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China Military Organization and Reform

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CHINESE MILITARY ORGANIZATION

Like all modern powers, China has a broadly structured national security system in which its forces are supported by a wide range of other organizations, security structures, and paramilitary forces. While China's strategic doctrine describes how China's armed forces will fight in the twenty-first century, its theoretical approach does not give a detailed picture of the PLA's ability to fight as its doctrine demands. Examining the organizational structure of the PLA and its institutional modernization helps clarify its ability to fight and to understand the changes in each individual service's force structure.

The changes in China's military organization—specifically the character, roles, and missions of each element of Chinese military and security forces—reflect a major shift toward modernization over the last two decades. These shifts are also reflected in its military personnel forces, equipment, deployments, and tactics summarized in the following chapters.

At the same time, there still are key uncertainties in assessing the effectiveness of such developments. China has not fought a modern war, or any serious conflict for decades. This makes it difficult to assess how the impact of such widespread institutional reforms would really impact the PLA if it had to operate in a wartime situation.

PLA Military Organization

The PLA comprises China's main armed forces and is exclusively under the authority of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Although it is called the People's Liberation *Army*, the PLA consists of four services—the PLA Army (PLAA), the PLA Navy (PLAN), PLA Air Force (PLAAF)—and as of December 31, 2015, the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF).¹ Additionally, China uses paramilitary forces—in particular, the Coast Guard—to patrol the waters within the nine-dash line, as discussed previously.

Starting in late 2015, China began to implement plans for structural military reorganization that had been announced at the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2013, with the goal of fully implementing the reforms shown in **Figure 1.1** by 2020 according to the demanding schedule set forth in **Figure 1.2**.

There are good reasons for such actions and for giving them high priority. Despite intermittent reforms, the PLA still bore a substantial resemblance to the Soviet model of armed forces developed in the 1950s. China had concluded that the pre-reform PLA command structure was top heavy, which hindered joint operations in a local wars context, and China's 2015 White Paper had focused on continuing to build a military capable of fighting “informationized local wars”.

The future battlefield is projected to be more dynamic and more fast paced, requiring lower echelon leaders to take the initiative and make battlefield decisions without having to wait for orders from higher up the command chain.² The joint operations that the PLA envisions conducting in the future require faster decision-making loops and shortened time gaps between sensors and shooters, both of which could be gained by giving lower level officers more authority to command.³

These were all key reasons for the encompassing reforms shown in **Figure 1.1**. They are a clear indication of the fact that China's leadership recognizes that significant updates are required to be a military power in the modern era.

The Reform Plans and Reform Schedule

These planned changes are so substantial that the April 2016 Department of Defense report on China observed they were the, "most significant reforms of the PLA in at least three decades."⁴ The same Department of Defense Report on China highlighted the main aspects of the organizational reforms as follows:⁵

Additionally, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) updated high-level strategies, plans, and policies that reflect its intent to transform itself into a more flexible and advanced force capable of more advanced joint operations and fighting and winning "informationized local wars"—regional conflicts defined by real-time data-networked command.

Structural Reform. The widening gap between the demands of winning informationized local wars and the PLA's legacy command, organizational, and administrative structure has fueled several proposals for reform since the 1990s. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee endorsed the need for reform at the Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress in November 2013 and the Central Military Commission (CMC) established the Leading Group for Deepening Defense and Military Reforms in the months that followed. President Xi Jinping chairs the group, and CMC Vice Chairmen Fan Changlong and Xu Qiliang serve as its deputies.

In late November 2015, President Xi introduced the major elements of structural reform intended to be carried out by 2020 at a special three-day reform group session. Further announcements followed in December. The Ministry of National Defense (MND) spokesman stated that, overall, the reforms sought to improve "leadership administration and command of joint operations" so that the PLA would have a force structure able to fight and to win modern conflicts. These reforms include:

- > *Theaters.* The PLA is transitioning from its seven legacy military regions (MR) to five "theaters of operations," or joint commands, in a move the MND spokesman tied to enhancing combat effectiveness.
- > *Army Headquarters.* In late 2015, the PLA began to establish a headquarters for its ground forces, creating a separate PLA Army (PLAA) service. Previously, leadership of ground units was integrated into the PLA's four general departments, which were each represented on the CMC.
- > *Rocket Force.* On December 31, 2015, China's military leadership re-designated the PLA Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) as the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) and elevated it from an independent branch to a full service.
- > *Strategic Support Force.* Also on the last day of the year, the PLA created a new force under the CMC, reportedly to oversee its space and cyber capabilities.
- > *Roles and missions.* The reform plan aims to establish two clear lines of authority under the CMC. It gives the services authority over "force management" issues while the theater headquarters command operations—a distinction that was ambiguous in the past.
- > *Staff Departments.* The leadership is also adjusting the PLA's senior staff bodies, in part by replacing the four general departments with six joint departments, three commissions, and five offices under the CMC.
- > *Internal Discipline.* The CMC is tightening military discipline with reforms to its Discipline and Inspection Commission, its Auditing Office, the PLA judicial system, and a new Politics and Law Commission.

In September 2015, President Xi also announced that the PLA would reduce its force by 300,000 personnel by the end of 2017, a move widely expected to result in fewer non-combat personnel, such as those specialized in arts and culture, administrative duties, or academic work. China's official media also report

the cuts will help to rebalance the proportion of forces among the services in ways that will raise the relative importance the PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF).

Figure 1.1: PLA Reform Schedule: 2015-2020

Table. PLA Reform Agenda, 2015–2020

Reform Area (English)	Reform Area (Chinese)	Topics	Target Date
Leadership Management System	领导管理体制	Reform Central Military Committee departments, military services, logistics system, equipment development system	2015*
Joint Command and Control System	联合作战指挥体制	Establish two-level joint command system, reform joint training, establish theater commands	2015 [†]
Military Scale Structure	军队规模结构	Reduce force size by 300,000, reducing noncombat personnel, reduce officer billets, phase out old equipment	2016 [†]
Force Composition	部队编成	Adjust force structure, optimize reserve force, reduce militias	2016
Cultivating New-Type Military Talent	新型军事人才培养	Enhance professional military education	2016
People's Armed Police command and control system and force composition	武装警察部队指挥管理体制和力量结构	Adjust People's Armed Police command and control and force structure	2016
Policy System	政策制度	Reform personnel system, budget management and procurement system, salary and welfare system	2017–2020
Developing Civil-Military Integration	军民融合发展	Enhance management of civilian-military integration	2017–2020
Military Legal System	军事法治体系	Reform military regulations and military justice system	No Date Provided

Source: Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, *China's Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms*, National Defense University, April 2016, <http://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-294.pdf>

