
China's Sweeping Military Reforms: Implications for Australia

Bates Gill and Adam Ni*

Formally launched at the end of December 2015, the ongoing reforms of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) are the most sweeping and potentially transformative in its history.

Since early 2016, these reforms have had immediate and far-reaching effects on the PLA's organisation, force posture, command and control structures, and internal politics. Looking ahead and over the longer-term, the successful implementation of these reforms will help build the PLA into a far more capable fighting force.¹ As far as China's top political and military leaders are concerned, these reforms are critical in transforming the PLA from a bloated, untested and corrupt military with low levels of professionalism to a force increasingly capable of conducting joint operations, fighting short, intensive and technologically sophisticated conflicts, and doing so farther from Chinese shores.

This reform effort has critically important implications for Australia, particularly in relation to China's development of strategic capabilities to deter the United States and its allies and partners in both nuclear and non-nuclear realms. This brief study details the organisational changes afoot for the PLA, the aims of these major reforms, and analyses how—if successful—they could affect the strategy of the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region.

Structural Changes

The PLA reform effort is an ambitious program of organisational restructuring aimed at improving both political and operational outcomes. In particular, these reforms have two key and—especially in the eyes of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership—mutually reinforcing objectives: (1)

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¹ For early 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic' takes on the PLA reforms, see Michael S. Chase and Jeffrey Engstrom, 'China's Military Reforms: An Optimistic Take', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, vol. 83 (2016), pp. 49-52; and Roger Cliff, 'Chinese Military Reforms: A Pessimistic Take', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, vol. 83 (2016), pp. 53-56.

strengthening CCP authority over the PLA; and (2) reorganising the PLA to become more effective in conducting joint operations.

Several important structural changes have been put in place to achieve these objectives. First, the PLA's command structure has been entirely revamped. Prior to the 2015/2016 reforms, the PLA command structure was highly complicated with unclear lines of authority. Under the old system, operational units effectively had two chains of command: one from operational units to military regions and up to the PLA General Staff Department and ultimately to China's top military body, the Central Military Commission (CMC); the other went from the operational units to their service headquarters (i.e., air force, navy) which also generally acted as functional commands. This meant that a naval or air force unit could be subject to the commands of both a military region commander and to the service to which they belonged. Further adding to the mix, the PLA Army did not have a service headquarters, a role that was instead played by the Army-dominated General Staff Department. This system was deemed far too complex and unworkable under the conditions of modern warfare with its focus on coordination and joint operations.

Under the new system formally introduced from late-2015, the command structure has simplified and flattened, with clearly delineated areas of responsibility. Several important changes took place.

First of all, the PLA's command structure has undergone substantial change. The four General Departments under the old system (General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armaments Department) have been dismantled and their functions mostly concentrated under the Central Military Commission. This removed an entire bureaucratic layer which was dominated by the PLA Army and had become too independent from the CMC and thus could pose a challenge to Xi Jinping himself.

Post-reform, the new PLA command system is described as "CMC takes overall charge, theatre commands direct operations, service headquarters direct force development" (军委管总, 战区主战, 军种主建). Under this new system, the role of the CMC and its immediate subordinate organs is to provide strategic oversight and command over the activities of the PLA. Day-to-day and wartime operations of the PLA are to be led by joint theatre commanders who control subordinate units from different services and branches intended to operate together. The individual service headquarters generally no longer act as functional commands and are instead responsible for force development (建军)—including providing equipment and troops, training, and administrative management of units that fall under them—similar to what the US military would term 'man, train, and equip' missions.

Second, the PLA's organisational structure has been transformed. Under the pre-2016 structure (see Figure 1 below), the PLA hierarchy consisted of the CMC, four General Departments, seven military regions, and headquarters for the PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, and the Second Artillery Force (as noted above, the PLA Army headquarters was subsumed in the General Staff Department which was traditionally dominated by Army officers).

