



The People's Liberation Army

Modernised but still mistrusted

世界人民大团结万岁

ROWAN CALLICK

OCTOBER 2025

Special Report

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Executive summary: ‘A heroic army is one the party can rely on’

Modernisation is at the core of the mission of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to change the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and beyond—to ‘set off a wave of modernisation in the Global South,’ as China’s paramount leader Xi Jinping has urged.¹ It is all about party control.

This naturally incorporates the party’s military arm: the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

Xi has stressed that it means accelerating the PLA’s development into ‘a world-class army’² capable of seizing and holding down Taiwan, which in recent decades the party has insisted is an integral part of the PRC, even though the PRC has never ruled it.

But while Xi has provided the PLA with cutting-edge weaponry, many signs point to his lack of confidence in the process so far of modernising its top personnel—of moulding them into fully responsive cogs in the great CCP machine.

That modernising mission matters intensely for the rest of the world—especially for the Indo-Pacific region—because the CCP won’t be satisfied with eating China itself.³ It’s also working to ensure that far beyond China—and beyond Taiwan, too—global institutions and trends, and regional seas and islands, are made safe for itself.

Many governments in the region appear to believe that, despite the PRC’s grey-zone fishing fleets and cyber destabilisation, their nations can continue to enjoy a net-beneficial relationship with the PRC thanks to access to its markets and to its cheap products as long as they don’t compete unfairly.

That view, which is common among Indo-Pacific elites, holds that greater engagement with China will provide insurance against its military ambitions. But China’s global security, development, civilisation and governance initiatives and many other programs and relentless rhetoric reveal that Beijing won’t be satisfied with mere engagement.

For the party wishes to advance—through PRC-style modernisation—everywhere. Its capacity to pursue key goals militarily is crucial for the credibility of that pervasive mission.

That means acquiring world-class weaponry, and ‘military–civil fusion’—the enmeshing of military and civilian industries via extensive technology exchanges—which are helping to transform the PLA from a territorial force into a major maritime power.

For Australia, the resulting concerns are manifold—including how to deter the CCP from its ambitions for regional domination, and how to upgrade Canberra’s contingency planning.

Xi has reached down to micromanage the military so that it can extend China’s suzerainty over adjacent seas, push US forces further away, and by 2027 be ready to take Taiwan. The changes are intended to provide Xi and his party with greater functional control over the PLA at large. He has reduced the former seven military regions to five theatre commands, to integrate service operations within them. There’s now greater strategic coherence.

Xi’s functional goals for PLA modernisation by mid-century are: informationisation, intelligentisation, and the ability to win high-intensity wars through integrated operations and network-centric warfare across all services and domains. The modernisation process also seeks to deter the US and its allies and other partners from blocking CCP ambitions.

But, while proclaiming that the PLA ‘has always been a heroic army that the party and the people can fully trust’;⁴ Xi demonstrates constantly that it still lacks his personal trust, doubting the loyalty, competence and honesty of senior officers, even those he has appointed. He subjects it to constant organisational and personnel churn. Top-down governance systems often create such dilemmas, even as they struggle to resolve them.

This essay examines how modernisation has become the central project for China, and how military structures are being reshaped as a result. It then more briefly describes the impact on hardware, before considering the successes and challenges resulting from this modernisation model. Questions relating to capability gains and strategic intentions are subordinate to the issues arising from the core modernisation narrative.

Introduction: Military modernisation essential for China's prestige

Australia's Foreign Minister, Penny Wong, said in a speech on 3 September 2024 that Australia is 'deeply concerned by the pace at which China's military is modernising, without the transparency or reassurance that the region expects'.⁵

That pace—in a hardware sense—was underlined exactly a year later, when a vast array of new-edge military kit, including hypersonic weaponry and anti-ship missiles, was paraded through Beijing to mark the 80th anniversary of victory in 'the War against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War'. The modern power on display was witnessed and applauded in the stands facing Tiananmen Square by a who's-who of authoritarian leaders from around the world, including Russia's President Vladimir Putin, North Korea's President Kim Jong-un, Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian, Myanmar's Acting President Min Aung Hlaing, and Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko. Former Western politicians were also in attendance, including former premier of Victoria Dan Andrews and former prime ministers of New Zealand Helen Clark and John Key.

Leading Australian historian of China John Fitzgerald said about the parade:

Xi Jinping's new world order demands universal recognition of regime security as a right of nations ... All the military personnel and powerful kit parading in Beijing belong to the party's private armed forces ... China functions as a party, not a national state. The country lacks a national army, navy and airforce, and the invitations extended to dictators of the world signal a call for universal recognition of the right of ruling parties to preserve themselves, with their own private armed forces, as an inalienable right of nations.⁶

For the authoritarian international partners of Xi, the parade embodied the modernisation (*xiandaihua*) that's been the cornerstone of the ambitious project to change China that's been underway since he became General Secretary of the CCP in 2012.

But, while encompassing the rapid upgrading of China's infrastructure as well as billions of dollars' worth of new PLA equipment, the ambitions for this modernisation project go far deeper and broader than that.

The dean of the School of Marxism at the Central Party School, Zhang Zhanbin, writes: 'The leadership of the Party is the unique political advantage of the new path of Chinese-style modernisation.'⁷ That priority of party dominance is the cornerstone of contemporary modernisation in China, including of military modernisation. Chinese-style modernisation doesn't mean the modernisation of China. This 'style's' chief characteristic is control.

The Xi Jinping Thought on the Economy Study Centre describes Chinese-style modernisation as 'modernisation in which material progress and cultural and ethical progress are in harmony'.⁸ Integration is a core element of that process, which incorporates, for instance, bringing military and civil development together, perceiving domestic and international threats as often aligned, integrating technologies, and ensuring that CCP leadership is well integrated into all networks of governance.

