

Xi Jinping's Address at the 19th Party Congress: Implications for the PLA and China's Defence Posture

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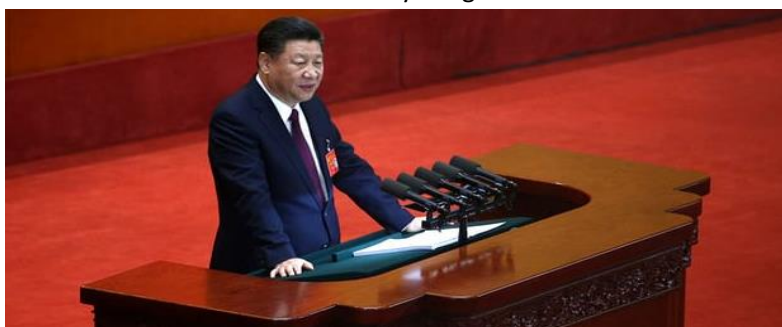


Introduction

“Xi Jinping Thought”, a doctrine now enshrined in the Chinese constitution, espouses the goal of ‘National Rejuvenation’ and realization of the ‘Chinese Dream’ of building a prosperous and strong nation. It recognizes that a muscular foreign policy, commensurate with China’s current economic status, is a vital necessity and that a strong, modern and transformed PLA is the most important instrument of diplomacy aimed at making China ‘strong’, after Mao made China ‘stand-up’ and Deng Xiao Ping made it ‘rich’. Strengthening the PLA, in the Chinese perspective, is integral to the holistic approach to national security entailing balanced emphasis on both development and security.

Highlights of Xi's Address Relevant to National Defence

General Secretary Xi, besides reporting the achievements of the PLA and progress made in modernization and transformation of the Chinese military over the past five years, spoke of pursuing a holistic approach to national security, upholding absolute Party leadership over the forces and staying committed to the chosen path of building strong armed forces by progressing modernization of national defence and military capacity. This, he said, was aimed at ensuring internal and external security, traditional and non-traditional security and meeting China’s own and ‘Common’ security obligations.



Chinese President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping delivers a speech during the opening ceremony of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Photograph: Wu Hong/EPA

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Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh

The following defence and security related aspects were highlighted in the speech:

- An unequivocal reiteration of the Party's control over the PLA.
- Road map for furthering ongoing PLA modernisation.
- Measures to enhance combat potential and induct niche defence technology.
- Measures to improve internal health of the organization.
- Making military service a profession of choice.

Upholding Absolute Party Leadership over People's Forces

There was reiteration of the Party's control over the PLA, with emphasis on building a force that obeys the Party's command and safeguards 'political security' as a fundamental task. PLA will be strengthened in accordance with the Party's thinking on shaping the military for a new era. Emphasis, it was stated, will also be laid on 'party building in the military', including inculcating the revolutionary tradition and maintaining the character of the 'People's Force'. Coming as this did from Xi, as the General Secretary, the President and the Chairman of CMC, these assertions were significant.



Chinese president Xi Jinping arrives for the opening of the 19th national congress of the Communist party of China at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Photograph: Jason Lee/Reuters

Road Map for PLA Modernisation

In listing the achievements over the past five years, Xi elaborated on the ongoing PLA transformation, the largest since the 1950s, announced by him in February, 2016. Significant features of PLA reforms are: the consolidation of the overall control of the armed forces under CMC, integration of the services, optimization of force levels, in particular the reduction of the Army component, conversion of erstwhile Military Area Commands (7) into Integrated Theatre Commands (5), replacement of four existing departments of General Staff,

Political, Logistics and Armament by 15 smaller functional departments under the CMC for capability development, and the creation of a PLA Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force (SSF). He also reported progress made in strengthening military training, enhancing combat readiness, achievements in protection of maritime rights, counter terrorism, disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, anti piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and International Peace Keeping Operations.

