on-going stand-off in Eastern Ladakh, coupled with China-Pak nexus, the security situation is extremely challenging for India. PLA has gone in for major infrastructure build-up in Eastern Ladakh and along the LAC opposite Arunachal Pradesh. Forward deployment of air and ground assets in Tibet and Xinjiang, provocative behaviour, incorporation of new defence and border laws amply manifest the Dragon's aggressive design. PLA's large-scale aggression in May 2020 was seemingly a replication of Mao's 1962 nudge, to send a strong message to the Indian leadership. Beijing apparently has no intention of resolving the boundary issue as obvious from the progress of politico-diplomatic and military level talks. PLA is likely to continue with its 'nibble and negotiate' policy in the realm of 'Grey Zone' warfare. It is time that our policy makers and defence planners comprehend the gravity of the situation and get the strategic direction right. It entails putting in place a national defence policy and joint war fighting doctrines, creating institutionalised higher defence organisational structures to prosecute limited operations in multi-domain setting; both in conventional cum 'non-contact' warfare scenarios. Ambiguities and anomalies with regards to the role of the CDS, architecture of 'Theatre Commands', complexities of border management, integrated development of military infrastructure and logistics besides 'procurement cum acquisition procedures' need to be ironed out on highest priority. All said, PLA at 'Ninety-Five' is in the wake of deep-rooted transformation which is doctrine cum technology driven, adequately supported by the budgetary allocations. It is fast closing up the capability gap vis-à-vis the US and Western Armies. In the coming decades, PLA will be able to take on extended global missions in keeping

with its enlarged role. This will dramatically change the balance of power matrix and world must be prepared to face an even more aggressive China in the coming times. For India, it has serious ramifications and merits a holistic review of national security and institution of suitable measures in both near and long term perspective.

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