



Roundtable Discussion on Select Defence and Security Issues in China

Speakers: Lt. General SL Narasimhan and Mr. Jayadeva Ranade

Chair: Mr. Ashok K Kantha

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Conference Room, ICWA, Sapru House

The roundtable discussion began with a few opening remarks by the Chair on the current reforms and changes in Chinese defence which is being implemented in China under Xi Jinping. Following his statement the first speaker, Lt. General SL Narasimhan, went into further detail and spoke about China's military transformation and its implications for India. The military reforms which were announced on November 2015 have been a topic of interest and discussion among China analysts. While most analysts believe that these reforms have been announced by President Xi Jinping to tighten his control over the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the speaker believes that these reforms were in fact handed over to Xi from the previous leadership and he has only carried these forward.

The speaker went on to explain that the present reforms for the modernization of the military commenced in 2006, as explicated in the White Paper published on China's national defence, showed a three-step development strategy of 2010, 2020 and 2050. At the moment China was in its second phase. The second phase, which ends in 2020, strives to complete military mechanization and to make major progress in full military IT application. Hu Jintao's work report to the 18th Party Congress highlights the advance reforms of China's national defence and armed forces. The speaker believed that this report was then passed on to Xi Jinping. With every change in leadership in China, there have been doctrinal changes which have been followed by reforms in the PLA, either in the form of reduction of military regions or

the reduction in strength of the military. Xi's doctrinal changes have been given in China's Defence White Paper 2015 and broadly cover three main points; to effectively secure China's oversea interests, to safeguard China's security interests in new domains and, to maintain regional and world peace. While earlier the philosophy of these military reforms was considered to be 'focusing on home territory and the periphery', it is now considered to be 'focusing on home territory and expeditionary capabilities'.

The main objectives of the PLA reforms were; to make PLA modern and 'informationised', to carry out joint operations, to make it capable of conducting military operations other than war, act as a strategic deterrent, to constrain decisions of potential adversaries, to place all services on a more even footing and to rein in corruption in the PLA. The transformation in the PLA was in six main areas; transformation of higher defence organisations, creation of PLA headquarters, reorganising military regions into theatre commands, creation of PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), creation of PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) and reduction of 300,000 people. While expanding on these transformations, the speaker explains that there will be five new theatre commands, namely, Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern and Central Commands. An interesting observation is that despite the large area of the Western Command, the new reforms reduced the troops by fifty per cent. The PLASSF included two areas; space operations and, information warfare including psychological operations, cyber and electronic warfare. The speaker stated that the PLASSF will be the battle winning force for China in the future.

The positive aspects of the PLA reforms for China were that they will achieve enhanced 'jointness' (cross-service cooperation), it optimized organisational structures for combat and ensured information dominance using the PLASSF. The challenges to the reform, however, were that there will be an increase in centralisation and standardization which might lead to an incompatibility between the PLA's present operational doctrine and the proposed organizational culture. The speaker concluded by giving us the implications of the Chinese military reforms on India. He emphasised that India needs to ensure deterrence regarding the reorganisation of departments in the PLA and, there is also a need to prepare for a protracted non-contact warfare which included preparing to counter space and electronic warfare. India also needed to work on its operational redundancies and develop Ballistic Missile Defence capabilities. The biggest takeaway for India from the Chinese military reforms was that there should be a 'will to reform'.

After the enlightening discussion on China's national defence, the next speaker, Mr Jayadeva Ranade took the floor to discuss China's internal security situation and its implications. The speaker went on to identify the major areas that challenge the Chinese leadership. Since the 18th Party Congress, we have witnessed a steady hardening of the Chinese State. Political stability and regime survival are at the top of the agenda of the Chinese government, reflected in two events. First, Xi Jinping was conferred the three top titles in the country at the Congress and second, the reduction of the Politburo Standing Committee which was filled with stolid doctrinaire Party members. The 2011-12 political turmoil where the cadres competed for positions in the upper echelons of the Party was the reason behind this strong stance.

