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'XI JINPING'S UPGRADING OF THE PLA AND IMPLICATION FOR INDIA'

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China's perception of its external environs has been changing incrementally since Xi Jinping took over as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and China's President, in 2012. Recent descriptions in official documents and statements by Chinese leaders reveal growing concern that China's external environment is becoming unpredictable and no longer as peaceful as earlier. India has begun to figure in these statements. The changing perception, which coincides with Xi Jinping's declared ambition of making China a strong and powerful nation, will shape the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s preparedness.

2. A commentary in the official PLA Daily (January 13) by Chen Hanghui of the PLA Nanjing Army Command College, anticipated that "the military game of great powers will become more intense" in 2022. It said "major powers such as Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and India have accelerated their military transformation, focusing on key areas to enhance their "high-end warfare" capabilities." Notable is the inclusion of India as one of the countries that the PLA is paying attention to. While the US, Russia, Japan and, to a lesser extent France and Germany were the focus of the commentary, it mentioned that India "will continue to promote the actual combat deployment of its first domestic aircraft carrier". It added that "The militaries of France, the United Kingdom, India and other countries have also strengthened research on artificial intelligence technology, trying to apply this technology more widely in the fields of intelligence reconnaissance, auxiliary decision-making and network security".

3. Chinese military commentators have similarly stressed that the risks to China's security are growing as it comes under pressure from a number of countries. Chinese military commentator Liu Yantong said "Right now, we are facing the threat of war. The army needs to be urgently aware that a war may happen overnight ... We should be fully prepared and combat ready at all times". Zhou Chenming, a researcher from Beijing's Yuan Wang Military Science and Technology Think Tank, said "the country's overseas interests are expanding, with major security threats coming from the sea, then the air, and even the cyber world".

4. These concerns were reflected in the report titled 'Current Situation in the Building and Development of China's Border and Coastal Defense' by Ouyang Wei, a border affairs expert and retired PLA Senior Colonel of the National Defence University. Posted on the official website of the ostensibly private Grandview Institution on October 12, it said China faces "increasingly serious challenges at its land and sea borders on almost every side and must

urgently reinforce its defences in these regions". Ouyang Wei assessed that "China was facing encroachment, secession and terrorism in some border areas".

5. He specifically referred to India and indicated that the present military tension is unlikely to ease for quite some time. He said "India takes China as a strategic contestant and adopts an approach of "defending the north and advancing eastward"." He added that India had deployed large numbers of forces against China in the disputed land border areas, "intensifying its encroachment on China's territory". He anticipated that clashes could occur, but would not damage the overall stability of the border. Ouyang Wei noted that India had increased its Navy budget and implemented the "Act East Policy" to push into the Pacific Ocean and, together with the United States, Japan and Australia, is monitoring and preventing China from expanding into the Indian Ocean. He concluded that "the possibility of intervention by the major powers from outside the region is on the increase".

6. The changing Chinese perceptions make the extensive military reforms more relevant for India as is the attention paid by Xi Jinping to the People's Liberation Army (PLA). China's official media regularly publicises Xi's visits to PLA establishments and units during his visits to provinces and cities outside Beijing and attendance at major military conferences. Xi has been monitoring the progress of professionalisation and modernisation in the PLA with special focus on making it a hi-tech scientific force with a thrust on the application and use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Preparing for war under realistic battle conditions is now routine in PLA training exercises.

7. The PLA Daily (November 1) publicised that Xi Jinping had signed a new set of regulations on military equipment procurement, focusing on war preparedness and combat capabilities, to facilitate rapid acquisition of the best weapons and equipment most needed on future battlefields.

8. Pointing to the likelihood of more military reforms, a book of commentaries published by the CCP's official newspaper People's Daily in mid-November mentioned the existence of structural problems. Military commentator Zhong Xin was quoted saying "The military's command system is not systematic, the army's structure is not sound enough, and the policy system lags, seriously limiting the PLA's defensive operations. If these problems are not resolved, plans to build a world-class modern military are just empty talk."

9. Meanwhile, there are indications that the PLA plans to modify and upgrade training programmes as well as improve its policy regarding the placement of soldiers. The PLA Daily (November 28) disclosed that Battalions face the problem of finding the appropriate jobs for recruits, or slotting the right person in the right job. It observed that this had become more important with the rapid development of military weaponry and equipment technology, the increasingly complex system, the increasing degree of knowledge intensiveness, and the increasingly higher requirements for specialised posts. A growing percentage of recruits in recent years are technically qualified or college graduates and this would relate to their job assignment. Other articles in the PLA Daily have referred to 'adjustment' and discipline problems with the younger recruits, many of who are graduates or generally better educated.

10. The Central Military Commission's Order No. 1 of 2022 signed by Xi Jinping on January 4 and which is a Training and Mobilisation order, emphasises training and requires the entire Army "to comprehensively promote the transformation and upgrading of military training, and to train elite soldiers who can fight well." It specifies that these "elite soldiers must be trained and toughened during the winters". A Commentator's article in the PLA Daily (January 5) explained that the Central Military Commission's Order "sounded the clarion call of the times for military training and preparation for war". Introducing a sense of urgency, it quoted Xi's remark that "In today's world, power politics and the "law of the jungle" still prevail, and various foreseeable and unforeseen risks and challenges have increased significantly, and the danger of war is a reality."

11. The mention of "elite soldiers" in the Mobilisation Order is new and suggests not only specialised training and equipment for such soldiers but also a specific, and as yet undisclosed, role. The instruction that they "must be trained and toughened during the winters" implies they will probably be deployed in the PLA Western Theatre Command along the border with India. Viewed in the backdrop of earlier reports that the authorities were stepping up recruitment of Mongolians from the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region for posting in the high altitude Tibetan Plateau, the instruction also appears to hint that the adaptability and performance of troops already deployed on the borders needs to be improved.

12. Alongside the intensified training programmes, Xi is paying attention to the salary and allowances of serving soldiers and the living conditions of the 56 million retired soldiers and veterans. The Chinese leadership is aware that dissatisfaction among the latter could spill over into the PLA. On January 4, in addition to the regular pay hikes, China's Ministry of Veterans Affairs issued the "Measures for Retired Soldiers' Monthly Retirement Payments and Resettlement Measures". This introduced a new system for the placement of retired soldiers and a monthly payment of pensions together with other measures to give them "respect" in society.

13. The PLA's task is spelt out in the Chinese Defence White Paper, 2019 which, for the first time, states that China is "the only major country yet to be completely reunified", thereby confirming that reunification is a political and military aspiration. In this context, the interview by retired PLA Col Liu Mingfu to Asahi Shimbun in May 2019 is especially relevant for India. Asked about China's territorial ambitions and what its limits would be, Liu Mingfu replied that the map used by "the current Chinese government is the clear standard for national sovereignty and territory". The reference to current Chinese government maps implies Chinese ambitions in the East Sea or Sea of Japan, the Senkaku Islands or Diaoyu Islands, South China Sea, Taiwan, and India's Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and Arunachal Pradesh. He also hinted at the possible use of force, probably in the context of Taiwan, by stating that "as time passes, the gap in national power with China will become less for the US".

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