

China announces military overhaul to make PLA Combat Ready

by Angus Grigg and Lisa Murray via jun - AFR *Saturday, Nov 28 2015, 9:00pm*

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Chinese President Xi Jinping has moved to give himself greater control over the country's armed forces as part of sweeping reforms which will also see Beijing establish its first overseas military outpost. The changes announced late on Thursday aim to bolster the navy, dilute the power of individual commanders while making the armed forces more responsive in combat situations.

The reforms will consolidate power around the Central Military Commission (CMC), which is headed by Mr Xi.

"A new structure will be established, in which the CMC takes charge of the overall administration of the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese People's Armed Police," Mr Xi said in a statement.

The overhaul will move China away from a Soviet-style command structure and more towards the American model, while giving greater weight to the navy and air force which have traditionally been overshadowed by the army.

"The military will be able to more quickly respond to urgent incidents," said Liu Jiangping, a military affairs expert at Beihang University.

Mr Liu said the new structure had eliminated four stages in the chain of command "Now it will only take one or two steps to reach the top," he said via phone.

While giving more power to the CMC, the reforms will also see renewed efforts to fight corruption in the military, a process Mr Xi has been accused of using to remove factional rivals and install his own people in key positions.

In a related development, the Ministry of National Defence confirmed the establishment of China's first overseas military outpost, in the east African country of Djibouti.

Beijing stopped short of labelling it a military base saying it was a "supporting facility" for piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and peace-keeping operations in Africa.

China is said to be negotiating a 10-year lease with the Djibouti government, a poverty stricken but strategically important nation in the Horn of Africa.

The United States has 4,000 troops stationed in Djibouti, its only military base in Africa.

The establishment of the Chinese outpost is a departure from the PLA's traditional focus on defending the Chinese mainland and is seen as part of Mr Xi's stated goal of becoming a maritime power.

"It [the outpost] will play an active role in helping the Chinese military to better fulfil its international obligations," said the Ministry of National Defence.

The military reforms, announced after a three-day meeting of the country's top brass in Beijing, aim to transform the PLA from a lumbering, corrupt and highly bureaucratic organisation into a modern fighting force.

This process began on September 3, when Mr Xi said troop numbers would be cut by 300,000 to around 2 million. More than half of these cuts are expected to involve officials or non-combat personnel.

It has been reported the reforms will see China's seven regional command area collapsed into four.

The traditional dominance of the army is also expected to be diluted with the new command structure giving equal voice to the air force and navy, as China projects power further afield and is more assertive over territorial claims.

"As the country progresses from a large country to a large and powerful one, defence and military development stands at a new and historic starting line," Mr Xi said. He also stressed; "the Communist Party of China has absolute leadership of the armed forces."

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