A military that projects a powerful image is deployed as a core underpinning of China's national prestige, which in turn has become central to the unwritten contract between the CCP and the people of China, which might be summarised as: 'We let you rule alone and without constraint, and in return you rejuvenate China, restore it to where it belongs, as the supreme power of Asia, and of the global South more broadly.' Formerly, that contract hinged on providing constantly improving prosperity—but that offering has fallen by the wayside. The obverse—especially obvious for Xi, whose twin focuses are ideology and history—is that former Chinese dynasties mostly fell when weak militaries made room for potent adversaries.

The contemporary PRC answer to weakness—to correct or eradicate it—isn't so much 'strength' as 'modernisation'. It's therefore crucial for democratic nations to understand the true nature of that modernisation.

Modernisation: a core party goal since Mao

The ‘Four Modernisations’ were introduced as core party goals during the Mao Zedong era. Premier Zhou Enlai urged their pursuit in a speech at a conference on scientific and technological work in Shanghai in January 1963. The following month, Marshal Nie Rongzhen, who was then chairman of the State Science and Technology Commission, named the four core modernisations as in agriculture; industry; defence; and science and technology.

Following the Cultural Revolution years, Deng Xiaoping swiftly resurrected those goals at the opening of a national science conference in 1978, when he stressed that the key was the modernisation of science and technology, without which there could be no rapid development of the economy.⁹

Xi Jinping has sought to bring greater focus, discipline and determination to achieve those goals—the successful application of which will, he believes, ease the path towards his ‘China dream’ of ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’.¹⁰ Party-building through ‘modernisation’ continues apace across and within every social institution in China, including businesses, schools and universities, NGOs, and temples and churches.

Xi has also incorporated it as a focal element within China’s leadership of the global South. In 2017, Xi said that ‘the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other countries to achieve modernisation,’ and were ideal for speeding up development while ‘preserving their independence’¹¹—of course meaning, while unspoken, from the US and the rest of the West. In a 2023 speech, Xi attacked what he called ‘the myth that modernisation means westernisation’, and posited ‘a new modernisation model, a brand new form of human civilisation’, no less.¹²

And Xi told 36 African heads of state and prime ministers assembled in Beijing in September 2024 that:

[M]odernisation is an inalienable right of all countries. But the Western approach to it has inflicted immense sufferings on developing countries. Since the end of World War II, Third World nations, represented by China and African countries, have achieved independence and development one after another, and have been endeavouring to redress the historical injustices of the modernisation process. As we are about to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the PRC, we are going all out to build a great modern socialist country in all respects and pursue national rejuvenation through a Chinese path to modernisation. Africa is also awakening again, and China and Africa’s joint pursuit of modernisation will set off a wave of modernisation in the global South, and open a new chapter in our drive for a community with a shared future for mankind.¹³

Mistakenly, many in Western democracies dismiss such statements as mere propaganda. But for the leader of a Leninist party, as Xi is, propaganda *is* truth.

Australia’s Ambassador to the US and former prime minister, Kevin Rudd, a considerable China expert, said in a speech in New York in September 2024:

While ideological worldviews and analytical methodologies have always loomed large within the CCP political firmament, under Xi Jinping there has been an even deeper ideological revival. Marxist dialectics have been the subject of multiple Politburo and other leadership study sessions. Indeed, Xi has become the most ideologically driven Chinese leader since Mao. There is still a tendency in the US and the rest of the West to simply write off all this ideology as largely an exercise in political formalism—i.e. it is what the CCP ‘needs to say’ to justify its *raison d’être*, rather than providing a real-world guide to policy behaviour in the practical affairs of the Chinese state. I have a different view. Over Xi’s decade in office, I argue he has deliberately set out to make the CCP and the country at large more Marxist, more Leninist, and more nationalist.¹⁴

Many—perhaps even within the party’s own heights—may be sceptical, privately, after more than seven decades of single-party rule, about elements of such propaganda, but just as the party remains unchallenged generally, so are its statements widely accepted as unchallengeable.

How China's modernisation and security are enmeshed

If the CCP leadership needs reminding of its profound dependency on its army, it can evoke the central role played by the PLA in crushing the nationwide protests of 1989, including most bloodily in Beijing itself. As the party, under Xi, pushes for relentless change in every sphere of life—with a special focus on the education system from kindergarten to postgraduates—it's fully aware of the central importance of changing the PLA also, of ensuring that the army, like the state, like the schools, and like industry, is fully on-message and is thus transformed too through modernisation, and can take its place, as a 'New Model Army', at the forefront of the 'New China'.

The keenly awaited third plenum of the 20th Central Committee of the CCP was held in July 2024. Its communique contained the word for modernisation, which is at the core of this transformation project, 29 times.

Xinhua reported that at the plenum:

[I]t was stated that national security provides a pivotal foundation for ensuring steady and continued progress in Chinese modernisation ... modernising national defence and the armed forces is an integral part of Chinese modernisation. We must maintain the party's absolute leadership over the people's armed forces and fully implement the strategy of strengthening the military through reform to provide a strong guarantee for realising the centenary goal of the People's Liberation Army in 2027 and achieving basic modernisation of national defence and the armed forces. We will improve the systems and mechanisms for leading and managing the people's armed forces, further reform joint operations systems, and deepen military-civilian reforms.¹⁵

The latter phrase is now usually described as 'military-civil fusion'.

Foreigners, including military analysts, frequently cite mystical Chinese sayings from the ancients, especially Sun Tzu—whose most cited quotes include *Appear weak when you are strong, and strong when you are weak*. However, the contemporary words of the Chairman of China's Military Commission, Xi Jinping, provide a clearer guide.

A fortnight after the third plenum, Xi authored an article in the party's important theoretical journal, *Qiushi* ('Seeking Truth'), in which he stressed the imperative to 'Achieve the goal of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the army and create a new situation for the modernisation of national defence and the army'—the PLA remaining of course the CCP's army, and not that of the Chinese state, of the People's Republic. That modernisation involves, he said, 'accelerating the construction of the people's army into a world-class army', which he described as 'a strategic requirement for the comprehensive construction of a socialist modern country'. This will also require, Xi wrote, 'adhering to the integrated development of mechanisation, informatisation and intelligence, and accelerating the modernisation of military theory, the modernisation of military organisational forms, the modernisation of military personnel, and the modernisation of weapons and equipment.'¹⁶ This has already substantially achieved an early goal of transforming the PLA from a territorial force into a major maritime power.

