XI'S ARMY: REFORM AND LOYALTY IN THE PLA

Introduction
by Mathieu Duchâtel

A politically reliable and modern force capable of joint operations – this is what China wants to achieve with its ambitious reforms of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The reforms, which are scheduled to be completed by 2020, represent no less than a major restructuring of the organisation - including a downsizing of the force. Contrary to the slow pace of other large-scale reforms launched by China, such as the reform of state-owned enterprises, the reforms of the PLA are proceeding swiftly so far. The planned restructuring will result in a radical redistribution of power, which will negatively impact some individuals and constituencies and will empower others. While the outcomes remain unknown, the reforms look set to strengthen central party control over the military through the Central Military Commission (CMC) and increase the political clout of the PLA’s various services at the expense of the Army (land forces).

Against this background, will the PLA resist change like other parts of the Chinese bureaucracy? Chinese analysts are cautious and refrain from providing many specific details about the potential outcomes of the reforms, preferring to shield themselves by making vague hints and suggestions. They write about “potential roadblocks” to the reforms, such as the level of vested interests and bureaucratic inertia, as well as the unavoidable difficulties faced by reforming any large organisation with established chains of command and hierarchies. Indeed, one might ask how

The Chinese have long been obsessed with strategic culture, power balances and geopolitical shifts. Academic institutions, think-tanks, journals and web-based debates are growing in number and quality, giving China’s foreign policy breadth and depth.

China Analysis introduces European audiences to these debates inside China’s expert and think-tank world and helps the European policy community understand how China’s leadership thinks about domestic and foreign policy issues. While freedom of expression and information remain restricted in China’s media, these published sources and debates provide an important way of understanding emerging trends within China.

Each issue of China Analysis focuses on a specific theme and draws mainly on Chinese mainland sources. However, it also monitors content in Chinese-language publications from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which occasionally include news and analysis that is not published in the mainland and reflects the diversity of Chinese thinking.
long it will take for the newly created entities in the PLA to work together smoothly? In a way, the commentators do not dare to speculate much beyond what is outlined in the official document issued by the Central Military Commission (CMC), which, itself, acknowledges that the reform programme touches upon “deep interests”.

The Hong-Kong rumour mill is bolder than the Chinese in its suggestion that even Xi is constrained by considerations over the balance of power within the PLA. It is indeed counterintuitive that General Liu Yuan, who was so instrumental in launching the anti-corruption struggle in the military, had to retire from the PLA even though many saw him as a close ally of Xi Jinping and expected him to gain a seat at the CMC. This unexpected move suggests that Xi had to take into consideration the views of General Liu’s many victims and enemies – the losers of the anti-corruption struggle and those who hold the view that it has gone too far in destabilising established constituencies.

Chinese commentaries make clear that maintaining political control over the PLA during the reforms is of vital importance. Under Xi, public pledges of loyalty in the media by high-ranking officers have become routine, but this is only one side of the story. Chinese commentaries also place an almost disproportionate level of importance on “political work” and the need to ensure ideological coherence within the PLA. The weakness of core ideological beliefs within the military is painted as a major problem that restructuring could possibly worsen. The leitmotif under Xi that China could face ideological subversion by the West is alive and well in these debates. The reforms strengthen central control over the PLA and institutionalise anti-corruption efforts by giving more weight to its Discipline and Inspection Commission. The balance of power within the PLA is therefore altered here, with the aim of pre-empting any potential challenge to the Party authority from within the PLA.

The clear obsession with political control indicated by the proposed reforms gives ground to those who believe that Xi Jinping faced a major challenge from a coalition of rival forces that gathered around the two purged officials, Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang, who were suspected of staging a coup a few years ago with support from within the PLA. The consideration of loyalty and discipline is so overwhelming in Chinese publications that operational issues almost seem to take a back seat. But it would be incorrect to believe that operations are in fact relatively less important. On the contrary, the reforms serve to reveal China’s great ambitions in terms of military power.

The internal re-organisation of the forces and regions deals a major blow to the Army (land forces), which have traditionally dominated the PLA, both politically and culturally. The reforms mean that the Army is downgraded to the same rank as the Air Force and the Navy. China’s current military modernisation and strategy is geared towards joint operations, and given Chinese national security priorities in maritime regions in East Asia and its new ambition to protect “overseas interests”, the Navy, the Air Force, the Rocket Force and electronic warfare units are increasingly gaining in strategic importance. The sources analysed in this issue of China Analysis give a few insights into some of the PLA’s operational weaknesses and vulnerabilities as they are perceived by Chinese commentators. For example, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance of foreign forces approaching Chinese waters remains a concern, which partly explains the construction of artificial islands and radar facilities in disputed areas of the South China Sea.

Taken together, the articles indicate that Xi Jinping is playing a risky game with a degree of caution but a clear sense of direction – a direction that was set a long time ago by Mao (in the form of absolute Party control over the military) and by Chinese generals (in the form of anti-access and area denial as the key operational priority for the PLA’s modernisation). Looking ahead, the reorganisation of the military and the greater level of central oversight will strengthen Xi Jinping’s already considerable power to select loyal generals who will faithfully implement the reform package of the Central Military Commission.
At the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2013, major reforms to the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) were announced. Beginning in September 2015, elements of the reform programme have been made public and the process is expected to last until 2020. The changes challenge a number of established interests, including by restructuring the Military Region system as well as the four General Departments, which have been blamed for facilitating patron-client ties in the PLA.

