

Promoting “Young Guards”: The Recent High Turnover in the PLA Leadership (Part II: Expansion and Escalation)

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The most noticeable trend under the leadership of Xi Jinping since the 2012 National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been the continuing consolidation of power. In particular, the military has been a key forum in which Xi has strengthened both his personal power and his new administration’s authority. Xi has adopted several approaches and political tactics to achieve this, including purging the two highest-ranking generals under the previous administration for corruption and other charges; arresting 52 senior military officers on various charges of wrongdoing; reshuffling generals between regions, departments, and services; attempting to systematically reform the PLA’s structure and operations; and, last but not least, rapidly promoting “young guards” (少壮派) in the Chinese military.

These bold moves will have profound implications, not only for Xi’s political standing in the lead-up to the next leadership turnover in 2017, but also for the development of civilian-military relations in the country and for the trajectory of China’s military modernization. The second installment in this series focuses on the reform of the military, including a detailed discussion of the background and chronology of the military reform plan. Although this reform is only in the initial stage of a multi-year plan, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has already undergone its greatest transformation—in terms of administrative lineup, operational theaters, and strategic priorities—since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

While China’s economic slowdown and the resulting socioeconomic tensions within the country have dominated public concerns both in China and abroad over the past few months, President Xi Jinping has won a milestone victory in restructuring the PLA. With this unprecedentedly large-scale and multifaceted transformation, known as the “military reform” (军改), Xi Jinping has profoundly revamped the PLA administrative lineup, restructured the operational theaters, and reshuffled officers across departments, regions, and services. These far-reaching changes are also paving the way for the rapid promotion of “young guards,” many of whom are seen either as Xi’s long-time protégés or his new loyalists.

Although it will take another five years to complete the military reform as scheduled for 2020, some major structural changes occurred immediately after Xi Jinping’s important speech in November 2015 and the announcement of the Central Military Commission’s “Resolution on Deepening the Reform of National Defense and the Military.”¹ China watchers have long considered the PLA to be the “most critical and most mysterious

domain of Chinese politics.”² Also, it has been widely recognized for decades that the Chinese military is markedly unprepared for modern warfare, as the PLA structure has not been conducive to commanding joint force operations.³ According to some analysts, “China’s military has not adapted to the modern era.”⁴ Xi’s grand military reform at least partially aims to address this long-standing problem.

The fact that Xi has “shown ability to impose his will on the PLA,” as a recent *Wall Street Journal* article observes, is a stunning contrast to his predecessors.⁵ Xi’s “sweeping change” to the PLA reflects “a skill that his predecessor Hu Jintao lacked utterly and that Jiang Zemin wielded inconsistently,” notes a seasoned overseas scholar of the Chinese military.⁶ The Chinese official media also claim that various changes in the PLA over the past few decades have been largely “piecemeal” (零敲碎打) in nature.⁷ By contrast, Chinese authorities characterize the current military reform as a “whole package of reform” (一揽子改革).⁸ A prominent Chinese media outlet, *China Newsweek*, calls the military reform a “revolutionary change” (革命性的改革) that is expected to “rebuild a modern military power system with Chinese characteristics.”⁹

It is not surprising that such a far-reaching change in the Chinese military would confront strong resistance. In many ways, the ongoing military reform is unprecedented in terms of the vested interests it affects. As the Chinese official media acknowledge, the strongest resistance to reform primarily relates to large-scale personnel changes.¹⁰ In 2015, prior to the reform, the PLA senior leadership consisted of about 1,500 high-ranking officers, including 2 vice chairmen and 8 members of the Central Military Commission (CMC), 23 full military-region-level officers (正大军区级), 105 deputy military-region-level officers (副大军区级), 395 full army-level officers (正军级), and 966 deputy army-level officers (副军级).¹¹ Many of these officers are expected to retire in the next two years. Some retirements will be due to age limits while others will be the result of structural changes that are part of the military reform plan. In fact, even the “system of levels of military officers” (将领级别) is subject to major change.¹² Also, among the 66 senior officers who serve on the 18th Central Committee of the CCP, 40 of them (61 percent) are expected to step down when the new Central Committee is formed in 2017. In fact, two members were recently purged on corruption charges and 27 other members have already retired.¹³

