

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Understanding the PLA's Command and Leadership System

M.S. Prathibha

October 17, 2022

S*ummary*

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has implemented reforms in 2015 to develop jointness in command to win wars in the information age. One of the reforms relate to the chain of command in both management of the military affairs and operational command of the PLA. By dividing the responsibilities of leadership and management of the military and operational command with the military services and theatre command respectively, the PLA is able to let the theatre command prioritise combat preparedness and the four military services (Army, Air Force, Navy, Rocket Forces) to focus on developing capabilities for their individual organisations.

In 2016, the Central Military Commission (CMC) issued a guideline on the “Opinion of the Central Military Commission on Deepening the Reform of National Defense and the Armed Forces” (中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见), which implemented far-reaching reforms in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Among measures, the CMC tasked the military to establish a three-tier chain of command for streamlining “leadership and management” of the military and “joint operational command” for the troops.¹ The PLA believes that these reforms have helped it to become successful in establishing a “lean and efficient joint operations command system for both peacetime and wartime operations”, which is integral to winning modern wars.²

The reforms are intended to enable the military to fight information-led joint warfare. The adversary might be using sophisticated air, land and sea systems accompanied by information superiority, which can ensure battlefield awareness during the course of the war. If the PLA does not have a chain of command that facilitates seamless command between services and a structure that prioritises jointness, then it cannot counter the entirety of systems of the adversary and win wars, even if the PLA has sophisticated weapons and highly-trained personnel.

In their view, once the PLA achieves ‘jointness’ in their command, it would enhance its joint operational capability through integrated training of different types of combat and support units. Especially, employing highly-qualified officers and NCOs alongside complex weapons system would not be possible without reforming the joint operational command in the theatres, which would work as a valve through which such operations can be carried out. Therefore, the chain of command for leadership and operational command was reformed to help the PLA to change its force composition, which had earlier relied on a dominating land force. This Brief examines the rationale for these reforms and their implementation.

Two Types of Three-Tier System

China’s President Xi Jinping had tasked the PLA to implement the two systems of chain of command before 2020 to successfully perform the tasks and missions given to them. There are two types of three-tier system.

1. Leadership and Management System (领导管理体制) (in short, leadership system).
2. Joint Operational Command System (联合作战指挥体制)³ (in short, command system).

¹ Zhang Mingcang, “[The Historic Achievement of Reforming and Strengthening the Army in the New Era](#)” (新时代改革强军的历史性成就), *Study Times*, 19 September 2022.

² Wang Hairong, “[Building a Strong Force for Peace](#)”, *Beijing Review*, 11 August 2022.

³ Ni Guanghui, “[Xi Jinping’s Speech Provides Fundamental Guidelines for Military Reform, What will the Chinese Military Look Like in 2020](#)” (习近平讲话为军改提供根本遵循, 2020年中国军队什么样?), *The Paper*, 28 November 2015.

The leadership system has a three-tier chain of command, namely the “Central Military Commission–Military Services–Troops” (军委——战区——部队). The command system has a three-tier chain of command for conducting combat operations, namely the “CMC–Theatre Commands–Troops” (军委——军种——部队).

These two systems would ensure that the Party’s leadership over the PLA is centralised and unified. Moreover, both the leadership and management of the military and operational command of the troops would rest with the CMC as a result of these reforms. In other words, the CMC becomes the nerve centre of all the operations from army construction, command, training, leadership and planning. In addition, it would streamline the CMC’s decisions by communicating its orders in a timely fashion to the concerned organisation and avoid confusion about the responsibilities among different PLA structures. In short, while the CMC is in overall charge, the theatre focuses on combat operations and the military services do army construction (building capability/modernisation).

