# Chinese Strategic Support Force (SSF) and Its Evolution After the PLA Reforms

## INTRODUCTION

Creation of the People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force in 2015-16 represented an important part of China's sweeping military reforms under Xi Jinping. Unlike traditional service arms focused on land, sea and air combat, the SSF was designed to consolidate China's capabilities in space, cyber, electronic warfare and defence R&D under a single, centrally controlled organisation.

Although conventional military platforms such as missiles, drones, ships, tanks and aircraft still attract most public and analytical attention, CCP's sustained focus on the SSF suggests that future conflicts will be shaped less by visible hardware and more by control of information, moulding perceptions and dynamic decision making.

This does not imply that the PLA is paying any less attention to military hardware and traditional warfare. Rather, it shows that they are paying as much attention to unconventional warfare as other militaries do to conventional.

Before these reforms, Chinese capabilities related to space, cyber operations, electronic warfare and psychological operations were scattered across multiple departments. Space assets were largely controlled by the former General Armaments Department, cyber operations by elements of the former General Staff Department's Third Department, and electronic warfare by the Fourth Department. This fragmentation led to multiple issues such as poor coordination, duplication of effort and slow decision making.

## BRIEF HISTORY

The SSF was created to resolve these issues by centralising strategic information capabilities under a single command directly subordinate to the Central Military Commission (CMC). This signaled Chinese belief of dominance in the information domain as a core pillar of modern warfare.

The role, locations and assets of various units from pre-2015 reforms were more or less collated into a joint command structure which was supposed to make decision making and allocation of resources faster and efficient. Most older departments and institutes retained their old addresses and resources. Additionally,

most of the Military Unit Cover Designators (MUCDs) remained in use, even though names of units and commands were changed. MUCD is a unique five digit identifier assigned to each PLA unit at Regiment, Brigade or equivalent and higher level.
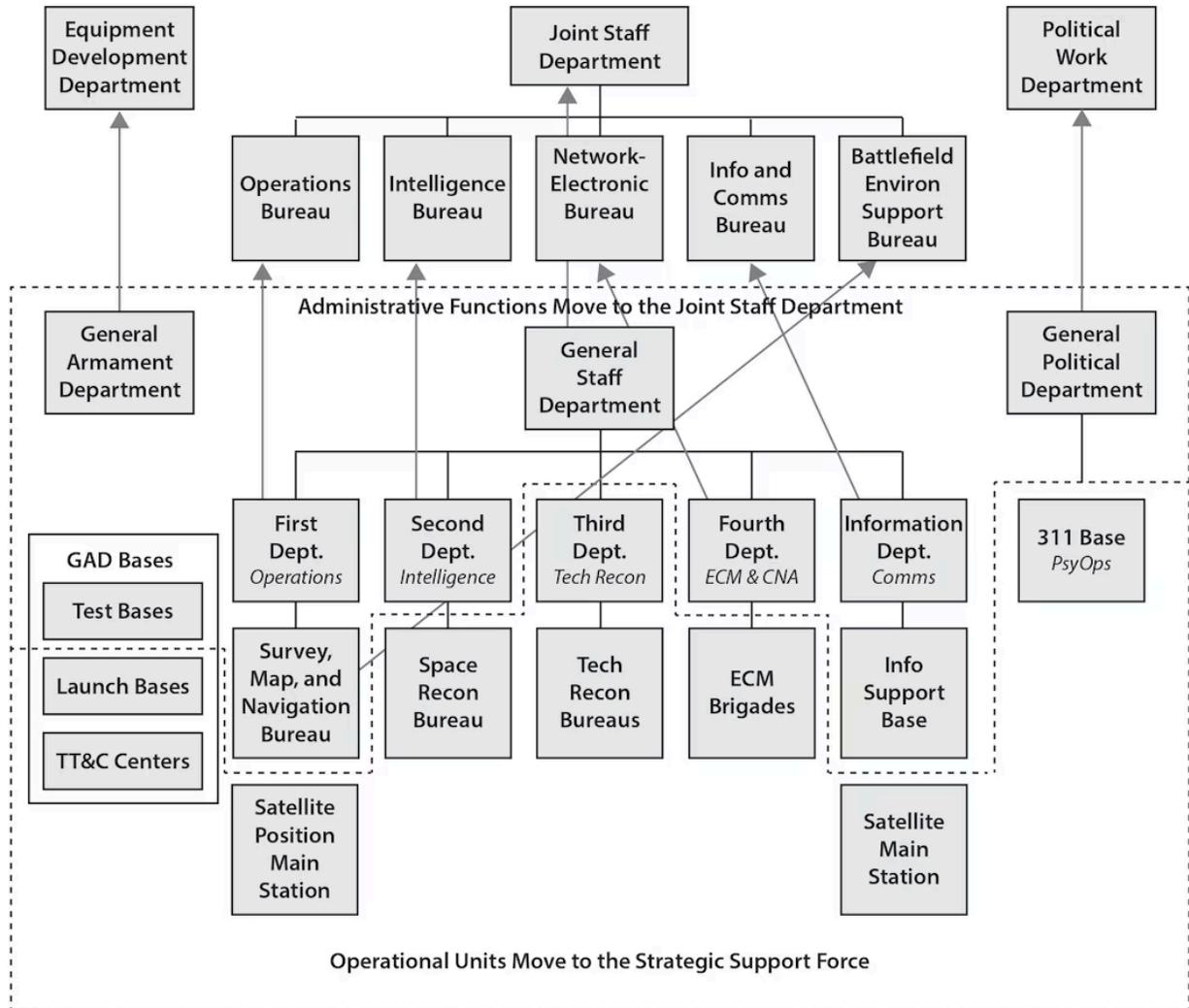
For example, 57th Research Institute meant for satellite communications had MUCD 61482 and had at least three offices with three different provinces. It continued to operate in the same addresses with the same MUCDs.