Xi said during his important speech to the 20th National Party Congress in 2022 that he would 'comprehensively strengthen the party building of the people's army to ensure that the gun will always obey the party's command'. Xi pledged also: 'We will deepen the reform of military academies, build a new military talent training system, and innovate military human resources management.' The PLA, Xi said at the Party Congress, 'has always been a heroic army that the party and the people can fully trust. It has the confidence and ability to safeguard national sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, and has the confidence and ability to provide strategic support for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. It has the confidence and ability to make greater contributions to world peace and development!'¹⁷

The PLA also retains the ability to unseat party leaders, although China has yet to experience a military coup, unless one counts the elbowing aside by General Yuan Shikai of Republican China's founding father Sun Yat-sen in 1912. For Xi, trust in the PLA's leadership, and thus a focus on security, is essential not only for the fulfilment of China's rejuvenation in the 'New Era' he has proclaimed, but also for his own prolonged tenure in office.

Cascading down from Xi, that new focus on security is reflected throughout the party, including in the widely followed posts of Zhang Hui, a party school professor in Guangxi Province, who has written:

At present, the world has entered a new period of turbulence and change. The instability and uncertainty of China's national security situation have increased, and the task of safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests is extremely arduous.

Only by being able to fight can we stop war. Only by building a strong people's army can we effectively safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests, and effectively respond to external military threats. In the new era, promoting national defence and military construction must implement Xi Jinping's Thought on strengthening the army and the spirit of the 20th National Congress of the party, and strive to create a new situation in national defence and military construction. General Secretary Xi Jinping attaches great importance to strengthening the military through science and technology ... Promoting the modernisation of national defence and the army is the common cause of the whole party, the whole army and the people of all ethnic groups across the country.¹⁸

PLA roles under Xi Jinping

Xi talks constantly about 'struggle'¹⁹ and uses 'security'²⁰ as a crucial motivator for backing his leadership. Political security is paramount, meaning the secure retention of power by the party, and the ultimate guarantor of that is its military arm, the PLA. Xi warns of the epochal challenges facing China, which he has characterised as 'dangerous storms'. Other layers of security continue to be added, too, against perceived threats that may be more economic than military—with Beijing battenning down the hatches, including by seeking to 'sanction-proof' China's economy such as by building its own international payments system that can function readily with global South tribute-states, and through developing a 'dual circulation' economy, the inner circle of which operates fully within the PRC itself.

But the bottom line for any CCP General Secretary is that he must be seen to be in full command of the party's army, the PLA—a symbiosis that proved, under Deng Xiaoping's ultimate direction, so crucial for the party when confronted by crisis in 1989.

'Modernisation' is today's term for the process of intensifying Xi's control of the PLA, and the latter's desired intuitive responsiveness to political commands. The PRC's 2019 Defence White Paper listed the PLA's historic missions as to provide strategic support for:

- the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system
- the safeguarding of national sovereignty
- protecting China's overseas interests, including personnel and shipping lanes
- promoting world peace and development.

Timothy Heath of RAND Corporation underlines that 'a broad variety of political and security drivers underpin the military's modernisation, many of which have nothing to do with waging war.' He emphasises the need to review broader party and government documents in order to gain insights into the PLA's preparedness for war making:

A grasp of its myriad drivers could help observers more accurately assess the danger posed by the PLA's modernization ... Xi Jinping's power hinges, in part, on his command of the military, which helps explain why he is often photographed in military uniforms or settings. Xi's instructions to remain focused on military duties takes place within the context of a broader effort to improve the overall modernization, competence and effectiveness of the government, which authorities regard as critical to realizing the country's goals of national revival.²¹

Note that ‘national revival’ is often also termed ‘rejuvenation.’

Domestic security is chiefly the responsibility of the People’s Armed Police (PAP), whose role and resourcing were greatly enhanced following the protests of 1989. The PAP, like the PLA, reports to the Central Military Commission (CMC), but operates as a sister organisation with little overlap. The PAP’s domestic remit enables the PLA to focus on external threats and opportunities. The PRC spends more on domestic security—including police, the PAP, ‘training centres’ for Uighurs in Xinjiang, and a massive surveillance capacity—than it does on defence from foreign actors. Beijing’s concern for integration, however, involves taking measures to restrict institutional rivalry and to ensure information sharing.

Xi himself is chairman of both state and party CMCs, which function virtually indistinguishably, and is commander-in-chief of the PRC’s new joint forces battle command centre.

He has set four functional goals for the PLA’s modernisation by mid-century:

- mechanisation and progress in ‘informationisation’—the integration of information and communications technology
- army-building and professionalisation
- ‘intelligentisation’—integrating artificial intelligence into the PLA’s command and control, weapons systems and platforms and decision-making
- The ability to fight and win wars.²²

How Xi is modernising PLA structures

How are those missions and modernisation goals changing the way the PLA operates?

The PLA is responsible to two CMCs—the party commission and the state commission (the latter introduced in 1982)—which usually have identical members. Xi chairs both, and has reduced the membership from 11 to seven.

Since Xi took control, the PLA has experienced constant organisational and personnel churn. He swiftly dismantled the General Staff Department, removed the service commanders’ seats from the commission, and provided the chairman and the party greater functional control over the PLA at large. He ordered the PLA Army to cut its numbers by about 300,000. Today it has about 2 million active-duty personnel in combat units.

Xi reduced the seven military regions to five theatre commands:

- the Northern Command, focused on Russia, Mongolia and the Korean Peninsula, and the Yellow Sea
- the Central Command, around Beijing, ensuring security for the CCP leadership
- the Western Command, focused on India and counterterrorism
- the Southern Command, responsible for the South China Sea and Southeast Asian borders
- the Eastern Command, facing Taiwan, the East China Sea, the Diaoyu or Senkaku Islands, and Japan.