Xi Jinping believes that these reforms are critical if China has to navigate the unprecedented changes that are happening in its environment. If military backwardness begins to take shape, then it could be fatal to national security. Military reform, therefore, cannot be in a slow and measured manner.⁴ According to Xi Jinping, the PLA has to not only catch up to the trends in revolution in military affairs but also be at the forefront.⁵ The PLA therefore needs a framework that would help in winning information-led warfare, and a joint combat command system would help in performing its missions and in achieving the end goal.⁶

Division of Responsibilities

One of the reasons for creating a separate chain of command for combat is to let the theatre command focus on strengthening its combat preparedness. According to Xi Jinping, “command” is the decisive factor in the PLA’s ability to win wars, especially the strategic thinking of commanders at all levels. The PLA believes that in the course of modern wars that are fought in highly information-oriented environment, the commanders would have to comprehend and analyse vast sums of information flow. This would require high degree of intelligence and reasoning to make accurate

⁴ Qian Xiaohu and Han Cheng, “[Summary of the Achievements of National Defence and Military Construction in the New Era Part II: Writing on the Wall about Reforming the Army](#)” (新时代国防和军队建设成就综述之二：书写改革强军的时代答卷), *PLA Daily*, 27 July 2022.

⁵ Ma Changwei et al., “[Great Practise of Reforming and Strengthening the Army in the New Era: Overview of the CPC Central Committee and Chairman Xi’s Leadership and Command to Deepen the Reform of the National Defence and Military](#)” (新时代改革强军的伟大实践——党中央和习主席领导指挥深化国防和军队改革综述), *Xinhua*, 22 September 2022.

⁶ Zheng Wenhao et al., “[Why Does President Xi Attach So Much Importance to the Joint Combat Command System](#)” (习主席为何如此重视联合作战指挥体系), *Xinhua*, 22 April 2022.

summations of the battlefield situation and the development of the war.⁷ This in turn would put pressure on the commanders to understand and implement stratagems, grasp the art of command and become proficient in the system of joint operational command.⁸

In their view, without refining the command structure, the PLA’s ability to wage war would be severely restricted. Unless one has an efficient combat command system, the commander would spend 85 per cent of their time sorting through large amount of information, and only 15 per cent related to combat issues.⁹ This trend has been reversed after achieving the integrated command information system.

Since the focus is on improving ‘command’ to attain combat readiness, the PLA has separated responsibilities such as capability-building and other administrative issues from the theatre command. The PLA therefore created a separate chain of command making the military services concentrate its leadership and management of the troops tailored towards the CMC’s guidelines such as the kind of capabilities that each service should be developing. On the other hand, this leaves the theatre command handling decisions regarding operational matters.

Leadership and Management System

This system is the chain of command where the decision or orders from the CMC are communicated to the individual military services and they, in turn circulate it to the troops (CMC–Services–Troops). This chain of command mostly deals with army construction and administration. It was implemented to enhance the CMC’s role as the supervisory manager, while the military services would exclusively focus on army construction (development of the capabilities of the individual military service branches).

For instance, the leadership and management system is designed to: (i) reinforce the leadership of the CMC; (ii) strengthen the CMC’s strategic planning, strategic command and strategic management capabilities; (iii) optimise the CMC’s role in allocation and organisational set-up; (iv) improve the decision-making and executive power; and (v) to establish a system of supervisory power that can be mutually restricting and mutually coordinating.¹⁰

⁷ Ye Mengyuan, “[On Comprehensively Improving the Ability to Prepare for War in the New Era: An Army Should Fight](#)” (关于全面提高新时代备战打仗能力：军队是要打仗的), *PLA Daily*, 24 September 2022.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Zou Zhenning, “[To Improve Command Speed in Future Wars, One Can Start From These Points](#)” (未来战争提高指挥速度可从这几点入手), *Guanming Daily*, 11 June 2019.

¹⁰ “[Opinion of the Central Military Commission on Deepening the Reform of National Defense and Army](#)” (中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见), *People’s Daily*, 2 January 2016.

Centralising the leadership and management of the military with the CMC reduces the chances that any one military services headquarters can dominate the planning and development of the combat capabilities. As a result, military service headquarters are only required to carry out army construction, management and supervision. For instance, the Air Force headquarters would be in charge of research and development of capabilities as per the requirements of the CMC.