On the other hand, reform and upgrades of PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) led to assigning of new MUCDs to a pretty large number of units even when their locations and assigned roles largely stayed the same.

From 2016 till 2024, SSF HQ had following six major departments under its direct command:
1. Staff Department
2. Logistics Department
3. Political Work Department
4. Equipment Department
5. Network Systems Department
6. Space Systems Department

Figure 1. Pre-Reform Locations of Major SSF Components

Key: ECM: electronic countermeasures; GAD: General Armament Department; PsyOps: psychological operations; TT&C: telemetry, tracking, and control; GPD: General Political

IMAGE: Pre-reform locations of major SSF units[1]

SSF was controlled directly by CMC, like the PLARF and unlike PLA Army (PLAA), PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) which were

[1] China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era By John Costello and Joe McReynolds https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1748555/chinas-strategic-support-force-a-force-for-a-new-era/

assigned to regional Theatre Commands (TC). Command of some of SSF's resources could have been allocated to respective TC HQs if needed.

## 2024 REFORMS & THE NEW FORCES

After operating for nearly 8 years under this structure, SSF was formally disbanded in 2024 and split into three new forces. The core functions remained the same, just split into separate entities for presumably better centralised control and specialised focus. The three new forces have the same Deputy Theatre Command leader grade and thus are positioned below TC in the command structure.[2]  After these reforms, CMC commands four services (Army, Air Force, Navy and Rocket Force) and four arms (Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, Information Support Force and Joint Logistics Support Force).[3]

Here, we'll be focusing on the three new forces:

**PLA Aerospace Force (ASF)**
It comprises SSF units responsible for CMC's space related missions such as space based Intelligence, Surveillance, and

[2] China's new Information Support Force
https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/05/chinas-new-information-support-force/
[3] The Chinese Military's New Information Support Force
https://www.cna.org/our-media/indepth/2024/08/chinese-information-support-force

Reconnaissance (ISR), military satellites and counter space operations. Derived from erstwhile SSF's Space Systems Department, it is considered largely analogous to the American Space force. It indicates that China now treats space as an independent domain for warfare.

ASF consists of multiple bureaus and other units which include Aerospace Reconnaissance Bureau, China Astronaut Research and Training Centre, Beijing Institute for Tracking and Telecommunications, Xi'an Satellite Control Center and a few others.[4] One of the more interesting units is Battlefield Environment Support Base or Base 35 with MUCD 32020 located in Wuchang District of Wuhan.[5]

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[4] PLA Military Aerospace Force: On the Frontier of Innovation and Competition
https://jamestown.org/pla-military-aerospace-force-on-the-frontier-of-innovation-and-competition/
[5] https://www.hbzknet.com/show_31.html

IMAGE: Battlefield Environment Support Base or Base 35[6]

[6] Google Earth and https://www.hbzknet.com/show_31.html

It commands a bunch of other units which include five Battlefield Environment Support Centres and a few others related to satellite operations and navigation.