Under the new structure (see Figure 2 below), the four General Departments were disbanded and their work was mostly subsumed within fifteen new functional organs, including the Joint Staff Department, under the direct control of the CMC. These sections comprise seven departments or offices, three commissions, and five affiliated bodies:²

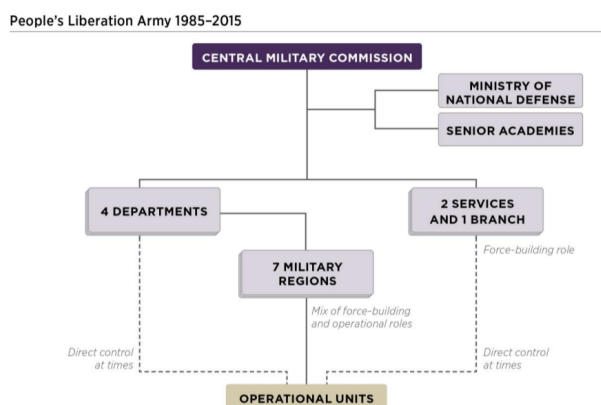
- General Office (办公厅)
- Joint Staff Department (联合参谋部)
- Political Work Department (政治工作部)
- Logistic Support Department (后勤保障部)
- Equipment Development Department (装备发展部)
- Training and Administration Department (训练管理部)
- National Defence Mobilisation Department (国防动员部)
- Discipline Inspection Commission (纪律检查委员会)
- Politics and Law Commission (政法委员会)
- Science and Technology Commission (科学技术委员会)
- Office for Strategic Planning (战略规划办公室)
- Office for Reform and Organisational Structure (改革和编制办公室)
- Office for International Military Cooperation (国际军事合作办公室)
- Audit Office (审计署)
- Agency for Offices Administration (机关事务管理总局).

The heads of the Joint Staff Department (General Li Zuocheng), the Political Work Department (Admiral Miao Hua), and the Discipline Inspection

² For more details, see China's Ministry of National Defence website section on the CMC, eng.mod.gov.cn/cmcc/index.htm. The fifteen organs are listed in the same order as they appear on the website.

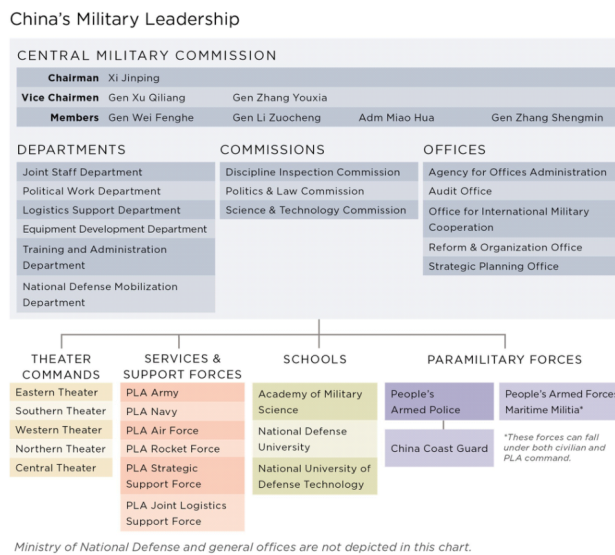
Commission (General Zhang Shengmin) concurrently have seats on the CMC.

Figure 1: PLA organisational structure prior to 2016 reforms



Source: Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016* (Washington, D.C., 2016), p. 55.

Figure 2: PLA organisational structure post-2016 reforms



Source: Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018* (Washington, D.C., 2018), p. 4.

In addition, as part of the reforms, the seven Military Regions were dismantled and replaced with five Joint Theatre Commands (see Figure 3 below):

- Eastern Theatre Command, headquartered in Nanjing
- Western Theatre Command, headquartered in Chengdu
- Southern Theatre Command, headquartered in Guangzhou
- Northern Theatre Command, headquartered in Shenyang
- Central Theatre Command, headquartered in Beijing.

The restructuring also resulted in a new Army headquarters and the elevation of the Second Artillery Force to a full service co-equal to the Army, Navy and Air Force and renamed the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF). A new service branch, the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), was also established as part of the restructuring.³

Figure 3: PLA Joint Theatre Commands since 2016



Source: Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016* (Washington DC, 2016), p. 2.

³ '陆军领导机构火箭军战略支援部队成立大会在京举行' ['Army Leadership Organ, Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force Inauguration Ceremony Occurs in Beijing'], 新华社 [Xinhua], 1 January 2016, <www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-01/01/c_128588494.htm> [Accessed 6 July 2018].

