

China's "Goldwater-Nichols"?

The Long-Awaited PLA Reorganization Has Finally Arrived

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On 31 December 2015, CCP supremo Xi Jinping announced the most sweeping reorganization of the People's Liberation Army since the 1950s. Rumors of these tectonic changes had been brewing for months, following decades of periodically aborted discussions about the need to fundamentally reshape the structure of the military for modern joint operations. This article outlines what we know so far, speculates about the confluence of political and military factors that was finally allowed to occur, and assesses the implications of the reforms for civil-military relations and military modernization.

Introduction

On 31 December 2015, CCP supremo Xi Jinping announced the most sweeping reorganization of the People's Liberation Army since the 1950s.¹ Rumors of these tectonic changes had been brewing since the reform decision was promulgated at the 3rd Plenum of the 18th Party Congress, and followed decades of periodically aborted discussions about the need to fundamentally reshape the structure of the military for modern joint operations. This article outlines what we know so far, speculates about the confluence of political and military factors that was finally allowed to occur, and assesses the implications of the reforms for civil-military relations and military modernization.

What We Know So Far

The reorganization of the PLA, announced at the end of 2015 but in planning for months, years, and even decades, is still in its very early stages. The outlines of key organizations have been discussed in the most general terms by designated spokespeople, and Xi Jinping has conferred titles and flags to the leaders of the new entities. From these broad strokes, however, we can make a few tentative conclusions:

- The primary strategic impetus for the changes is the long-desired realignment of the PLA's bureaucracy and operational units to fight modern, joint operations in an informatized environment.²
- Embedded in this change is the well-known structural critique of the previous system, whose German general staff structure was too top-heavy in Beijing and whose administrative military region structure was too geographically entrenched and immobile for expeditionary joint operations.
- The four General Departments (Staff, Political, Logistics, and Armaments) have been abolished, and their constituent elements have been transferred to units subordinated to a more muscular Central Military Commission and distributed among five service-like organizations, including a new Army service command, Air Force, Navy, a reconstituted Rocket Force (formerly Second Artillery), and a new Strategic Support

Force that encompasses cyber, intelligence, electronic warfare, and space missions.[†] The dispersion of the general department offices is described in the official *CMC Opinion* as moving from “a general department system into a multi-department system.”³

- The most important of the new CMC organizations is the Joint Staff Department, which is likely the command interface between the CMC leadership and the new theater or warzone commands. The distinction between the levels of the CMC and the theater commands is described by the PLA as the “leadership management system” (领导管理体制) versus the “joint operation command system” (联合作战指挥体制).⁴
- The seven peacetime administrative Military Regions (Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Jinan, Lanzhou, Nanjing, and Shenyang, in protocol order) have been replaced by five theater commands (East, South, West, North, and Central, in protocol order), or *zhanqu*, whose structure is expected to be similar to the exercised warzone commands of the last decade or so. By eliminating the General Staff Departments, the PLA will henceforth use a “two-level joint operations command system” (两级联合作战指挥体制).⁵
- This new system is much closer to its American counterpart, with the CMC departments acting like the Joint Staff, the *zhanqu* more closely approximating combatant commands, and the services/forces charged with the mission of “manning, training, and equipping” the operational units, or what the PLA terms “construction” (建设). As described in the official *CMC Opinion*, the “Central Military Commission performs general management, theaters are mainly in charge of operations, and military branches are mainly in charge of force building” (军委管总、战区主战、军种主建).⁶
- If one examines their previous positions, none of the newly appointed leaders of these organizations is terribly surprising, with the exception of LTGEN Gao Jin, whose previous career in the Second Artillery does not make him an obvious choice to lead an organization concerned with cyber, EW, intelligence, and space launch/monitoring.

The issue of the rank and grade structure associated with these new organizations is complex and not entirely confirmed yet by open sources, and some of the analysis must therefore remain speculative. There is also the remote possibility that the rank and grade structure will be abolished in toto, but it is difficult to understand how the PLA would meaningfully interact with either the party or the government in the absence of a compatible bureaucratic hierarchy.

Table 1 (next page), compiled by the inestimable PLA organizational guru Ken Allen, provides information about the CMC’s new 15 functional sections including seven departments (offices), three commissions and five directly affiliated bodies. The table

[†] As discussed below, the five “service-like organizations” are not all “services” (军种) according to the Chinese nomenclature, since the Strategic Support Force uses the term “budui” (部队), which the PLA translates as “force.” Thanks again to Ken Allen for this distinction.

includes the current organization name, the name of the person who has been assigned as the leader, as well as that person's previous position and grade. Based on each person's previous grade, it is assumed that they are still filling a billet of the same grade. It is also assumed that the Military Region Leader Grade and Deputy Leader Grade will be renamed Theater/War Zone/Combat Zone Leader Grade and Deputy Leader Grade, respectively.