The new commands are intended to integrate service operations within them. The old command areas were always headed by an army officer, whereas now the heads might come from any service, and their deputies necessarily from a different service. There’s now greater strategic coherence. Achieving the new required ‘jointness’ in mentality and in operational habit remains very much a work in progress. But, unlike the US command system that spans the world, the PLA’s theatre commands are centred on sovereign PRC territory, with a few peripheral step-outs as in the South and East China seas.

At the same time as the command areas were restructured, the PLA Second Artillery Force became the PLA Rocket Force, which is perceived to have control over ballistic and cruise missile forces and the nuclear armoury, and which reports directly to the CMC and is thus on a par with the PLA Army, Navy and Air Force.

Xi also introduced a Strategic Support Force, centralising control of space, cyber, electronic, informational and psychological operations, also reporting directly to the CMC. But that was disbanded in April 2024—due to poor implementation and/or corruption—being replaced by the Aerospace Force (ASF), Cyberspace Force (CSF) and Information Support Force (ISF). All three new forces, like their Strategic Support Force predecessor, report directly to the CMC, though it remains unclear how they'll each interact with theatre commands and individual services. And the old scandal-prone General Logistics Department that formerly oversaw military spending, especially procurement, has under Xi had its responsibilities divided between the CMC's own General Logistics Department, the Audit Office and dispersed accounting and resource-management centres.

So the PLA now embraces 'four services and four arms'. The four services are the Army, Navy, Air Force and Rocket Force, while the four arms are the ASF, the CSF, the ISF and the Joint Logistics Support Force. As Meia Nouwens, the head of the China program at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, says:

Importantly, the ASF and CSF aren't support forces in the same way the ISF is. Both the ASF and CSF control capabilities in each of their domains and as such play a different role from the ISF's support function for the rest of the military. By creating the ISF, President Xi Jinping likely thinks that the 'information support' function requires greater prominence generally, and at the inter-service and inter-theatre levels in particular.²³

And, in the crucial realm of party direction, Xi abolished the PLA's General Political Department in 2015, recreating it as the Political Work Department. But one of that department's more powerful capabilities was its oversight of the list of those eligible for investigation for corruption, and Xi shifted such powers to other agencies within the reorganised high command. Brookings Institution's Jonathan Czin wrote in February 2025 that, over the previous year, 'Xi refocused attention on the problem of political loyalty in the PLA', in June directing the high command to a political work conference in the iconic location of Yan'an, when the official documentation reported that Xi analysed 'deep-seated problems that need to be addressed in military political work'.²⁴

Payton Rawson has pointed out in *The Strategist* how the PLA 'reports to the rest of the CCP at every level of command', chiefly through three layers—of party committees or branches, political commissars and political agencies in administrative and functional departments. Those are 'the three foundational political structures at the heart of the dual-command structure'. In particular, the commissars are ubiquitous in PLA units, at every level, and are granted authority similar to—or arguably higher than—their corresponding military commanders. The commissars act as the party branch secretaries, while the commanders serve as deputy secretaries. Rawson says:

From the Western perspective, a collective leadership system like this would seem to weaken the PLA's ability to make good decisions quickly. Its advantage, however, is complete political alignment and, ideally, prevention of corruption. The dual-command structure can secure party loyalty with little room for error, but at some point the party is making a trade-off, be it for speed of communication, innovation or intent.

He stresses that the military exists to hold political power for the party: 'The dual-command structure is not just a quirk of command-and-control tactics; it's integral to the PLA's purpose'.²⁵

Joel Wuthnow of the US Institute for National Strategic Studies asks whether the PLA's effectiveness—however impressive its hardware—might also be crucially impaired by its lack of experience in modern joint operations and by an organisational culture that preferences micromanagement over delegated authority.²⁶

Xi has also been overseeing a range of 'below-the-neck' modernisations, including reducing corps-sized army groups from 18 to 13, and splitting divisions or regiments into combined-arms brigades, as the new backbone of the army, with each army group now comprising specialist brigades—artillery, air defence, engineering etc. The big beneficiary from that reform has been the PLA Navy's Marine Corps, which has been increased from two brigades to eight—the increase comprising four combined arms brigades, one special operations brigade and a shipborne aviation brigade, with the marine force rising rapidly from about 12,000 to about 40,000 personnel.

The recruitment age was raised in 2021 for those with high-school and undergraduate qualifications from 22 years old to 24, and for postgrads from 24 years to 26. Bonuses and other incentives were introduced to increase the proportion of college graduates among active-duty officers, and the reserve officer program now includes only graduates.

The military education system was restructured, reducing the number of institutes from 77 to 43. Senior officers are required to be rotated more frequently to reduce corruption. The army remains fundamentally a conscript service, churning through about 20% of its total force every year—placing great pressure on training and retraining. Many serve for just two years. Thus, new legislation was passed by the National People's Congress in 2024, permitting the re-recruitment of retired service personnel, who will be prioritised, especially those experienced in space and cyberwarfare areas. And, as the economy stutters, the attractiveness of a military career grows. The conscription cycle, needing about 400,000 recruits annually, has increased from once to twice a year. However, the PLA lacks, almost entirely, combat experience even among its veterans. Its most recent war—against Vietnam—was fought, unsuccessfully, in 1979.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine will have driven home to the PLA some key lessons, including those relating to sanctions, intelligence gathering and party loyalty, and also the importance of air supremacy, of electromagnetic, cyber and information warfare, the adversary's ability to resupply, the use of nuclear threats as deterrence, and the crucial role of logistics and maintenance. It has forced Xi to recognise the risks and costs associated with large-scale military expeditions. In risk terms, any that appears existential for the party itself must weigh against it in the mind of Xi, whose life has been devoted to the CCP.

