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Artificial Intelligence in People's Liberation Army Modernisation: A study of Western Theatre Command and Implications for India

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1.1 Introduction

On the night of 15 June 2020, Indian and Chinese soldiers fought with stones, iron rods and nail-studded clubs in the Galwan Valley. It was a destructive clash on the India-China Border over the decades, and 20 Indian soldiers were killed. While the battle was primitive in execution, the force that initiated it was well-prepared and sophisticated. They reportedly placed orders for additional nail-studded clubs around the same time. In the following months satellite images indicated the development of surveillance towers, infrastructure, strengthened command posts, and an expanding system of cameras and sensors across the Tibetan Plateau.

This contrast reflects a broader transformation within the People Liberation Army (PLA) which has over the years steadily integrated Artificial Intelligence (AI) capabilities into every dimension of military operations - from intelligence fusion to autonomous combat systems and cognitive electronic warfare. Since the 2016 PLA reorganisation, the Western Theatre Command (WTC) has overseen military operations along the India-China border, including sensitive regions such as Tibet, Ladakh, and Arunachal Pradesh.

Within this evolving structure, China has articulated the concept of "intelligentised warfare" in key policy documents like China's 2019 Defence White Paper and is not just theoretical - it is actively being developed and tested, especially along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). China has also aimed to become a world class military force by 2049. Civil Military Fusion (CMF) has further reinforced this effort by linking civilian technological innovation with military needs, thereby enhancing PLA's decision-making speed, surveillance, and coordination across domains.

This unprecedented convergence of AI and military power has thus changed the nature of warfare. The paper examines the role of AI in the modernisation of the PLA and analyses its operationalisation through the WTC, with a focus on its strategic implications for India.

Evolution of PLA Modernisation

2.1 Historical Evolution

The victory by the United States in the 1991 Gulf War compelled China to redefine its military strategy and laid the foundation of its modernisation efforts. During the war, the US demonstrated its military muscle through technologies that were highly advanced for the time, including precision-guided weapons, satellite navigation, advanced command networks, and early intelligent targeting systems, showcasing the effective use of information-based Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems.

In 1978, the pragmatic Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping initiated military modernisation reform through the four-character policy Gaige Kaifeng (改革开放), following which China began to transition from Mao Zedong's manpower-intensive 'People's War' military doctrine towards 'People's War under modern conditions', which later evolved into the doctrine of 'Local Wars under Modern Conditions' (Roy & Nair, 2022). While the reforms and adjustments in the doctrines improved military preparedness of the PLA, China lacked capabilities of high technology warfare required to win wars in the future. The rate of modernisation remained slow due to the inefficient, corrupt and undertrained PLA. At the same time, a large portion of Chinese military equipment was based on 1960s generation Soviet technology, and during the 1980s China continued producing relatively low-technology Soviet design equipment, many of which were exported to Iraq. The Iraqi forces used some of the Chinese exported weapon systems in the 1991 Gulf war and they proved to be largely outdated and ineffective against the technologically advanced, information-dominant U.S. military (Dahm, 2021). The advanced technological capabilities by the

US in the Gulf war thus exposed the relative backwardness of the PLA and raised concerns about its national security. China realised that wars are not just won by destroying forces on the battlefield but also by constructively incapacitating damage to the operational systems of the adversary. These lessons pushed former Chinese president Jiang Zemin in 1993 to update China's official military strategic guidance to the objective of Preparations for Military Struggle (PMS) which emphasised on "winning local wars in conditions of modern technology, particularly high technology" (Fravel, 2015). This forward-thinking reform of mechanisation marked an institutional starting point of the PLA's transition towards a technologically advanced military force.

2.2 Shift towards informatisation

However, the reform designed to advance PLA capabilities struggled due to challenges in operationalising high-technology warfare. The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade heightened the Chinese perceptions of strategic threat, exposed the PLA's vulnerabilities and prompted an accelerated shift towards informationised warfare. In response to these challenges, China closely observed the Revolution in Military Affairs during the 1990s and increasingly viewed information superiority, coordinated strikes, and the ability to conduct "non-contact" warfare through long-range precision attacks as fundamental for modernisation (Newmyer, 2010). These developments marked a transition from observation to adaptation and formed the basis for China's later shift toward informationised and intelligentised warfare.

Reflecting this shift, the concept of a "Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese characteristics" was formally incorporated into China's 2004 National Defence White Paper by Jiang Zemin (Rana, 2017). The China's National Defence White Paper 2004 notes that the PLA takes advantage of progress in government and social sectors in the field of informationalisation" and establishes research and production systems that can integrate both military and civilian efforts (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2004). The civil military integration highlights China's early recognition that technological innovation within civilian sectors could help in rapidly achieving military modernisation and strengthening the PLA’s ability to adapt to informationised warfare. This approach is further evident in contemporary practice, where civil technology advances are systematically used to augment military capabilities. In 2004, the Central Military Commission (CMC) revised its strategic guideline that emphasised “winning local wars under conditions of informatisation” (Fravel, 2015). This adjustment occurred during the leadership transition from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao and was followed by a focus on a network centric warfare that utilises information technology as the driving force for military modernisation. The objective was to achieve information superiority across the battlefield by the effective use of information technologies with capabilities related to command-and-control, reconnaissance and surveillance. This was intended to provide the PLA with a decisive advantage of winning a war with comprehensive and a faster accumulation of information, data transmission, strategic analysis and decision making.

However, the PLA was confronted with challenges involving technical proficiency required for a successful implementation of informationisation. To address these challenges, Hu Jintao implemented new training directives and revised the Outlines on Military Training and Evaluation (DaGang), emphasizing technical proficiency, joint exercises, and preparation for information-rich warfare (Kamphausen et al., 2014). Building on informatised training, the PLA also developed Integrated Command Platforms (ICPs) to integrate command, intelligence, communications, weapons systems, and militia-based networks into a single coordinated platform (Kamphausen et al., 2014). The initiatives ushered a new capability within the PLA to manage complex data flows, coordinate joint operations, and improve command and control across its forces. This preparation was necessary to support future operational readiness especially in the WTC, where inhospitable terrain and climate make military operations in the sensitive borders difficult.

Building on this foundation, the PLA also began experimenting with aerial systems. According to a report in the *South China Morning Post*, the PLA established its first unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) squadron in 2011 at a base in Gansu province, with around 70 hypersonic drones derived from retired J-6 and J-7 aircraft (Chan, 2022). These drones were mainly controlled by human operators and did not yet use advanced artificial intelligence. Nevertheless, their adoption indicates that the PLA had begun experimenting with the unmanned military capabilities, a step that would directly contribute to the development of later intelligentised warfare systems.

The period of leadership under Hu Jintao thus transformed the PLA into an information driven force by establishing the technological, organisational, and training structures necessary for the later integration of artificial intelligence.

2.3 Military Reforms under Xi Jinping

Since taking over the helm, Xi Jinping's rise has marked a clear shift in the pace and direction of PLA modernisation. Xi Jinping has made the PLA his foremost priority by advancing radical reforms that suggest a shift towards a more assertive defence posture, and a progressive outlook centered on strategically winning wars, safeguarding national interests and enabling China's emergence as a regional and a global power.

A key foundation of these reforms was his articulation of the 'China Dream' concept in 2012 and it represents a strategic vision centered on the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the restoration of China's status as a major global power. Military power is an important part of this revival. Xi Jinping's visit to the Guangzhou Military Region in December 2012 made it clear that a 'strong nation dream' requires a 'strong military dream' and the 'unity of a wealthy country and a strong military' (Hongshan & Shengdong, 2012). From its very inception, therefore, the China Dream has demanded a modern and a technologically advanced PLA. The 'China Dream' made military modernisation a key requirement for achieving national rejuvenation, which later pushed the PLA to adopt advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence. As a result, the integration of AI is not just a technological upgrade but part of China's long-term strategy to build a stronger military that is highly capable of protecting its strategic interests.