This large-scale turnover of the military leadership should not come as a surprise. As some overseas analysts observe, Xi Jinping successively purged Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong—two vice chairmen of the CMC from the previous administration—on corruption charges, including selling military positions and ranks. But a large number of Xu and Guo protégés (some of whom “bought” their senior military positions) remain in the PLA leadership.¹⁴ In order to remove obstacles to military reform, Xi Jinping was reported to have stated firmly: “Any officers who oppose the military reform should step down.”¹⁵

Also unsurprisingly, rumors about PLA leadership personnel matters have spread over the past few months. For example, some overseas media mistakenly reported that General Jia Ting’an, a confidant of former party boss Jiang Zemin, was under house arrest at the Rocket Force Hospital.¹⁶ Other analysts mistakenly surmised that, as a result of military reform, the CMC has expanded to become a leadership body with over 20 members,

including heads of the 15 agencies in the CMC, commanders of the five forces, and commanders of the five theaters of operations.¹⁷ These analysts apparently failed to grasp the delicate balancing act Xi Jinping must perform to avoid challenging Jiang Zemin. They also misperceived the nature and objectives of the ongoing structural changes within the PLA.

It was a surprise, however, that two very prominent generals, former political commissar of the PLA General Logistics Department Liu Yuan and former commander of the Nanjing Military Region Cai Yingting, did not receive widely anticipated promotions following the recent leadership reshuffling in the PLA.¹⁸ Liu played arguably the most critical role of anyone in the PLA in helping purge Gu Junshan, Xu Caihou, and Guo Boxiong—the three biggest “tigers” in the military leadership—during Xi’s anti-corruption campaign. It was widely believed that Liu would win a seat or even a vice chairmanship on the CMC in recognition of his immense contribution to Xi’s anti-graft campaign in the military. But instead of obtaining a pivotal position of power, he retired from the PLA. Cai Yingting, one of Xi’s closest confidants in the military, also lost the opportunity for a top position, such as leading the newly reorganized Joint Chief Department or the newly established Army Headquarters.¹⁹ Instead, he was appointed as president of the PLA Academy of Military Science, a position that is unlikely to allow him to serve on the next CMC. The overseas Chinese media characterize Cai Yingting as having been marginalized (边缘化) as a result of this latest reshuffling.²⁰

What are the main features and ultimate objectives of military reform? How can Xi Jinping make sweeping changes in the PLA leadership at a time when he needs to avoid making too many enemies in the political and military establishments? How does Xi perform this delicate balancing act? Answering these crucial questions will greatly enhance our understanding of both the ongoing transformation of this new Asia-Pacific military power, and the capabilities and political strategies of its commander-in-chief, Xi Jinping.

Background and Chronology of the Military Reform Plan

The idea for military reform was introduced in the resolution of the third plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP, held in November 2013.²¹ Four months later, on March 15, 2014, the CMC Leading Group for Deepening Reform of the National Defense and the Military, which was headed by CMC Chairman Xi Jinping, was formally established. At this inaugural meeting, Xi Jinping appointed his close political ally Xu Qiliang (CMC vice chairman) to be executive deputy head of the leading group, effectively demoting Fan Changlong (CMC executive vice chairman), who served as deputy head of the leading group. This unconventional swap in the authority of these two CMC vice chairmen reflects Xi’s resolve to tightly control the reform process for the PLA and his intention to make major personnel changes in the coming years.²²

At the second meeting of the leading group, held on January 27, 2015, various proposals for military reform were discussed. According to Chinese official sources, these proposals were based on 860 meetings with various stakeholders, organized by members and staffers of the leading group. Meanwhile, those members and staffers conducted 690 so-called “field visits to institutions and troop headquarters” (军地单位调研). In addition,

they solicited comments at individual meetings with about 900 military leaders (both active and retired) at the army level (军级) or above and reviewed over 2,000 completed questionnaires from officers at the brigade and division levels (师旅级).²³

