

# If you want peace, prepare for war: Chinese land forces modernisation

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**China's military modernisation began in the mid-1990s after Beijing realised that its military was incapable of participating in a modern conflict such as the 1991 Gulf War. *Sam Cranny-Evans* reports on the extent to which China's land forces have been transformed by the process**

The modernisation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was a process that has had to start from the very top of the organisation and filter down to the lowest tactical elements. The ultimate goal is to create a modern army that is capable of conducting joint operations under a unified command-and-control (C2) system. This has forced Beijing to shift focus and favour away from the land forces so that it can bring its naval and air elements up to the standard required. At the same time the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has removed power from the PLA's general departments, which the party said had grown too powerful to supervise and were incapable of modernising or improving the armed forces.

In this context, and despite a shift in focus away from the land forces, the PLA Ground Force (PLAGF) has received most of the funds and new equipment that have been made available. As a result, on the surface the PLAGF appears to be a modern and capable force that is well armed and ready to face the threats of the future battlespace.



*A column of Chinese Type 99 MBTs and support vehicles on manoeuvres. Type 99s rarely appear in Chinese MND publications, but they are touted as an answer to Western MBT designs. (Chinese MND)*

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The projected completion date for PLA modernisation is 2020, which coincides with the end of the 13th armed forces development plan and by this time the PLA will be required to be capable of winning “local wars under conditions of informationalisation”. The definition of ‘local wars’ may have two meanings, the first being conflicts with China’s neighbours – such as Taiwan, India, and nations around the South China Sea – while the second could be short-duration, high-intensity regional conflicts conducted at a distance from the Chinese mainland. In either scenario it is likely that Chinese forces will soon come into conflict with the United States and that attempts will be made to establish Chinese hegemony in the South China Sea and further abroad.

The PLAGF has an estimated strength of 1,340,000 personnel: a 300,000-person reduction in size from its pre-reform strength of 1,640,000. The service is divided into five theatre commands, designed to give the CCP greater control over the army. The size of the PLAGF means there are considerable disparities in the levels of equipment in service with each command. For example, some formations are still armed with the 1984-vintage Type 59-II main battle tank (MBT), which is ill-suited for modern conflicts against Western or late Soviet-era armoured forces despite a comprehensive upgrade that includes a 105 mm main gun.

However, the leading edge of China’s mechanised forces is much better equipped for modern warfare, with Type 99 and Type 96 MBTs, which provide a considerable increase in capability over the Type 59-II, and the later Type 85 armoured personnel carrier (APC). The Type 99 is China’s most advanced MBT; it is believed to carry a battle management system and advanced fire-control computer and features explosive reactive armour (ERA) over the turret and hull. However, the type is rarely mentioned in Chinese Ministry of National Defence (MND) press releases and did not take part in the recent ‘Vostok 2018’ exercises with Russia.

Although one reason for this might be the cost of the vehicles, another is that, since many of the PLAGF’s recruits are believed to be drawn from the rural regions of China, where literacy and exposure to advanced technologies (smart phones, for instance) is low, the PLAGF may be struggling to attract enough recruits capable of operating the advanced mission systems installed on the Type 99s. Additionally, this may also affect the service’s ability to maintain the vehicles.

The need for technological improvements is not the only influencing factor for the introduction of modern vehicles. A PLA report from the General Armament Department released in 2014 stated, “The average Chinese soldier is two centimetres taller and their waistline five centimetres larger than 20 years ago.” In simple terms this means that many PLA recruits are too large to comfortably use the smaller Type 59s and even some of the earlier Type 96 MBTs. This may have influenced the design of the Type 96B: a variant of the Type 96 released in 2016. The Type 96B is thought to carry an improved fire-control system, as well as a more powerful engine to cope with the additional armour placed on the vehicle. Both changes reflect an increased desire for the PLAGF to arm itself with modern armoured vehicles that can perform on an international stage.

However, having modern equipment does not necessarily lead to a modern army. Much of the official Chinese discourse around the modernisation process reflects the political influence of the CCP. For example, one report in the *People’s Daily* stated the following requirements for PLA personnel: “Adhere to the guidance of [President] Xi Jinping’s strong military ideology, implement the military strategic policy under the new situation, strengthen the mission, strengthen reform and innovation, strengthen the implementation of work, and comprehensively improve the preparations for the new era.”

This underscores how pervasive Xi Jinping's political influence and ideology is over China's military reforms. Meanwhile, the same report later stated, "The officers and men believe that the new era requires the military to have new capabilities, and to have new capabilities it is necessary to focus on actual combat training." This has seemingly been confirmed by other reports on PLAGF training exercises. For example, one story published by Sina in July this year included the following statement from Ma Ruiwen, a tank commander from the 81st Army: "It should be said that, no matter whether the communication link is faulty or the flight plan is not sufficient, it reveals that there are still many problems in our collaborative training, and we need everyone to seriously reflect on it."

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(940 of 3638 words)

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