In detailing the road map, he once again highlighted salient way-points: of completing 'mechanization' by **2020**, completing **modernization by 2035** and achieving **complete transformation into a world class force by 2049-50 (mid-21st Century)**. In terms of significance from the Indian perspective, the phase till 2020 includes 'mechanization' as related to enhancement of mobility (mechanised infantry/motorisation). It also includes greater infusion of information and other high-end technologies, referred hither to as *informationisation*. This phase would therefore aim to achieve enhanced integral mobility of the reorganized brigades and develop Integrated Network Warfare capability. **Modernization** as a goal could be interpreted to imply upgradation of the weapons and equipment of respective services, creation (and maturing) of command and control structures for conduct of joint operations, honing doctrines and organizations for orchestrating joint operations at the level of Integrated Theatre Commands and creation of organizational structures for conduct of asymmetric warfare in emerging domains (cyber, space etc.). The **complete transformation by mid century** would imply induction of high-end technology to match perceived global competitors (like the US), and refining of command and control structures to conduct integrated network centric operations in all dimensions from own territory and from anywhere else in the world (*expeditionary capability*). The overall objective is to transform the PLA in terms of doctrine, organizational structures, weapons, equipment and personnel, in a phased manner.

Enhancing Combat Potential and Induction of Technology

Xi's assertion in the speech that the 'military is built to fight' and it must be shaped to manage crisis, deter and win wars in traditional and emerging security domains, should be considered as the normal exhortation of any national leader. It is also not out of the usual to state that 'combat capability' would be the basic evaluation

criteria for the forces. What matters is the overall intent and purpose for which the military, an instrument of the State and the Party in the instant case, is utilized by the leadership in its quest for making China 'strong' (assertive).

Xi stated that 'technology is the core combat capability' and the PLA must adapt to the trend of the new global military revolution (Revolution in Military Affairs - RMA). He encouraged undertaking innovation in fields of high-end defence technology. Reported Chinese advancements in artificial intelligence, development of hypersonic vehicles, UAVs, amphibious armoured vehicles, indigenous naval propulsion systems, EMALS and the Magic Island makers changing the terrain in the South China Sea, are developments in this direction.

Concurrent to the ongoing reduction of regular PLA personnel, Xi referred to the continuation of the system of recruitment of civilian personnel in the military for undertaking roles related to the fields of management (administration) and technology (R&D, technical services requiring special skills, defence industry etc.). This would be in addition to the civilian personnel already working in cultural and political branches of the PLA. This measure seems to be aimed at cutting the cost of maintaining the 'tail' (administrative support elements) of the combatant component (teeth) of the armed forces. It is also aimed at providing opportunities to the family members of soldiers, particularly from remote areas.



PLA veterans and local residents watch the opening of 19th Party Congress on television at a bookstore in Shenyang in China's north-eastern Liaoning province. Photograph: AFP/Getty Image

In his assertions on deepening military reforms, Xi said that the system of 'Career officers' would be implemented in the military. Simultaneously, however, he also vowed to implement 'Party building in the military'. Balancing 'military professionalism and Party loyalty' seems difficult to achieve and would perhaps be an arduous task for the Chinese Socialist military institutions, requiring an element of evolving 'combat systems with distinctive Chinese characteristics'.

Other Aspects of Strengthening the Military

The following aspects were also highlighted by Xi, which the Party and the nation need to address to make the military strong:

- Formulation of Integrated National (Security) Strategy.
- Refining system of general mobilization.
- Creation and strengthening of unified higher defence organization for integrated operations.
- Civil-military integration.
- Improving combat and intelligence capability.
- Strengthening of border, coastal and air defence.
- Conduct of military training under combat conditions and promoting innovation.
- Enforcement of probity and strict military discipline.
- Protecting legitimate rights and interests of military personnel and their families
- Establishing an administration for veterans.
- Making military service an occupation that enjoys public respect.

Assessment of Implications

Political Control of Armed Forces

The PLA has traditionally remained under the Party control and the current Party Congress has only reasserted this arrangement, albeit more emphatically. This assertion comes against the backdrop of Xi's concerted anti-corruption drive in the PLA and decisions to remove generals of the stature of General Fang Fenghui, Chief of Joint Staff Department at the CMC, and General Zhang Yang, Director of the Military Political Department. Viewed also in relation to the 'CMC Chairman responsibility system' introduced since late 2014, it is evident that there are greater expectations of the PLA maintaining 'probity', 'political integrity' and safeguarding 'political security' of the country. Viewed positively, the arrangement ensures participative strategy formulation and clearer directions to the armed forces. It also ensures greater commitment of the national leadership to the modernisation and strengthening of the forces. On the other hand, however, traditional wisdom would suggest armed forces remaining apolitical because military professionalism and loyalty to the party are hard to reconcile for the military leaders.