On 3 September 2015, Xi Jinping announced major military reforms aimed at reorganising the PLA's structure, reducing the size of troops, strengthening party control, and preparing the military for modern, technology-driven warfare. The reforms had been drafted in 2011, but the implementation happened after years of internal consensus-building (Ranade, 2016). The delay in implementation of the unprecedented reforms gave Xi Jinping time to strengthen political control within the PLA, making it possible to introduce major institutional changes aimed at modernising the military.

The formal establishment of Strategic Support Force (SSF) and Rocket Force by the CMC on 31st December 2015 marked a significant change in the organisational structure of the PLA. The SSF centralised China's space, cyber, electronic warfare, and information operations capabilities to support joint military operations. It improved coordination of intelligence, surveillance, and communications, while enabling faster decision-making and more effective joint operations. Whereas the PLA Rocket Force focused on strengthening the precision strike and deterrence capabilities through improved command, control, and data integration systems.

In 2016, the decades-old seven military regions were replaced with five theatre commands, each exercising joint command of the forces and tasked with the territorial defence of China's five regions: North, South, East, West, and Central. The theatre commands strengthened the joint operational capabilities, enabled faster decision making and gave a specialised military attention to each region. These reforms were outlined in the 4993 characters 'Guideline on Deepening National Defence and Military Reform' issued on January 1, 2016. The guideline also aimed to promote military-civil fusion to enhance combat effectiveness and the PLA to win informationised wars by 2020 (Ranade, 2016). Under Chinese leader Xi Jinping these earlier civil-military integration efforts were further expanded into a broader national Military-Civil Fusion strategy that aimed at integrating civilian technological innovation with military modernisation to strengthen both economic and military power simultaneously. The 13th FYP (2016-2020) specified the MCF strategy ten times, representing China's transition from CMI to MCF (Fritz, 2019). MCF further expanded the PLA's modernisation approach by integrating AI, big data analytics, aerospace systems, and quantum technologies into defence development, allowing the military to utilise innovations from China's wider technology sector to support long-term military modernisation.

To ensure effective functioning of the new military system in the battlefield, the PLA has also made significant changes to the teeth-to-tail ratio (TTR). In this context, the PLA has leveraged modern technologies such as drones and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to improve support and logistics capabilities (Bommakanti & Mann, 2023). The exercises with ASN-series UAVs in 2016 demonstrated the ability to guide firepower, conduct assessments related to damage, and provide detailed images of the battlefield. Smaller drones like the CH-802 were used by the special forces and armoured units to observe nearby areas, monitor movements of the adversary, and collect real-time information during operations (Kania, 2018). The expansion of real-time battlefield data marked an important step toward intelligentised warfare, as such information systems later helped in the integration of AI for faster analysis and decision making.

Taken together, these organisational, technological, and doctrinal military reforms have accelerated the importance of innovation and improved the PLA's capability to integrate advanced technologies.

It is from this foundation of over three decades of reforms that the PLA's intelligentised warfare doctrine and AI modernization programme have emerged, as explained in the following sections

AI in PLA Modernisation

3.1 Operational Concepts Enabled by Reforms

The post-2015 reforms under Xi Jinping were significant not merely as organisational changes but as efforts to fundamentally reshape how the PLA can plan and conduct modern warfare. Two key operational concepts emerging from these reforms are system-to-system warfare and multi domain precision warfare, both of which reflect how intelligentised warfare is applied in practice.

3.1.1 System-to-System Warfare

The PLA's theory of victory is based on Systems Destruction Warfare. Rather than defeating an adversary through attrition, the aim is to disrupt the adversary's operational system by targeting key parts of their military system such as command-and-control centers, satellite communications, and logistics networks. These systems operate across many domains like land, sea, air, space, cyber, electronic signals, and even psychological influence.

Within this framework, information dominance is the core requirement for military superiority, and this allows forces to work together effectively, understand the battlefield clearly, and disrupt the decision-making process of the adversary. The PLA's information confrontation system includes both attack and defence capabilities. Information based attacks include actions such as jamming radar and communications, hacking networks, conducting psychological operations, and physically destroying the information facilities of the adversary. Whereas the information-based defence focuses on protecting its own systems through cybersecurity measures and protection against electromagnetic leakage. All these capabilities are connected through a secure and layered military communication network that enables real time information sharing and coordinated operations across military systems (Engstrom, 2018).

3.1.2 Multi domain Precision warfare

China's Multi-Domain Precision Warfare (MDPW) is the PLA's core operational concept that formally emerged in PLA discussions around 2021 as a key element of its shift toward "intelligentised warfare". The MDPW leverages the C4ISR network that is supported by big data and AI to quickly detect weaknesses in an adversary's military system and coordinate joint forces across different domains to carry out precise strikes against those targets (Probasco et al., 2026). Additionally, this concept shows that the PLA aims to fight wars by making better use of information and advanced technology rather than relying only on traditional military strength. By the integration of command systems, sensors and precision strike capabilities, the PLA can engage with its targets quickly and efficiently. The approach also enhances operational speed, improves battlefield awareness, strengthens Anti-Access/Anti-Denial (A2AD) ability and ensures dominance through information. The PLA can achieve favourable results with lower cost, greater precision and less risks through this approach in modern technology driven conflicts. However, the success of this strategy depends on reliable data and secure communication systems, which might be at risk of disruption in contested environments.

Taken together, both the concepts highlight the growing importance of AI, data, and networked systems in modern military operations.

3.2 Intelligentised Warfare

China views AI as the core driver of the ongoing Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese characteristics and a central enabling element to help the PLA transition from informationised warfare to intelligentised warfare. Rather than representing a single technological shift, intelligentisation reflects the convergence of AI with data systems, information gathering systems, advanced connectivity and autonomous technologies to create a highly advanced, digitally integrated and cognitively enhanced form of warfare.

Mechanisation and Informationisation form the technological and operational foundation for intelligentisation. AI driven warfare requires modern military equipment as well as strong information networks that can collect and share battlefield data. AI can then process voluminous and disorganized data gathered from sensors, evaluate threats and provide real time insights.
As per the PLA’s dictionary, AI weapons can provide autonomous detection, identification, and can cause destruction of enemy targets with limited human intervention (Shrivastava, 2021). Advancements in AI enabled weapons will give China nimbler military forces who can respond quickly to emerging threats with increased speed, wider operational reach, improved precision, and enhanced combat effectiveness.

3.3 Three-Stage Modernisation Framework and the Shift Toward Intelligentisation

“Military intelligentisation” was considered as a national priority by Xi Jinping at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 (Mallick, 2021). In the same year, the State Council issued the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan that outlines guidelines for China to become a world leader in AI by 2030. The plan called for China to strengthen the MCF in the domain of AI through close cooperation of knowledge and technology resources back and forth between civil technology sectors, national defence institutions and the military. Alongside this the plan calls for supporting the usage of AI in national defence and security, including applications related to intelligent decision-making, training and simulation technologies, and the development of intelligent equipment and autonomous systems (Webster et al., 2017).

Following the policy initiatives, the PLA has adopted an approach consisting of three stages to progress towards military modernisation: mechanisation (large scale modernisation of weapons), informatisation (network-centric precision strikes), and now intelligentisation (AI-driven automation, data integration, and algorithmic decision-making). The party officially calls for the progress of these three stages through ambitious goals that aim at achieving modernisation of national defence and the armed forces by 2035 and transformation of the PLA into a world class force by 2049. The world class military objective aligns with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 2049 and serves as a key element of Xi's broader vision to achieve the "national rejuvenation" of China by that time.

In 2020, China established a development target to accelerate the integrated advancement of mechanisation, informatisation, and intelligentisation by 2027, the centennial year of the founding of the PLA (Hart et al., 2021). These timelines indicate that the PLA is following a gradual and planned process of modernisation that aims to prepare its forces for future conflicts.