Figure 1.2: PLA Structure Pre/Post Reforms

Figure 1. PLA Structure Prior to Reforms

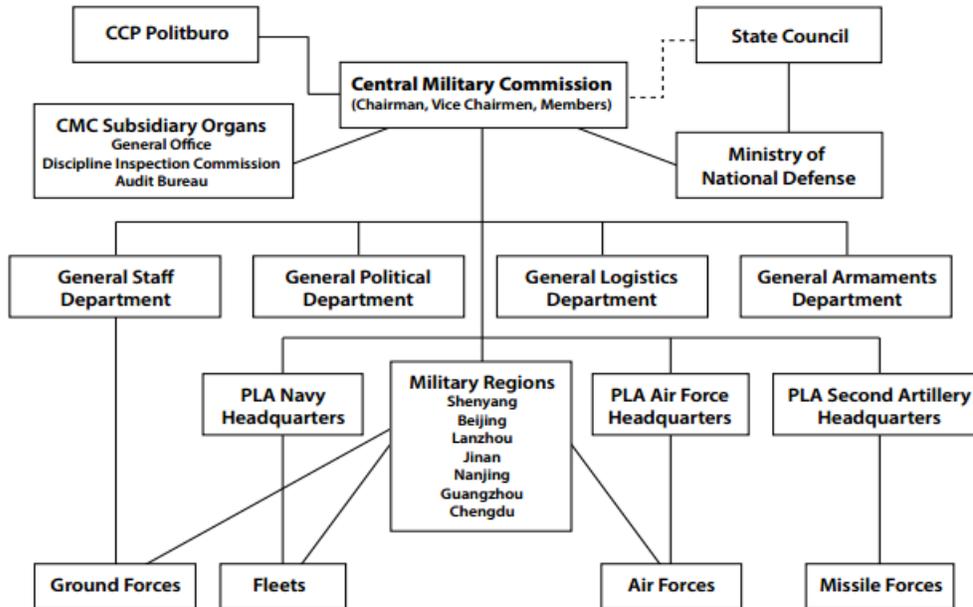
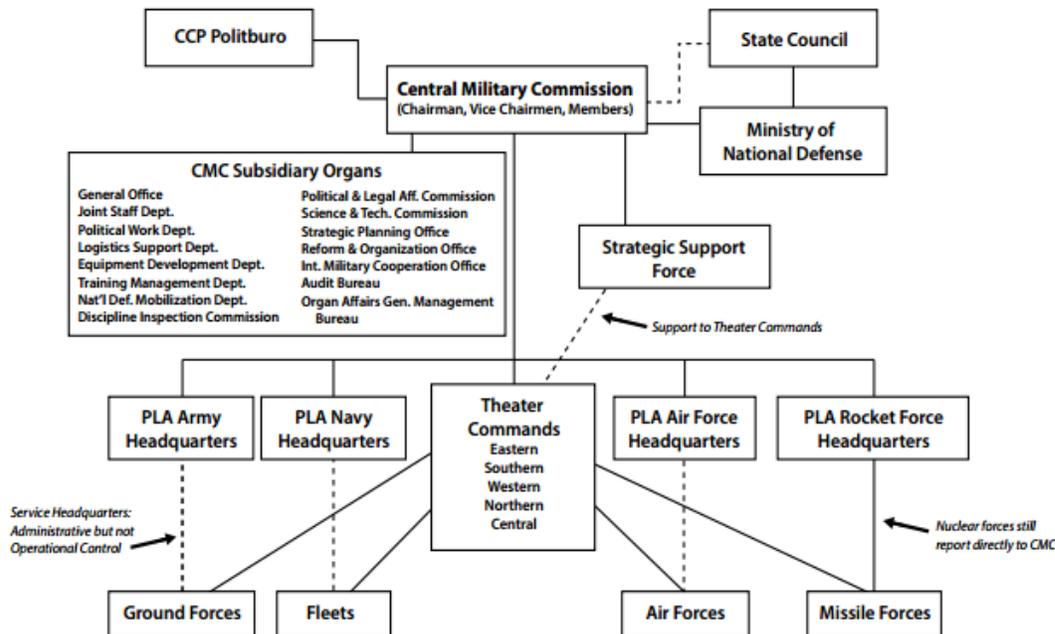


Figure 2. PLA Structure after Reforms



Source: Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, *China's Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms*, National Defense University, April 2016, <http://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-294.pdf>

The proposed reforms also include substantial changes to the lines of authority within the PLA as China seems to be moving towards a more Western-style military setup.⁶ The changes have led analysts to compare the reforms to “China’s Goldwater-Nichols.”⁷ An April 2016 report by Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow of the National Defense University noted that:⁸

The reforms affected not only individual organizations but also the lines of authority connecting the PLA’s major components. Chinese sources describe the revised division of labor with the following formula: the CMC and its subsidiary departments will provide overall management, the theaters will focus on operations, and the services will manage force building. In effect, the PLA will have two distinct chains of command: an operational chain passing from the CMC to the theaters to the troops, and an administrative chain flowing from the CMC to the service headquarters to the troops.

The nature of the reforms suggests that the PLA is moving toward a more modular, U.S.-style C2 arrangement in which operational commanders develop force packages from units that are trained and equipped by the services. In particular, the PLA restructuring has drawn comparisons to the U.S. military following the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. This act resulted in a C2 structure for the U.S. military in which authority flows from the President and Secretary of Defense to the commanders of the regional unified combatant commands, who lead joint forces within their respective theaters. Service chiefs were given an advisory role, with responsibilities to “organize, train, and equip” troops. This bifurcation of authority appears similar to the evolving PLA distinction between operational and administrative chains of command.

Reforming the Middle More than the Top

There are important, and sometimes questionable, limits to such reforms. While the reforms are considerable—particularly within the midlevel bureaucracy—the top levels of the command structure will not be restructured. As depicted in **Figure 1.2** and **Figure 1.3** the Central Military Commission (CMC) remains the dominant stakeholder in leadership of China’s military. Additionally, the role of the Politburo, State Council, and Ministry of National Defense appear not to have been meaningfully altered.

The continued power of the CMC and the military’s permanent connection to the CCP makes it clear that the reforms will not fully remake the PLA as a Western military. Indeed, many of the characteristics of the PLA are still unique to the Chinese system. The National Defense University report by Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow states:⁹

Nevertheless, the new PLA C2 system has some key differences with the U.S. system. First, unlike the U.S. combatant commands, which span the globe, the theaters cover territory only within China. Operations far beyond China’s borders (such as those in the Middle East or the Indian Ocean) will apparently be centrally directed by the JSD in Beijing. Second, the PLA retains the CMC as its highest decision making body and does not have a U.S.-style commander in chief equivalent. Nevertheless, as discussed below, the reforms have strengthened Xi Jinping’s role within the CMC (under what is being labeled a “CMC chairman responsibility system”). Third, the PLA remains a Leninist military whose primary responsibility is defending CCP rule. Unlike the U.S. military, where unit commanders exercise sole authority, the PLA retains political commissars and Party committees that are supposed to play a role in all key decisions.

Thus, China’s official description of its overall command structure and military decision-making process in its 2006 defense white paper is likely to continue to remain mostly accurate.¹⁰

The state exercises unified leadership over national defense activities. China’s armed forces are under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The Central Military Commission (CMC) of the CPC and that of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are completely the same in their composition and in their function of exercising leadership over the armed forces. The CMC chairman has overall responsibility for its work.

The National People's Congress (NPC) elects the chairman of the CMC of the PRC and, upon nomination by the chairman, decides on the choice of all other members of the CMC. The NPC decides on war and peace and exercises other functions and powers relating to national defense as prescribed by the Constitution. When the NPC is in recess, its Standing Committee decides on the proclamation of a state of war, decides on the general or partial mobilization of the country, and exercises other functions and powers relating to national defense as prescribed by the Constitution.

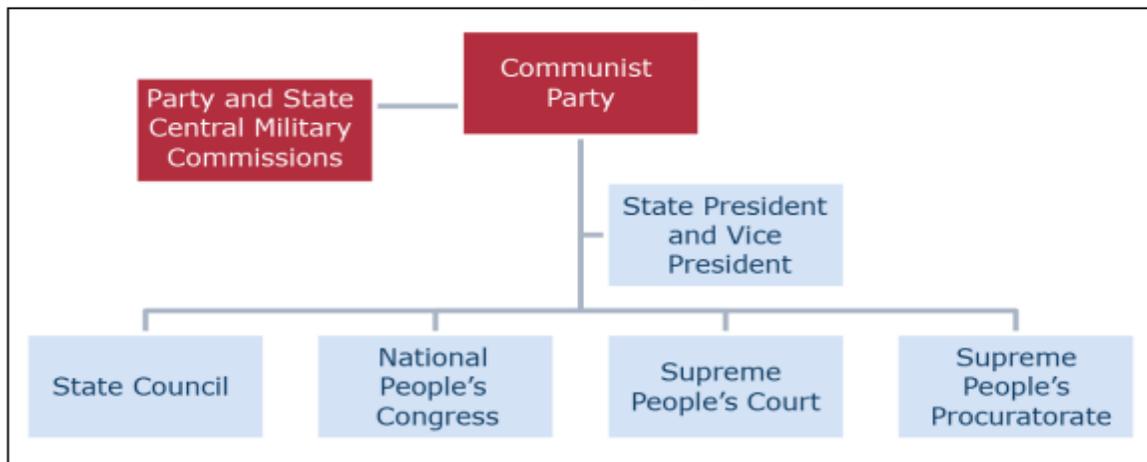
The president of the PRC, in pursuance of the decisions of the NPC and its Standing Committee, may proclaim a state of war, issue mobilization orders, and exercise other functions and powers relating to national defense as prescribed by the Constitution.

The State Council directs and administers national defense building in the following areas: making national defense development programs and plans, formulating principles, policies and administrative regulations for defense building, administering defense expenditure and assets, directing and administering national defense scientific research and production, directing and administering work related to mobilization of the national economy, mobilization of people's armed forces, people's air defense and national defense traffic, directing and administering the work of supporting the military and giving preferential treatment to families of servicemen and martyrs, as well as the resettlement of servicemen discharged from active service. It also directs national defense education and, jointly with the CMC, the building of the Chinese People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) and the militia, the work concerning enlistment and reserve service, and the administration of border, coastal and air defenses, and exercises other functions and powers relating to national defense building as prescribed by law.