Losers and Winners in the PLA Reforms

The upshot of this restructuring was to centralise command, control and military modernisation authority within the CMC and to the CMC leader, Xi Jinping. In doing so, the reforms set up a flatter command structure by removing the four general departments which had become an overly-powerful added layer of authority between the CMC on the one hand, and the military regions and services on the other. The power and functions of the dismantled four general departments have been largely handed over to the fifteen organs under the CMC. The reorganisation also led to downsizing the PLA by 300,000 personnel, mostly from non-combat essential Army units.⁴

In assessing 'winners' and 'losers' from these massive changes, it appears the PLA Army has suffered the greatest loss. From a strategic operational perspective, it is clear the Army's traditional mission of deterring land-based threats and homeland defence has dramatically diminished in favour of those parts of the PLA which can provide offshore power projection in air, maritime, space, nuclear and cyber domains: the Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force. Possible land-based threats—such as border disputes with India or risks posed by insurgencies in Central and Southwest Asia—have not risen to the same level of urgency as challenges from other domains.

Dismantling of the four formerly-powerful Army-dominated general departments is another signal of reduced status for the Army as was the creation of a new Army headquarters co-equal in rank to the other services—in essence a 'demotion' for the Army from its leadership status in running the former general departments to the status of a 'mere' service arm.

The Army has also seen the largest cuts to personnel, with one official report stating that the force would now number less than 1 million, a continuation of its downsizing over the past two decades and a move that would "evenly proportion the PLA army and the other services".⁵ The reforms also cut the number of PLA Army group armies from eighteen to thirteen, a streamlining resulting in a loss of officers, troops, administrative positions and resources.

Part of the Army 'demotion' and downsizing was about political control. Under Xi Jinping's predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the PLA overall, and its Army leadership in particular, had become deeply corrupt and resistant to much-needed reforms, including structural changes, streamlining and the divestment of commercial activities. Once in office, Xi Jinping moved to clean up the Army, remove it as potential political challenge and obstacle to military reforms, and re-assert CCP authority over China's

⁴ Yang Sheng, 'Reform to Downsize PLA Army, Boost Navy Numbers', *Global Times*, 11 July 2017, <www.globaltimes.cn/content/1055927.shtml> [Accessed 6 July 2018].

⁵ Ibid.

sprawling military. In addition to the formal reform and reorganisation effort launched at the end of 2015, Xi took the bold step of arresting and disgracing PLA Army generals Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, previously China's two most-powerful military officers as Vice Chairmen of the CMC, on corruption charges. This occurred alongside the removal of hundreds of other Army officers.

That said, the PLA Army remains highly influential within the military hierarchy. For example, the leadership of most of the newly-formed Joint Theatre Commands are from the PLA Army. One prominent exception was the appointment of PLA Navy Vice Admiral Yuan Yubai to head the Southern Theatre Command in early-2017, replacing PLA Army General Wang Jiaocheng. But Yuan's appointment is the exception which proves the rule: he is the first and only non-Army officer ever to lead a PLA Military Region or Theatre Command.⁶ In addition, despite troop cuts, the Army still accounts for more than half of total PLA personnel. Some scholars argued that the Army may try to use the new command and control arrangements at joint theatre level "to reassert the service's strategic relevance and political muscle by gaining the ability to command assets controlled by the other services". However, if that is the case, these authors argued, such measures would come "at a potential cost in overall operational effectiveness" for the PLA.⁷

The biggest 'winner' of the reforms—and intentionally so—is the CMC under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Under the current structure, the CMC has wrested enormous authority away from former PLA general departments and placed it directly under CMC control in the form of the new fifteen functional organs which it oversees.

In addition, the non-Army services have also largely benefited from the reforms. According to official PLA media, "the number of troops in the PLA Navy, PLA Strategic Support Force and the PLA Rocket Force will be increased, while the PLA Air Force's active service personnel will remain the same".⁸ The PLA Navy is also slated to increase its platforms and resources, including the infusion of Army personnel repurposed to serve in the Navy's rapidly expanding Marine Corps.⁹ The PLARF was elevated to a full service arm and its personnel will be increased. The PLASSF has been

⁶ Dennis J. Blasko, 'A "First" for the People's Liberation Army: A Navy Admiral Becomes a Joint, Regional, Commander', *China Brief*, vol. 17, no. 5, 31 March 2017, <jamestown.org/program/first-peoples-liberation-army-navy-admiral-becomes-joint-regional-commander/> [Accessed 6 July 2018].

⁷ These quotations from Phillip C. Saunders and John Chen, 'Is the Chinese Army the Real Winner in PLA Reforms?', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, vol. 83 (2016), pp. 44-48.