The shift towards intelligentisation is also reflected by the establishment of the Information Support Force (ISF). On 19 April 2024, the PLA dissolved the SSF, which resulted in the creation of the ISF to strengthen information support and network-based warfare capabilities. Earlier, Xi Jinping had called for the PLA to make major progress toward informatisation by 2020 and to basically achieve mechanisation. However, China's 2019 defence white paper acknowledged that the PLA had not yet completed mechanisation and remained in urgent need of improving informationisation (Nouwens, 2024). The establishment of the ISF therefore suggests that the development of integrated information and communication capabilities remains an ongoing process. Through effective data management, battlefield communication, and information system coordination, the ISF intends to support AI-enabled operations and advance the PLA's broader transition toward intelligentised warfare.

China’s 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030) which was formally approved in March 2026 reinforces the shift of the PLA towards intelligentised warfare and accelerates the MCF. The plan emphasises development, integration and deployment of AI, unmanned and autonomous systems, counter-hypersonic and quantum sensing technologies (Estrada, 2026). The 15th five-year plan represents the consolidation of China’s well established modernisation efforts, where AI shifts from being one element in a broader reform agenda towards an increasingly central driving force for China to achieve its modernisation goals. The plan also reflects China’s steady focus on continuous AI development to support the achievement of 2027, 2035- and 2049-year modernisation targets.

Taken together, the developments reflect that the PLA is systematically moving towards intelligentised warfare through institutional reforms, strategic planning and modernisation targets.

3.4 Strategic Drivers for PLA’s AI Modernisation

The PLA’s accelerating shift towards AI should be understood as part of China’s wider military modernisation efforts. Instead of just a technological advancement, the adoption of AI is driven by both external security pressures and internal operational challenges.

According to the 2019 official white paper on *China’s National Defence in the New Era,* China’s military preparedness faces risks arising from rapid and unforeseen technological advances (Kania, 2020). The PLA's accelerated shift toward intelligentisation and AI-enabled warfare thus reflects not only an opportunity for modernisation but also a response to perceived strategic vulnerability and the risk of being at a position of disadvantage against technologically advanced adversaries. As other major powers increasingly adopt automation, data-driven systems, and autonomous technologies, the use of AI for PLA Modernisation can be considered as China’s national priority to remain competitive in future conflicts.

Modern battlefields generate a large amount of data through sensors, surveillance systems, and networked command structures. The volume and speed of incoming information can overwhelm human operators and can slow the decision-making process, creating a state of “analysis paralysis” (Glonek, 2024). With an increase in the number of information intensive military operations, the ability to quickly process data becomes as important as collecting it. Integration of AI thus becomes a strategic advantage for the PLA to manage complex data and enhance speed, accuracy and coordination of military operations.

Ongoing strategic tensions in regions such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and along the India-China border further require the PLA to be prepared for high-intensity, multi-domain conflicts. Potential flashpoints involving Taiwan, where external actors such as the United States may be involved highlight the requirement for quick decision making, information sharing and coordination. China's push towards intelligentised warfare is therefore closely linked to its goal of strengthening military capabilities by key milestones such as 2027 and achieving its overall military modernization goals by the middle of the century.

In addition to these external technological challenges, Chinese military leadership has also identified internal weaknesses in command performance that have encouraged the adoption of AI. For instance, the PLA media often calls "Five Incapables"**(五个不会)** as a long-standing challenge, highlighting difficulties among some PLA commanders in assessing battlefield situations, understanding the intentions of higher commanders, making timely operational decisions, deploying forces effectively, and responding to unexpected developments (Faint, 2025). Despite reforms and efforts to overcome this persistent challenge, it is adding complexity for China to achieve its modernisation milestones and become a world class army by 2049.

All these challenges explain why PLA is rapidly integrating AI for Modernisation.

3.5 Key Areas of AI Integration

3.5.1 Intelligent Command Systems

Intelligent Command Systems (ICS) are also referred to as AI-enabled Command and Control (C2) systems, and they represent PLA's effort to transform the decision-making from a human centered process to a data driven and automated system. By amalgamating a large amount of information from sensors, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and other open sources, these systems aim to provide commanders with an enhanced understanding of the battlefield, predictive analysis, battle simulations and support for decision making.

The development of AI-enabled command and control systems in China is supported by extensive military science and research institutes, and it shows that AI integration is a long-term strategic goal for the PLA rather than just experimental technological development. The National University of Defence Technology (NUDT) plays a central role in this effort through its Key Laboratory of Information Systems Engineering and works on improving and expanding the use of AI in the PLA's command and control systems. The National Defence University (NDU) conducts research on AI based war gaming and command information. Other civilian universities like Tsinghua University, Beihang University, and several defences related technical institutions provide their expertise in autonomy, human-machine teaming, providing algorithms and interfaces for intelligent command architectures (Kania, 2019). Together, they form a strong academic and research backbone to support China's effort to integrate AI across the command, decision making and operational structure.

The PLA's effort to link high resolution satellites, reconnaissance drones, ground sensors, and soldier-terminal data into a 'combat cloud brain' and its capability to merge and convert a large amount of data in real time to a precision grade accurate high-resolution holographic digital battlefield model, reflects China's transition from platform-centric warfare to networked and data-centric intelligentised warfare (Narang, 2025). By enabling the commanders to analyse the entire battlefield, the 'combat cloud brain' strengthens the ability of the PLA to easily monitor troop movements, identify targets, predict potential future threats, and assess operational conditions with an increased speed and precision than was previously possible. Its significance lies not only in improving situational awareness but also in reducing time required to make command decisions, allocate the forces and operationally adapt during a combat. This improves the PLA's ability to coordinate military operations across different domains and quickly adapt to changing battlefield situations. Through this level of speed and engagement the PLA can observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA) with minimal delay and eventually operate faster than adversaries. A faster PLA can shorten the time available for opponents to understand military movements or respond carefully during crises.

This development can be currently reflected in the GTCOM Battle Command system that forms a battlefield situation map in real time by connecting people, devices, environment, events and other factors in a scattered geographical area. It integrates multi-modal big data management technology and AI algorithms to provide smooth routes for the dispatch of mission related resources, simulate confrontations, help in the formation of the troops and allocate tasks (GTCOM, n.d.). Systems like GTCOM indicate how humans and AI can work together in military decision-making. AI assists in quickly handling large amounts of data, allowing commanders to make faster and better decisions. During a war or even a dispute, timely and accurate understanding of the complex battlefield provides strong support for the efficient operation of military exercises and is key for a decisive victory.

The smaller Chinese firms are constructively contributing to the PLA's intelligentisation efforts, reflecting the expanding extent of China's MCF strategy. To illustrate, U-Tenet has developed AI models and systems that assist in strategic decision making, operational planning, intelligence analysis and autonomous military operations. These systems include Tianji, described as a cloud-based decision-support platform; Tianwang, a data system that integrates intelligence from multiple sources for enhanced situational awareness; and Tianjian, an integrated battlefield intelligence coordination system (Graham & Singer, 2025). Chinese military reporters further claim that the Tianji model can incorporate real-time lessons from contemporary conflicts, including the war in Ukraine (Graham & Singer, 2025). The PLA is thus actively taking efforts to accelerate fast learning through AI assisted models. The Ukraine war has shown how drones, real-time intelligence, and data-based targeting can strongly influence battlefield outcomes. By embedding such battlefield data into AI systems, the PLA can study patterns, test different strategies and improve planning of military operations through simulations. Furthermore, the PLA has not fought a major war since 1979 and learning through AI models offers an opportunity to overcome this lack of recent combat experience through data-driven learning and predictive analysis.

Experimental developments within the PLA further indicate growing efforts to integrate AI into command decision-making processes. Laboratory based "AI commander" developed by the NDU are designed to participate in large scale joint operational simulations. The AI commander replicates human decision-making patterns and adapts through repeated virtual conflicts (Chen, 2024). These systems can allow the PLA to test strategies, analyse battlefield situations more quickly, and learn from simulated outcomes without relying entirely on human commanders. Since the PLA follows the principle that "the party commands the gun", so the absolute final authority will remain with CCP leaders, and the AI systems will just function as force multipliers for command efficiency under the party controlled human PLA commanders rather than independent decision makers.