The core aim of the PLA's important and ongoing structural changes is to enable it to operate in a high-intensity war through integrated operations and network-centric warfare across all services and domains. Xi has instructed the PLA to tackle its 'peace disease'²⁷ and develop an attitude of 'freestyle fighting, live-fire strikes and long range sea patrols'²⁸ to test weaknesses and to ensure constant improvement. The distractions of the Covid-19 era helped the PLA Navy shore up its positions in the South China Sea. But, as Meia Nouwens says, 'large-scale joint exercises across services and theatre commands are still nascent'²⁹—although the PLA does now exercise more frequently with other forces, including those of Russia, Pakistan and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation countries from central Asia. China opened its first overseas military base, in Djibouti, in 2017. It's learning from UN peacekeeping missions, in which up to 3,000 of its military personnel have been engaged.

Its sorties into Taiwan air and sea space are designed to improve PLA skills, test Taiwan's military response and impose financial and maintenance costs on Taiwan's responding forces. In some respects, Taiwan has become the most valuable catalyst for the PLA's modernisation.

The broader context of 'securitisation'

The pressing nature of the need for modernisation, and the continuing unease at top party levels that the PLA isn't yet measuring up to its new goals, fit a broader context of heightened concerns about security emanating from Xi Jinping himself. They have generated the creation of a plethora of new security-focused bodies, requiring significant restructuring.

The Central National Security Commission (CNSC) was first announced at the third plenum of the 18th Party Congress in November 2013. At its inaugural meeting on 15 April 2014, the Overall National Security Outlook (ONSO) was also launched, and Xi Jinping stressed that the body was part of a larger project to 'promote the modernisation of the national governance system and governance capacity' as well as to 'better adapt to the new situation and new tasks facing our national security'.³⁰ Leading CCP expert Jude Blanchette points out that:

from top to bottom, the new CNSC was a purely party institution, thus marking yet another shift in policymaking and implementation authority away from the government apparatus (i.e., the State Council) and toward the CCP, a trend that has been one of the defining features of the Xi era.

By the time of a 17 April 2018 meeting of the CNSC, 'Xi's tone had darkened, perhaps reflecting China's increasingly volatile relationship with the United States.'³¹ Blanchette cites an article posted on a website run by the Central Organisation Department:

In the body of national security, political security is the heart. If the heart stops beating, even the strongest body will lose its vitality ... The most fundamental thing to maintain political security is to safeguard the leadership and ruling position of the Communist Party of China and the socialist system with Chinese characteristics.³²

During this period, there was an expansion of subnational national security commissions (NSCs), from provincial to county levels, that were subordinate to higher level NSCs, and all ultimately reporting to the CNSC commanded by Xi himself. In April 2022, Xi Jinping unveiled the Global Security Initiative at the Bo'ao Forum, incorporating the concept of 'common security' and challenging the US-led security order.³³

Blanchette adds that:

national security intellectuals in China have repeatedly stressed the artificiality of demarcations between internal and external national security risks ... The ONSO is leading to some important, and in many ways worrying, trends in China that will impact not only the tone and tenor of its domestic governance but also its external behaviour [including] its rationalisation and institutionalisation of the CCP's long-standing fear (and paranoia) about threats to its hold on power ... This maximalist view of national security also has a potentially debilitating effect on the real work of protecting China's actual national security (as distinct from a narrower focus on protecting the CCP).³⁴

Alongside institutional innovations focused on security, Xi's new era has also seen a succession of related legislative initiatives, including the National Security Law (2015), the Counter-Terrorism Law (2015), the National Defence Transportation Law (2016), the National Intelligence Law (2017), the Foreign NGO Law (2017), the Cyber Security Law (2017), the Foreign Investment Law (2020) and the Data Security Law (2021).

PLA kit modernisation

Much of the global commentary is especially excited by the hardware side of PLA modernisation, and that's where the public propaganda usually focuses, since it does reflect real achievements. A leading aim of the kit modernisation is to transform the PLA from a seemingly bloated, inert and corrupt body into one that appears more clearly positioned for 'intelligent warfare'³⁵ and is resourced with the equipment needed to win short and sharp wars against technologically sophisticated adversaries. The PLA's 'pacing challenge' in kit modernisation is the US military, which is increasingly measuring itself against Chinese developments.

Here are a few examples. The PLA Army has a new lightweight tank, Type 15, suitable for high-altitude engagement in, for instance, Tibet. The Navy has become the world's largest, with about 340 ships and submarines, including three aircraft carriers. Helicopters can now rearm and refuel on board ships as they head towards maritime operations. The Air Force has more than 2,800 crewed aircraft, excluding those used for training and including the highly capable J20 stealth fighters, now substantially powered by indigenous turbofan engines. It now has nuclear-capable air-to-air refuelling bombers.

The PLA has boosted and modernised its nuclear armoury, ramped up to more than 500 operational warheads today (a total expected to rise to 1,500 in the next 10 years), with three new missile silo sites in north and west China. This nuclear intensification may be in part the projected outcome of Ukraine war experience on a potential Taiwan conflict. Then-President Joe Biden said in February 2022: 'That's a world war, when Americans and Russia start shooting at one another.'³⁶ Enhanced nuclear capabilities might be perceived as providing crucial deterrence against US involvement in a Taiwan imbroglio. The Rocket Force says that it's now ready for 'full-scale nuclear war', not only for strategic deterrence or 'limited nuclear war'.³⁷ The military parade in Beijing on 3 September featured new and modified nuclear systems not previously publicly displayed, and for the first time showcased land-, sea- and air-launched weapons—the nuclear triad—in the same parade.³⁸

China has hypersonic missiles that travel at many times the speed of sound. The DF-41, China's most powerful nuclear-armed ballistic missile, first paraded publicly at the 70th anniversary of the PRC six years ago, along with 700 pieces of kit, can hit targets anywhere in the US. The Rocket Force continues to build up its nuclear triad—intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and strategic bombers with nuclear bombs and missiles. And it's testing a space-based delivery system that would position warheads in a low Earth orbit before de-orbiting them towards targets.

Military–civil fusion

The core strategy for implementing the 'new-style whole-country system'³⁹ that has produced such hardware advances, at a pace that the party insists will be at least maintained despite the slowing of the broader economy, is 'military–civil fusion' (MCF).⁴⁰

This is perhaps the most successful element in the massive PLA modernisation project. The cross-cutting new sector is overseen by the Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development, which was established in 2017.