The speaker considered the 18th Congress a 'watershed in Chinese politics' and many changes have taken place following it. The Congress gave the messages of stability, assertive policies, party supremacy and the China Dream. Xi Jinping had used nationalism and ideology to ensure political stability and regime survival. Under Xi, China could be considered to have embarked on a new '30-year era' like that of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Xi saw the army as the key to achieving his goals and moved to strengthen his grip over the PLA, demanding that the PLA follow the command of the Communist Party. He had taken steps such as the expansion of party surveillance and party members within the PLA; he also bought it under the purview of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission. Xi Jinping's campaign against corruption in the PLA has also been extensive with Xinhua reporting that 4,885 PLA officers had been punished for graft.

The slowdown of the Chinese economy, which was experiencing a slower growth rate, is due to the many redundancies in the Chinese economic sector. China has targeted reforms in their 106 central state-owned enterprises but this had been a difficult task. A major step taken was the decision to cut 5 or 6 million workers from the steel, mining and coal industries in the next 3 years. Number of protests in China had gone up by 30 per cent and the graduate unemployment level has also increased at the same rate. While income inequality had increased, the quality of poverty has worsened. The leadership in China, according to the speaker, was particularly concerned with the 'Colour Revolution' which has led to stringent regulations. Document No.9, issued in 2013, complained about the intensification of western cultural and ideological infiltration into China. This was followed by a sharp crackdown against schools and universities. In January 2015, regulations were further imposed and all western sources utilised for teaching were weeded out of the libraries. The National Security

Education Campaign was also launched in 2016 which was targeted against foreigners and foreign influence.

The speaker believed that there was an arc of vulnerability developing around China. Particularly in Tibet, the degree of restlessness was increasing. There were reports, that to counter this instability, China had introduced hard measures in Tibet such as the implementation of an iron grid, increase in budget of the Public Security Bureau by 54% and an increase in Party surveillance and indoctrination into the Party. The Xinjiang province also provided a violent situation for China. China had taken a hard stance against terrorism originating in Xinjiang as well as against the Uyghur Muslims. The radicalization of the Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine district of Myanmar which borders China is another cause of worry for the Chinese. Taiwan and Hong Kong also continue to be a problem for China. The speaker concluded by saying that the imposition of these strict measures and control showed a growing inflexibility in the Chinese system. The discussion left us with the understanding that in the coming years we will observe an increased prickliness by China on issues that challenge its regime and political stability.

Report prepared by Niyati Shetty, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speakers:

Speaker 1

Lt Gen SL Narasimhan, PVSM, AVSM**, VSM (Retd) is a Madras Regiment Officer and is a graduate in Mathematics. He is a post graduate in Defence Studies and presently a PhD Candidate. He has seen action in Op PAWAN in 1987 in Sri Lanka and has a vast experience in 'Counter Insurgency Operations, Line of Actual Control and High Altitude Area environment. After having successfully commanded the largest Corps of the Army in the North East, Narasimhan attained super annuation after a successful stint as Commandant, Army War College. He is well accomplished in the Chinese language. Lt Gen S L Narasimhan has authored many articles in various journals and magazines. He is presently Member of the National Security Advisory Board.

Speaker 2

Mr. Jayadeva Ranade, is a Member of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) and President of the 'Centre for China Analysis and Strategy', New Delhi. A former Additional Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India, he is also a Member of the Core

Group on China of the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi. He is a security and intelligence expert and a seasoned China analyst with almost 30 years of experience in the field. He has been directly involved in formulation of policy at the highest levels in the Government of India. Ranade is the author of the book 'China Unveiled: Insights into Chinese Strategic Thinking' released in January 2013. He contributes to many mainstream national newspapers, magazines and leading publications, mostly on strategic and security issues relating to China, Tibet and East Asia.

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