Furthermore, in China's vision of future intelligentised warfare, command systems will act as an "extension of the human brain" where the "command brain" is connected to the human brain, allowing humans and machines to make decisions together (Masafumi, 2022). The fusion can change how military command systems work as machines are not assisting cognition from outside but are becoming a part of the cognitive process itself. In this situation, the commander does not consult the AI; the commander thinks through it. Hence, the decision making will become extremely faster and more integrated, as human judgment and machine analysis work together in real time. The change affects not only the effectiveness of the military but also fundamental ideas like responsibility, fairness in the use of force, and how much control humans have, which are key to the laws of armed conflict.

Across every layer of the command architecture - from real-time sensor fusion through the combat cloud brain, to battlefield mapping through GTCOM, to multi-source intelligence integration through U-Tenet's Tianji ecosystem a coherent pattern emerges. Instead of building separate technologies, the PLA is creating a unified system where human judgment and machine analysis work together at a speed and scale that humans alone cannot match.

3.5.2 Decision-Support Algorithms

AI-based decision-support systems are assisting the PLA to rapidly move towards intelligentised warfare by accelerating the speed of decision-making. These support systems can assist in accelerating the reach, precision and lethality of PLA's military operations, thereby increasing their chances of victory.

In December 2024, a Chinese state-owned defence research institute filed a patent application that proposed a military large language model (LLM) trained on multiple intelligence sources like open-source intelligence (OSINT), human intelligence (HUMINT), signals intelligence (SIGINT), geospatial intelligence (GEOINT), and technical intelligence (Dutta, 2025). By systematically finding patterns and connections that humans might overlook, this system reduces uncertainty and provides the PLA with depth and accuracy needed in a complex information environment to make informed decisions.

The development of autonomous AI decision-support systems by the PLA and NUDT represents more than technological development and signals a shift towards how military decisions are structured under conditions of uncertainty. The processing of real time battlefield data and prioritising important information, the system reduces the cognitive burden on commanders and enables them to make decisions approximately 43% faster while maintaining over 90% accuracy, even when communications are jammed (Dixit, 2026). However, faster decision-making should not be seen only as a clear operational advantage. It also increases reliance on AI systems in high-pressure situations, where there may be less time for human judgement and careful thinking. In addition, the system's ability to work even when communications are jammed suggests a change in how electronic warfare may develop. Instead of just blocking signals, opponents may try to interfere with or manipulate the data itself. Thus, controlling accurate information becomes more important than acting quickly. As a result, while this AI system can create advantage by improving the responsiveness of the PLA in contested areas such as coastal, maritime, and border regions, they also have the possibility to create new risks that could affect decision making.

The PLA's use of DeepSeek to analyse large volumes of intelligence data highlights a growing reliance on AI to support speed and accuracy in decision making. Deep Seek has a strong language capability and an ability to work with satellites, radars, and drones to improve reconnaissance by easy identification of targets and making useful assessments about them (Jian, 2025). This means the AI system can work effectively without needing very powerful and expensive computers. Because of this, it can be used on smaller devices closer to the battlefield instead of relying on large central data centres, which could be easily targeted and destroyed. However, DeepSeek is a commercial AI model developed within a state system, and it may still face technical risks such as misleading inputs and problems with data reliability. This is because AI systems may display algorithmic bias where output has the possibility of reflecting underlying biases in training data or model's design. This concern is supported by DeepSeek's disclosure that notes risk like hallucinations and misuse remain an "unavoidable" problem (Chow, 2025).

Beyond DeepSeek, the PLA's affiliated institutions are experimenting with other commercial Chinese models like Baidu's Ernie and iFlyTek's Spark. They convert large amounts of data from sensors into structured text descriptions (Chen, 2024). This reflects the PLA's growing interest in integrating commercial AI ecosystems into military training. The text descriptions can further be used to train perception and situational awareness systems. Baidu has denied affiliation or other partnership with the academic institution (Chen, 2024). This denial is significant as Chinese technological companies are aware of the risks of being openly connected to the military, especially due to international scrutiny and possible sanctions. Therefore, rather than showing that no relationship exists, such denials may suggest that the relationship is sensitive and more deeply embedded.

In addition to these developments, the PLA is also adapting other AI models for specialised intelligence roles. China's "Chat Bit" is an AI assistant that is designed using Meta's Llama 13B LLM and is modified for collecting intelligence information and processing it, thus allowing the PLA to make informed decisions during operations. However, the use of Llama for military applications is explicitly banned as per Meta's license (Pomfret & Pang, 2024). The reported use of Meta's Llama model in systems like "Chat Bit" despite restrictions on military use, reflects that such rules are difficult to enforce, especially for open-source AI. Once these models are publicly available, it is hard to prevent its usage for military purposes because there is almost no effective legal enforcement possible against powerful governments like China's. The system has also reportedly reached 90 % of the performance level of Open AI's GPT-4 LLM (Pomfret & Pang, 2024). With a performance this close to GPT-4, Chat Bit gives PLA an advantage to use advanced AI for intelligence analysis at a very large scale and in a continuous manner that won't cause fatigue. Adversaries who mainly rely on humans for analysis would find it extremely difficult to match this level of speed.

All these decision support algorithms are giving PLA a growing advantage over opponents that rely on human decisions. If the opponents fail to keep up with this AI progress, it will reflect not just their capability gap but also a cognitive gap where the speed of making decisions and processing the data becomes as important as the weapons themselves.

3.5.3 Surveillance and ISR- UAV Data Fusion in Border Monitoring

The PLA has increasingly developed an AI integrated Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) system architecture to strengthen monitoring along its contested borders. By combining satellites, drones, radars and sensors, the system can detect ships, aircrafts, missiles and troops. It can further track them in real time, identify what they are and where they are going and lastly, share this data instantly with the military. This improves situational awareness and response speed in border regions. However, the system is costly and complicated due to high research and development, complex integration of sensors, and maintenance expenses, suggesting a limit in its scalability and long-term sustainability.

A key component of this system is the use of satellite constellations such as the Jilin-1 constellation, operated by Chang Guang Satellite Technology (Defense Security Asia, 2026). It's use in monitoring the US-Iran conflict highlights how high-frequency earth observation enables continuous tracking of military activity. For instance, satellite imagery revealing the deployment of US F-22 fighter jets in Israel and Qatar demonstrates that the system can generate detailed insights about adversary's capability and movements (Defense Security Asia, 2026). However, the significance of this capability also reflects a shift towards AI enabled processing. The large number of images produced by large satellite constellations cannot be managed manually, making AI essential for detection of changes, identification of military targets and recognising patterns. So, the PLA now has an advantage to process and interpret data quickly. Although misinterpretation of data in military operations could lead to incorrect assessments and strategic disadvantage.

While satellites provide wide area coverage, UAVs offer a more detailed and close-range observation. The PLA's use of high-altitude UAVs such as the Guizhou WZ-7 Soaring Dragon allows for real-time ISR operations with longer surveillance time and reduced vulnerability to air defence systems. The conduct of UAV operations in collaboration with intelligence officers that are attached to air brigades allows for a faster interpretation and use of data near the battlefield (Kadidal, 2025). The system significantly shortens the time between detection and action, creating an advantage for modern warfare where speed matters the most. Additionally, the WZ-7's deployments across regions such as the Taiwan Strait and the India-China border demonstrates that it is not a future capability and is actively deployed at China's most strategic flashpoints (Tiwari, 2024). However, the capability also raises important concerns. Heavy reliance on UAV based real time intelligence may increase the risk of rapid escalation or unintended confrontations as quicker decisions will not allow verification and restraint.

AI's integration in UAV systems also allows the PLA to process multi source data in real time, improving how information is used on the battlefield. For instance, SFNet, an AI based image fusion model combines infrared and visible images collected by UAV sensors to produce clearer and more useful outputs (Hu et al., 2024). This improves accuracy of detection in complex environments such as border regions with poor visibility. Additionally, the use of an edge AI approach in the model through processors such as Lynxi KA200 enables real time processing of information directly on the UAV (Hu et al., 2024). This helps the UAVs to analyse data onboard without depending entirely on remote command centres. As a result, the responses are quicker and operational efficiency is improved.