Joint Operational Command System

The chain of command in this system applies at the functioning of the combat level. The CMC passes its orders to the theatre command, which in turn carries out its duties as a joint combat command and communicate its instructions directly to its troops (CMC–Theatre Commands–Troops). This chain of command is necessary for conducting joint operations because the theatre command is at its centre and as a joint command, it can conduct integrated training of its various operational and support units from all services at its disposal for both peacetime and wartime operations. The command system is intended to: (i) adapt to the strategy of integrated joint operations command; (ii) build peace and wartime preparation; and (iii) help create a lean and efficient strategic campaign command system.¹¹

As mentioned earlier, the division of responsibility is such that the theatre command can focus on combat-related issues.¹² For instance, the theatre commands are charged with responding to security threats in their respective strategic directions, maintaining peace, containing wars and winning wars. They have a pivotal role in safeguarding the country's overall national security and military strategies.

According to Xi Jinping, integrated joint operations are the heart of future warfare and the PLA should grasp and comprehend the world military trends. As a result, whereas before the reforms in the PLA, the operational units were training independently and were unable to coordinate their training jointly. After the implementation of the joint command system, the theatre command coordinates joint operations in an increasing fashion.¹³

The joint operational command system ensures that all elements of joint and multi-service commands are integrated. In other words, the theatre command achieves a pivotal position in the command chain as they would develop the capability to have

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cai Pengcheng, [“Newly Reformed and Reconstructed Joint Operational Command System of Our Country”](#) (我军联合作战指挥体制在改革重塑中全新亮相), *PLA Daily*, 26 September 2018.

¹³ Ibid. The five theatre commands, literally "battle zone commands", are named after their strategic locations in north, south, east, west and central China, replacing the current seven military area commands headquartered in Beijing, Nanjing, Chengdu, Ji'nan, Shenyang, Lanzhou and Guangzhou, respectively. The PLA army, which formerly had a larger proportion in the previous military area commands, is likely to see a reduced proportion, while other forces—including the navy, air force and the rocket force—will play a bigger role.

an integrated command system, which would lead it to communicate seamlessly between different commands from units from the military services and support forces, and raise the situational awareness of the theatre. Since the responsibility of the theatre command is to prepare and win wars, the command system would help in focusing on the types of war being fought, the kind of command system to train, and increase the capability of the operational units within the theatre command to carry out the instructions of the CMC.¹⁴

Within the structure of the command system, the theatre command therefore takes a lead in forming the entirety of the joint operational command structure as they would be involved in military forces allocation planning necessary for combating threats, evaluation of combat and support capabilities of the troops in the theatre, planning of joint operations and joint training planning in accordance with the threat being faced by the theatre. Therefore, a theatre command becomes more focused on the extent of its boundaries of areas of responsibility and can engage in combat missions accordingly.

Conclusion

The two command systems are considered as the nervous system of the military management and combat in the PLA. Unity of leadership, such as the control of the PLA through the CMC, remains one of the goals for constituting the leadership system. The two systems divide the responsibilities such as joint operations command at the theatre level and army construction and management at the level of military service branches.

The theatre command, for instance, would only focus on developing joint operations capability against the adversary they are facing in their strategic direction. Each theatre command has different levels of strategic threats, faces different kinds of adversaries and needs different sets of capabilities to counter them. The command system facilitates it by making sure that the joint command system is not bothered by administrative and management duties and exclusively plans for joint operations. They can train according to the requirement of their theatre and come up with operational plans that fit their threat perception.

Such a separation of the responsibilities has made the PLA to focus exclusively on developing a joint combat capability. As a result, the theatre commands are conducting exercises focused on improving the joint operations’ capability and training is centred on joint training. The execution of such a capability is possible because of the structure of the leadership and command system. The leadership and command system is able to ensure that the theatre command can achieve integration between the different services and different operational units deployed in the theatre and achieve command efficiency by improving the situational awareness of the theatre.

¹⁴ Note 6.

About the Author



Dr. M.S. Prathibha is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2022