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Panel II: China Military Modernization

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Panel II: China Military Modernization

Chair: Jean-Pierre Cabestan, professor at Hong Kong Baptist University and Associate Research Fellow at Asia Centre.

First speaker: Prashant Kumar Singh, Associate Fellow at the East Asia Centre, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA).

Second speaker: Antoine Bondaz, Associate Fellow at Asia Centre and Sciences Po

Discussant: Srikanth Kondapalli, professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Associate Research Fellow, Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi

Prashant Kumar Singh proposed an Indian view on China's Grand Strategy and Military Doctrine.

A "Grand Strategy" refers to a state's ultimate objectives and core interests in the international system, and to the methods to achieve them. While a "Grand Strategy" is a long-term vision that doesn't need to be formally articulated, we can see an evolution of Chinese Grand Strategy since the Mao era. Mao's priority on the reconstruction of socialism has been followed by a period of institutionalization and stabilization of political power under Deng Xiaoping, then a focus on the restoration of China's international reputation under Jiang Zemin, until Hu Jintao's adoption of his so-called "harmonious strategy".

But since 2011, we have seen a clearer formulation of China's core interests, identified by the former State counsellor for external relations Dai Bingguo as being (1) China's political stability and the CCP leadership (2) Sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unification (3) China's sustainable economic and social development. This was followed by the formulation of Xi's Chinese Dream of "The Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" involving a whole redesign of both domestic politics and foreign policy. At the international level, Xi's government is expressing firmer positions, challenging the US' leadership position and giving the priority to the defence of "Chinese rights" over the preservation of peace. To implement this Grand Strategy, Xi Jinping intends to strengthen China's muscles in the fields of domestic politics, finance, diplomacy and defence.

As far as the PLA is concerned, Chinese strategy has evolved from a rather defensive strategy and protracted stalemate under Mao, progressively shifting to a more offensive and "quick battle and quick resolution" of local wars approach during the following periods. Xi Jinping's military doctrine can be seen as the most advanced stage of a long-term transition, except that we see also a new focus on strategic initiatives, on informationised war and on long-distance naval capabilities. More importantly, Xi's government has reasserted the CCP's political control over the military, on which it had weakened its grip during Jiang and Hu's eras. This has been materialized by the reorganization of the Four General Departments (Staff, Political, Logistics and Armaments Departments) into fifteen departments, commissions and offices and the overhaul

of the seven military regions into five theatres. In addition, Xi Jinping has created three new services (Ground Force, Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force), all with the perspective of weakening the traditional PLA headquarters and placing his henchmen at the top of the military.

India does not seem to have more than an incidental place in Xi Jinping's Grand Strategy and India-China relations have never been characterised by significant ideological wars. Peace, stability and cooperation between the two countries have remained a strategic choice rather than a wilful one. However, some hot local issues remain quite sensitive: the boundary dispute (on the West and the East zones), Chinese suspicion of India's role in Tibet and its apprehensions towards a rapprochement between India and the US, and India's worries about non-transparent aspects of China-Pakistan relations.

To avoid any war with China, Prashant Kumar Singh suggests India uses a combination of skilled diplomacy and enhanced military capabilities as well as maintains its commitment for the liberal and rule-based world order along with a prudent engagement with China in the region (for anti-terrorist actions for instance). But above all, India should master the art of asymmetrical warfare across the political, diplomatic and military spectrum, so as to pursue the establishment of a new "India-China Zone of Smart Diplomacy" and eventually, the creation of a "New Indo-China".

Antoine Bondaz focused his presentation on the growing CCP control of the PLA, stressing that military modernization is not just about infrastructures but also about ideology. As suggested by Prashant Kumar Singh, we are witnessing today a return to an "army of the Party" model like under Mao, challenging the model of an "army of the State".

Xi Jinping gave a strong symbolic signal of his intention to strengthen the CCP's grip over the PLA, by holding the 2014 military political work conference in Gutian, a former revolutionary base where Mao had first laid down in 1929 the doctrine that the PLA is the armed force of the CCP and not the government¹. Actually, the Chinese military system under Xi Jinping is experiencing the most far-reaching restructuring of the PLA in its history.

The Chinese military system can be defined by two characteristics. The first one is a decision-making process characterised by a dual-processual fragmentation between a myriad of bodies and actors, in the state and within the Party. The foreign policy process is more plural, with the proliferation of influential foreign policy players and a "fractured authority" (Linda Jakobson) in foreign policy formulation. At the same time, the system displays a two-level concentration of power under Xi Jinping's administration. The president has ensured that the CCP institutions keep a central position, all the more when it comes to strategic issues. On the top of this structure, Xi Jinping has become the China's

1- During the Gutian Congress of 1929, Mao condemned two "incorrect" pervading views in the military. The first one was the belief that "military affairs have a leading position over politics", while the second was the idea that the task of the Red Army is "merely to fight" instead of serving as "an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution".