Under the State Council are the Ministry of National Defense (MND) and other departments concerning national defense building. The CMC directs and exercises unified command of China's armed forces. It has the following functions and powers: deciding on the military strategy and operational guidelines of the armed forces, directing and administering the building of the PLA, submitting proposals related to national defense to the NPC or its Standing Committee, formulating military regulations, issuing decisions and orders, deciding on the structure and organization of the PLA, appointing and removing, training, evaluating, and rewarding and punishing members of the armed forces, approving systems and development programs and plans for weaponry and equipment, and exercising other functions and powers as prescribed by law.

Figure 1.3: China's Political Structure

The Communist Party sits atop China's political power structure, controls all political institutions, and commands the military



Source: CRS research.

Source: Susan V. Lawrence, *China's Political Institutions and Leaders in Charts*, Congressional Research Service, November 12, 2013, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43303.pdf>.

As the Chinese 2006 defense white paper makes clear, this Central Military Commission (CMC) is at the top of China's military chain of command. This will remain true following the implementation of the reforms. It plays the decisive role in planning and decision-making for military-security policy and all issues related to the armed forces. Since 1982, the CMC has been the most senior decision-making body for military affairs and armed forces in China. The CMC is directly derived from the Central Committee of the CCP, thereby putting the Chinese armed forces under Party control.

The January 2016 *Central Military Commission Opinion on Deepening Reform of National Defense and the Armed Forces* reiterates this point as a key aspect of the reforms, stating:¹¹

It is necessary to consolidate and perfect the basic principles and system of the Party's absolute leadership over the military, maintain the nature and purposes of the people's military, carry forward our military's glorious traditions and excellent work style, comprehensively implement the Central Military Commission chairmanship responsibility system, and ensure that the supreme leadership right and command right of the military are concentrated in the CPC Central Committee and in the Central Military Commission.

The chairman of the CMC—currently China's president, Xi Jinping—is the commander-in-chief of all Chinese forces. The responsibilities of the CMC encompass operational command over all of China's armed forces and its branches, military doctrine development, logistics, and civil-military relations.

In practice, two CMCs exist next to each other—one for the party, one for the state—but they are almost identical. The National People's Congress elects the state commission's 11 members; the Central Committee of the CCP elects the party commission.¹² The existence of two parallel CMCs shows that the PLA and the armed forces play a twin role in the Chinese body politic—the CMC, and therefore the PLA, on the one hand is an integral part of the CCP and on the other hand serves as the highest administrative body for the Chinese state's military. Both CMCs have the same membership structure; the most important difference between the two is the existence of the General Office in the party CMC. The General Office facilitates and manages interaction among China's most senior military leaders.

These relations, however, seem to be moving toward a more centralized national security structure under the authority of the current Chinese President and through the Party. It should be noted that the National Security Commission, which was established in November 2013 and not formally a part of the PLA command structure, may play a significant role in informing the decisions and actions of the CMC in a more unifying way for handling both domestic and foreign security threats to the CCP.

Organization of the PLA

The area most visibly impacted by the reforms is the mid-level bureaucratic entities. Previously, the CMC maintained command and control over the armed forces through four general departments (GDs): the General Staff Department, the General Political Department, the General Logistics Department, and the General Armament Department. The GDs were the bureaucratic units that combined military planning and command in lieu of a ministry of defense. However, the reforms dissolved the GDs and replaced them with 15 subsidiary departments, commissions, and offices under CMC control.

A 2013 Congressional Research Service report outlined the old CMC's structure and authority within the Party as follows:¹³

The Party's Central Military Commission (CMC) exercises unified command over China's armed forces, consisting of the active and reserve forces of China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA); a paramilitary force, the People's Armed Police Force (PAP); and a militia. The PLA...is not a national army belonging to the state. Rather, it serves as the Party's armed wing.

The civilian General Secretary of the Communist Party serves as the CMC's chairman. The rest of the CMC is currently comprised of uniformed officers. They are two vice chairmen (who serve concurrently on the Party's Politburo), the State Councilor for military affairs (who serves concurrently as Minister of Defense), the directors of the PLA's four general departments, and the commanders of the Navy, the Air Force, and the strategic and conventional missile forces, known as the Second Artillery Corps. The Party and State CMC's have identical memberships and are effectively a single body. The institution of the Party CMC is the locus of authority.

The four general departments direct the service branches and serve as the national headquarters for the Army. They also direct China's military regions (MRs), also known as military area commands or theaters of war. The seven military regions are the Shenyang MR, Beijing MR, Lanzhou MR, Jinan MR, Nanjing MR, Guangzhou MR, and Chengdu MR. The Navy, the Air Force, and the Second Artillery Corps each has its own separate national headquarters. The Ministry of National Defense is not in the chain of command.

An April 2016 National Defense University report addressed the reforms and how the CMC is structured following reform implementation:¹⁴

On January 11, 2016, Xi revealed that the general departments had been replaced by a new CMC structure composed of 15 departments, offices, and commissions. The GSD's extensive portfolio was dispersed among several new CMC departments. Its core C2 function was transferred to a new Joint Staff Department (JSD), while its sub-departments responsible for training, mobilization, and strategic planning each became first-level departments directly under the CMC. The GPD, GLD, and GAD became the CMC Political Work, Logistics Support, and Equipment Development departments, respectively. The GPD's law enforcement functions were transferred to a new CMC Political and Legal Affairs Commission, while its oversight of Party discipline in the PLA moved to a strengthened CMC Discipline Inspection Commission. The GAD's Science and Technology Commission, responsible for defense innovation, was placed under direct CMC oversight.

The dissolution of the GDs and advent of the fifteen CMC subsidiaries seems to be done with the goal of the increasing the power and oversight of the CMC and CCP. This is corroborated by Xi Jinping's speech to the new departmental heads of the CMC on January 11, 2016 in which he noted that the CMC was establishing "concentrated and unified leadership" within the military apparatus.¹⁵

Figure 1.4 provides a visual summary of CMC updates.

Figure 1.4: Updated CMC Sections and Leadership

Table 1
CMC Functional Sections⁷

CMC Organization	Organization assessed grade	Leader	Leader's previous position	Leader's previous grade
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

Source: James Mulvenon, "China's "Goldwater-Nichols"? The Long-Awaited PLA Reorganization Has Finally Arrived", *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 49, p.3.

Operational Command Levels

Under the old system the operational command levels directly under the CMC and the GDs differed among the branches. China's 2006 and 2013 defense white papers describe the command structure of its service branches and its military regions in more detail than its more recent strategy papers that provide more broad overviews of military strategy and reform.¹⁶

The Army has no independent leading body, and the leadership of it is exercised by the four general headquarters/departments. A military area command exercises direct leadership over the Army units under it.

The Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery Force, each of which has a leading body consisting of the headquarters, the political department, the logistics department and the armaments department, direct the military, political, logistical and equipment work of their respective troops, and take part in the command of joint operations.

The Navy organizes and commands maritime operations conducted independently by its troops or in support of maritime operations. There are three fleets under the Navy, namely, the Beihai Fleet, Donghai Fleet and Nanhai Fleet. Each fleet has flotillas, aviation divisions, etc. under its command.

The Air Force organizes and commands air operations conducted independently by itself or with Air Force personnel as the main fighting force, as well as air defense operations in the capital area. It has an air command in each of the seven military area commands of Shenyang, Beijing, Lanzhou, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou and Chengdu, respectively. Under an air command are aviation divisions, ground-to-air missile divisions (brigades and regiments), anti-aircraft artillery brigades (regiments), radar brigades (regiments) and other support troops. In major directions and key target areas there are also corps- or division-level command posts.

The Second Artillery Force organizes and commands its own troops in case of launching nuclear counterattacks with strategic missiles and conducting operations with conventional missiles. Under it are missile and training bases, and relevant support troops.

Military area commands (theaters of war) are military organizations set up according to the administrative divisions of the state, geographical locations, strategic and operational directions, and operational tasks. They are CMC-appointed organs for commanding joint theater operations. They direct the military, political, logistical and equipment work of the troops under them. Under a military area command are the headquarters, the political department, the joint logistics department and the armaments department. A military area command is mainly in charge of formulating programs and plans for combat readiness and operations of troops in the theater and for the reserve force buildup of the theater, organizing and commanding joint theater operations involving different services and arms, and providing joint logistical support. At present, the PLA has seven military area commands, namely, Shenyang, Beijing, Lanzhou, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou and Chengdu.

Reforming Military Regions and Force Groupings for Joint Operations

Another substantial reform is that PLA ground forces at the command level below the CMC structure will be reorganized from seven military regions (MRs) to five theater commands (Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, Central) that cover all of China's territory (**Figure 1.5**). The theater commands will have their headquarters in Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Shenyang, and Beijing. These commands now represent more functional blocks of forces, tied better to China's main defense and operational needs, with a better focus on the Northern, Eastern, and Southern theaters – the key areas where China needs coherent military contingency plans and operational control.