At the third meeting of the leading group, which took place on July 14, 2015, the “Overall Plan on Deepening the Reform of the National Defense and the Military” was issued.²⁴ On July 22 and 29, respectively, Xi Jinping convened the CMC executive meeting and the CCP Politburo Standing Committee meeting. These two top military and civilian decision-making bodies reviewed and approved this important document. On October 16, 2015, Xi convened the CMC executive meeting again to approve the “Implementation Plan for the PLA Leadership and Command System Reform,” another important document detailing various aspects of and the overall roadmap for military reform.²⁵

On September 3, 2015, Beijing held a grand military parade (大阅兵) to celebrate the 70th anniversary of victory over Japan and the end of World War II. This military extravaganza apparently aimed to fuel the Chinese public’s desire for China to become a major military power. At the same time, the parade also highlighted Xi Jinping’s authority as commander-in-chief of the Chinese military.²⁶ During the parade, Xi announced that 300,000 military personnel would be discharged over the next few years, reducing the total number of PLA members from 2.3 million to 2 million. Analysts have generally interpreted this move as a “less is more” approach—fewer troops but a more-enhanced capacity to conduct modern warfare.²⁷

It is interesting to note that between the two aforementioned top-level leadership meetings on the military reform plan, the Chinese authorities also made important announcements about the prosecution of three top military “tigers”: (1) on March 31, 2014, the prosecution’s case on Gu Junshan was forwarded to the PLA Military Court; (2) on June 30, 2014, the prosecution’s case on Xu Caihou was forwarded to the court; and (3) on July 30, 2015, the prosecution’s case on Guo Boxiong was forwarded to the court. As the previous installment of this series documents, a total of 42 senior officers at the major general level or above (including Gu, Xu, and Guo) were purged during that timeframe.²⁸ Ten more senior officers were arrested after August 2015, bringing the total number of purged senior officers to 52.²⁹ According to unverified sources, General Wang Jianping, former commander of the People’s Armed Police (PAP) and current deputy head of the Joint Staff Department, has been under investigation for corruption. Wang’s father-in-law, son, and *mishu* (personal assistant) are all under house arrest.³⁰ There may or may not be a direct link between the announcements of these prosecutions and investigations and the progress of the military reform plan. Nevertheless, one can reasonably argue that purges of top military officers have silenced some potential opponents in the military establishment.

Following all of the aforementioned preparations, Xi Jinping convened the CMC military reform work conference in the Jingxi Hotel in Beijing from November 24 through November 26, 2015.³¹ About 200 senior civilian and military leaders attended the conference. At the conference, Xi presented the “3-term and 12-character overall guideline” for military reform, in which the CMC takes charge of the centralized and

unified administration of the military (军委管总), the theaters of command focus on combat operations (战区主战), and the various military services pursue their own buildups (军种主建).³²

At the conference, a three-step plan to implement military reform was also announced: (1) for the remaining weeks of 2015, the plan prioritized implementing the reform of the CMC administrative system and the joint operational command system; (2) for 2016, the reform focuses on changes in the military academies and the PAP; and (3) from 2017 to 2020, the reform aims to improve coordination and complete all aspects of the plan.³³

The Quickest and Largest Military Reorganization in PRC History

This ongoing military reform is remarkably impressive for the pace with which multiple large-scale structural changes have been implemented. Over the past two months, several major changes have occurred:

- On December 31, 2015, the newly restructured PLA Army Headquarters, the PLA Rocket Force, and the PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF) were formally established. They are now among the “five forces” (五大军种) in the PLA, along with the Navy and the Air Force.
- On January 11, 2016, the CMC announced the expansion of its agencies from four general departments to 15 leadership bodies, consisting of six departments, three commissions, and six offices.
- On February 1, 2016, the CMC convened a military ceremony announcing the new structure of the PLA’s theaters of operations (namely, the Eastern Theater Command, Southern Theater Command, Western Theater Command, Northern Theater Command, and Central Theater Command). These five commands replaced the seven military regions named after the cities where their headquarters had been located (Beijing, Shenyang, Ji’nan, Lanzhou, Nanjing, Chengdu, and Guangzhou).³⁴

Figure 1 (next page) displays the new administrative structure, the division of services, and the PLA’s theaters of operations following the recent military reform. These sweeping changes are very much in line with the stated objectives of the reform plan: to fix perceived problems such as the “balkanized components of China’s armed services,” the dominance of ground troops, the lack of legal supervision and law enforcement in the military, and the inefficient command system that results from multiple layers of administration.³⁵ Without a doubt, these changes will profoundly alter the inner workings of the Chinese military.