“chairman of everything”². The General Secretary of the CCP is not only in charge of all foreign policy related decision-making bodies (excepted for the OBOR commission), he is also leader of 7 out of 18 “leading small groups” (LSGs) of the CCP Central Committee. The need for reforms of the military system was therefore driven by Xi Jinping’s intention to enhance political control over the country’s main institutions. This modernization-reorganization took place in three stages:

(1) The first step was the implementation of new institutions and conceptual tools to shape the environment to reform. This started no later than the 18th CCP Congress in 2012, with a considerable personnel reshuffle in the PLA: among the 91 highest military leaders within the PLA, 57 were then newcomers. The renewal also affected the PLA Air Force (91% of newcomers), the Navy (82%) and the top-three PLA Academies (71%). Xi Jinping developed at the same time the concept of “overall national security outlook” (总体国家安全观), comparable to the idea of comprehensive national power.

(2) This was followed by an incremental evolution of the military doctrine to better serve Chinese expanding interests. In the 2015 White Paper on *China’s Military Strategy*, a specific attention is given to the safeguard of the country’s maritime rights, the development of joint naval and aerospace operations, and other illustrations of the elaboration of an “integrated strategic deterrence”.

(3) The last step of the reform was a complete reorganization of the army to better serve the rule of the party and the updated doctrine. This is the objective of the December 2015 reorganisation, that launched the creation of a “joint operations command system” under the superintendence of the new title of “Commander in chief” (bound to Xi Jinping), and the replacement of the Four Generals who have lost a significant part of their autonomy and prerogatives.

The next step of the military system reform is aimed at better integrating civil and military activities while keeping the objective of a more pervasive control of the Party over the army. This is exemplified by the new law on National Defence Transport adopted in September 2016 by China’s Parliament, a law that involves the establishment of a national authority to command the network, along with local authorities and military bodies.

In the draft outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), the concepts of “national security system with Chinese characteristics” and of “general national security” have been sketched. This is a reminder that the first mission of the Chinese armed forces is to “resolutely uphold the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system with Chinese characteristics”.

2- Expression used by Geremie Barmé, an Australian academic, who contributed to a collection of essays on China under Xi Jinping, called *China Story Yearbook 2014: Shared Destiny*.



Discussion

Srikanth Kondapalli has underlined that China’s military modernization has to be examined at a broader strategic level, since it has crucial consequences for foreign countries. Xi Jinping’s mention of a “new type of major power relations” with the US in February 2012 displayed an evolution of China’s view of the international power hierarchy. China’s definition of a “major power” has nothing to do with economic matters or a GDP-based definition, since it applies to Europe and Russia but excludes Japan, India or any other Asian country. China’s departure from a low profile foreign policy to a proactive diplomacy at the regional and at the global level is the evidence that it wants to move ahead.

Even though India is never mentioned in China’s white papers, India has been indirectly affected by China’s military modernization, through the provision of nuclear technology, training and expertise to Pakistan. Pakistan’s medium-range ballistic missiles are now constraining India from undertaking anti-terrorist actions in the region and the China-Pakistan military organization becoming closer is a real threat for India. On this aspect, it is up to the US, Europe and France to closely monitor the range of military technologies Pakistan wants to get on the long term. In South Asia, India is concerned by China’s strategy of industrial investments. Through considerable investments in the energy and in the telecommunications sectors, China is intruding on India’s sphere since the monitoring of these industries is linked to the Chinese SOEs and the PLA.

Last but not least, China’s soft power should not be neglected, as the Tibet issue, involving a symbolic figure of international renown (the Dalai Lama) tends to give more importance to the ideological aspects of the conflict. In addition, India’s current Prime Minister is raising afresh the notion of democracy as far as the India-Pakistan conflict is concerned, so we see that ideological aspects are revived in the China-India relationship as well. This is where Europe could represent an interesting alternative to China at the regional level, offering to combine simultaneously modernization and democratization of institutions.

When comparing China and India military capabilities, **Srikanth Kondapalli** estimates that China has a quantitative superiority over India (1.8 million troops compared with 1.1 million for India), but that the two countries match up in qualitative terms since the recent modernization of India’s military (their IRBMs have comparable range and damage potential).

This report has been prepared by Margot de Groot van Emden, Junior Fellow at Asia Centre.