Following the reforms, the theater commands will handle command operations, while the services will be in control of force management—essentially the equipping and organizing of military units. The goal of these changes is to rectify past confusions regarding what roles fall under which organization's purview. Furthermore, the decrease in MRs marks a long-term trend of consolidating regional PLA branches that began as 13 in 1955 and was subsequently cut in both 1970 and 1985.¹⁷

On a functional level, a report from the Jamestown Foundation in February 2016 notes¹⁸, “The theater commands will have Army, Navy, and Air Force components based, respectively, on the ‘relevant naval fleets’ and air forces of the former Military Regions (MR)—Rocket Forces were not mentioned.”

A February 2016 Xinhua article following the theater reorganization offers further insight into the goals of reform and the CMC and Xi's thought process:¹⁹

The CMC Vice Chairman Fan Changlong announced the appointment of leaders for the five theater commands, which was endorsed by Xi. CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang presided over the ceremony.

Xi called on the theater commands to keep their duties in mind and resolutely implement the country's military strategies.

The principle of a newly implemented structure, in which the CMC takes charge of the overall military administration, theatre commands focus on combat and the different military branches pursue their own development, must be resolutely observed, Xi said.

He further required building a joint battle command system that is "absolutely loyal, resourceful in fighting, efficient in commanding and courageous and capable of winning wars."

Xi said the move to establish the theater commands and form the joint battle command system is a strategic decision by the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the CMC to realize the Chinese

dream of a strong military. It is also a landmark progress in implementing the military reforms and building the PLA's joint battle system.

He said the five theater commands are responsible for dealing with security threats in their respective strategic scopes, maintaining peace, containing wars and winning wars, noting their pivotal role in safeguarding the country's overall national security and military strategies.

The theater commands are directed to unswervingly act under the command of the Party and firmly uphold the CPC's absolute leadership over the armed forces, Xi said, urging the troops to strengthen political awareness and the awareness of safeguarding general interests.

"The armed forces should maintain a high degree of conformity with the CPC Central Committee and the CMC, strictly obey political discipline and rules, and carry out their orders and instructions to the letter," he added.

The newly-established commands should concentrate on fighting battles, Xi said, asking them to study the mechanism of winning modern wars, grasp the law of employing military forces, speed up the development of a strategy for the theater commands and enhance the training of joint operations and command in order to win the initiative in future wars.

Xi urged the theater commands to improve their ability to command and strengthen joint command and action to complete the tasks of routine combat readiness and military actions.

On behalf of their respective theater commands, the political commissars of the five theater commands vowed to firmly listen to the command of the CPC Central Committee, the CMC and Xi, and to perform their missions mandated by the party and the people.

Other CMC members and representatives from various military units attended Monday's ceremony.

China's military reform is aimed at establishing a three-tier "the CMC - theater commands - troops" command system and an administration system that goes from the CMC through various services to the troops.

Before the reshuffle, China had seven military area commands headquartered in Shenyang, Beijing, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chengdu and Lanzhou, which will no longer be maintained, said China's Defense Ministry spokesperson Yang Yujun during a press conference on Monday.

The five theater commands, under the administration of the CMC, are formed based on the functions and organs of the former military area commands, with the functions of command and logistics support improved, said Yang.

The Army, Navy and Air force have already been set up within the theater commands, according to Yang.

The newly-established commands are the top joint battle command agencies, performing the power and duties of taking unified command and control of the troops as entrusted by the CMC, said Yang.

Figure 1.5: Chinese Military Regions

Military Regions (MR) 1985–2015



Theaters 2016–Present



All locations are approximate.
Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative.

Source: DoD, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2016*.

PLA Army (PLAA)

The reforms are particularly impactful for the PLAA as they establish an individual PLAA headquarters for the first time. The 2016 Department of Defense assessment of China noted:²⁰

In November 2015, the PLA established a separate Army headquarters for its ground forces. The CMC creation in late 2015 of a separate Army headquarters set the conditions for joint operations by leveling the status of the services. This change has required an alteration in the organization of theater commands, which for the first time are establishing separate subordinate theater army headquarters to lead their ground components.

Other aspects of PLAA modernization continued in 2015. The PLA also continued to modernize and to restructure its ground force to create a fully modern army capable of fighting and winning multiple simultaneous regional land wars as the core element of a national joint force. In 2015, the PLAA emphasized mobility exercises across MRs, the mechanization of combat brigades, the creation of high-mobility infantry and combined-arms battalions, and the delivery of advanced command, control, communication, computers, and intelligence (C4I) equipment that provides real-time data-sharing at the division and brigade level. Modernization also involves improved rotary-wing army aviation with precision-guided munitions (including dedicated air-to-air missiles for helicopter-to-helicopter aerial combat). The PLAA continued to field tracked and wheeled artillery systems, wheeled anti-tank guns, anti-tank guided missiles, wheeled and tracked armored vehicles, and air defense systems which incorporate advanced target-acquisition capabilities. Advanced long-range artillery systems—conventional and rocket—as well as supporting target-acquisition systems continued to enter the force, providing PLAA tactical- and operational-level units with world-class, long-range strike capabilities.

The operational level directly subordinate to the theater commands comprises 18 group armies (GAs) for the PLAA ground forces. These GAs represent the highest exclusively military command level. They command a mix of divisions and brigades, although some GAs utilize only brigades or divisions. **Figure 1.6** shows the locations of each GA and their primary missions, according to the DoD's 2015 and 2016 annual reports to Congress on the Chinese military.

It is reported that the average number of troops under GA command has declined and may decline further in the future, as the PLAA shifts to a modular brigade structure²¹ and already deploys GAs made exclusively of brigades.²² Other organizational reforms that have an impact on the PLAA's structure and order of battle are explained later in this chapter.

Although GAs are roughly similar to a NATO corps, with 30,000-50,000 personnel, they are smaller than a corps in the U.S. military. Moreover, a GA with an all-brigade force structure would be more comparable to a U.S. division.²³ Consequently, a shift in the PLAA force structure towards brigades would significantly reduce the number of personnel per GA and, unless additional GAs were added, such a trend would ultimately reduce PLAA force numbers. It would also allow China to put more emphasis on high capability combat units like maneuver brigades, rather than on mass and larger, less flexible formations.

Below the GA command level, ground forces are organized into divisions, brigades, regiments, battalions, companies, platoons, and squads. The exact order of battle varies between different theaters and GAs.

Figure 1.6: Locations of PLAA Group Armies



Source: DoD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*.



CHINA: Group Armies (GA) Primary Missions		
Shenyang MR	Nanjing MR	Lanzhou MR
16 GA – Defensive, Offensive CT	1 GA – Amphibious, Offensive CT	47 GA – Defensive, Offensive CT
39 GA – RRU, Offensive MF	12 GA – Amphibious, Offensive CT	21 GA – Offensive MF, Defensive
40 GA – Defensive, Offensive CT	31 GA – Amphibious, Offensive CT	
Beijing MR	Guangzhou MR	
65 GA – Defensive	15 Airborne – RRU, Offensive MF	
38 GA – RRU, Offensive MF	41 GA – Offensive CT, Amphibious	
27 GA – Defensive	42 GA – Amphibious	
Jinan MR	Chengdu MR	
26 GA – Offensive CT, Defensive	13 GA – Defensive, Offensive CT	
20 GA – Offensive CT, Defensive	14 GA – Defensive, Offensive CT	
54 GA – Offensive MF, Amphibious		
		MR – Military Region
		MF – Mobile Force
		RRU – Rapid Reaction Unit
		CT – Complex Terrain (mountain, urban, jungle, etc.)

Source: DoD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2015*.

PLA Navy (PLAN)

For the PLA Navy (PLAN), a naval staff headquarters in Beijing forms the command level below the CMC. The highest operational command level in the PLAN is made up of three fleets – the North Sea Fleet, the East Sea Fleet, and the South Sea Fleet. Their headquarters are shown in **Figure 1.7**.

These fleets are then divided into flotillas, groups, and squadrons.²⁴ All fleets maintain operational command over the forces in the areas of their responsibility. Each fleet is organized to oversee coastal, deep-water, and naval aviation operations. Forces afloat are divided into divisions, regiments, and squadrons. In wartime, command over naval forces may be transferred to the MRs.²⁵

These forces are evolving towards a more “blue water” navy, and both their command structure and modernization reflects this.