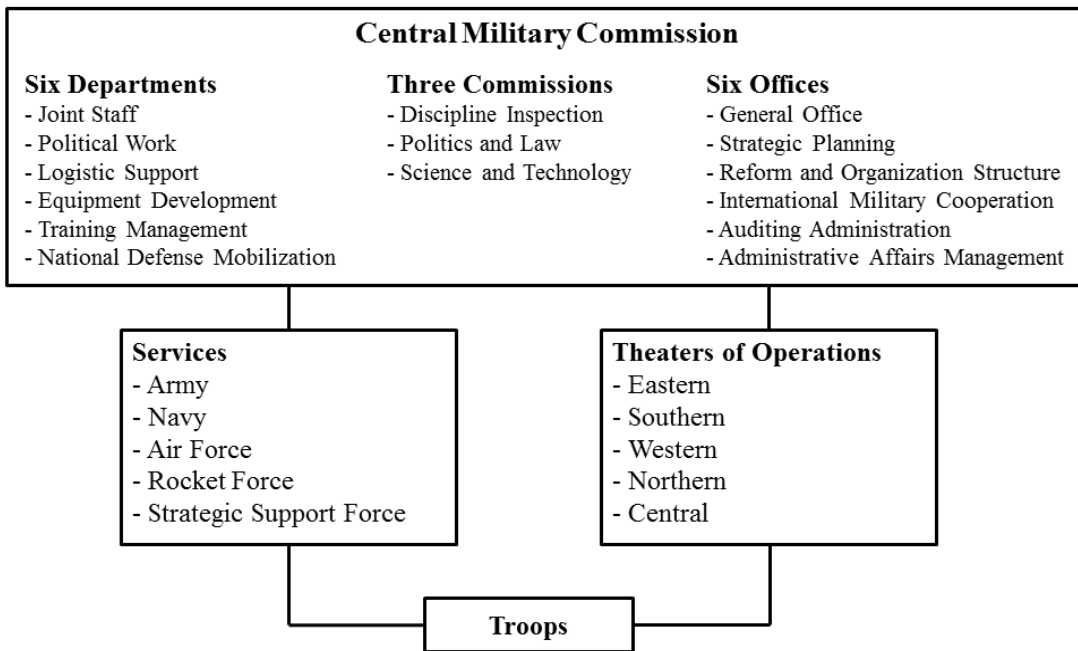
Empowering the CMC Instead of the Four General Departments

The CMC, which consists of top party and military leaders, is a dual military leadership organ in both the CCP and the PRC government. It serves as the highest point of military command authority, responsible to the CCP and the government for overseeing the armed forces. A central objective of military reform is to allow the CMC to directly command the military services and theaters of operations instead of exercising its leadership role through four general departments (staff, political affairs, logistics, and armaments), which was the process before the reform. As a result of this structural change, these four

departments will not have power and authority to potentially “override” (架空) the CMC itself. Because this new structure eliminates the general departments as a level of command, it should also make the direction of the CMC more streamlined and efficient. Although these four departments may still carry more weight than most of the other 11 agencies under the direct leadership of the CMC, all of these 15 bodies now, in theory, reside at the same level of influence. The role of the General Office, given its close working relationship with the chairman of the CMC, apparently has risen in importance compared to its previous organizational status.