In addition to satellite and UAV systems, the PLA is also developing integrated sensor platforms such as radar-video fusion systems. By combining radar detection with visual surveillance, these systems improve the ability to track targets in real time, including small and low-altitude objects like drones. This system has an advantage of precision vision, long distance and weather friendly applicability and it will allow the border troops to carry out tasks more efficiently (Sen, 2026). The use of such platforms indicates a move towards multi-sensor integration at the tactical level, where automated processing is important for the continuous flow of data. This further suggests the growing role of AI to enable faster detection, tracking and response in surveillance operations in border areas.

These developments indicate a strategy that goes beyond surveillance. The PLA is trying to remove delays caused by human involvement at every stage of intelligence work - from collecting data to analysing and identifying targets. Instead, it is using automated systems that can work continuously and much faster. However, there are still important limitations. During an actual conflict, adversaries may use electronic warfare, anti-satellite weapons, or counter-drone systems, which could disrupt these networks. While AI and networked systems provide significant advantages, they are not completely reliable in contested environments. If communication networks are disrupted or data flows are interrupted, the effectiveness of these systems can be reduced. This suggests that the PLA must still depend on resilient systems, backup capabilities, and human judgment during high-intensity conflicts.

3.5.4 Autonomous Systems

Military autonomous systems including AI-enabled drones, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) are transforming PLA's defence capabilities by replacing human control with AI for navigation and decision-making in tasks like surveillance, reconnaissance, and combat. This section examines how autonomous systems are being integrated into PLA operations and their implications for future warfare.

3.5.4.1 Drone swarm systems

Drone swarm systems are a significant part of AI-driven modernisation in the PLA and have changed the way modern warfare is fought. AI enabled drone swarms rely on a large number of low-cost drones that can autonomously operate together. In this model, losing some drones during an operation is expected and acceptable if the overall mission is achieved. This creates economic pressure on defenders, as countering the low-cost drones may require them to use expensive interceptor systems. Through AI integration, the PLA aims to improve scalability, operational flexibility and battlefield resilience for successful military operations.

The Atlas Swarm 2 platform reflects China's progress in autonomous systems. As a ground-based combat vehicle capable of carrying up to 48 fixed winged UAVs, with a separate command vehicle managing up to 96 drones within a single operational network, it enables coordinated large-scale operations. These drones can perform varied tasks like reconnaissance, electronic warfare, and strike missions and can operate as part of the coordinated “kill chain” from detection to strike. Their ability to autonomously re-assign tasks indicate the growing use of AI for task allocation and decision making (Khollam, 2026). The shift towards a more distributed and autonomous system with AI, augments the speed and scale of military operations while reducing the need for any direct human assistance. This will allow military operations to be conducted more quickly and efficiently.

Another example of China’s progress in autonomous systems is the ability to deploy large drone swarms that use limited human input. A South China Morning Post (SCMP) article indicated that a single soldier was able to control over 200 fixed wing UAVs, and each drone has intelligent algorithms that allow coordinated and autonomous military operations. These swarms can divide tasks among themselves, conduct reconnaissance, electronic warfare, and strike missions simultaneously (Wei, 2026). As per traditional military thinking, a human commander must always be involved to make key decisions. However, with advanced autonomous systems there is a limit to how much they can help, as human attention and decision-making capacity remains constrained. This indicates a fundamental shift in military warfare, where individual commanders no longer control individual systems but sets objectives and the AI coordinates and executes the operation at scale. China can use a very large number of drones with the involvement of only a few people and thus making operations cheaper, easier to manage and reducing the risk of losing soldiers.

In addition, the drones also have AI-driven anti jamming algorithms that enable them to continue operation in electronically contested environments where there is a risk of disruption in the communication and navigation systems. In such a difficult situation, the swarm can switch to autonomous mode and allow individual drones to plan flight paths and carry out missions independently (Wei, 2026). The modern drone swarms are no longer fully dependent on communication links. Even if signals are jammed, the mission can continue because drones can operate independently. In such a situation, the adversary must intercept and destroy individual drones kinetically, as electronic jamming alone is no longer sufficient to stop the swarm’s operation.

3.5.4.2 Unmanned Ground Vehicles (UGVs) and AI-enabled Ground Operations

A military parade was organized by the PLA in September 2024 showcasing a family of land-based unmanned systems operating under a common AI-enabled framework. Key platforms included the ZRY-222 tracked combat vehicle, the ZRZ100 armed UGV for reconnaissance and fire support, and the GPJ221 mine-clearing system that is designed to support assault operations (Narang, 2025). In addition, unmanned transport vehicles such as the CWB221 and robotic dogs were displayed for logistic support, including ammunition resupply and casualty evacuation (Narang, 2025). The display reflects a shift towards a more connected system, where AI helps coordinate different platforms across combat, engineering, and support roles. This suggests that AI is not only enhancing individual capabilities but is also restructuring the organisation of ground operations by enabling more integrated and coordinated battlefield functions.

This system-level integration is further reflected at the tactical level, particularly in how unmanned systems are used in high-risk environments such as urban warfare. An urban training exercise conducted by an armoured infantry unit of the 83rd group army, as displayed on CCTV footage, highlights the PLA's evolving use of small first-person view (FPV) controlled robots that are equipped with rocket launchers and are deployed ahead of ZBL-08 Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV) to test enemy positions, attack targets and weaken defences. The PLA soldiers can control them using goggles and game-pad style controllers for real time situational awareness (Miller, 2025). Given that urban terrain is one of the most challenging and costly environments for the armoured forces as there is limited visibility, narrow streets and a risk of surprise attacks. The deployment of FPV robots ahead addresses these obstacles as they can enter the kill zone first and navigate these environments, enter buildings, and draw fire. The rocket launchers can help them engage with the targets independently, which actively weakens the enemy's defence before the IFV even moves forward. Moreover, using goggles and gamepad controllers is important because soldiers can safely control robots from a distance, learn quickly, and see the battlefield in real time without putting themselves in danger. Exploration of this approach further accelerates the PLA's effort to reduce the risk of losing personnel during dangerous phases of assault.

Building on this, China has also evolved its military canine robots into intelligent wolf packs that operate through a shared sensing network which forms a collective brain, allowing the pack to autonomously collaborate and foster joint decision making. The pack can also integrate drones for cross domain military coordination and are adaptive in complex terrains. Each robot performs specialised roles that include reconnaissance, strike, and support and it shows AI-enabled task distribution. While the systems can autonomously identify targets, human approval is still required before engagement, indicating a controlled approach to autonomy (Zhen, 2026). This system avoids major errors by keeping humans involved and helps China appear responsible internationally, while still using advanced AI in its military. The whole pack can handle everything on its own- from reconnaissance and strikes to providing support without needing separate human teams. This means one wolf pack can replace multiple traditional military elements and therefore it enhances PLA's operational efficiency and reduces manpower requirements. Hence the battles could happen faster, be more dangerous for opponents and involve fewer risks for Chinese troops.

This capability is not only conceptual but is already being demonstrated in practice. CCTV footage showed the 76th Group Army conducting a coordinated attack drill with robot wolves participating in the operation (Baidu, 2026). Public footage of these drills signals China's technological superiority and readiness for unmanned competition in the future. It is a signal to the potential adversaries that China can conduct high risk operations with minimal human intervention.

3.5.4.3 Intelligent Missile Systems

AI is being integrated into advanced missile systems, particularly in the development of hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs). Machine learning techniques are used to optimise trajectory planning and enhance evasion techniques. In parallel, AI helps in increasing the identification of targets and providing accuracy in the precision of striking them (Agarkar, 2025). The combination of high speed, flexibility and accuracy gives China an advantage to carry out strikes that are quick and effective, even in challenging situations. This shifts the advantage towards attacking systems rather than being defensive, as these missiles are harder to stop. Adversaries need better detection techniques and defence systems to assess and address such immediate threats.

All the above developments indicate a shift towards a more distributed, data-driven, and semi-autonomous form of modern warfare, where the role of a human is moving from direct control to supervision, evaluation and decision oversight. However, the effectiveness of these systems will depend on their reliability in contested environments and the ability to balance autonomy with human judgment.