The 2013 Chinese white paper noted that:²⁶

The PLA Navy (PLAN) is China's mainstay for operations at sea, and is responsible for safeguarding its maritime security and maintaining its sovereignty over its territorial seas along with its maritime rights and interests. The PLAN is composed of the submarine, surface vessel, naval aviation, marine corps and coastal defense arms.

In line with the requirements of its offshore defense strategy, the PLAN endeavors to accelerate the modernization of its forces for comprehensive offshore operations, develop advanced submarines, destroyers and frigates, and improve integrated electronic and information systems. Furthermore, it develops blue-water capabilities of conducting mobile operations, carrying out international cooperation, and countering non-traditional security threats, and enhances its capabilities of strategic deterrence and counterattack.

Currently, the PLAN has a total strength of 235,000 officers and men, and commands three fleets, namely, the Beihai Fleet, the Donghai Fleet and the Nanhai Fleet. Each fleet has fleet aviation headquarters, support bases, flotillas and maritime garrison commands, as well as aviation divisions and marine brigades. In September 2012, China's first aircraft carrier Liaoning was commissioned into the PLAN. China's development of an aircraft carrier has a profound impact on building a strong PLAN and safeguarding maritime security.

The 2015 Chinese white paper further added:²⁷

With the growth of China's national interests, its national security is more vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy, serious natural disasters and epidemics, and the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as institutions, personnel and assets abroad, has become an imminent issue....

To implement the military strategic guideline of active defense in the new situation, China's armed forces will adjust the basic point for PMS [preparation for military struggle]. In line with the evolving form of war and national security situation, the basic point for PMS will be placed on winning informationized local wars, highlighting maritime military struggle and maritime PMS....

In line with the strategic requirement of offshore waters defense and open seas protection, the PLA Navy (PLAN) will gradually shift its focus from “offshore waters defense” to the combination of “offshore waters defense” with “open seas protection,” and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure. The PLAN will enhance its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime maneuvers, joint operations at sea, comprehensive defense and comprehensive support....

The seas and oceans bear on the enduring peace, lasting stability and sustainable development of China. The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests. It is necessary for

China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.

The key question that such development raises is just how effective China's mix of new organizational structures, an emphasis on a more professional military, and weapons quality and technology over numbers, can be made by a country with so limited an actual experience in modern warfare. The answer is not as obvious as saying that combat experience is critical. Britain learned the hard way how effective German naval forces could be with limited experience at the Battle of Jutland and in the chase to sink the Bismarck. While Britain won, it was a much closer run than the Royal Navy has anticipated.

Figure 1.7: PLAN Fleet Headquarters



Source: DoD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*.

PLA Air Force (PLAAF)

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) maintains a headquarters at a command level below the CMC. Before the reforms operational command over the PLAAF was dispersed among MR air force commands.²⁸ The MR headquarters retained control over combined operations, while the MR Air Force commander was responsible for flight operations within the MR.²⁹ **Figure 1.8** shows the locations of major PLAAF and PLAN aviation units throughout each MR. Tactical units include divisions, brigades, regiments, groups, squadrons, battalions, companies, platoons, squads, and flights.³⁰ It remains to be seen exactly how proposed reforms will alter the PLAAF.

China's 2013 white paper described the PLAAF as follows:³¹

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is China's mainstay for air operations, responsible for its territorial air security and maintaining a stable air defense posture nationwide. It is primarily composed of aviation, ground air defense, radar, airborne and electronic countermeasures (ECM) arms.

In line with the strategic requirements of conducting both offensive and defensive operations, the PLAAF is strengthening the development of a combat force structure that focuses on reconnaissance and early warning, air strike, air and missile defense, and strategic projection. It is developing such advanced weaponry and equipment as new-generation fighters and new-type ground-to-air missiles and radar systems, improving its early warning, command and communications networks, and raising its strategic early warning, strategic deterrence and long-distance air strike capabilities.

The PLAAF now has a total strength of 398,000 officers and men, and an air command in each of the seven Military Area Commands (MACs) of Shenyang, Beijing, Lanzhou, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou and Chengdu. In addition, it commands one airborne corps. Under each air command are bases, aviation divisions (brigades), ground-to-air missile divisions (brigades), radar brigades and other units.

Once again, it is difficult to estimate the real world impact of these changes on effectiveness. It is easy to create an effective air force on paper, but China has limited real experience in using modern air power in actual combat, and even less experience in using it in effective joint warfare. It may well have learned enough from other nations and its exercises to become steadily more effective, but there are no unclassified reports from Western sources that convincingly address this. As a result, it is all too easy to either underestimate China on the basis of its lack of experience or to exaggerate its capability on the basis that all of its modernization efforts will be fully effective.

It is important to point out, however, that China is surrounded by regional neighbors that face the same lack of military experience. With the exception of the United States, no other regional power has conducted any meaningful form of modern war for decades.

Figure 1.8: Locations of PLAAF & PLAN Major Aviation Units



Source: DoD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*.

PLA Rocket Force (PLARF)

Unlike the SAF, the PLARF is a formal branch of the PLA rather than a separate service like its predecessor. During the inauguration ceremony Xi Jinping stated the PLARF will be, “core force of strategic deterrence, a strategic buttress to the country's position as a major power, and an important building block in upholding national security.”³² While there are reports³³ that the PLARF will control China’s entire nuclear triad, the 2016 Department of Defense report on China states:³⁴

The Rocket Force, renamed from the PLASAF late last year, operates China’s land-based nuclear and conventional missiles. It is developing and testing several new classes and variants of offensive missiles, including a hypersonic glide vehicle; forming additional missile units; upgrading older missile systems; and developing methods to counter ballistic missile defenses.

Beneath this headquarters are six corps, also known as bases, which themselves command missile brigades, regiments, battalions, companies, and platoons. However, it is possible for both bases and brigades to operate independently directly under the CMC.

According to the *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, the SAF had three command levels capable of independent action at the campaign level:³⁵

The participating strength of the Second Artillery Campaign is the Second Artillery Campaign large formation which normally contains the following three types: missile bases, missile base groups, and missile brigade at the campaign level.

The PRC's 2013 white paper described the SAF as follows:³⁶

The PLA Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) is a core force for China's strategic deterrence. It is mainly composed of nuclear and conventional missile forces and operational support units, primarily responsible for deterring other countries from using nuclear weapons against China, and carrying out nuclear counterattacks and precision strikes with conventional missiles. Following the principle of building a lean and effective force, the PLASAF is striving to push forward its informationization transform, relying on scientific and technological progress to boost independent innovations in weaponry and equipment, modernizing current equipment selectively by applying mature technology, enhancing the safety, reliability and effectiveness of its missiles, improving its force structure of having both nuclear and conventional missiles, strengthening its rapid reaction, effective penetration, precision strike, damage infliction, protection and survivability capabilities. The PLASAF capabilities of strategic deterrence, nuclear counterattack and conventional precision strike are being steadily elevated. The PLASAF has under its command missile bases, training bases, specialized support units, academies and research institutions. It has a series of "Dong Feng" ballistic missiles and "Chang Jian" cruise missiles.

The 2015 Chinese defense white paper did not provide new details in regards to the structure of the SAF but the PRC's Ministry of National Defense website did further clarify the current structure, organization, and force building of the SAF.³⁷

The Second Artillery Force is a strategic force under the direct command and control of the CMC, and the core force of China for strategic deterrence. It is mainly responsible for deterring other countries from using nuclear weapons against China, and for conducting nuclear counterattacks and precision strikes with conventional missiles.

The Second Artillery Force sticks to China's policy of no first use of nuclear weapons, implements a self-defensive nuclear strategy, strictly follows the orders of the CMC, and takes it as its fundamental mission the protection of China from any nuclear attack. In peacetime the nuclear missile weapons of the Second Artillery Force are not aimed at any country.

But if China comes under a nuclear threat, the nuclear missile force of the Second Artillery Force will go into a state of alert, and get ready for a nuclear counterattack to deter the enemy from using nuclear weapons against China. If China comes under a nuclear attack, the nuclear missile force of the Second Artillery Force will use nuclear missiles to launch a resolute counterattack against the enemy either independently or together with the nuclear forces of other services.

The conventional missile force of the Second Artillery Force is charged mainly of the task of conducting medium- and long-range precision strikes against key strategic and operational targets of the enemy.

Structure and Organization

The operational command authority of the Second Artillery Force is highly centralized. The chain of command runs from the CMC, the Second Artillery Force and missile bases to missile brigades. The operations of the Second Artillery Force must follow the orders of the CMC in the strictest and most precise manner.