Table 1
*CMC Functional Sections*⁷

<i>CMC Organization</i>	<i>Organization assessed grade</i>	<i>Leader</i>	<i>Leader's previous position</i>	<i>Leader's previous grade</i>
General Office (办公厅)	(Theater deputy leader)	LTGEN Qin Shengxiang (秦生祥)	Director CMC General Office	MR deputy leader
Joint Staff Dept. (联合参谋部)	CMC member	GEN Fang Fenghui (房峰辉)	Chief of the General Staff	CMC member
Political Work Dept. (政治工作部)	CMC member	GEN Zhang Yang (张阳)	Director, GPD	CMC member
Logistic Support Dept. (后勤保障部)	CMC member	GEN Zhao Keshi (赵克石)	Director, GLD	CMC member
Equipment Development Dept. (装备发展部)	CMC member	GEN Zhang Youxia (张又侠)	Director, GAD	CMC member
Training & Administration Dept. (训练管理部)	Theater deputy leader	MGEN Zheng He (郑和)	Deputy Commander, Chengdu MR	MR deputy leader
National Defense Mobilization Dept. (国防动员部)	Theater deputy leader	MGEN Sheng Bin (盛斌)	Deputy Commander, Shenyang MR	MR deputy leader
Discipline Inspection Commission (纪律检查委员会)	Theater leader	GEN Du Jincai (杜金才)	Deputy Director, GPD & Secretary, CMC Discipline Inspection Commission	MR leader
Politics & Law Commission (政法委员会)	Theater deputy leader	LTGEN Li Xiaofeng (李晓峰)	Chief Procurator, PLA Military Procuratorate	MR deputy leader
Science & Technology Commission (科学技术委员会)	Theater deputy leader	LTGEN Liu Guozhi (刘国治)	Director, GAD S&T Commission	MR deputy leader
Office for Strategic Planning (战略规划办公室)	Corps leader	MGEN Wang Huiqing (王辉青)	Director, GSD Strategic Planning Dept.	Corps leader
Office for Reform & Organizational Structure (军委改革和编制办公室)	Corps leader	MGEN Wang Chengzhi (王成志)	Director, GPD Directly Subordinate Work Dept.	Corps leader
Office for International Military Cooperation (国际军事合作办公室)	Corps leader	RADM Guan Youfei (关友飞)	Director, MND FAO (director, GSD FAO; director, CMC FAO)	Corps leader
Audit Office (审计署)	(Corps leader?)	RADM Guo Chunfu (郭春富)	Director, CMC Auditing and Finance Dept.	(Corps leader?)
Agency for Offices Administration (机关事务管理总)	Corps leader	MGEN Liu Zhiming (刘志明)	Deputy Chief of Staff, Shenyang MR	Corps leader

NOTE: FAO = Foreign Affairs Office

Table 2, also compiled by Ken Allen, provides a list of the four services, the Strategic Support Force, and the five *zhanqu* (theater commands). The table includes the current organization name and the name of the person who has been assigned as the leader, as well as that person's previous position and grade. Based on each individual's previous grade, it is assumed that they are still filling a billet of the same grade. It is also assumed that the Military Region Leader Grade and Deputy Leader Grade will be renamed Theater Command Leader Grade and Deputy Leader Grade, respectively.

Table 2
PLA Services, Strategic Support Force, and Zhanqu

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Organization assessed grade</i>	<i>Leader</i>	<i>Leader's previous position</i>	<i>Leader's previous grade</i>
Army Leading Organ (PLA Army) (陆军领导机关)	Theater leader	GEN Li Zuocheng (李作成)	Commander, Chengdu MR	MR leader
PLA Rocket Force (火箭军)	Theater leader	GEN Wei Fenghe (魏凤和)	Commander, PLA Second Artillery Force	CMC member
PLA Strategic Support Force (战略保障部队)	Theater leader	LGEN Gao Jin (高津)	Commandant, Academy of Military Science	MR leader
PLA Navy (海军)	Theater leader	ADM Wu Shengli (吴胜利)	Commander, PLA Navy	CMC member
PLA Air Force (空军)	Theater leader	GEN Ma Xiaotian (马晓天)	Commander, Air Force	CMC member
Northern Zhanqu (北部战区)	Theater leader	GEN Song Puxuan (宋普选)	Commander, Beijing MR	MR leader
Eastern Zhanqu (东部战区)	Theater leader	GEN Liu Yejun (刘粤军)	Commander, Lanzhou MR	MR leader
Southern Zhanqu (南部战区)	Theater leader	GEN Wang Jiaocheng (王教成)	Commander, Shenyang MR	MR leader
Western Zhanqu (西部战区)	Theater leader	GEN Zhao Zongji (赵宗岐)	Commander, Jinan MR	MR leader
Central Zhanqu (中部战区/中央战区)	Theater deputy leader	LTGEN Han Weiguo (韩卫国)	Deputy commander, Beijing MR	MR deputy leader

In the coming weeks and months, we can expect greater clarity regarding the subordinate organization structure, sub-leaders, roles, and missions of all of these new organizations, though it is important to note that the reform process itself is expected to continue through the year 2020.⁸ In the first Ministry of National Defense press conference on the reorganization, Senior Colonel Yang Yujun declared, “This round of reform will be implemented according to plans and in stages. We will release reform information in due course in accordance with (the) reform process.”⁹

Why Did Reform Succeed This Time?