ASF as an organisation now commands most of Chinese space based surveillance, communications and warfare assets. It enables CMC to keep track of Taiwanese fortifications, American carrier battle groups as well as Indian activities on Indo-Tibet and Indo-Xinjiang borders and high seas in a theatre specific yet centralised manner.

## PLA Cyberspace Force (CSF)

Derived from SSF's Network System's Department, it largely follows the same mandate. Its core roles include offensive and defensive cyber operations, data networks exploitation and maintaining national cyber and information security. Considering that PLA now considers offensive cyber operations as the first line of offence in any sort of open or covert warfare, the importance of this force in Chinese war planning can't be overstated.

This force currently operates in form of five regional Technical Reconnaissance Bases (TRB) in line with the five TCs:

1. Western TRB. Longquanyi District, Chengdu.
2. Eastern TRB. Qixia District, Nanjing.
3. Northern TRB. Shenhe District, Shenyang.
4. Southern TRB. Baiyun District, Guangzhou.
5. Central TRB. Haidian District, Beijing.

Additionally, it operates one Cyberspace Operations Base (COB) responsible for warfare in cyber, electronic and psychological domains in addition to specialised research and development in these fields. This COB commands atleast five known units in Ledong, Nyingchi, Yanqing. Yingtang and Nicheng.



IMAGE: PLA CSF's Cyberspace Operations Base in Tibet (under expansion). Antennas can track multiple satellites.[7]

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[7] https://www.bing.com/maps

**PLA Information Support Force (ISF)**

While AFS and CSF have their specific warfare niches, ISF is meant for creation and maintenance of joint information support networks for support of other PLA arms and forces. It is responsible for a centralised application of network information systems across all aspects of PLA operations. Its official roles include creating, operating and maintaining a robust joint network information system to support PLA's joint informationised warfare doctrine.

Like ASF and CSF, it did inherit a few units and resources from the SSF, but it seems like a significant portion of its component units is being raised from scratch. One of such major units could be the former Information and Communication Base which originally was commanded by PLA's General Staff Department.
Some of the units are involved with set-up, maintenance and security of Chinese optical fibre networks like one with MUCD 75841 (exact name unknown) which has 19 known detachments spread across multiple provinces.[8]

## The Capability Jump

The 2024 restructuring of PLA SSF is a lot more than just a bureaucratic reshuffle. It is an upgrade based upon experience, changing technologies and a reform of Chinese

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[8] PLA unit 75841, for security of Chinese communication lines
https://jjamwal.in/yayavar/pla-unit-75841-for-security-of-chinese-communication-lines/

multi-dimensional warfare capabilities. The three new forces consolidate and centralise PLA's resources for grey zone warfare and provide it capabilities to start and dominate the non-kinetic part of overt as well as covert warfare with well planned escalatory ladder.

Combined with the huge number of space launches, ASF provides a huge capability jump in the fields of satellite imagery acquisition, signals intelligence and remote sensing. CSF enables CMC to exert immense pressure on all adversaries via cyber espionage and public opinion shaping without declaring a direct war. ISF ensures that data flows seamlessly from a satellite high up in space to an Artillery Brigade commander in Tibet. This shortens the decision making cycles and helps with combined arms operations on all fronts.

Some of these capabilities were observed during Operation Sindoor where a huge amount of anti-India and pro-Pakistan propaganda was generated and methodically spread across social media and various other platforms within a very short amount of time. [9] Additionally, China helped Pakistan with real

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[9] Twitter  https://x.com/anshu217/status/1989229559351541962

time tactical and intelligence data[10], very likely generated by these three new forces.

## Conclusion

For Chinese adversaries as well as allies, these upgrades and consolidation of Chinese grey zone warfare assets is as big a threat as the more traditional armed forces. PLA's new capabilities of data theft, cyber attacks, anti-satellite operations and cognitive warfare have a lot more to do with extending CMC's territorial and influential hegemony than defensive. The multiple consecutive reforms indicate that PLA treats them as iterative processes aligned with evolving doctrine and technology, rather than as static achievements. One key lesson here is that Chinese military power should be analysed more by the continuity of function and intent, not just changing doctrines, organisations and people.

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[10] China gave Pakistan radar, satellite aid during border standoff with India, claims report https://www.msn.com/en-in/money/topstories/china-gave-pakistan-radar-satellite-aid-during-border-standoff-with-india-claims-report/

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