Employment of PLA

Xi affirmed the employment of the PLA to safeguard 'China's own' and 'Common Security'. The concept of 'Common Security' emanates from China's New Framework of Security which propagates that security is universal and embraces all countries. It entails security through mutually beneficial cooperation in areas of common interest and covers wide ranging fields that include political, economic, military, social and cultural. It aims at providing an environment of comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security.¹ The principle is no doubt attractive but the challenge remains of arriving at acceptable modalities of implementation. The apprehension is that it may be used by China to justify the 'self assigned' role of being a regional/global security provider and custodian of global commons, whereby the PLA may be used increasingly on foreign soils for protection of overseas Chinese infrastructure projects, for instance under BRI and MSR, including CPEC, or in expeditionary operations. This aspect needs to be observed more closely in terms of its practical implementation.

Transformation and Modernisation of PLA

The speech laid considerable emphasis on reporting the progress of ongoing PLA modernisation. What implications is this likely to have for India?

Reorganisations (*creation of integrated theatre commands and conversion of Second Artillery Corps to PLA Rocket Force*) and creation of additional services (SSF and Rocket Force) are Strategic and Operational level force structuring exercises which enhance both deterrence and combat capability. The force application of these formations will however only be possible in an *all out conventional war*, which, under the current circumstances, seems less than likely. Thus, despite the new structures in place, the current pattern of border activity, at tactical level, is likely to prevail, albeit with greater assertiveness on part of the PLA. Manifestation of asymmetric warfare is also more likely in the cyber, EW and space domains, due to a larger footprint and inherent deniability, rather than the legacy trend of supporting insurgent groups.

The formations deployed along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India may experience greater synergy in border activity, all along the Indo – China border, due to integration of the Chengdu and Lanzhou Military Regions into the Western Theatre Command. Operational coordination between PLA, PLAAF and other elements of SSF may be expected, beyond the geographic limits of India's operational structures (Northern, Central and Eastern Commands).

China is laying considerable emphasis on strengthening the PLAN for its power projection in the Indo-Pacific. Greater PLAN activity may be witnessed in the Indian Ocean region, besides the continuing aggressiveness in the East and South China seas. There is also likely to be greater synergy in response along land borders and at sea, necessitating similar calibration of activities on the Indian side.

Recommendations

Though belatedly, India has shifted the focus of capability development to its Northern borders. Following the concept of 'manned borders' with adequate strength of acclimatized troops pre-located along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), there is no reason for alarm in India. Also, at most areas of interest, the terrain works as a positive force multiplier for India, enhancing its defensive capability. Following measures, however, merit priority action:-

- Improvement of infrastructure and connectivity to the LAC.
- Enhancement of ISR capability for surveillance of depth areas.
- Priority *operationalisation* of 17 Corps, the accretion Corps for the mountains. This will enable a synergized and comprehensive operational planning for the entire length of India's Northern borders, now under the operational command of a single PLA Western Theatre Command.
- Creation of appropriate operational capability in cyber and space domains and comprehensive planning for employment of Special Forces.
- Honing of inter-theatre mobilization plan of the Army and Air Force, to optimize on force levels for two front contingencies.
- Evolving a road map for development of the Navy, with appropriately considered decisions with respect to: additional aircraft carrier(s), submarines, helicopters, mine counter measure vessels etc., and the development of the *sentinels* (Andaman & Nicobar, Lakshadweep Islands).
- Evolving a road map for modernizing the Air Force, considering optimum requirements of combat aircraft, transport aircraft, AWACS, UAVs, helicopters and aerial weapons, for deployment on northern borders.

- Factoring of 'strategic deterrence' in overall capability development to enhance force parity.

Conclusion

An analysis of the Xi speech suggests that the PLA is being transformed and the national defence of China is being strengthened to complement China's assertive foreign policy, with the underlying theme that making the country prosperous and making the military strong go hand in hand. China is developing its armed forces as an instrument of the Party (CPC) democratic India maintains apolitical armed forces to safeguard its security.

Despite the macro level reforms in the PLA, which enhance overall deterrence against a conventional conflict, the pattern of Chinese activities along the LAC is likely to remain unchanged, except perhaps for greater assertiveness in transgressions. The pattern of asymmetric warfare, in support of China's claims, may move to newer domains. India, while remaining confident of its border management capability, must take note of these military trends in China and take appropriate measures for overall capability development.

Endnotes:

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