MCF is based upon fostering extensive technology exchanges between civilian and military industries—in a variant of the way in which that might be seen to work in the US. A core aim is for civilian channels to acquire intellectual property, key research and tech innovations from overseas industrial countries to drive the PRC's own military tech sector. Many of the party leaders in MCF have spent years working overseas and then returned. The military–industrial sector in China is fully state owned and party-directed, and is inherently responsive to the needs for effective war making.

Dr Wu Guoguang, a senior researcher at Stanford University, who early in his career provided policy advice to the Beijing leadership, says that 'self-reliance will be crucial for a China that is engaged in a war with Taiwan which inevitably will bring it into a confrontation with the industrial democracies'.⁴¹ He says that 'technology driven growth with independent technological progress is Xi Jinping's strategy to deal with' that issue, and that Xi is promoting military–industrial leaders to leading CCP positions. Examples include Zhang Guoqing, vice premier with special responsibility for industry, who worked in Iran; Li Ganjie, head of the party's Central Organisation Department, who was based in France for years and has specialised in applying foreign technology; and Jin Zhuanglong, an aerospace-engineer-turned-politician as a Central Committee member.

The mobilisation of civilian ships and aircraft to support military operations is a further example of MCF success, reducing the PLA's need to buy and maintain large transport fleets, while redirecting or appropriating civilian tech also reduces its research and development costs. The PLA is now almost completely self-sufficient in arms production, substantially as a result of MCF. And joint ventures with Russia in strategic tech areas such as nanotech, biotech and artificial intelligence also reduce residual dependence on acquiring advances from industrial democracies.

MCF has replaced the former military holdings in commercial enterprises, often in real estate, which were supposedly separated out and spun off during the 1990s, with the aim of interrupting the intricate patronage networks that resulted. But corruption inevitably persists, including through the massive procurement opportunities as the military modernises.

The Taiwan challenge

Xi said in a speech celebrating the Xinhai Revolution that triggered the end of the Qing dynasty: 'Taiwan's independence separatism is the biggest obstacle to achieving the reunification of the motherland, and the most serious hidden danger to national rejuvenation'.⁴²

Such talk of 'unification', or 'reunification' as it's more commonly expressed, thus means talk of Taiwan, which is front and centre of PLA planning.

The current, 14th, Five-year Plan calls for ‘the achievement of the 2027 centennial military building goal’ to mark the centenary of the founding of the PLA.⁴³ Much has been read into that. Former US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director Bill Burns and Admiral John Aquilino—before he retired in 2024 as head of the Indo-Pacific Command—have both claimed that Xi has instructed the PLA to be ready to invade Taiwan successfully in 2027, although Burns has also stressed that such an instruction does not guarantee an invasion then, but does act as ‘a reminder of the seriousness of Xi’s focus and his ambition’.⁴⁴

In fact, this is a part of a string of military modernisation goals, chiefly that China will—as Xi Jinping told senior military officers in Beijing in 2017—‘basically complete national defence and military modernisation by 2035’ and possess a ‘world-class military by mid-century’.⁴⁵ Thus the PLA’s modernisation reforms are expected to take years still to complete. Sophisticated electronics and propulsion systems are among the areas that require considerable further development. Dr Wu Guoguang says that China’s ‘pursuit of self-sufficiency in critical high-tech products has emerged as a significant challenge’ as American export controls have stepped up. He lists three challenges to achieve ‘world-class forces’:

- whether advanced capabilities can still be acquired in the new era of a stagnating economy
- reduced access to foreign tech as strategic competition steps up
- the risk of strategic missteps such as escalating territorial disputes beyond capabilities.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Beijing’s continued progress in hard power has been more visible and has already been leveraged by the CCP to project military power and assert Chinese interests in the Indo-Pacific region. However, the PLA still requires talented personnel, doctrinal changes, decision-making structures and practice to turn weapons and platforms into actual capability, says Meia Nouwens. For instance, progress on informatisation has fallen behind the planned completion and, she adds:

the PLA continues to grapple with issues around command-and-control structures, operationalising the concept of ‘jointness,’ recruiting, and retaining skilled talent to the level required, and training them in a realistic manner. Until it has done so, the PLA is not yet the military that Xi envisions will ‘fight and win wars’ on the CCP’s behalf.⁴⁷

A key question pertinent to the Taiwan challenge is whether modernisation has become so elevated as a party goal, almost to an existential level, that any temptation to use force against the island any time before mid-century may be moderated by the concern that such a massive move, if premature, could throw the PLA off its long-term modernisation course. As a dominant military power as a result of success in modernisation, China would be perceived as having achieved great-power status—which is crucial for the party’s continued unquestioned domestic grip. To comprehend which goal has the upper hand in the mind of Xi and his closest associates, and to what extent the prospect of military failure or descent into attrition might be perceived as potentially existential problems for the party itself, is a very hard task, given the ‘black box’ nature of decision-making and policy formulation at the top in China. ‘Humint’ has been elusive since both US and Taiwanese undercover information networks were rapidly and mercilessly brought down by Beijing a dozen years ago.

Despite the modernisation thrust, as Joel Wuthnow of the US Institute for National Strategic Studies asks importantly, might the PLA’s effectiveness—however impressive its hardware—be crucially impaired in combat by its lack of experience in modern joint operations, by an organisational culture that preferences micromanagement over delegated authority, by distrust tinged with envy between party leaders and the military, and by vulnerability to defensive weapons such as were used to devastating effect during the opening phases of the Ukraine war?⁴⁸

Xi has proven he can be a risk-taker. He talks constantly about ‘struggle’⁴⁹—56 times in a single speech at the Central Party School, on 3 September 2019—and uses ‘security’⁵⁰ as a crucial motivator for continuing to back his leadership, 13 years on. But an action such as moving against Taiwan that appears potentially existential for the party itself may weigh against it in the mind of a leader whose life has been devoted to the CCP.