⁸ Yang, 'Reform to Downsize PLA Army, Boost Navy Numbers'.

⁹ Minnie Chan, 'As Overseas Ambitions Expand, China Plans 400 Per Cent Increase to Marine Corps Number, Sources Say', *South China Morning Post*, 13 March 2017, <www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2078245/overseas-ambitions-expand-china-plans-400pc-increase> [Accessed 6 July 2018].

newly established and its personnel and resources will likewise increase. With the creation of the PLASSF and its space-related mission, the PLA Air Force was apparently foiled in its hopes of gaining control of China military aerospace activities.¹⁰

Operational Aspirations of the Reforms

Underlying the structural reforms and inter-service competition is the strategic operational aim for the PLA to become more effective at “winning local wars under conditions of informationization”.¹¹ This has been a longstanding aim of the PLA for well over a decade. However, Xi Jinping has brought far more pressure to bear on the PLA to live up to this expectation operationally and not just rhetorically.

Within weeks of assuming power as the General Secretary of the CCP and Chairman of the CMC in November 2012, Xi made a three-day inspection visit of PLA troops based in southern Guangdong Province. His message was clear: “being able to fight and win a war is absolutely necessary for a strong military” and as such the PLA needed to intensify its “real combat” awareness.¹² More recently, in his work report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP in October 2017, Xi candidly presented his expectations for the PLA:

[W]e will upgrade our military capabilities, and see that, by the year 2020, mechanization is basically achieved, IT application has come a long way, and strategic capabilities have seen a big improvement. ... We will make it our mission to see that by 2035, the modernization of our national defense and our forces is basically completed; and that by the mid-21st century our people's armed forces have been fully transformed into world-class forces.

...

A military is built to fight. Our military must regard combat capability as the criterion to meet in all its work and focus on how to win when it is called on. We will take solid steps to ensure military preparedness for all strategic directions, and make progress in combat readiness in both traditional and new security fields. We will develop new combat forces and support forces, conduct military training under combat conditions, strengthen the application of military strength, speed up development of intelligent military, and improve combat capabilities for joint operations based on the network information system and the ability to fight under multi-dimensional

¹⁰ Kevin L. Pollpeter, Michael S. Chase, and Eric Heginbotham, *The Creation of the PLA Strategic Support Force and its Implications for Chinese Military Space Operations* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2017), pp. 13-14, <www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2058.html> [Accessed 6 July 2018].

¹¹ State Council Information Office, *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing: The Office, May 2015), section III, <english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm> [Accessed 6 July 2018].

¹² 'Xi Orders PLA to Intensify Combat Awareness', *Global Times*, 12 December 2012, <www.globaltimes.cn/content/749795.shtml> [Accessed 6 July 2018]; 'Xi Jinping Calls for PLA "Real Combat" Awareness', *CCTV*, 12 December 2012, <english.cntv.cn/program/china24/20121212/107070.shtml> [Accessed 6 July 2018].

conditions. This will enable us to effectively shape our military posture, manage crises, and deter and win wars.¹³

These calls were followed by a live speech, broadcast to thousands of military facilities across the country, in which Xi urged the PLA to “create an elite and powerful force that is always ready for the fight, capable of combat and sure to win in order to fulfil the tasks bestowed by the party and the people in the new era”. He added the troops needed to “enhance their military training and combat readiness”.¹⁴

But how to get there and what role will the restructuring and reform of the PLA play? Authoritative strategic documents such as the PLA's *Science of Strategy* and Chinese defence white papers make clear the areas where the PLA must focus in order to prepare for, fight, and win wars. They stress the growing importance of maritime domains (both ‘offshore defence’ and ‘open seas protection’), stronger capabilities in the nuclear weapons, outer space, and cyberspace realms, the need to project power further away from China's borders and protect the country's expanding overseas interests, and improvements in informationised warfighting.

With these strategic goals in mind, the reforms set in motion in late-2015 aim to achieve several critical operational outcomes. First, the PLA is to be restructured in way more suited to the types of combat it will likely encounter in the future. Transforming the PLA from an Army-centric force and placing priority on the other services is a key step in this direction. Reorganising the Military Regions—each of which traditionally had a standalone, largely defensive mission to perform—into five Theatre Commands increasingly capable of wartime joint operations and cross-theatre coordination would be another important structural outcome. Clarifying the fundamental responsibilities of the PLA hierarchy—with the CMC in overall command, theatre commands directing warfighting and the services headquarters handling force development (军委管总, 战区主战, 军种主建)—would streamline command and control and smooth any necessary transition from a peacetime to a wartime footing.