Among these 15 agencies, three (namely, the Disciplinary Inspection Commission, the Politics and Law Commission, and the Office of the Auditing Administration) are responsible for military supervision and anti-corruption activities. The fact that they now

Figure 1
Organizational Chart of PLA Leadership



NOTE AND SOURCE: “Revealing the PLA leadership and management system after the military reform” (改革后解放军领导管理体系全揭秘). Xinhua Newsnet, February 1, 2016, <http://news.sohu.com/20160201/n436594091.shtml>. Author’s translation.

report directly to the CMC suggests that these anti-graft agencies will have more power and autonomy than ever before.³⁶ The increased emphasis on accountability, scrutiny, and rule of law reflects the effort of the leadership under Xi to fight rampant corruption in the PLA, as evidenced by the cases of Gu Junshan, Xu Caihou, and Guo Boxiong. The promotion in importance of the Department of the National Defense Mobilization means it can help with civilian-military integration. On the other hand, the promotion in importance of the Office of International Military Cooperation raises the question of its relationship to the Ministry of Defense, which previously was in charge of international affairs in the PLA.

It is unclear which heads of these 15 agencies, five services, and five theaters of operations will obtain seats on the next CMC. Heads of the PAP and major military academies—such as the National Defense University (NDU), the Academy of Military Science (AMS), and the National University of Defense Technology (NUDT)—previously had the same “level of military office” as heads of the greater military regions. Figure 1 does not include these four important military institutions because the structural changes to the PAP and military academies will not begin until sometime this year.

According to unverified reports, the Chinese leadership may consider reestablishing the position of CMC secretary-general (军委秘书长).³⁷ Moreover, it has been speculated that members of the next CMC may include the CMC secretary-general, two deputy secretary-generals, and deputy ministers of the Ministry of Defense (which will also be newly added posts).³⁸ At this point, there is no evidence that the Chinese leadership will establish these posts and, even if it does, that these leaders will become members of the CMC. It is notable, however, that the current members of the CMC will not be guaranteed membership beyond 2017 due to the ongoing military reform, even if they qualify in terms of falling below age limits. This gives Xi Jinping significant leverage to promote newcomers to this supreme military leadership body.

From an Army-Centric System to a Joint Command System

Several aspects of military reform are intended to alter the long-standing “dominance of the army” (大陆军) in the Chinese military.”³⁹ These include the aforementioned downgrading of the four general departments (which have been dominated by officers from the army), the establishment of the Army Headquarters (which aims to make the army equal to instead of superior to other services), the founding of the Strategic Support Force, and the emphasis on joint operations within the new structure of theater-based commands. These measures all contribute to a strategic shift from a Soviet-style, army-centric system toward what analysts call “a Western-style joint command.”⁴⁰

Xu Guangyu, a retired major general who worked in the PLA General Staff Department, recently commented to the Chinese media that in the U.S. military, the ratio of army, navy, and air force personnel is 4:3:3, whereas in China the ratio is 72:11:17.⁴¹ According to China’s White Paper on Defense in 2013, PLA military personnel numbered 850,000 in the army, 235,000 in the navy, 398,000 in the air force, and 817,000 in other forces, including the Second Artillery.⁴² This cross-country comparison has been well covered in the Chinese media over the past few years. As some foreign reporters have described, the current military reform reflects Xi Jinping’s ambitious vision for greatly downsizing the “ground forces further and making them a subordinate service with their own ‘PLA Army’ headquarters, while expanding the Navy and Air Force.”⁴³

In service of that objective, not only has the number of operational commands been reduced from seven to five in order to better execute strategic missions and maintain operational readiness (as discussed earlier), but the other service forces (navy, air force, rocket force, and strategic support force) will also increase their personnel and augment their strategic importance in these five new theaters of operations. It is believed that

several group armies (primarily ground forces) will be abolished as part of military reform.⁴⁴

With the same objective in mind, the Strategic Support Force (SSF) has been added to China's five service forces. The SSF is primarily engaged in "high-tech operations like electronic, space, and cyber warfare."⁴⁵ According to U.S. analysts, the Chinese government recently increased annual funding by 30 percent to support these operations.⁴⁶ Though it sounds mysterious to some analysts, for the PLA this newly established SSF is nothing extraordinary. Chinese media have frequently cited the fact that the U.S. Cyber Command has approximately 6,000 members engaged in cyber offense and defense.⁴⁷ In addition, in the United States the National Security Agency (NSA) employs about 40,000 people, many of whom conduct similar work in information technology.⁴⁸