The Second Artillery Force is mainly composed of the nuclear missile force, the conventional missile force, the support force, educational institutions, research institutes and the headquarter organizations. The missile force is organized into missile bases, missile brigades and launch battalions.

The support force is organized into technical and specialized support units such as reconnaissance, intelligence, signal, ECM, engineering, logistics and equipment units. The educational institutions include a command college, an engineering college and a school for NCOs. The research institutes include equipment and engineering institutes.

Force Building

Following the principle of building a lean and effective force and going with the tide of the development of military science and technology, the Second Artillery Force strives to raise the informationization level of its weaponry and equipment, ensure their safety and reliability, and enhance its capabilities in protection, rapid reaction, penetration, damage and precision strike. After several decades of development, it has

created a weaponry and equipment system with both nuclear and conventional missiles, both solid-fueled and liquid-fueled missiles, different launching ranges and different types of warheads.

The Second Artillery Force is endeavoring to form a complete system for war preparations, optimize its combat force structure, and build a missile operational system suited to informationized warfare. Its nuclear and conventional missile forces are kept at an appropriate level of readiness. The Second Artillery Force is making steady head-way in the construction of its battlefield system, and makes extensive use of modern mechanical equipment and construction methods. Each completed project is up to standard.

The Second Artillery Force is also dedicated to logistical reforms and innovations. It has created integrated data bases for field support and informationized management platforms for logistic materials, and improved support systems for the survival of combatants in operational positions. As a result, its integrated logistical support capabilities in case of actual combat have been markedly enhanced.

To ensure the absolute safety of nuclear weapons, the Second Artillery Force strictly implements rules and regulations for nuclear safety control and accreditation of personnel dealing with nuclear weapons, has adopted reliable technical means and methods, strengthens the safe management of nuclear weapons in the process of storage, transportation and training, improves mechanisms and methods for emergency response to nuclear accidents, and has put in place special safety measures to avoid unauthorized and accidental launches.

In terms of training, the Second Artillery Force takes specialized skills as the foundation, focuses on officers and core personnel, centers its attention on systems integration and aims at improving overall operational capabilities. It actively conducts specialized training, integrated training and operational training exercises. Specialized training mainly involves the study of basic and specialized missile theories, and the training in operating skills of weapons and equipment. Integrated training mainly consists of whole-process coordinated training of all elements within a combat formation.

Operational training exercises refer to comprehensive training and exercises by missile brigades and support units in conditions similar to actual combat.

The Second Artillery Force has adopted a rating system for unit training and an accreditation system for personnel at critical posts. It enhances on-base, simulated, web-based and realistic training, explores the characteristics and laws of training in complex electromagnetic environments and integrated training of missile bases, and is conducting R&D of a new generation of web-based simulated training systems. Significant progress has been made in building the "Informationized Blue Force" and battle laboratories.

The Second Artillery Force places personnel training in a strategic position, and gives it high priority. It is working to implement the Shenjian Project for Personnel Training, and create a three-tiered team of first-rate technical personnel. As a result, a contingent of talented people has taken shape, whose main body is composed of academicians of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, missile specialists, commanding officers, and skilled operators and technicians.

Once again, this is an aspect of Chinese forces where China has no practical experience. In this case, however, that closest thing any nation has to such experience is the U.S. use of cruise missiles and UCAVs in limited wars, and the even more limited Russian use of UCAVs against targets in Syria. The Iraqi and Iranian use of missiles during the Iran-Iraq War and in the 1991 Gulf war was largely an exercise in terror strikes against area targets like cities, and more recent missile firings in Syria and Yemen have been more demonstrative than serious attempts at warfighting.

China's ability to plan and execute a successful major missile campaign remains uncertain – as does that of the United States, Russia, and other regional powers like North Korea and Iran. This is particularly true in the face of joint warfare involving air forces with long-range precision strike capability.

Additionally, the threat of nuclear war is inherently effective as a deterrent and for the purposes of strategic intimidation. Using it means entering unknown territory that risks existential

consequences. Even limited threats of mutual assured destruction become totally unpredictable, and potentially so escalatory as to change every pre-use strategic calculation, the moment they are put into practice.

This is also a form of war where the senior political leadership may not understand the real nature of any use and the risks of restraint or non-restraint. Deterrence theory, like game theory, works best if it is never put into practice. It can degenerate into complexity or chaos” theory with all too little warning.

Strategic Support Force (SSF)

On December 31, 2015 Xi Jinping announced the creation of the Strategic Support Force (SSF) as an independent branch of the PLA reporting to the CMC. The Department of Defense notes briefly that the SSF will “oversee its (China) space and cyber capabilities.”³⁸ The Chinese military establishment has been very tight-lipped thus far on what the SSF’s role and responsibility will be as part of the PLA. Military spokesperson Yang Yujun did, however, note that it was “an important growth point” for the PLA.³⁹

A January 2016 Center for Naval Analyses China Studies report by David Finkelstein discusses the SSF as follows:⁴⁰

Of all the official information released by Beijing to date, the PLA has been most vague about the missions, organization, and composition of this new force. It is not even clear at this point whether the Strategic Support Force is a service-level organization like the navy and air force, or an independent functional command.²⁴ Its name in Chinese would suggest the latter.

From what can be gleaned from official commentary, the Strategic Support Force is going to have several mandates, none of which have been spelled out in any detail. These include the following: some unspecified role in logistical support to the warfighting forces, some responsibility for “civil-military integration,” and responsibility for “the building of a new type of combat operation force.”²⁵ The latter two functions strongly suggest that the Strategic Support Force will be responsible for developing, managing, and possibly deploying the most modern, high-technology assets that define modern warfare to the warfighting commands. Our biggest hint is the term “from what can be gleaned from *xinxing zuozhan liliang*; 新型作战力量).

In the parlance of the PLA, “new type operational forces” generally refers to those key capabilities or units which are characterized by cutting-edge technologies and are deemed essential for prosecuting modern, high-technology, and information-intensive campaigns. Without such assets, according to various PLA writings, a military force fights under a great disadvantage. Examples usually given are cyber space, outer space, the electro-magnetic spectrum, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) assets, and precision-guided munitions. The term is sometimes applied to special operations forces, special aviation, and maritime assets such as unmanned aerial and underwater vehicles (UAVs, UUVs), and electronic countermeasures units.

These capabilities and units reside at the heart of what the PLA refers to as “informationized local wars” (*xinxihua jubu zhanzheng*; 信息化局部战争), which the PLA’s new military strategy (published in May 2015) has identified as the type of modern warfare that the Chinese armed forces must be able to prosecute, and which, from an operational perspective, this entire reorganization is meant to facilitate.²⁶

The need for these types of high-technology assets and capabilities also undergirds the call for enhanced “civil-military integration” in research and development and production, which means that the development of new technologies in the civil and military research and development sectors should be better coordinated

and mutually supportive. Hence, this may be one reason why “civil-military integration” is listed under the auspices of the new Strategic Support Force.

So, an informed guess is that the Strategic Support Force is where cyber space, outer space, and other high-tech capabilities will reside. We will simply have to wait and see how this new command shapes up.

The Organization of the Chinese Security and Paramilitary Forces

At the same time, the Chinese armed forces are only one component of the overall Chinese security apparatus. China’s security responsibilities are shared among the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Public Security, the People’s Armed Police Force (PAPF), and the PLA. All of these organizations perform important functions, although the greatest burden in an armed conflict against a foreign power naturally lies with the PLA.

China Coast Guard (CCG)

In recent years, the China Coast Guard (CCG) has garnered much of the focus among Chinese paramilitary forces for its role in China’s conflicts over disputed maritime territory in the East China Sea and South China Sea. The official creation of a national coast guard only occurred in 2013 when China Marine Surveillance (CMS), the Fisheries Law Enforcement (FLE), and other smaller entities were consolidated into the CCG led by the newly created State Oceanic Administration.⁴¹ The creation of the official CCG was largely due to the growing reliance China placed on the paramilitary force for pursuing its maritime interests. In fact, commentators within China have gone as far as to refer to it as “China’s Second Navy”.⁴²

The CCG is well equipped. The 2016 *IISS Military Balance* indicates that it possesses roughly 330 patrol and coastal combatant ships making it the largest blue-water coast guard force in the world.⁴³ Additionally, the 2016 Department of Defense report on China notes that the Chinese are continuing to build and modernize the CCG.⁴⁴

China prefers to use its government-controlled, civilian maritime law enforcement agencies in maritime disputes, and uses the PLAN in an overwatch capacity in case of escalation. The enlargement and modernization of the China Coast Guard (CCG) forces will improve China’s ability to enforce its maritime claims. The CCG is increasing its total force level at a rapid pace. Over the last five years, China has added more than 100 ocean-going patrol ships to the CCG to increase its capacity to conduct extended offshore operations and to replace old units. In the next decade, a new force of civilian law enforcement ships will afford China the capability to patrol more robustly its claims in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Overall, the CCG’s total force level is expected to increase by 25 percent. Some of these ships will have the capability to embark helicopters, a capability that only a few CCG ships currently have.