Purges of top PLA commanders

Here's a list—not comprehensive—of some of the top PLA officers and others investigated and purged in recent times:

- In July 2022, the Minister for Industry and Information Technology, Xiao Yaqing, was purged.
- In March 2023, former Defence Minister Wei Fenghe, who earlier commanded the Rocket Force, disappeared from public view.
- Soon after, Foreign Minister Qin Gang and Defence Minister Li Shangfu, perceived as Xi confidants and with Li especially highly regarded previously as a military-industrial leader, were also purged.
- In November 2023, Ding Laihang, Commander of the PLA Air Force, was placed under investigation for a corruption case involving the redevelopment of Beijing's Xijiao military airport.
- In December 2023, nine generals were removed, including the commander of the Strategic Support Force that has since itself been wound up, and also three top aerospace executives from the MCF sector.
- In January 2024, Wang Xiaojun, who had been president of the China Rocket Academy, lost his position. It appears that the entire Rocket Force leadership was replaced during 2023.
- In March 2024, Li Zhizhong, a lieutenant general who was deputy commander of the PLA's Central Theatre Command, was removed.
- In December 2024, Admiral Miao Hua, the top political commissar of the PLA and a member of the CMC, was suspended and placed under investigation for 'serious violations of discipline,' according to the Defence Ministry.
- Strong evidence emerged in March 2025 that General He Weidong, the vice chairman of the CMC, was arrested—the highest-ranking military officer to fall since 1967—as was former PLA General Logistics Department Minister Zhao Keshi. And *India Today* claimed that further senior figures, including the Western Theatre Command Deputy Commander, the Eastern Theatre Navy Commander, the Deputy Director of the CMC Science and Technology Committee, and the Director of the Military Affairs Office had also been disciplined.
- In June 2025, Vice Admiral Li Hanjun, chief of staff of the PLA Navy, was removed.

Military purges appear relentless

The chief challenge to the effective modernisation of the PLA has emerged as the lack of top-level CCP confidence in senior military officers. The purging even of generals, including those who had ascended to the CMC, and those who have owed their rise to Xi and have previously appeared fully loyal to him personally, appears to be relentless. This marks the greatest point of vulnerability in the PLA, going so far as to raise questions about whether it can win sufficient trust to be deployed in major combat beyond the skirmishing in which it's been engaged in recent times, in the seas near the Philippines, Japan and Vietnam, in the Himalayas on the Indian border, and in Taiwan's air and sea zones.

Brookings Institution's Jonathan Czin has written that 'Xi has now made the removal of CMC members a regular feature of China's politics,' to the extent that 'the persistence of corruption undermines Xi's confidence in the PLA ... Xi is quite serious when he says that he wants the PLA to prepare to "fight and win battles"—a turn of phrase that itself implies that the PLA is not ready.'⁵¹

Xi said at the mid-2024 Military Political Work Conference held in Yan'an, the historic base of Mao at the end of the Long March, that the party required a strong, loyal, corruption-free and capable military under party guidelines and supervision. He stressed ideological transformation and the revitalisation of the commissar system, and pleaded for 'relevant personnel at all levels, especially senior cadres, to introspect, engage in soul-searching reflections, and make earnest rectifications.'⁵²

Despite its impressive modernisation under his authority, Xi retains an anxiety bordering on distrust of the PLA, balanced however by his dependence on it as the essential heart of his party's authority.

The military purge has kept rolling on, amid reports that senior officers who were based in Fujian Province have come under especially close scrutiny—despite, or perhaps because of, Xi having worked in the province for six years and early after his elevation to the top leadership having brought a number of colleagues from those times into senior roles in Beijing.

Xi's failure to create a credible statist, tech-driven economy due to the resurgence of rampant corruption has presented him with an institutional governance dilemma. 'This,' Dr Wu Guoguang says, 'is a classic dilemma with concentration of power: absolute power yields absolute corruption. In the Chinese context, it is also embedded in the CCP's scheme of "concentrating strength to accomplish great projects".' At the same time, it's inevitable that Xi is seeking to curb proactively any potential threat to his own authority that may come from the emergence of a new cohort of military-industrial leaders whom he has himself promoted. Dr Wu adds that, even after the recent trail of purges, that cohort remains the most coherent group among the groups within the current leadership. They're younger, with wide governance power in the areas they lead, both sectoral and geographic, as well as within the party organisational apparatus, and are well educated and very knowledgeable. It isn't surprising that Xi might experience some anxiety about them in terms of his personal power. But he's unlikely to fully curtail this trend in leadership promotions, in part because his exclusive control over the military forms 'the most solid base for his concentration of power', as Dr Wu adds.⁵³

Because the PLA is a party arm, internal security is prioritised as highly as external security, adding a further burden of compliance that in other militaries would rest with outside agencies. The PLA retains—and indeed has enhanced the roles of—political commissars and party committees. Under Xi, the PLA has experienced waves of purges and restructuring—although, on the positive side of the ledger, it's been given a greater foreign policy role. A war would grant PLA leaders greater political influence, too—something that Xi might not favour. The challenges made apparent by the recent purges are likely to cause Xi to tighten his personal control over every area of PLA operations and personnel, and especially over the inevitable continued rise of the MCF elite, even as that whole sector becomes, as its role is elevated, a political battleground.