PLA mavericks and reformers had been calling for these very changes for decades, so why did reform succeed now, and what dangers does it still face from internal resistance and external challenge? Institutionally, few PLA analysts would disagree that the previous system suffered from “deep-level contradictions and problems,” which “seriously hindered the development of military building, seriously retarded preparations for military struggle, seriously affected the performing of our forces’ duties and missions.”¹⁰ Yet reform of this scale has already begun to break “rice bowls” throughout the system and entail many personnel “making sacrifices.”¹¹ Indeed the organizational changes were preceded by an announcement by Xi Jinping at the military parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II that 300,000 troops would be demobilized, which is particularly politically sensitive given the recent weakening in the Chinese economy.

First and foremost, it is clear that this reform is being driven with the personal imprimatur and political heft of Chairman Xi Jinping himself, though clearly aligned with an organizational desire for reform within parts of the PLA itself.¹² Xi has dedicated a significant amount of his political capital on issues of party-military relations. My article in *CLM* 47 analyzed the appearance of the so-called CMC Chairman Responsibility System, which represents an important personalization of Xi’s leadership over the PLA. Earlier, *CLM* 46 explored Xi’s implementation of his leadership consolidation at the Gutian Conference in November 2014, where the top 420 officers in the PLA were lectured about the absolute control of the PLA by the Chinese Communist Party, leavened with unsubtle threats about their individual vulnerability to his expanding and merciless anti-corruption investigations. Yet the *Central Military Commission Opinion on Deepening Reform of National Defense and the Armed Forces* issued on 1 January 2016 insists that a key goal of the reorganization is to “consolidate and perfect the basic principles and system of the party’s absolute leadership over the military” [emphasis added], implying there is still work to be done in party-army relations and perhaps even reflecting the concern that the reforms might undermine Beijing’s grip on the military.¹³ But why does Xi have the power and authority to impose these huge, wrenching changes, whereas his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao did not? The ultimate answer, I think, lies in the anti-corruption campaign mentioned above. Through the investigation and arrests of former CMC Vice-Chairmen Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, Xi and his inquisitors have no doubt amassed an unprecedented amount of information about endemic corruption in the PLA, particularly the pay-for-promotion system, incriminating every single senior officer in the leadership. Those files, or the widespread fear among the leadership of what might be contained in those files, is very likely the Sword of Damocles hanging over any officer foolish enough to question the reform or seek to retard its progress. With this leverage, Xi Jinping has been able to kickstart the bone-deep reform that the PLA has needed for decades, and which will perhaps be seen in retrospect as the critical turning point in the realization of his “China Dream.”

Notes

¹ http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2016-01/01/content_4634922.htm

² Staff commentator, “Firmly Grasp the Goal Task in the Deepening of Defense and Military Reforms—Third on Seriously Studying and Implementing Chairman Xi’s Important Speech at the Central Military Commission’s Work Conference on Military Structural Reforms,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 30 November 2015, p.1.

³ “Central Military Commission’s Opinions on Deepening Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces,” Xinhua, 1 January 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-01/01/c_1117646695.htm.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ An official listing of these CMC organizations was described in an MND press conference that can be found here: http://news.mod.gov.cn/headlines/2016-01/11/content_4636184_2.htm.

⁸ “Firmly Grasp the Goal Task in the Deepening of Defense and Military Reforms,” p.1.

⁹ Wang Jingguo, Sun Yanxin, and Huang Yifang, “Defense Ministry Spokesman Gives Detailed Explanation on Relevant Issues of Deepening National Defense and Army Reforms,” Xinhua, 1 January 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-01/01/c_1117646764.htm.

¹⁰ “Firmly Grasp the Goal Task in the Deepening of Defense and Military Reforms,” p.1.

¹¹ Staff commentator, “Consciously Strengthen and Deepen Mission Commitment to the Deepening of Defense and Military Reforms—Second on Seriously Studying and Implementing Chairman Xi’s Important Speech at the Central Military Commission’s Work Conference on Military Structural Reforms,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 29 November 2015, p.1.

¹² Staff commentator, “Bring Thinking and Action Into Line With Chairman Xi’s Important Decisions and Instructions—First on Seriously Studying and Implementing Chairman Xi’s Important Speech at the Central Military Commission’s Work Conference on Military Structural Reforms,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 28 November 2015, p.1.

¹³ “Central Military Commission’s Opinions on Deepening Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces,” Xinhua, 1 January 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-01/01/c_1117646695.htm.