

# XI'S ARMY: REFORM AND LOYALTY IN THE PLA

## ABOUT

The Chinese have long been obsessed with strategic culture, power balances and geopolitical shifts. Academic institutions, think-tanks, journals and web-based debates are growing in number and quality, giving China's foreign policy breadth and depth.

*China Analysis* introduces European audiences to these debates inside China's expert and think-tank world and helps the European policy community understand how China's leadership thinks about domestic and foreign policy issues. While freedom of expression and information remain restricted in China's media, these published sources and debates provide an important way of understanding emerging trends within China.

Each issue of *China Analysis* focuses on a specific theme and draws mainly on Chinese mainland sources. However, it also monitors content in Chinese-language publications from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which occasionally include news and analysis that is not published in the mainland and reflects the diversity of Chinese thinking.

### Introduction

by Mathieu Duchâtel

A politically reliable and modern force capable of joint operations – this is what China wants to achieve with its ambitious reforms of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). The reforms, which are scheduled to be completed by 2020, represent no less than a major restructuring of the organisation - including a downsizing of the force. Contrary to the slow pace of other large-scale reforms launched by China, such as the reform of state-owned enterprises, the reforms of the PLA are proceeding swiftly so far. The planned restructuring will result in a radical redistribution of power, which will negatively impact some individuals and constituencies and will empower others. While the outcomes remain unknown, the reforms look set to strengthen central party control over the military through the Central Military Commission (CMC) and increase the political clout of the PLA's various services at the expense of the Army (land forces).

Against this background, will the PLA resist change like other parts of the Chinese bureaucracy? Chinese analysts are cautious and refrain from providing many specific details about the potential outcomes of the reforms, preferring to shield themselves by making vague hints and suggestions. They write about "potential roadblocks" to the reforms, such as the level of vested interests and bureaucratic inertia, as well as the unavoidable difficulties faced by reforming any large organisation with established chains of command and hierarchies. Indeed, one might ask how

long it will take for the newly created entities in the PLA to work together smoothly? In a way, the commentators do not dare to speculate much beyond what is outlined in the official document issued by the Central Military Commission (CMC), which, itself, acknowledges that the reform programme touches upon “deep interests”.

The Hong-Kong rumour mill is bolder than the Chinese in its suggestion that even Xi is constrained by considerations over the balance of power within the PLA. It is indeed counterintuitive that General Liu Yuan, who was so instrumental in launching the anti-corruption struggle in the military, had to retire from the PLA even though many saw him as a close ally of Xi Jinping and expected him to gain a seat at the CMC. This unexpected move suggests that Xi had to take into consideration the views of General Liu’s many victims and enemies – the losers of the anti-corruption struggle and those who hold the view that it has gone too far in destabilising established constituencies.

Chinese commentaries make clear that maintaining political control over the PLA during the reforms is of vital importance. Under Xi, public pledges of loyalty in the media by high-ranking officers have become routine, but this is only one side of the story. Chinese commentaries also place an almost disproportionate level of importance on “political work” and the need to ensure ideological coherence within the PLA. The weakness of core ideological beliefs within the military is painted as a major problem that restructuring could possibly worsen. The leitmotif under Xi that China could face ideological subversion by the West is alive and well in these debates. The reforms strengthen central control over the PLA and institutionalise anti-corruption efforts by giving more weight to its Discipline and Inspection Commission. The balance of power within the PLA is therefore altered here, with the aim of pre-empting any potential challenge to the Party authority from within the PLA.

The clear obsession with political control indicated by the proposed reforms gives ground to those who believe that Xi Jinping faced a major challenge from a coalition of rival forces that gathered around the two purged officials, Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang, who were suspected of staging a coup a few years ago with support from within the PLA. The consideration of loyalty and discipline is so overwhelming in Chinese publications that operational issues almost seem to take a back seat. But it would be incorrect to believe that operations are in fact relatively less important. On the contrary, the reforms serve to reveal China’s great ambitions in terms of military power.

The internal re-organisation of the forces and regions deals a major blow to the Army (land forces), which have traditionally dominated the PLA, both politically and culturally. The reforms mean that the Army is downgraded to the same rank as the Air Force and the Navy. China’s current military modernisation and strategy is geared towards joint

operations, and given Chinese national security priorities in maritime regions in East Asia and its new ambition to protect “overseas interests”, the Navy, the Air Force, the Rocket Force and electronic warfare units are increasingly gaining in strategic importance. The sources analysed in this issue of *China Analysis* give a few insights into some of the PLA’s operational weaknesses and vulnerabilities as they are perceived by Chinese commentators. For example, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance of foreign forces approaching Chinese waters remains a concern, which partly explains the construction of artificial islands and radar facilities in disputed areas of the South China Sea.

Taken together, the articles indicate that Xi Jinping is playing a risky game with a degree of caution but a clear sense of direction – a direction that was set a long time ago by Mao (in the form of absolute Party control over the military) and by Chinese generals (in the form of anti-access and area denial as the key operational priority for the PLA’s modernisation). Looking ahead, the reorganisation of the military and the greater level of central oversight will strengthen Xi Jinping’s already considerable power to select loyal generals who will faithfully implement the reform package of the Central Military Commission.