

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*New Frontiers in
China's Military
Organisation*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:
Anushka Saxena

19 November 2025

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Speaker: Ms. Anushka Saxena, Staff Research Analyst, Indo-Pacific Studies Programme, Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru; and, Doctoral Research Scholar, Manipal Institute of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal.

Chair: Mr. M.V. Rappai, Security Analyst; and, Emeritus Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- Ms. Saxena began by situating China's military reforms within its long-term strategic assessment of the global security environment. She explained that since the 1990s, the PLA has believed that future wars will be shaped primarily by information technologies and network-centric operations. This perception has guided various phases of PLA modernisation. The speaker emphasised that China sees information dominance as the prerequisite for battlefield superiority. She also noted that reforms have consistently aimed to align the force structure with this evolving understanding. As a result, informatisation has become the foundation upon which new institutional innovations have been built.
- The speaker analysed the significance of the 2015 military reforms as a structural turning point in the PLA's evolution. She explained that the abolition of the four general departments dismantled an old bureaucratic structure that had become inefficient for joint operations. The establishment of Theatre Commands shifted the PLA's focus toward a more operation-centric and mission-oriented framework. Ms. Saxena argued that this transition allowed the leadership to redistribute power, strengthen Party control, and narrow systemic gaps between services. She highlighted that these reforms created the conditions to introduce specialised formations. This set the stage for China's current approach to multi-domain warfare.
- The disaggregation of the Strategic Support Force (SSF) marks China's entry into new military organisational frontiers. She explained that the SSF, once responsible for space, cyber, electronic, and information operations, has now been dismantled and replaced by three discrete forces. This reflects Beijing's recognition that each domain

requires specialised command structures, dedicated expertise, and coherent chain of command. She argued that this change acknowledges the operational complexity of emerging domains, particularly cyber and space. The speaker also pointed out that a single umbrella organisation limited the PLA's effectiveness by creating bottlenecks. The new structure, therefore, signals a more domain-specific model of modern warfare.

- Ms. Saxena highlighted the emergence of the Information Support Force (ISF), which is central to China's pursuit of joint operations. The ISF is responsible for battlefield communications, data transmission, information networks, and real-time decision-support systems. This formation ensures that all branches of the PLA — land, air, sea, cyber, and space — operate on a unified information grid. The speaker emphasised that the ISF's elevation reflects the recognition that information flow is the backbone of modern warfare. She argued that the PLA seeks to shorten the sensor-to-shooter cycle through integrated data support. The ISF, thus, represents China's attempt to institutionalise information dominance as a warfighting principle.
- Ms. Saxena examined the creation of the Cyberspace Force as a major step in consolidating China's cyber warfare capabilities. She explained that cyber responsibilities were previously divided across multiple departments, creating duplication, inefficiencies and coordination challenges. The new formation centralises both offensive and defensive cyber operations, providing the PLA with a clearer strategic posture in cyberspace. The speaker argued that this reflects global trends where leading militaries treat cyberspace as a full-fledged warfighting domain. She added that China views cyber operations as crucial for strategic deterrence, information control, and disrupting adversary command systems. This organisational upgrade enhances China's ability to conduct integrated cyber campaigns.
- The speaker also explored the significance of the Aerospace Force and China's ambition for space superiority. She noted that this formation oversees satellite operations, space-based intelligence, navigation systems, and counter-space missions. By extracting these responsibilities from the old SSF, China ensures a more specialised, technically focused command structure. The speaker argued that space systems underpin nearly all PLA operations, from missile guidance to reconnaissance.

She also highlighted China's interest in denying adversaries access to space assets, reflecting broader anti-access strategies. The Aerospace Force, therefore, plays a key role in ensuring dominance over strategic high ground.

- Ms. Saxena analysed the broader implications of these reforms for command clarity, political control, and organisational efficiency. She explained that separating cyber, space, and information functions reduces internal friction and enables more precise chains of command. The speaker noted that political supervision is simultaneously strengthened, ensuring that new formations remain firmly aligned with Party leadership. She argued that efficiency gains are expected across training, recruitment, and operational planning. These reforms also allow the PLA to respond more rapidly to domain-specific threats. Overall, the organisational model now better reflects the demands of 21st century warfare.
- The speaker concluded by emphasising that China's reforms reflect its preparation for multi-domain, intelligentised warfare. She stated that the PLA views the future battlefield as an integrated environment where information, cyber, space, and traditional domains interact simultaneously. The creation of specialised formations is, therefore, part of a systemic effort to modernise command structures, technology adoption, and operational doctrine. The speaker argued that China aims to gain advantage by integrating AI, automation, and data fusion into its warfighting systems. She highlighted that these reforms serve both strategic and political objectives, including enhancing Xi Jinping's control over the military. Ultimately, China's new organisational frontiers reveal its ambition to achieve decisive superiority in future conflicts.

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