A second intended operational outcome is improvement in the PLA's joint warfighting capability. This has been a traditional challenge for the PLA. However, creation of the Joint Theatre Commands ostensibly allows for control and coordination across the services in theatre in a way the PLA has not operated before. More in the way of realistic joint training will be needed,

¹³ Xi Jinping, *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*, report delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 18 October 2017, <www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf> [Accessed 6 July 2018].

¹⁴ Christina Zhao, ‘China: President Xi Jinping Tells Army Not to Fear Death at Enormous Military Assembly’, *Newsweek*, 4 January 2018.

as will improvements in integrated command, control and communications across the service arms in theatre. With the creation of the PLASSF, it appears the PLA will make progress toward such integrated information sharing. It also appears the PLASSF will be central to developing and supporting greater PLA capacity for an integrated strategic deterrence posture. This posture would involve the integration of various military means for maximising deterrence effect, including nuclear, conventional, (counter)space, information, and other new and emerging capabilities.¹⁵

A third key operational outcome would be a greater ability to project Chinese military power offshore for offensive and deterrence purposes as well as to conduct military operations other than war (MOOTW) to secure Chinese interests around the world including counter-terrorism, anti-piracy, civilian evacuation and humanitarian relief operations. The reform and reorganisation of the PLA will see the increasing importance and expanding capabilities of the Chinese Navy, Air Force, PLARF and PLASSF, all of which would play critical roles in achieving all or most of these operational goals. In addition, the re-subordination of the People's Armed Police under the CMC at the start of 2018 highlights the streamlining of paramilitary capabilities for domestic operations as well as for 'grey zone' activities, such as those conducted by China's Coast Guard and Maritime Militia in the South China Sea.¹⁶

Finally, it is also clear that the reforms are intended to bolster the PLA's ability to conduct warfare under modern, informationised conditions and to do so in conventional forms of combat as well as within the nuclear, outer space, advanced aerospace and cyber domains. Hence, the creation of the PLASSF and the consolidation of most of the PLA's space, cyber and electronic warfare capabilities within this new body aims to address the PLA's longstanding aspiration to fight more effectively on the information battlefield. Likewise, boosting the standing of the PLARF within the PLA, investing in its nuclear arsenal, and integrating its growing and diverse conventional ballistic and cruise missile force within joint theatre operations are all aimed at strengthening the PLA's range of offensive and deterrent options on the twenty-first-century battlefield—what many Western analysts might term an “anti-access, area denial” (A2AD) capability.

¹⁵ Xiao Tianliang, et al. (eds), *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2015), pp. 119-35.

¹⁶ Kristin Huang, 'China Brings People's Armed Police Under Control of Top Military Chiefs', *South China Morning Post*, 27 December 2017. For more on China's Coast Guard and Maritime Militia, see Andrew S. Erickson, 'Understanding China's Third Sea Force: The Maritime Militia', *Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies* (blog), 8 September 2017, <medium.com/fairbank-center/understanding-chinas-third-sea-force-the-maritime-militia-228a2bfbbedd>.

Implications for Australia

As the 2015-2016 reforms take effect, the PLA will advance as a modern military force. This will include strengthening its strategic nuclear deterrent, expanding and modernising its conventional missile arsenal, and developing other strategic capabilities in other realms, including in space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum. With these advances, the Chinese political leadership and PLA are in a better position to impose costs on the United States and its allies, both in wartime and peacetime.

For Australia, some of the most important implications of the ongoing reforms relate to the 'new' strategic organisations of the PLA. While not truly 'new', the establishment of the PLARF and the PLASSF clearly signals the priority Beijing intends to give to conducting more effective deterrence operations and warfare in nuclear, space, cyber, aerospace (missile), and electronic domains. The anti-ship conventional forces of the PLARF, as well as the PLASSF's intended facilitation of joint air-, land-, maritime-, space-, and cyber-based operations, should be of particular concern to the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) operating within range of these Chinese capabilities.