3.5.5 Cyber and Electronic Warfare

The PLA is developing AI tools to automatically detect cyber-attacks, make its communication networks stronger and harder to break, and improve its cyber warfare capabilities. The Cyberspace Force oversees the PLA's cyberwarfare, electronic warfare, information operations, and cyber espionage activities (Keller, 2025). With the use of AI, the PLA can process large volumes of data more quickly, identify targets faster, and improve the speed of operational planning. This suggests that AI is enabling a close integration between cyber and electronic warfare, allowing the PLA to conduct more coordinated and real-time operations across both domains. As a result, the PLA may gain advantage by disrupting adversary systems while protecting its own networks, increasing overall operational effectiveness in information and intelligentised warfare.

AI enabled bots are being used to find weaknesses in systems, test how secure they are, and automatically carry out cyber-attacks such as creating malware and stealing data (Agarkar, 2025). This gives PLA an advantage to disrupt communication and information systems of the adversary from the very start of a conflict, reduce their ability to respond effectively and shape the information environment in its favour.

In addition, a 2024 study by PLA researchers describes several soft-kill methods, including corrupting data, reversing systems, inserting hidden backdoors, and using adversarial attacks to interfere with machine learning models (Graham & Singer, 2025). This allows the PLA to enter and control the system of the adversary in advance, disrupt their communication and decision-making, and even use their own technology against them. By utilising all these methods together, PLA can cause major system failures and gain an advantage without using direct force.

Furthermore, these actions are hidden and technical, making it difficult to prove who is responsible and thus allowing the PLA to deny involvement.

Beyond cyber operations, China has significantly expanded its capabilities for electronic warfare through a network of electronic intelligence satellites that can track and analyse global radar and signal emissions. This is a real time and a space-based capability that enables the PLA to coordinate jamming and deception operations with high precision. With the integration of electronic, cyber, and space domains, China is developing an "electronic kill chain" that can disrupt sensors and decision-making systems of adversaries within minutes (Ojha, 2025). Such capabilities significantly expand the PLA's ability to continuously monitor and analyse systems of adversaries across multiple regions, allowing it to target them with precise jamming and deception operations. The combination of different warfare domains strengthens the PLA's ability to carry out coordinated attacks that disrupt communication, confuse sensors, and distort the adversary's understanding of the battlefield. As a result, the enemy may lose situational awareness and struggle to make decisions at the very start of a conflict. This quick disruption can give the PLA a short but an important advantage before the enemy can respond properly.

At the same time, the PLA has developed "cognitive electronic warfare," where automated systems can classify signals, detect threats, and deploy countermeasures without human intervention (Ojha, 2025). This level of autonomy can increase the response speed and effectiveness of operations in complex electromagnetic environments. However, removing human involvement also creates risks, because automated systems rely on data patterns and when presented with unclear signal, it may not fully understand context or intent. As a result, the system may respond wrongly or too quickly, which could lead to unintended escalation.

Overall, these developments indicate that the combination of AI, cyber operations, and electronic warfare in PLA Modernisation will create a major change in how wars may be initiated and controlled. A small cyber operation can achieve effects that would normally require expensive military force. Therefore, control of information and the electromagnetic domain are the most important factors in the early stages of war.

3.6 Limitations of AI

During the Israel-Gaza Conflict, the AI systems completely failed because they were trained on wrong scenarios. For instance, Israel used GPS spoofing on a large scale. This means they sent out fake GPS signals to hide the real locations of important assets. This tactic affected their own system as XTEND's autonomous drones became confused, losing positioning data and human interpreters had to step in (LEVATON, 2025). This demonstrates that electronic warfare tactics can disrupt military's own AI systems, especially when they depend heavily on external signals like GPS.

Building on this, many deep learning models lack transparency in the process of decision making. For instance, it is difficult for the operator to comprehend the specificity of AI recommendations. This is called the "Black Box" problem, and the opacity of a Black box model can hide cybersecurity risks, biases, privacy breaches and other issues (Kosinski, 2024). This creates overlapping dangers. The hidden bias in the training data can cause AI to misidentify civilians or attack wrong targets. Moreover, the inability to explain the process of decision-making holds no one legally accountable under the International Humanitarian Law. In the context of the PLA, where AI is being rapidly integrated into command-and-control systems with limited human oversight, this opacity becomes extremely concerning with increased risk of operational errors and legal challenges. However, the PLA could also use this lack of transparency as a strategic advantage to make fast decisions in war that others cannot fully understand or verify. This could give it an edge in conflicts, while making it harder for others to question or respond to those decisions.

In addition, many Generative AI tend to hallucinate and provide false, confidently stated answers. In a war, hallucinations can be dangerous because decisions are time sensitive and false information can mislead commanders or operators who rely on it for intelligence, targeting, or planning.

AI also struggles to adjust in real time to new situations beyond what it was trained to handle, and this can make their performance unreliable when placed in new or unexpected conditions.

These limitations collectively highlight that AI can significantly augment military capabilities, but its reliability remains constrained in warfare environments that are complex and unpredictable, where misinformation, lack of transparency and poor adaptability can have serious operational consequences.

Western Theatre Command

4.1 Overview and Strategic Significance

The PLA's WTC was established in May 2016 when China reorganised its seven former Military Regions - Shenyang, Beijing, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Lanzhou into five joint theatre commands. The WTC exercises operational authority over China's borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal and Myanmar. The west zone comprises more than half of China's land area, 22 percent of its population and more than one-third of China's land-based military (Ranade, 2016). This makes it the largest theatre command and gives China strategic depth, increased operational flexibility and better control over multiple border regions simultaneously.

The reorganisation merged the former Chengdu and Lanzhou Military Regions into a unified WTC, which is now responsible for overseeing military operations along the India-China border, including Tibet, Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. It is a powerful military formation which enhances joint planning and coordination of military operations. The Qinghai region in the West Zone made it easier and faster to send and deploy troops who are used to high altitudes into Tibet and Ladakh (Ranade, 2016). China can thus respond faster and maintain sustained pressure along the border more effectively.

The formations that are most important for India include the 76th Group Army and 77th Group Army (headquartered in Chengdu), the Tibet Military District (TMD) and the Xinjiang Military District (XMD), along with special high-altitude infantry and combined armed brigades that have been strengthened since 2017.

In April 2020, the WTC was operationally responsible for the intrusions in Ladakh and that activated the entire 4,057-km Line of Actual Control (LAC) (Ranade, 2025). This was followed by multiple confrontations including the Galwan Valley Clash on 15th June 2020 and a large build-up of troops on both sides along the border. This led to a long standoff and a heavily militarised situation, with tensions continuing despite several rounds of talks and partial disengagement. Beijing has not settled its border disputes with India and continues aggressive military activity along disputed border regions.

4.2 AI Applications in Western Theatre Command

The integration of AI into intelligent command systems, decision-support algorithms, ISR data fusion, autonomous platforms, cyber warfare, and smart logistics within the WTC is not just modernising the PLA but actively reshaping the military balance along the LAC. These capabilities compress the OODA loop, provide continuous monitoring, enable scalable low-risk operations and support sustained operations in high-altitude terrain. Since the 2020 border clash, the WTC has shifted from fragmented coordination to a more proactive, data driven approach that enables China to shape escalation dynamics and put forward a sustained pressure over the LAC.

4.2.1 Command and Control

After the Galwan Valley Clash of 2020, the PLA has strengthened how it manages and coordinates forces along the border. Earlier delays in the flow of information and decision making led to fragmented coordination between units. Now, forces in areas like Tibet and Xinjiang are kept in a much higher state of readiness and are supported by improved data sharing, situational awareness and integrated command systems. As a result, the PLA has become extremely responsive and organised.

This shift towards a faster and more integrated command and control is implemented through the WTC's Joint Operations Command Centre (JOCC) and it functions as the "smartest brain" responsible for planning and simulating battlefield scenarios (Saxena, 2024). JOCC provides a clear operational advantage to the PLA by allowing commanders to test different battlefield decisions in real time using updated information, rather than just relying solely on pre-planned estimates. Such capabilities are likely to shape how the PLA may operate in future border conflict. Through real-time data processing and integration, the delays caused by fragmented inputs will be reduced and the PLA can efficiently process, integrate data and make informed decisions.

