

Dr. Manoj Joshi on

China's Military Modernisation



And its Implications

China's military modernisation began a long time ago. In the 1990s to be precise. But from 1990, when the PLA was overwhelmingly equipped with reverse engineered Soviet-era weapons, till the beginning of this decade, the focus was on enhancing the quality of PLA weapons and systems. We are now witnessing the latest phase as of 2015 when China launched a comprehensive reform to its military organisation. The focus of its modernisation is in shifting the balance from its Army to the Navy and Air Force and on integrating C4ISR systems. In addition, China is making major efforts to leap frog over US advantages through investments in futuristic technologies.

According to specialists on the PLA, they have moved from 'digitalisation' to 'networkisation' and now they aim to achieve 'intelligentisation'. This third stage involves the use of emerging technologies including artificial intelligence (AI), with big data and cloud computing to enhance the PLA's C4ISR capabilities.

In general terms, modernisation involves a qualitative upgradation of older doctrines, organisation and structures – and equipment. It has to take place in the context of specific threats and capabilities of perceived adversaries and their modernisation trajectory.

The main focus of the Chinese military remains possible conflict over the Taiwan straits and newer contingencies in the South China Sea and the seas of Japan and Korea. A sense of urgency has been brought into the reform given the standoff with the US on the issue of the South China Sea and Japan over the Senkaku islands.

All this involves two aspects: first, the reshaping of the PLA organisation, its doctrine and its command and control structure. The second is the upgradation of its military hardware.

The past year has been extremely significant for organisational changes that have led to the creation of Theatre Commands in place of the older military regions, a completely reorganised higher

command system emphasising joint operations, the upgradation of the force dealing with its nuclear deterrent and the creation of a new strategic support force.

In the first phase, Chinese strategy was to have systems "good enough" to fight a regional war. It would play catch up often using asymmetrical strategies like fielding large numbers of ballistic missiles, including A2/AD systems.

Now it is looking at the next phase, where instead of catch up, China seeks to leap-frog, even while simultaneously developing technologies which will degrade US systems. In line with this, it is pursuing technologies related to hypersonics, directed energy and counter-space. Doctrinally, it is emphasising joint, and integration of, Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR).

China is enhancing its missile force for regional contingencies. These include cruise missiles, short, medium and IRBMs, a new generation of fighters, integrated air defence