As the PLA—and particularly the PLARF and the PLASSF—continue to advance in their reform and reorganisation, this will likely pose significant new challenges to the United States and US allies, including Australia, affecting strategic stability and deterrence, extended deterrence, conventional force operations, information dominance and security, critical infrastructure, and other key aspects of national security. Given China's diversifying array of nuclear and strategic conventional capabilities, Canberra should seek continued, clarified, and reliable extended deterrence guarantees from the United States, to include nuclear attacks as well as non-nuclear Chinese threats and attacks which could have strategic effect as in the space- and cyber-domains.¹⁷ Admittedly, this will be a complex task given the pace of technological change in cyber and space technology as well as the relatively underdeveloped thinking on extended deterrence with respect to the new strategic domains. Nevertheless, given its importance and pressing nature, it is an area where these two close allies must aim to collaborate.

In addition, with China's growing array of advanced conventional capabilities, especially in the advanced aerospace (missiles), outer space, and cyber domains, Australia should work with the United States and other trusted allies and partners to enhance defensive countermeasures and offensive

¹⁷ The US *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019*, Section 1255 states that the "United States stands unwaveringly behind its treaty obligations and assurances, including those related to defense and extended nuclear deterrence, to South Korea, Japan, and Australia", <www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/5515/text> [Accessed 20 October 2018].

capabilities in these realms in order to maximise operational manoeuvrability and strategic deterrence effects. These investments must include capabilities that would improve the capabilities of the United States and its allies to pre-empt, disrupt, suppress and defend against Chinese conventional missile, cyber and counterspace attack.

Moreover, as the PLASSF solidifies its position as the PLA's cyber force, Australia should enhance its capacities to prevent, deflect and respond to more sophisticated information operations. As with their predecessors, PLASSF operatives will seek access to sensitive information from US allies and learn how to disrupt joint allied communications and operations. Moreover, the PLASSF will likely conduct information operations against a variety of Australian-based targets, including government organisations, education institutions, and local and multinational companies. Hence, the Australian Government will need to work with a variety of non-government actors in protecting Australia's information security interests.

Finally, as the PLA becomes more reliant on space- and cyber-based systems to achieve its strategic aims and modernise its military operations, Australia should join the United States and other allies to focus on China's space- and cyber-related assets to assess the PLA's progress toward more effective joint operations and to identify potential targets for pre-emption and disruption. A focus should be brought to bear in particular on the evolution of PLARF and PLASSF roles and capabilities.

Conclusion

The ongoing reform of the PLA along with the rapid modernisation of its military hardware will improve the warfighting and deterrence capabilities of China's military. While it is still too early to tell whether the current round of ambitious PLA reform can achieve its intended goals, there is little doubt that China's growing military muscle will be able to impose increasingly higher costs on the United States and its allies in the years ahead. This is especially so in any scenario involving US and allied intervention in areas close to China's mainland periphery, for example, in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait.

For military planners in Washington and Canberra, the rapid evolution of PLA's strategic forces in the nuclear, space and cyber space domains should be of particular concern. PLA reform has focused heavily on joint operations, and on increasing China's operational and strategic options in these new domains.

Operationally, the development of new capabilities by the PLA, such as advanced conventional missiles and (counter)space platforms, will pose new challenges to the effectiveness and survivability of ADF assets in case of conflict. Strategically, China's improved deterrence capabilities across

multiple domains will make it costlier for Australia to be involved in such a conflict, especially if reliable extended deterrence guarantees are eroded as the relative balance of deterrence power continues to tilt towards China.

Importantly, the operational and strategic challenges for Australia stemming from PLA reform efforts will become more pronounced in the years ahead. As the PLA transforms towards a more professional and modern fighting force, it will have a more diversified array of force projection platforms with which it can hold the ADF and Australian targets at risk. It is critical that military planners and strategists in Canberra are up to date on the rapidly developing PLA and the attendant challenges, risks and opportunities it poses.

Bates Gill is Professor of Asia-Pacific Strategic Studies at the Department of Security Studies and Criminology, Macquarie University. From 2012 to 2017 he held positions at the Australian National University and the University of Sydney. He was previously Director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), an independent think tank recognised as one of the world's top ten research institutes in international affairs.

Adam Ni is a China researcher, and a Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University. His areas of interest include China's international relations, strategy and security issues. Adam has worked in various China-related positions in academia, government and the private sector. He is a frequent commentator on China-related issues for international media.
