

Amendment to China's National Defence Mobilisation Law

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On 31 August, Xi Jinping promulgated an amendment to the 2010 National Defence Mobilisation Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国国防动员法), which will enter into force on 1 October this year. The amendment does not fundamentally overhaul China's mobilisation system, but significantly expands the state's capacity to rapidly mobilise all types of resources, including technological and digital assets. It also strengthens the direct leadership role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Xi Jinping himself, effectively removing state institutions from the decision-making process. It further deepens civil-military fusion, tightens control over supply chains and the reserve system and establishes a mechanism to control data, technology and economic resources. There are currently no grounds to regard these legislative changes as part of Beijing's planning for any specific offensive action in the near term. However, they are consistent with a long-term policy of systematically preparing China for a potential conflict with the United States.

For the first time, the law defines mobilisation and states that its purpose is 'to ensure a rapid transition between peace and war'. The amended law links mobilisation with economic development and the emergency response system, with provisions covering strategic reserves, transport, healthcare and cybersecurity. Mobilisation will encompass not only the armed forces and the defence industry, but also state-owned enterprises and the private sector, electronic data and virtually all 'civilian resources'.

The amended law also integrates the mobilisation system much more closely with the emergency management system. This is significant given the increasing frequency of natural disasters in China. Preventing them and mitigating their consequences constitute one of the pillars of the CCP's domestic legitimacy.

The Party at the helm

The amendment more explicitly subordinates the mobilisation system to the leadership of the CCP, including local Party committees, and reduces the role of state institutions to implementing the Party's decisions. Article 3 now explicitly states that 'national defence mobilisation work shall uphold the leadership of the CCP, implement Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military, adhere to the Holistic Approach to National Security and implement the military strategic guideline for the New Era'. This also strengthens the direct authority of the CCP General Secretary over the mobilisation process. In this respect, the amendment represents a further step in Xi Jinping's efforts to tighten his control over the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The provision stating that the State Council and the state Central Military Commission of the PRC 'jointly lead all national defence mobilisation work and formulate relevant policies, guidelines and regulations' has been removed, thus eliminating state bodies from the entire decision-making process and vesting leadership in the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the CCP Central Committee. The State National Defence Mobilisation Commission has likewise been placed under the 'centralised and unified leadership of the CCP Central Committee'. From 1 October, local mobilisation commissions will also operate under the leadership of the CCP committee at the corresponding level and under the supervision of the commission at the next higher level.

A return to total war

The changes to the law clearly respond to the global shift in the security environment away from 'small, professional peacetime armies' towards a model in which a state is capable of waging a prolonged conflict by drawing on the full resources of its society and economy. For China itself, this is not a new development, but rather a modernised return to the Maoist concept of 'protracted people's war', which has its counterpart in Europe's total defence strategy. However, the two models should not be conflated. The difference lies in China's more far-reaching objectives of centralisation and the administrative subordination of the economy and society to wartime requirements and, above all, its reliance on rigid hierarchy, whereas European models tend to see strength in networked structures and the autonomy of their constituent elements.

In practical terms, the amendment provides the state with a legal basis for systematically collecting and updating data on its mobilisation potential. The law introduces the concept of 'dynamic updating' of information on reserves. Mobilisation now also extends to companies operating in advanced technology sectors, electronic data collection, cybersecurity and software development. Strategic reserves encompass not only goods, but also technologies and production capabilities, with the private sector assuming greater responsibilities and playing a larger role in national defence, and with mere registration for potential PLA use now serving as a means of maintaining the reserve.

Responsibility for reserves has shifted from local conscription offices to state authorities and military bodies at all levels, in accordance with their respective competences. State agencies, organisations and enterprises are required to provide support. The amended law also mandates that defence requirements be taken into account throughout the planning, design, construction and maintenance of infrastructure.

State-owned and private enterprises, organisations and individuals may be assigned tasks related to the storage, transport and distribution of strategic reserves. Once mobilisation begins, they must prioritise meeting defence requirements. At the same time, the state will encourage enterprises, institutions and social organisations to expand physical stockpiles, 'technological reserves' and 'production capacity reserves'. The objective is not only to safeguard defence production, but also to build peacetime capacity for a rapid production surge in the event of conflict.

Rapid production surge

The amendment also establishes a more comprehensive system of mobilisation plans, tests and exercises. Defence companies are required to regularly practise converting and scaling

up production, and to maintain backup databases and software. China's mobilisation concept is clearly shifting towards 'reserving capacity' rather than merely stockpiling products. For the first time, the law explicitly mandates assessments of the resilience and security of military-industrial and supply chains. The aim is to ensure the smooth functioning of defence production and to maintain the capacity to expand it rapidly.

The amended law expands the scope for taking control of civilian resources. If reserves prove insufficient once mobilisation has begun, authorities at county level and above may requisition or otherwise take over civilian resources. The definition of 'resources' now explicitly includes 'means of transport', while the term 'other materials' has been replaced with the broader 'other resources'. Given the amendment's emphasis on cybersecurity, this suggests that the state also reserves the right to take control of resources in this domain, such as the computing capacity of private enterprises, including those operating in the artificial intelligence sector.

This is also an element of 'reserving capacity', as the CCP treats propaganda, domestic information control and disinformation activities as components of warfare and seeks to retain the ability to rapidly scale up its capabilities in these areas. This is further evidenced by the legal basis the law provides for managing information platforms and countering 'false information' during mobilisation.