Further evidence of this transformation can be seen in the development of a Joint Command Information System within the WTC. It is led by an officer and integrates separate service level systems into a single network, enabling the creation of a comprehensive situational picture (Lu, 2022). Everyone in the command can now see the same battlefield picture at the same time, making decisions faster and more coordinated.

Together, these developments will change the decision-making ability of the PLA by assisting them with real-time information sharing and unified situational awareness. Through AI integrated and data driven command systems, the modernised PLA will compress the response time along the LAC and hence act faster and more coherent in military operations.

4.2.2 ISR and Border Surveillance

The WTC operates in a region of high altitude, extreme weather conditions and limited visibility, which delays situational awareness, intelligence processing and decision making of the PLA along the India-China border. The PLA has thus prioritised integration of AI in ISR and border surveillance to overcome challenges like incomplete or delayed responses posed by immanent geographical constraints.

At an operational level, AI is changing ISR from relying on individual platforms to a more connected and data-driven system. The testing of advanced unmanned systems like the FH-95 drone series in Xinjiang in July 2022, reflects that AI enabled platforms are no longer limited to surveillance but have capability of electromagnetic jamming and armed reconnaissance (Saxena, 2024). This shift indicates that ISR within the WTC is no longer limited to collecting information. Instead, it can increasingly be used for observing and shaping the operational environment along the India-China border by disrupting communications, influencing the electromagnetic spectrum, and gathering intelligence simultaneously. Along the LAC, this can make it arduous for the Indian army to accurately assess the intent of the advanced systems and increase the chances of miscalculations, as the time to make quick decisions is reduced and uncertainty is increased.

The August 2023 testing of Chengdu GJ-2 armed reconnaissance drone in Xinjiang's Northwestern deserts further reinforced the shift towards multi-functional, AI enabled ISR systems. The GJ-2 reconnaissance drone is piloted by remote operators and has a capability of searching, detecting, identifying, tracking and attacking several targets in one mission (Saxena, 2024). This multi-functional ability reveals the depth of AI integration where operations can move from a traditional step by step process to parallel execution. Moreover, the synergy between human operators and AI will enable faster and adaptive operations as the AI can handle data analysis and the human operators can provide oversight and judgment.

Together the FH-95 and GJ-2 become an active part of combat by providing continuous surveillance and operational support. In a complex Himalayan terrain where delays are common, these AI enabled drones shorten the OODA cycle and increase PLA's responsiveness.

The integration of ground sensors has further magnified the intelligence capabilities of the PLA in WTC. In Tibet's Cona County the PLA has positioned electro-optical and infrared (EO/IR) surveillance systems capable of continuous 360-degree monitoring. These include both fixed "big eye" sensors and portable devices equipped with laser ranging capabilities. Importantly, the systems are networked and feed AI based analytics that operate 24/7 and thus enable continuous and autonomous threat detection and classification (Dominguez & Edwards, 2021). The predictive battlefield awareness increases accuracy in decision making by identifying repetitive patterns, creating evidence and providing actionable insights through continuous border monitoring. This increases the precision of surveillance and assessments of threats, allowing the PLA commanders to manage the sensitive borders more flexibly and efficiently.

Similarly, high altitude and long endurance platforms such as WZ-7 "Soaring Dragon" deployed at the Shigatse air base accelerates the PLA's ability to impact India's military communications and radio airwaves (Satam, 2022). Shigatse air base is located approximately 150 km from the Sikkim border, and it allows China to strengthen its operational reach in the Tibetan plateau. By leveraging capabilities of WZ-7 “Soaring Dragon”, China improves real time awareness, gains stronger control over information and enables faster response along the LAC.

AI has also facilitated integration across multiple domains, and this development is highly advantageous for a terrain where geographic and environmental constraints create challenges for data sharing and coordinated operations. Simulation exercises in the WTC have demonstrated that electromagnetic interference from adversary aircraft can reduce combat effectiveness. However, after the integration of air defence forces, different units were efficiently able to share battlefield information and it improved coordination and situational awareness (Prathiba, 2022). In this context, such integration is likely supported by advanced data processing and decision-making systems where AI is used to filter signals, manage data and improve response time. Once in effect, AI will compress the decision-making cycle and will allow the PLA to respond more rapidly.

Overall, the integration of AI within ISR and border surveillance in WTC is reshaping China’s border strategy from a manpower intensive to a proactive, strategic and data driven approach. Through cross domain integration, continuous monitoring and accelerated decision making, AI advances PLA’s ability to manage escalation, sustain pressure and respond quickly to emerging threats along the LAC.

4.2.3 Autonomous Systems Deployment

China is using autonomous systems such as stealth drones, drone swarms, and ground robots to change how warfare works in the difficult Himalayan terrain. Cliffs, rock formations, glacier cracks, and steep ridges along with low visibility causing cold climatic conditions limit conventional operations. AI-driven platforms provide new ways to enhance reach, speed, and flexibility.

The forward deployment of three GJ-11 Sharp Sword platforms to Shigatse for a semi- operational test reflects WTC’s transition from just experimental testing to an operational integration of stealth unmanned strike systems in the Himalayan region. These AI enabled low observable platforms give China an advantage to reduce India’s time to effectively detect and respond while establishing a capability of forward-based deep-strikes under high-altitude conditions (Defence Security Asia, 2025). Shigatse's location places the GJ-11 within a credible striking range of critical Indian military and dual-use infrastructure in Ladakh, including the Daulat Beg Oldie, Nyoma Advanced Landing Ground, and facilities around Leh. This reduces the advantage of distance, as key Indian bases are now closer to possible strikes. Furthermore, the stealth drones can maintain a constant and less visible presence, allowing China to activate them without any clear warning signs of escalation. Hence, it can become harder for India to predict and prepare for action.

At the same time, China is developing systems like the Atlas Swarm-2 ground-based launcher which has the capacity to fire up to 96 drones and send them together to attack a target within a range of 150 km (Northwest man, 2026). The AI enabled control assists the drones to coordinate their movement and targeting, making it harder for air-defence systems to stop them. The effectiveness of traditional defences can be reduced and with AI shortening the time between detection and strike, the WTC can carry out faster and more coordinated operations along the LAC. The usage of autonomous systems also reduces operational risk and cost, making it easier for China to exert pressure without using expensive and important assets.

To overcome challenges related to visibility and access, the PLA has deployed non-kinetic systems such as a robot dog with an acoustic dispersal device (Narang, 2026). This makes the PLA's combat system in the WTC more flexible and efficient as high-altitude areas (above 4,000-5,000 meters) make it very difficult for soldiers to operate because of low oxygen, quick fatigue, and extremely cold temperatures. Whereas a robot dog is not affected by these conditions and can keep operating for a longer duration through autonomous movement and balance. It can move across the steep slopes, narrow paths and rough terrain by adjusting its legs in real time. The PLA can send these robot dogs in areas blocked from normal view that Indian soldiers might use for hiding or defence. The acoustic output can produce disturbing sounds that can create ambiguity by testing reactions or directly forcing soldiers to reveal their position. This will allow China to put steady pressure along the LAC while avoiding a direct conflict.

The PLA is moving towards a layered and adaptive operational approach by deploying AI-enabled systems across air and ground domains. These technologies reduce dependence on human limitations, compress response times, and challenge traditional defence systems. The use of non-kinetic and semi-autonomous systems will strategically create uncertainty for India and give China an advantage to shape the operational environment on its own terms. The evolving use of autonomous systems is likely to make the operational environment more complex, unpredictable, and difficult to manage for India.

4.2.4 Smart Logistics in High Altitude

Logistics in the WTC of the PLA presents significant challenges that are primarily driven by the need to sustain military operations in extreme altitude, harsh weather and long supply distances across the Tibetan plateau. In response, the PLA has increasingly introduced AI based smart logistic systems to improve efficiency and responsiveness.

