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China unveils five new theater commands

Move aims to streamline military coordination

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President Xi Jinping hands over a military flag to Commander Zhao Zongqi and Political Commissar Zhu Fuxi of the Western Theater Command on Monday in Beijing at a ceremony marking the establishment of five theater commands. Photo: Xinhua

China on Monday unveiled a long-anticipated plan to regroup its seven military area commands into five theater commands, a move that observers said aims to beef up the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) combat capabilities and enhance its response efficiency through a joint command system to face the challenges of a new era.

The five theater commands, literally "battle zone commands," are named by their strategic locations in north, south, east, west and central China, replacing the current seven military area commands headquartered in Beijing, Nanjing, Chengdu, Ji'nan, Shenyang, Lanzhou and Guangzhou.

At a military flag-conferring ceremony on Monday in Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping, also chairman of the Central Military Commission, told the newly assigned commanders and political commissars that the theater commands will shoulder the responsibility of responding to security threats, safeguarding peace, war containment and winning wars in each strategic location, military newspaper the PLA Daily reported.

Xi urged all theater commands to unwaveringly follow the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and faithfully carry out instructions and orders from the CPC Central Committee and the CMC.

"Each theater command needs to focus on combat, ... enhance the training of joint operations and command, and seek to win the initiative in future wars," Xi said.

The establishment of the theater commands marks historic progress in the PLA construction of a joint battle command system, Chinese defense ministry spokesperson Yang Yujun said at a press conference on Monday in Beijing.

Yang noted that the establishment of theater commands is in line with a three-tier "CMC-theater commands-troops" system.

Under this system, the CMC is the top command, the theater commands will be able to deploy various forces in the region for combat, and each branch of the military will focus on training their own troops.

The mechanism was introduced in November 2015 when Xi unveiled the nation's military reform blueprint, which analysts praised for boosting command efficiency and combat capabilities.

Under the CMC's leadership, the theater commands will focus on engagement, while the PLA army, navy and air force will focus on developing their respective forces, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

Meanwhile, a drastic change can be noticed in the appointment of new political commissars and commanders of the theater commands, as some top officers have been assigned to a different strategic location from their previous position.

For example, Liu Yuejun, former commander of Lanzhou Military Area Command in the country's northwest has been appointed commander of the Eastern Theater Command.

The personnel adjustment is in line with the PLA's routine practices of training senior military officers to become familiar with each strategic location, Fang Bing, a professor at the PLA National Defense University told the Global Times.

He added that more senior officers from the navy and air force will be assigned in the future as top leaders of the theater commands.

Song Zhongping, a Beijing-based military expert, said that the reshuffle can strengthen the authority of the CMC's leadership by preventing cliques within the armed forces and inertia of senior officers.

Adjustment of forces

While no official details have been revealed regarding the exact regions covered by each theater command, analysts pointed out that the newly established commands will likely address the new challenges faced by China as a growing world power.

According to Song, the Western Theater Command may shoulder more responsibilities in counterterrorism, while the eastern and southern commands will face more threats from the East and South China Seas - each requiring a different style of joint battle command.

"The different strategic locations will require an adjustment of different PLA forces inside each theater command. The PLA army, which formerly had a larger proportion in the previous military area commands, is likely to see a reduced proportion, while other forces - including the navy, air force and the rocket force - will see a bigger role," Song said.

The PLA has also adjusted its different forces under the theater commands based on the functions of the PLA navy and air force, as well as previous military area commands, Yang told reporters at the Monday conference.

Fang pointed out that the adjustment of PLA forces under a theater command system is also in line with the practices of the world's leading military powers.

"The previous mechanism with seven military commands was set up when China was under heavy military pressure from the north, but the nation's security environment has changed over the decades, hence requiring a re-drawing of area commands addressing different strategic locations," Fang noted.

Fang added that as the new theater commands are in full charge of their respective regional forces in certain part of the country, they will be able to concentrate on dealing with specific challenges, a more efficient system than the previous structure which saw overlaps.

Meanwhile, Fang denied accusations that China's military reform to strengthen combat capabilities is an act of muscle-flexing, stressing that China's military strategy in active defense has not changed.

The defense ministry also reiterated that China's defense policy is defensive in nature and its military strategy features active defense.

The Chinese military intends to seek more military cooperation and make greater contribution to safeguarding world peace.