In 2013, China consolidated four of its maritime law enforcement agencies into the CCG and subordinated its operations to the Ministry of Public Security. The CCG is responsible for a wide range of missions, including enforcing China’s sovereignty claims, anti-smuggling, protecting fisheries resources, and general law enforcement.

The continued buildup of the CCG largely stems from the ongoing unresolved nature of China’s maritime disputes with Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and numerous others. Additionally, they have managed to derive substantial success from the use of the CCG in protecting their various claims. The CCG continues to successfully prevent fisherman from the Philippines from accessing Scarborough Shoal, even in the after the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled that the Chinese were violating the Filipino fisherman’s right to fish there.⁴⁵

The CCG also regularly sails through the contested Senkaku islands and into Japanese territorial water.⁴⁶

The 2016 Department of Defense report on China adds:⁴⁷

China has used low-intensity coercion to enhance its presence and control in disputed areas of the East and South China Sea. During periods of tension, official statements and state media seek to frame China as reacting to threats to its national sovereignty or to provocations by outside actors. China often uses a progression of small, incremental steps to increase its effective control over disputed areas and avoid escalation to military conflict. China has also used punitive trade policies as instruments of coercion during past tensions and could do so in future disputes. In 2015, China continued to employ China Coast Guard and PLA Navy ships to implement its claims by maintaining a near-continuous presence in disputed areas in order to demonstrate continuous and effective administration. Recent land reclamation activity has little legal effect, but will support China's ability to sustain longer patrols in the South China Sea. In 2012, China restricted Philippine fruit imports during the height of Scarborough Reef tensions. In 2010, China used its dominance in the rare earth industry as a diplomatic tool by restricting exports of rare earth minerals to Japan amid tensions over a collision between a Chinese fishing boat and Japanese patrol ship.

China's strategy to protect its maritime claims also extends beyond the use of traditional coast guard or naval forces. The Chinese use regular fishing boats and crews—backed by the military—to further their agenda in maritime disputes. This array of nontraditional forces forms what China considers to be its “maritime militia”.⁴⁸

Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy of the Naval War College noted in a June 2016 *Foreign Affairs* article that:⁴⁹

The militia represents a useful tool in China's plan to bloodlessly press its maritime claims, since its frequently civilian appearance allows Beijing to deny its involvement in encounters such as last October's and exploit the U.S. Navy's rules of engagement, which limit the actions U.S. ships can take against civilian vessels. Despite its potency, the maritime militia is the least understood of China's sea forces, and so far, the U.S. government has not acknowledged its existence in public reports or major official statements.

The maritime militia units are managed by local PLA military commands and are funded by local and provincial governments. To encourage locals to join up, municipalities often promise to pay militia personnel a pension equal to several thousand dollars per year if they are disabled in the line of duty—a sum comparable to other Chinese government pensions and an attractive draw in a rural fishing village. Hainan, the Chinese island province that claims administration over most of the South China Sea, is home to many of the most advanced units, some of which Chinese officials, including Chinese President Xi Jinping, have visited.

Maritime militia units are designed to look like civilian groups in most contexts, and they have considerable leeway to decide when to use the military uniforms in which their members usually train. A [January 2014 article](#) in China's official military newspaper, *PLA Daily*, neatly captures the intended effect: “Putting on camouflage, they qualify as soldiers; taking off the camouflage, they become law-abiding fishermen.” Of course, these are no ordinary fishermen. Members of the militia report to the People's Liberation Army and other government elements, and their missions are mandated and sponsored by the Chinese state. What is more, according to authoritative Chinese government and military-affiliated publications, some of China's most advanced maritime militia units—the same ones that would likely be entrusted with missions requiring contact with U.S. and other foreign forces—are trained by PLA Navy officers.

The Chinese maritime militia has been involved in numerous high-profile controversies near various locations where China has territorial disputes. In March 2009, a group of Chinese ships harassed the USNS Impeccable in the South China Sea and even attempted to use hooks to snag advanced sonar technology off the ship.⁵⁰ In April 2012, illegal fishing by Chinese fisherman began a standoff at the Scarborough Shoal that ultimately led to China seizing and militarizing

the Shoal.⁵¹ President of the Philippines Benigno S. Aquino III even likened China's aggressive land seizure to Nazi Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland.⁵² In May 2014, a Chinese fishing boat rammed and sunk a Vietnamese vessel in a confrontation near a contentious Chinese oil rig located in the proximity of the Paracel Islands.⁵³ In 2016 alone, a hundred Chinese fishing ships violated Malaysian territorial waters,⁵⁴ Vietnam seized a Chinese fishing boat in its waters,⁵⁵ and the Indonesia navy opened fire on a Chinese ship in its territorial waters.⁵⁶ Additionally, there have been numerous other lower-profile incidents and they seem unlikely to cease going forward.

Ultimately, China's utilization of the maritime militia indicates a growing global reliance on asymmetrical conflict tactics. Drawing comparison to Russia's deployment "little green men" paramilitary forces to the Ukraine, commentators have referred to China's fisherman as "little blue men".⁵⁷ The paramilitary forces provide China a strategic outlet that is simultaneously aggressive while also being largely devoid of the threat of traditional naval escalation due to the relatively low stakes and the plausible deniability that China is able to maintain. Still, while China continues to place high strategic value on the active maritime militia, it has alienated regional countries and furthered concerns that China's rise will not be peaceful.

Ministry of State Security (MSS)

The Ministry of State Security serves under the PRC's State Council and conducts foreign and domestic intelligence and counter-intelligence collection. MSS agents perform covert activities, both inside and outside of China.⁵⁸

Ministry of Public Security (MPS)

The Ministry of Public Security has responsibility for internal security, and is also under the State Council. It is the highest-level administrative body for Chinese law enforcement forces and oversees approximately 1.9 million police personnel throughout China. These police forces have "many functions including domestic patrol, traffic control, detective, anti-crime, anti-riot, and anti-terrorism."⁵⁹ In 2001, the MPS ordered major cities to each establish an anti-riot force of no fewer than 300 personnel, many of whom are equipped with armored cars and armored personnel carriers.⁶⁰

People's Armed Police Force (PAPF)

The People's Armed Police Force (PAPF), also called the People's Armed Police or PAP, serves under the command of the CMC and the State Council, but by definition it is not part of the PLA.⁶¹ It serves as an internal security force and was described by the 2010 Chinese white paper as the "shock force in handling public emergencies."⁶² In addition, the PAPF acts as a light infantry reserve in the event of war and also takes part in reconstruction and rescue efforts after national emergencies.⁶³

The PAPF's 660,000+ personnel are spread between the Internal Security Forces, the Border Defense Force (including the Coast Guard), the China Marine Surveillance Agency, the Maritime Safety Administration, and the Fisheries Enforcement Command. Some PAPF units are responsible for border security and for guarding critical infrastructure,⁶⁴ including critical military infrastructure.⁶⁵

China's 2010 white paper stated that the PAPF also shares some territorial air defense duties with the PLAAF, PLAN, and PLA ground forces.⁶⁶ The 2013 white paper notes,⁶⁷

In peacetime, the PAPF's main tasks include performing guard duties, dealing with emergencies, combating terrorism and participating in and supporting national economic development. In wartime, it is tasked with assisting the PLA in defensive operations.

Based on the national information infrastructure, the PAPF has built a three-level comprehensive information network from PAPF general headquarters down to squadrons. It develops task-oriented weaponry and equipment and conducts scenario-based training so as to improve its guard-duty, emergency-response and counter-terrorism capabilities.

The PAPF is composed of the internal security force and other specialized forces. The internal security force is composed of contingents at the level of province (autonomous region or municipality directly under the central government) and mobile divisions.

Specialized PAPF forces include those guarding gold mines, forests, hydroelectric projects and transportation facilities. The border public security, firefighting and security guard forces are also components of the PAPF.