Xi Jinping's grand strategic plan for military transformation has benefited from the advice of several PLA generals, both retired and active duty. Among them, Zhang Qinsheng, a retired general and former first deputy chief of the General Staff, is believed to have had an outsize influence on Xi in designing the military reform plan.⁴⁹ A leading candidate for the position of PLA chief of staff prior to the 2012 Party Congress, General Zhang has long been known for his strong interest and expertise in electronic warfare and joint military operations.⁵⁰ Zhang also became famous for his role as the chief commander representing the Chinese side in the 2005 Sino-Russian joint military exercise, which was named "Peace Mission 2005."

Zhang was born in Xiaoyi County, Shanxi Province, in 1948, and advanced through the military ranks as a staffer focused on military training and operation. In 2002, he was merely an associate dean and director of the Battle Department of the NDU. But over the following decade, because of his theoretical knowledge of modern warfare and his innovative ideas for pursuing China's military modernization, Zhang advanced remarkably fast in his career, progressing from director of the Department of Military Operations in the Headquarters of the Chief of General Staff (2003–2004) to assistant chief of the General Staff (2004–2006), deputy chief of the General Staff (2006–2007), commander of the Guangzhou Military Region (2007–2009), and finally to first deputy chief and deputy party secretary of the General Staff (2009–2012).⁵¹ He was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general in 2006 and then to the rank of general in 2010.

As a member of the 17th Central Committee of the CCP and a rising star in the General Staff Department, Zhang was expected to win a seat on the 2012 CMC. But during a holiday banquet for China's military leadership early that year, Zhang, in a drunken rage, lashed out against what he called the prevalence of incompetent officers in the top echelon of the PLA. According to the *New York Times*, Zhang vented his anger in front of then CMC chairman Hu Jintao, who immediately "walked out in disgust."⁵² Some overseas reporters also believe that Zhang Qinsheng lost favor because he advocated for the state army (军队国家化) instead of the party army.⁵³ Zhang retired from the PLA in 2012 and was appointed as vice chairman of the Financial and Economic Committee of the National People's Congress, a ceremonial civilian position. It has been widely believed among the Chinese military establishment that Zhang Qinsheng now serves not

only as a top advisor on military reform to Xi, but also as Xi's "point man to recommend candidates for key positions" (点将人) in the PLA leadership.⁵⁴

The next installment in this series will provide a detailed analysis of personnel changes that have occurred thus far.

Notes

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⁶ *Ibid.*, quoting Li Nan, an expert on Chinese civilian-military relations who teaches at the U.S. Naval War College.

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⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

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¹⁹ For the strong ties between Xi and Cai Yingting, see Cheng Li, “Xi Jinping’s Inner Circle (Part 3: Political Protégés from the Provinces),” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 45 (Fall 2014), p. 11.

²⁰ *World Journal*, February 5, 2016; also see <http://www.worldjournal.com/3726359/article-邊緣化?蔡英挺轉任軍科院長/?ref=中國&ismobile=false>.

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²⁵ Liang Fulong, “The announcement of the plan for the military reform process.”

²⁶ Chris Buckley, “Military Parade in China Gives Xi Jinping a Platform to Show Grip on Power,” *New York Times*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/world/asia/china-military-parade-xi-jinping.html>.

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- ²⁸ See Cheng Li, “Promoting ‘Young Guards’: The Recent High Turnover in the PLA Leadership (Part I: Purges and Reshuffles),” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 48 (September 9, 2015): pp. 5–6.
- ²⁹ For the updated list, see <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/中共十八大以来的反腐败工作>. For the background on some of the latest purges, see *World Journal*, November 14, 2015, p. B3.
- ³⁰ See China Digital Times Website, January 20, 2015, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2015/01/聯合新聞網-解放軍副總參-王建平被查/>.
- ³¹ Xi Zhigang, “The top level design of military reforms,” p. 18.
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