



## **Xi Jinping and Reform in the People's Liberation Army**

**Speaker: Dr. Manoj Joshi**

**Chair: Mr. M.V. Rappai**

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**Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi**

Dr. Manoj Joshi presented an immensely captivating and informative talk on 'Xi Jinping and Reform in the People's Liberation Army'. At the outset, he mentioned that ever since the third Plenum, a deep process of reformation in China's military has been noticed. In order to strengthen his argument, statistical data showing the rapid rise in military exports by China to Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar were given. He emphasised that the main theme of his talk would be the reform in the organisational structure of the People's liberation Army (PLA). Aside from this, the speaker was very clear about the fact that the discussion on the ongoing reforms in the PLA cannot be exclusive of President Xi Jinping as he is the main driving force behind it. According to Dr. Joshi, the reforms are a part of President Xi's 'China Dreams' because of which the military budget is soaring, the military hardware is being upgraded and China's presence in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean is being felt more than ever before. Dr. Joshi presented a number of valuable reasons as to why China is keen on reforming its military. The reasons are as follows: firstly, the United States' military activities might have convinced the Chinese to upgrade their military; secondly, it may be a strategy to keep the PLA close to the CMC and lastly, the concept of military regions had become obsolete.

The speaker continuously spoke about President Xi's role behind the military reforms and mentioned that military reforms had been on President Xi's agendas right from the beginning. This is evident from the fact that one of his first visits after assuming office was to the Guangzhou Military Region (GMR) where he talked about the reform of the PLA. In his view, President Xi associates the reform of the PLA with the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation; hence, PLA had to undergo a major austerity crackdown under President Xi's leadership. Furthermore, China witnessed a tremendous reshuffling of its army officers and a major cut down of military troops, which was announced during the military parade in September 2015.

Apart from major changes like the cut down of 3,00,000 army personnel, small but specific changes like the banning of alcohol during the PLA banquets were also carried out.

With regards the change in focus from traditional military forces to a more modernised system like electronic warfare, there were two government white papers that the speaker mentioned in particular. The whitepaper on *Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces* specially talks extensively about the new situations, new challenges and new missions of China's military. Further, the speaker discussed about the integration of the civil with the military during the presentation.

The change in the number of theatre commands is one of the most noteworthy changes as it affects the functions and structures of the Military Regions (MR) that were in place until now. Another major change in China's military came about with the establishment of the PLA Rocket Force and the PLA Strategic Support Force on 31 December 2015. After the detailed description of the reforms, the presentation focused on the side effects of the reforms, the formation of small leading groups being the most prominent one. During the Central Military Commission's (CMC) conference in November 2015, it was commented by the *Global Times* that China's military must keep up with its economic stature.

In his concluding remarks, the speaker mentioned that the act of dismantling of the old MRs along with many other reforms would definitely have winners and losers. There may have even been hints of resistances but China, which is going through an economic slowdown and is faced with chances of being locked in the middle-income trap, needs the PLA. At a time when the country is going through an economic reformation, an incompetent military seems dangerous, hence the emphasis on strengthening of the military.

## **Discussion**

During the ensuing discussion, the chair gave his valuable comments on how China is doing much more than merely mirroring the US. He also commented at length on how the new military office bearers belonged to a certain circle where most were already well acquainted with the President, like his school friends and classmates. Questions regarding the employment of PLA, the politics behind party controlling the army, and the civilian-military relations were also raised. The speaker answered all of it by explaining how on the whole China's system works very differently than the Indian system. He explained how its military is full of Chinese characteristics which may seem absurd for any other country but could work considerable well for China. The next set of questions focused on the professionalism of the PLA, the motivation for the PLA to carry out its new role and the prospects of education and training for the PLA abroad. The speaker noted that the China Dream is the main motivating factor behind the PLA and though its success or failure can only be judged around 2021, at present these reforms are a reality. Regarding education, the speaker mentioned how the Academy of Military Sciences is indeed focusing on higher military education. The speaker ended the discussion by clarifying and giving details behind the appointment of the leaders of the new theatre commands, the process of incorporating the 3,00,000 military men who were removed from their job and the new structure of the MRs,

theatre commands and battle zones. The last question on what in the speaker's view constitutes the weakness of the PLA from the perspective of India. The response was as interesting as the question. The speaker replied by saying that a major way in which the PLA could be bettered is if there is a change in attitude towards China's minorities in terms of both recruitment in the army and otherwise.

*Report prepared by Preksha Shree Chettri, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.*

### **About the Speaker**

Dr. Manoj Joshi is a Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation. He is a graduate from St Stephen's College, Delhi University and a Ph.D. from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. He has been a Visiting Professor at the SIS, JNU, as well as a Visiting Fellow at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University. He has had distinguished career as a journalist for three decades, specializing on national and international politics and is a commentator and columnist on these issues. He has written extensively on issues relating to Siachen, Pakistan, China, Sri Lanka and terrorism in Kashmir and Punjab. He was also an Academic Fellow of the American Studies Research Centre, Hyderabad. He has been a member of the National Security Council's Advisory Board and is the author of two books On the Kashmir issue and several papers in professional journals.

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