A key example is the "Xueyu" delivery app reportedly used by field units in Tibet Autonomous Region. This system allows the field units to submit supply requests through a centralised platform, which aggregates demands in real time and coordinates distribution based on priority and availability. The system then supports dispatch planning, allocation of resources such as trucks, aircraft and warehouse capacity across different military locations (Graham & Singer, 2025). Delay and small shortages of supplies can quickly stop military operations more than enemy attacks can. If a unit runs out of essentials like fuel, warm food, or medicine in extreme winter conditions, it cannot function properly. The Xueyu supports the PLA by reducing the delay and hence improves the battlefield efficiency by improving coordination and speed of supplies in the WTC.

However, the impact of such systems is best understood as enhancing existing capabilities rather than overcoming the structural constraints of high-altitude operations. Through smart logistics the PLA's ability to maintain a continuous presence is strengthened and operational readiness is enhanced.

Strategic Implications for India

The PLA gains an advantage through faster decision-making that is enabled by real-time data integration and AI-based analysis at its command centres and this also helps in overcoming the "Five Incapables." The architecture of the ISR system further assists China to continuously monitor and perform multiple tasks at the same time. The autonomous systems (swarms, stealth platforms, robotic units) provide resilience and multiplication of force with reduced need of manpower. Furthermore, the Smart logistics improve forward readiness by addressing challenges of distance and harsh weather conditions. The PLA has thus become capable of maintaining high readiness in high-altitude environments despite constraints related to the terrain.

Together, through these developments the PLA has a qualitative edge in information superiority, speed of command, greater effectiveness through human-machine coordination, and lower operational risk and cost. This further aligns with China's broader approach to intelligentised warfare, including Systems Destruction, and Multi-Domain Precision Warfare that enables the WTC to manage the LAC more effectively while keeping a sustained military pressure.

For India, this creates a growing operational asymmetry along the LAC. China's faster decision making and constant surveillance reduces India's reaction time, increasing the likelihood of responding rather than acting first in a crisis. The integration of AI across its systems helps it detect and respond to Indian movements quickly and shape the situation in its favour. While India has demonstrated AI-enabled capabilities in operational settings, but these are not yet fully integrated across all services at scale.

The most consequential gap is structural. India is still in transition toward integrated theatre commands, so the Army, Navy, and Air Force continue to operate through separate service command systems rather than a fully unified theatre system (Dutta, 2025). Against a Western Theatre Command that combines intelligence, targeting, logistics, and electronic warfare through AI-supported decision systems, India's fragmented command structure can lead to delays at a time when speed is critical.

The problem is reinforced by weak integration of ISR systems. While each service has developed AI-enabled surveillance and reconnaissance tools independently, integration into a fully combined single operational picture remains uneven. For instance, during Operation Sindoor, systems such as the Battlefield Surveillance System (Sanjay) integrated with Trinetra enabled real-time multi-sensor data fusion to create a common operational picture, while AI tools like Electronic Intelligence Collation and Analysis System (ECAS) achieved high accuracy in identifying electronic threats (Haider & Khan, 2025). This shows meaningful progress from experimentation to operational use but also indicates that integration is in the process of institutionalisation rather than consistently implemented across all commands and domains. Without this integration, AI systems cannot effectively connect and analyse information from different sources. As a result, India will find it difficult to convert satellites, drones, and signals intelligence into continuous real-time awareness at the pace the PLA has achieved with a more integrated ISR architecture.

Furthermore, the use of multiple AI applications, including real-time weather forecasting systems such as Anuman 2.0 and AI-enabled drones for continuous data feeds, further demonstrates India's growing ability to deploy AI in active military operations (Haider & Khan, 2025). The gap is that these capabilities remain used for specific operations and not yet across the entire military system. The PLA in WTC integrates AI command systems that combine satellites, drones, ground sensors, and soldier-terminal data into one combat-cloud picture, compressing response time and improving unified situational awareness. So, China still holds the advantage in persistence, scale and coordination.

In the EW domain, India's approach has historically been more reactive and limited to specific platforms. However, India is improving it by building a joint architecture and scalable EW ecosystem needed to compete at the same level (Press Information Bureau, 2024). In contrast, PLA uses AI integrated systems that can manage signals, carry out jamming, and deceive communications much faster. This can create a gap in speed and effectiveness of operations in the EW domain. The PLA has a first-mover advantage through AI-enabled EW, but India's ongoing integration could limit this over time.

At the core of these challenges is a gap in data processing, computing capacity and skilled personnel. India has approximately 38,000 GPUs for AI-related applications, which is significantly lower compared to China's scale (Joshi, 2026). In military use, this limits the ability to process large volumes of data, train advanced models, and support real-time decision-making across domains. In addition, the military has only recently begun focusing on developing technological skills of personnel, with plans announced in 2025 to induct specialists in emerging technologies through the Army Knowledge and Enablers Corps (Marathe & Giri, 2025). Despite the steps of active progress, India is still in the process of developing the human capacity that the PLA has already put into operation.

Taken together, these gaps may place India at a relative disadvantage in both decision-making and response time during a military operation along the LAC, increasing the likelihood of reacting to situations shaped by the PLA rather than influencing them from the outset.

Policy Recommendations

First, India must accelerate the transition towards integrated theatre commands. Without a unified command structure, AI enabled systems will not be able to deliver full operational value, as data and decisions would remain fragmented across services. Institutional reforms that enable joint planning, shared data, and unified decision-making are therefore essential for battlefield advantage.

Second, India should prioritise tri-service ISR integration. India should move towards a persistent, real time common operational picture across all domains. This requires investment not only in platforms, but also in data-sharing architectures, secure communication networks and interoperability standards.

Third, AI enabled electronic warfare and spectrum management capabilities must be strengthened as the PLA uses AI for adaptive jamming, signal control, and spectrum dominance. India must expand initiatives such as joint EW frameworks and AI-driven spectrum systems to ensure that AI enabled operations remain functional in contested electromagnetic environments.

Fourth, India should address gaps in data, computing infrastructure and human capital to determine the effectiveness of AI enabled operations in the future. Recent measures towards inducting technology specialists are important but require scaling and long-term institutional support.

Finally, India should focus on operationalising AI at scale and moving from successful use in specific military operations to consistent application across the force. This includes development of a doctrine for coordinated use of autonomous systems, improving logistics integration, and ensuring that AI-enabled decision-support systems are embedded within routine command processes. India must also develop an AI doctrine for border warfare that defines how AI will be used under contested conditions, where human decisions remain central and there is continuity of operations when communications, sensors, or networks are degraded.

Overall, India should transform AI from emerging capabilities into a fully integrated military system as the balance along the LAC will increasingly depend on speed, coordination, and sustained information advantage rather than numbers alone. This will further help India remain effective, relevant and operationally capable while facing disruption, escalation or technological pressure from China.

Conclusion

7.1 Key findings

China is making unrelenting progress in modernising its PLA where AI is no longer a peripheral supporting tool but is being embedded across command systems, ISR, autonomous systems, EW platform and smart logistics to quickly combine data, make decisions, shorten response times and coordinate operations across different domains.

In the WTC, these capabilities are significant because they support persistent surveillance, integrated battlefield awareness, and sustained pressure along the LAC, while lowering operational risk and cost for China.

At the same time, AI remains limited to constraints like network vulnerability, contested electromagnetic environments, data quality issues, and the continued need for human oversight in high-intensity conflict.

7.2 Future Warfare Trends

Future warfare will become data centric, faster and more distributed with combat cloud brains, multi sensor fusion, drone swarms, autonomous ground and air systems and AI enabled electronic warfare increasingly shaping the battlefield. China also places a stronger emphasis on joint operations, grey-zone tactics, and deterrence which suggests that the next era of warfare will be multidimensional and highly technological. The role of humans will shift towards supervision and judgement, while the machine-based systems detect, analyse and coordinate with speed.

This points to future operations that are more non-kinetic, more ambiguous, and harder to attribute, especially in the information and electromagnetic domains.

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