Dr Joel Wuthnow says that, long before Xi, Mao and Deng were troubled by PLA officers who challenged top civilian leaders or pursued their own agendas:

Nothing Xi has done to control the bureaucracy, including purging and rotating officers, handpicking trusted agents, or reforming control mechanisms, has resolved this problem ... He cannot be fully confident in what the PLA tells him about its state of readiness or internal deficiencies, whether created by corruption, poor or ineffective leadership, or advantages of foreign adversaries. Such uncertainties might well impact his confidence in ordering the PLA into battle.⁵⁴

Xi weighs the risks

The PLA, despite being provided now with much of the modern equipment that it had craved, has experienced constant organisational and personnel churn, driven by Xi personally—indicating a lack of confidence. He finds it hard—perhaps with good cause—to trust the loyalty, competence and honesty of senior officers, even those he has appointed. He demands especially strong ideological commitment from them. Jude Blanchette cites Xi as warning that 'The disintegration of a regime often begins in the realm of ideology ... when the defensive line on the plane of ideology is breached, other lines of defence are hard to hold.'⁵⁵

Dr Wu Guoguang has written that 'Xi's third term has occasioned unceasing political storms sweeping across the country and especially the Party-state military system.' Many of those purged, he points out, 'were widely viewed as Xi's protégés because it was under Xi himself that they were promoted' to their significant positions:

Like Stalin's Great Purge, Xi's purge has been continuous, wave after wave, increasingly victimising those who had helped him to purge former enemies ... This atmosphere disincentivises communist cadres from taking initiative in their jobs, which further degrades the quality of policymaking and increases the likelihood of further mis-steps and further crises, and thus more purges ... The central concern is power. The targets of purges provide a ready supply of scapegoats for the leader's governance problems.

Wu describes the central resulting paradox: 'the declining ability of the regime to achieve its public goals even when it is in the firm control of its leader', creating in turn 'incurable insecurity'.⁵⁶

Top-down governance systems usually create such dilemmas, even as they struggle to resolve them. Military structures are all naturally hierarchical, intensifying the need to get personnel selection right, which is complicated in an authoritarian-tending-towards-totalitarian one-party state favouring micromanagement over delegation, and where professional effectiveness must be matched by irreproachable political correctness. When—or, more importantly, how—might the PLA reach such a desired level, in Xi's eyes?

In addition, the PLA's lack of combat experience could be telling if it were to face, for instance, American forces hardened by almost constant conflict in recent decades—although even the US hasn't had to engage in high-intensity maritime warfare since World War II. And for PLA recruitment, despite the patriotic appeal, a military career might trouble families with just one child. The earliest second children born since the one-child policy was changed aren't yet nine years old.

Xi insists that 'adhering to the people's democratic dictatorship must not be shaken'.⁵⁷ But, if the PLA were to become bogged down or even fail in an epic task such as taking Taiwan, many Chinese people might respond—this being the party's army—by questioning the continuing authority of the communist hierarchy to which they have deferred for almost 76 years.

Within a few weeks of being elevated to the top leadership, Xi told PLA recruits in Guangzhou that 'it is the soul of the military to obey the command of the party without compromise, and the top priority for the military to be able to fight and win battles'.⁵⁸ Modernisation is seen by Beijing as central to such victories, and thus also to the fulfilment of the China dream and to Chinese rejuvenation, including through 'reunification'.

Xi warns that, 'without party leadership', such modernisation 'will veer off course, lose its soul, or even bring catastrophic mistakes'.⁵⁹

So it all comes down ultimately to him. And, while Xi can be a risk-taker, any risk that appears existential for the party to which he has devoted his life may weigh his mind against taking it.

Conclusion: Danger still awaits

The modernisation of the PRC is a core goal of the ruling CCP. The party uses the term 'modernisation' for two purposes—to elevate and highlight the country's rapid and throughgoing physical reconstruction, awing its own people and the wider world, and also to entrench party control pervasively.

Both meanings of 'modernisation' have been brought fully to bear on the PLA, the party's army. More intense party control enables General Secretary Xi Jinping to micromanage the military to seek to ensure its responsiveness to his every policy and command.

Security has become, under Xi, a greater priority than prosperity, reflecting both the PRC economy's troubles and the growing sense in Beijing that opportunity beckons for the PLA to spearhead a surge in PRC power and influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond—responding appropriately, according to the narrative created by the Xi leadership, to 'dangerous storms' abroad in the world.

The modernisation of the PLA has thus become, as a party plenum stressed in 2024, ‘an integral part of Chinese modernisation’.⁶⁰

And the party is eager to underline its full awareness of contemporary shifts in war making. A recent article in the party flagship *People’s Daily* says:

New-quality combat capability is an original and iconic concept proposed by President Xi, reflecting his keen understanding of global military development trends and the laws of modern warfare [as shown in] recent global wars and military operations, such as the Ukrainian crisis and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict ... The emergence of innovative achievements in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence and their widespread application in the military are driving a new trend in warfare: the integration of mechanisation, informatisation, and intelligence.

The article adds that battlefield space is becoming multidimensional space; combat platforms are transitioning to uncrewed operations; combat command is evolving into intelligent systems, military strikes’ precision and immediacy; and control over war is elevating to ‘control over the brain’.⁶¹

The immense resources poured into this top-priority CCP project as a result, chiefly through the development of the MCF structure, have ensured the rapid modernisation of the equipment available for the PLA on land, at sea, in the air, in space and in cyberspace.

Despite that, the PLA is still seen to require the experience and the talented personnel, doctrinal changes, decision-making structures and practice that are needed to turn weapons and platforms into full combat capability, especially if it’s called upon to attempt to seize Taiwan.

The chief challenge to the effective modernisation of the military is Xi Jinping’s lack of confidence in senior military officers. He has purged waves of generals, including those who have ascended to the CMC, many of whom had appeared especially personally loyal to Xi, who had appointed them. Can he trust a PLA with an existentially important mission for the party, such as taking Taiwan, if he can’t fully trust its most senior officers?

But the modernisation task remains a work in progress. Xi is still strongly intent on pursuing it—on completing his push for the PLA to become fully fit for any purpose that the CCP assigns to it. The PLA’s organisational structure may appear to be one of dual-command, but Xi is determined that at every level the party is paramount.

It would be dangerous for militaries that are clearly or potentially in Xi’s sights to underestimate such singlemindedness.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ASF	Aerospace Force
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMC	Central Military Commission
CNSC	Central National Security Commission
CSF	Cyberspace Force
ISF	Information Support Force
MCF	military–civil fusion
NGO	non-government organisation
NSCs	national security commissions
ONSO	Overall National Security Outlook
PAP	People’s Armed Police
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PRC	People’s Republic of China

