

Understanding PLA reforms by Loro Horta

Loro Horta (lorohorta@yahoo.com) is a senior diplomat based in Beijing. He is also a graduate of the Peoples Liberation Army National Defence University senior officers course, the US Naval Post Graduate School and the American National Defense University. The views expressed here are strictly his own.

During the massive military parade held Sept. 3 to mark the 70th anniversary of the defeat of Japan in World War II, Xi announced that major military reforms would soon be carried out, including the reduction of 300,000 personnel. In the following months reforms were announced, including consolidation of the current seven military regions into four strategic zones, which suggests that the PLA will abandon its Soviet structure in favor of one similar to that of the US. Last year, major reforms were announced concerning military discipline and China's military industries. Chinese state media has been replete with articles reporting resistance from the military to the reforms. The fact that state-controlled media has reported this dissatisfaction suggests significant resistance from the PLA. Why is Xi so determined to carry out these reforms?

Articles on the growing capabilities and expansion of the Peoples Liberation Army could fill a library. Balanced and objective analyses of the military, especially its human dimension, are far less common. Ideology, cultural bias, and institutional interests often preclude objective analysis of China's capabilities. While the PLA has achieved significant technological advances in areas like missiles, space, cyberwarfare, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), its military industrial complex remains rather primitive when compared to that of the US or even Japan.

The failure of Chinese military industries to produce advanced weapons is demonstrated by its recent acquisitions of Russian weapons. This year China purchased 35 SU-35 fighter jets from Russia, a testimony to the limits of its own aviation sector. China's much-publicized stealth aircraft, the J-31, is reported to have serious deficiencies. A video from a 2014 airshow showed thick black smoke coming from the plane's exhaust nozzles. Many observers, including some Chinese, doubt the efficiency of the J-31's anti-radar coating. China has also been lobbying hard to buy *Lada*-class submarines from a reluctant Russia. Not surprisingly, changes to military industries and a rationalization of investment in R&D are top priorities of the current round of reforms.

A less visible problem for China is the poor state of its organizational structure, human resources, training, and morale. Weapons are only as effective as the personnel who use them. A scathing report published last year by the Chinese military concluded that PLA exercises were outdated and did not meet the requirements of modern wars. While the PLA has

been acquiring advanced systems, an outdated training system puts into question its ability to integrate these systems and operate them in high tempo intensive operations in sea, air, land, and cyberspace. While significant progress has been made in modernizing curriculums at Chinese military educational institutions, serious problems persist. The poor quality of training and education of the Chinese military is a reflection of the wider crisis of the Chinese national education system. With very few exceptions, standards at Chinese universities remain modest. A military is the reflection of the strengths and weaknesses of its society and the PLA is no exception.

The PLA's doctrine and command structure is also outdated and cumbersome. To this day, it does not have a joint command structure. The seven military regions are autonomous and in wartime would be unable to tap the resources of other regions. For instance, a Taiwan contingency would be the responsibility of the Nanjing military region. While resources can be allocated from other regions, there is no unified command structure to facilitate the allocation process. Coordination between the Navy, Air Force, and Army remains rudimentary and has been acknowledged by several official reports.

In 2015, President Xi's nationwide anti-corruption campaign turned its focus to the PLA. While many observers have dismissed the campaign as an old-fashioned communist purge, the issue is more complex, particularly in the case of the PLA. The assertion that Xi is using the campaign to eliminate PLA officers not loyal to him is an oversimplification. As early as the mid-1980s, Deng Xiaoping criticized the corruption and incompetence of the PLA. The fact is that China's military faces a serious problem with corruption and mismanagement. The overwhelming majority of generals and other senior officers arrested in the anti-corruption campaign are primarily from logistics, administration, engineering, and research organizations, areas with more opportunities for corruption. It is hard to imagine generals working in logistics taking power. The important commands for the protection of political power are the military area commands, and these have remained largely unaffected by the campaign.

The cancer of corruption in the PLA threatens to undermine its efficiency as a fighting force. Several generals have been arrested on charges of selling military promotions. The extent of the practice is hard to ascertain. However, the large numbers of senior officers allegedly involved suggests that it is widespread. This puts the ability of the PLA to fight into question.

The competence, reliability, and discipline of the Chinese military are being challenged at a time when regional tensions are on the rise. China's relations with a militarily advanced

Japan remain tense and the US has challenged territorial China's claims in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, several Southeast Asian countries are modernizing their forces as a result of apprehensions about Chinese intentions in the region. China's deteriorating external security environment makes reform urgent. In late November, Xi announced that reforms will begin in December and that no more time would be wasted.

China is aware of the consequences of corruption and mismanagement in a military. During the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Navy was as advanced as the Japanese Imperial Navy and had more ships. However, corruption, incompetence, and low morale were seen as the cause of a humiliating defeat and the loss of Taiwan. Technology alone could not save China.

While the PLA Navy (PLAN) is larger than its Japanese counterpart, Japan enjoys significant technological superiority. The training and professionalism of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Forces personnel is far superior to that of the PLAN. Xi and the Chinese leadership are well aware of these facts. The current reforms are motivated by an urgent need to improve the human resources and moral fiber of the PLA. It's risky for China to embark on a more assertive posture in the region while having such a problematic military. Ultimately, the effectiveness and efficiency of even the most advanced weapons systems is only as good as the personnel who operate and maintain them. President Xi faces enormous resistance from the PLA particularly the land forces. It remains to be seen whether he can bring meaningful change.

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