Additionally, one of the most substantial roles of the PAPF is controlling the border. This is especially true considering China shares its border with more countries than any country in the world. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 it has resolved 12 of the 14 land border disputes with its neighbors via peaceful negotiation.⁶⁸ The two remaining involve India and Bhutan. The dispute with India, in particular, remains troublesome as tensions remain high and fire is often exchanged across the border.⁶⁹ Ch

The Ministry of National Defense notes:⁷⁰

The border public security force, listed as a component of the PAPF, is an armed law-enforcement body deployed by the state in border and coastal areas and at ports. Its main responsibilities are as follows: border and coastal public security administration; ports and border inspection and surveillance; patrols and surveillance in areas adjacent to Hong Kong and Macao; patrols and surveillance along the demarcation line of the Beibu Gulf; and the prevention of and crack-down on illegal and criminal acts in border and coastal areas, such as illegal border crossing, smuggling and drug trafficking.

The border public security force has 30 contingents in provinces (autonomous regions or municipalities directly under the central government, except Beijing); 110 detachments in border and coastal prefectures (prefecture-level cities, autonomous prefectures or leagues) and 20 marine police detachments in coastal prefectures; 207 active-duty border inspection stations at open ports; 310 groups in border and coastal counties (county-level cities or banners); 1,691 border police substations in border and coastal townships (towns); 46 frontier inspection stations on major border routes; and 113 mobile groups deployed in important sectors in border areas.

In recent years the border public security force has made efforts to implement the strategy of safeguarding the people and consolidating border defense; strengthen public security efforts by the general public; improve mechanisms for investigating, mediating and settling disputes, conflicts and mass incidents; tackle prominent public security issues; promote the building of model villages and consolidate border defense; and help children in need, thus vigorously promoting harmony and stability in border and coastal areas. Further efforts have been made by border inspection stations to improve their services. As a result, an environment has been created for safe, rapid and convenient customs clearance.

The border public security force, supported by other relevant departments, has cracked down hard on crimes, such as illegal border crossing, drug trafficking and smuggling, and carried out campaigns to combat organized criminal gangs and suppress evil forces in border and coastal areas. Since 2007 it has arrested 4,400 illegal border crossers, seized 3,806 kg of drugs, seized smuggled goods worth RMB620 million, cracked 19,205 criminal cases and handled 60,063 violations of public security.

Further PLA Organizational Reforms

The 3rd Plenum of the 18th Party Congress featured statements strongly backing military reforms, particularly organizational reforms. Organizational reforms have been particularly difficult to

implement in the past because of deeply entrenched interests within the PLA that benefit from the current organization and structure of the PLA. However, PLA theorists have stressed that organizational reform is vital if the PLA is to successfully conduct integrated joint operations in line with the local wars doctrine.

Some of the key organizational reforms include: flattening the command structure, reforming the old Military Region system to better facilitate joint operations, improving personnel education, forming modular force groupings. These reforms are part of a broader embrace of the RMA with Chinese characteristics and joint operations.

Continued Importance of Improving Training and Education

Arguably the most important reform, and one re-emphasized at the Third Plenum meeting, has been continued training and education reforms. The PLA has stressed that it needs personnel that are well trained and educated in joint operations and the use of new technology if they are to operate using tactics and doctrines that have not yet been battle tested.⁷¹

Moreover, the “PLA also notes that compared to highly advanced armed forces, the PLA’s current information literacy is low and its lack of specialized and technical personnel is constraining modernization.”⁷² In order to better train and educate its personnel, the PLA is investing in new facilities and upgrading bases so that they can conduct more complex battlefield simulations and more effectively teach its personnel how to conduct joint operations. These facilities will also include “battle labs” that will experiment with and refine new and novel tactics.⁷³

However, the nature and success of PLA efforts education has yet to be publically discussed amongst the other reforms. In the Jamestown Foundation February 2016 report on PLA reform, the authors categorize education as an “unanswered question” and provide a list of questions that still need to be addressed regarding the PLA’s education efforts.⁷⁴

What is the status of the Academy of Military Science, National Defense University, and National University of Defense Technology? Will they continue to be directly under the oversight of the CMC? What changes will occur in the PLA system of educational academies and schools? Will the number of new students be reduced because of the 300,000-person reduction? Will new academies be formed or former academies transformed into new entities based on changes in personnel and force structure? For example, will more NCO schools or more command academies be established?

The Broader Anti-Corruption Campaign

These military reforms are also tied to a much broader anti-corruption campaign that President Xi Jinping has made a cornerstone of his administration. The 2016 Department of Defense report on China notes:⁷⁵

The CCP’s anticorruption efforts in the military targeted more than 40 senior officers in 2015, including former Central Committee Politburo member and CMC Vice Chairman Guo Boxiong, who served as the PLA’s top general before he retired in 2012. Guo, who was accused in July 2015 of accepting bribes and abusing his authority over promotions, is the second retired member of the high command to come under scrutiny for graft. Former CMC Vice Chairman Xu Caihou, Guo’s colleague, died this year while awaiting prosecution for corruption. Anticorruption investigations in the PLA parallel a larger Party-wide effort that President Xi initiated shortly after taking office to safeguard the legitimacy of the CCP, root out corruption and powerful rival networks, improve governance, and strengthen central control. Military discipline inspectors have targeted individual power networks and sectors historically prone to corruption, and the PLA is also revising its regulations to prevent abuse more effectively.

Some observers expect that even former President Jiang Zemin may be a target of this anti-corruption campaign.⁷⁶ Another scenario is that Xi and Jiang came to an agreement that allowed Xi to maintain his relationship with Jiang while going after high-profile members in Jiang's network.⁷⁷

The debates surrounding this anti-corruption campaign has centered on the true motivations driving the campaign. Some observers have seen the campaign as largely the manifestation of a power struggle within the CCP. Others believe that President Xi has a sense of urgency that stems from the belief that corruption presents a critical and even existential threat to the CCP.

Those who believe that the campaign is simply an internal power struggle point to the fact that the anti-corruption campaign itself is very opaque.⁷⁸ Information surrounding the campaign is tightly controlled and released carefully. One Chinese observer asserted that if the campaign was genuine, the anti-corruption campaign would be more transparent.⁷⁹

Those who see the campaign as a pivotal point in Chinese politics point to the unprecedented scale of the anti-corruption campaign. They note that the campaign has crossed factional lines rather than staying within them, the latter of which would have strongly suggested that a power struggle was underway. For instance, although Jiang Zemin's political allies have been a significant target during the campaign, President Xi himself is widely considered to be a protégé of Jiang.⁸⁰

The opaque nature of the CCP and its one party rule makes it difficult to determine the facts. However, the available evidence indicates that the motivations of the corruption campaign may stem from a mix of factors. It appears that President Xi is motivated both by exerting control over the military in a way that his predecessor Hu Jintao was unable to, while also rooting out legitimate corruption in the pursuit of building a modern informationized fighting force.

The April 2016 National Defense University report by Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow notes:⁸¹

The main political drivers of the reforms are the desire to tighten civilian political control over the PLA and the need to deal with rampant corruption inside the military, including in the promotion system. These reflect Xi's general tendency toward centralizing authority and his use of the anticorruption campaign as both a means of rebuilding the party's image and a weapon against opponents. Since the new PLA command and control structure might best be described as Goldwater-Nichols with Chinese characteristics Xi assumed office, there has been a drumbeat of stories stressing the need for the party to exercise "absolute leadership" over the military; this was a major theme at the October 2014 PLA Political Work Conference at Gutian. Reiteration of this principle suggests continued leadership concerns about control over the military.

If President Xi's anti-corruption campaign is successful in rooting out corruption and creating an environment that discourages it, the entrenched interests that have hampered PLA reform in the past may finally be overcome. These sweeping changes will affect many in the PLA, potentially threatening entrenched interests. The disbanded General Logistic Department had a history of corruption particularly linked with real estate and development.⁸² The progress that these two groups make may act as a gauge to measure the effectiveness of the anti-corruption effort and PLA organizational reform.

The Chinese View on the Current State of the PLA in Relation to Local Wars and Joint Operations

Seen in another context, China's organizational reforms are crucial if China is to resolve a problem that it calls the "Two Incompatibles." This problem is explained as follows:

The main contradiction in our army building is that the level of our modernization is incompatible with the demands of winning a local war under informatized conditions, and our military capabilities are incompatible with the demands of carrying out the army's historic missions in the new century and new stage.

Such a characterization would suggest that the PLA views itself as not having reached the level of capability and modernization that can successfully fight the kind of war it expects to fight. Although the PLA's technical advances have captured much world attention, the PLA is much more concerned about issues regarding organization, logistics, force structure, training, personnel education, and command and control.

Jiang Zemin emphasized the importance of non-technical aspects of modernization in the context of personnel education: "Though we're unable to develop all high-technology weapons and equipment within a short period of time, we must train qualified personnel first, for we would rather let our qualified personnel wait for the equipment than the other way round."⁸³

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