



CENTRE FOR  
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STUDIES

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**PLA MODERNISATION FROM DEMONSTRATION,  
ABSORPTION TO EXECUTION OF REFORMS  
BY  
LT COL JS SODHI (RETD)**

**ORGANISED BY CENJOWS  
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## **CHINA'S PLA MODERNISATION AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES**

**BY LT COL JS SODHI (RETD)**

**ORGANISED BY CENJOWS ON 23 APR 2026**

The guest lecture delivered by Lt Col J S Sodhi provided a comprehensive and insightful analysis of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), focusing on its modernisation, strategic ambitions, and evolving geopolitical posture. The session brought together scholars and military analysts, fostering an engaging discussion on contemporary security challenges, particularly in relation to China's growing military capabilities.

The lecture began by tracing the transformation of the PLA from a relatively weak naval force during the 1990s, especially evident during the Taiwan Strait crisis, to becoming the world's largest navy by 2015. This rapid evolution was attributed to China's long-term strategic planning and sustained investment in military infrastructure and technology. The speaker emphasised that China's primary strategic objectives centre on Taiwan, the Spratly Islands, and Arunachal Pradesh, with clearly defined timelines for potential military engagements and overall modernisation.

A key focus of the lecture was the phased reform of the PLA under Xi Jinping's leadership. Beginning in 2012, these reforms have significantly restructured China's military apparatus. The 2015 reforms replaced seven military regions with five theatre commands, enhancing joint operational efficiency. More recently, the 2024 reforms have shifted the PLA's focus from platform-centric warfare to information-centric warfare, highlighting the growing importance of cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and integrated command systems.

The integration of artificial intelligence into China's military strategy was another critical aspect discussed. China's AI ambitions, supported by initiatives such as the 2017 New Generation AI Development Plan, aim to position the country as a global leader by 2030. The speaker highlighted developments such as AI-enabled drones and autonomous systems, which are intended to compensate for the PLA's lack of recent combat experience. This reliance on advanced technology underscores China's approach to modern warfare, where technological superiority acts as a force multiplier.

The lecture also addressed China's strategic timelines, noting that the PLA aims to be capable of undertaking major military operations by 2027, achieve full modernisation by 2035, and become a world-class military power by 2049. Taiwan was identified as the most immediate objective, followed by the Spratly Islands and Arunachal Pradesh. The importance of strong political backing, clear strategic goals, and efficient execution was highlighted as central to China's military success.

Despite its advancements, the PLA's lack of combat experience since the 1979 conflict with Vietnam remains a limitation. The speaker noted that China is attempting to offset this gap through investments in rocket forces, AI, and other advanced technologies. This technological emphasis is designed to enhance operational readiness and reduce dependence on traditional combat experience.

The strategic importance of the Spratly Islands was discussed in the context of regional dominance in the South China Sea. The speaker argued that China's control over these islands would significantly strengthen its geopolitical position, especially given the limited capacity of other claimant states and the unlikely prospect of direct U.S. military intervention.

In the discussion on India's strategic position, the speaker emphasised the importance of maintaining strong relations with neighbouring countries to counterbalance China's influence. However, he noted that many of India's neighbours have increasingly aligned with China economically. To address this, India must improve its project execution, enforce accountability, and accelerate infrastructure and diplomatic initiatives.

When questioned about potential allies in a Sino-Indian conflict, the speaker expressed scepticism about external support. While countries like Israel may provide limited technological assistance, major powers such as the United States and Russia are unlikely to intervene directly. Consequently, India must be prepared to operate independently in the event of a conflict.

The lecture further explored China's evolving objectives in Arunachal Pradesh, including the strategic significance of infrastructure projects. The concept of multi-domain warfare, encompassing land, sea, air, cyber, electronic, and even water domains, was highlighted as a defining feature of China's military strategy.

Finally, the session examined the broader geopolitical dynamics of the South China Sea. The speaker noted that regional states lack the capacity to effectively challenge China, and the United States shows limited interest in escalating military tensions. India, in turn, is likely to remain focused on its immediate regional concerns rather than intervening in distant conflicts.

In conclusion, the lecture underscored the importance of strategic clarity, political will, and technological advancement in modern military transformation. It also highlighted key lessons for India, particularly the need for stronger regional engagement, improved governance in project execution, and increased investment in emerging technologies. The session provided valuable insights into the shifting balance of power in Asia and the challenges posed by China's rising military capabilities.