Official sources say that these and other reforms are necessary to transform the PLA into a military force capable of conducting integrated joint operations to protect the Party’s interests within and beyond China’s borders. PLA analysts point out the importance of implementing the reforms, but also highlight the challenges that will come in attempting to carry them out, especially given entrenched interests within the PLA.

**Overhauling the PLA**

Since they began in September, the reforms have already brought about large-scale changes to the force structure, organisation, and operational command of the PLA. On 1 January 2016, the Central Military Commission (CMC) released an “Opinion on Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces” (hereafter, the “Opinion”), which provides the rationale, objectives, and priority areas for the reform programme. The “Opinion” states that the reforms represent the only way to achieve the rejuvenation of the military as well as China’s national-level goals, including the goals of becoming a “moderately prosperous society” (小康社会, xiakang shehui) by 2021, and becoming a “modern socialist country” by 2049. The reforms are also necessary to overcome the structural and policy barriers that exist in the current national defence system.

According to the “Opinion”, the main principles of the reforms are to reorient the PLA to the “correct political direction” of Party control and to improve combat capability by creating an integrated joint operations system that can fight and win wars. Other areas targeted for reform include strengthening innovation and promoting a “rule by law” mindset, so that the reforms are seen within the context of a system of laws and regulations. Policy changes are to be complemented with reforms to organisational systems, and these reforms are to be introduced incrementally, so as to ensure the stability of the armed forces and effective integration with them.

Three of the reforms are particularly significant for the near-term future. First, the roles of national-level, theatre-level, and service-level organisations have been redefined. The description of the new delineation of powers is that “the CMC manages, the theatre commands focus on warfighting, and the services focus on building [the forces]” (junwei guanzong, zhanqu zhuzhan, junzong zhuzhan, junzhong zhujian). The CMC has greater authority over the four old General Departments, whose functions have now been reorganised into 15 bodies that are under the direct control of the CMC. The Theatre Commands (zhanqu) replace the seven military regions. They will conduct combat operations under the “joint operations command system” (lianhe zuozhan zhihui tizhi), as part of an effort to improve joint warfighting operations in contrast to the old, peacetime-focused Military Regions. The services have also been profoundly transformed. An Army headquarters has been established for the first time, aligning it with other services. The Second Artillery Force, which controlled China’s nuclear and conventional missiles, has been elevated to the level of a separate service called the Rocket Force. Along with the Navy and the Air Force, this brings the total number of services to four. The services will focus on force “building”, or training, equipped and those armed forces. Finally, the newly-created Strategic Support Force will focus on cyber, information, and electromagnetic warfare, and possibly some areas of space operations as well.

Second, the PLA as a whole is continuing to decrease in size, though (it is hoped) to increase in quality; a new 900,000 personnel reduction follows two similar cuts in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The reform programme has also introduced policies aimed at improving talent recruitment and development within the armed services. It is likely that a significant portion of these cuts will apply to the PLA Army, although no specifics have been announced yet with regard to any major reductions.

Third, the “Opinion” discusses improvements to PLA equipment acquisition. The “Opinion” states that “fundamental changes” have been made to the national defence, with the “four major improvements” to be achieved through “three changes” (sishi fenbi, sanhuan gaiyi): the establishment of the National Defence Mobilisation Department; the establishment of the Staff Department, the Political Work Department, the Logistic Support Department; the establishment of the People’s Armed Police Force, the China Coast Guard (now the Civil Affairs Administration); the establishment of the People’s Armed Police Force, the China Coast Guard (now the Civil Affairs Administration); the establishment of the People’s Armed Police Force, the China Coast Guard (now the Civil Affairs Administration); the establishment of the People’s Armed Police Force, the China Coast Guard (now the Civil Affairs Administration); the establishment of the People’s Armed Police Force, the China Coast Guard (now the Civil Affairs Administration).

1. “Central Military Commission Opinion on Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces” (中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见, zhongyuan junwei guanzong jianguo zai jundui gaige de yijian), Central Military Commission, 1 January 2016

regulatory systems that would reduce the power of bribes, position-buying, and other corrupt practices that have led to public disciplinary action being taken against PLA officers in recent years.

**Resistance to reform**

PLA analysts and stakeholders have pointed out both the opportunities presented by the reforms and the challenges of implementing them. Largely in line with official commentaries, Xu Debin argues that the PLA needs to be open-minded and to consider the reforms in the light of the new challenges that China faces and the new requirements for the PLA in dealing with them. Xu draws a historical analogy: he contrasts nineteenth-century Japan’s ability to grapple with outside concepts and reforms (including military reform) with the late Qing Dynasty’s rejection of foreign ideas. Xu implies that the PLA has failed to incorporate foreign ideas about some aspects of modern warfare. He notes that since the “reform and opening” era began in the 1970s, China has not managed to develop a truly modern army or navy. Xu says that one of the main areas of resistance to the current reform programme involves concerns about how the relationship between the theatre commands and the services will work in practice. The theatre commands are tasked with warfighting, while the services are supposed to build modern forces – but some fear that in view of this split, the services may pursue force modernisation efforts that are not relevant to warfighting requirements. Meanwhile, the theatre commands may not recognise the limits under which the services are operating due to personnel or costs. And it may be “difficult to focus [the new] command authorities” in order to prosecute a conflict. These concerns may indicate that mechanisms for coordination between the theatre commands and the services have not yet been fully worked out.

Senior Colonel Tang Junfeng also points out potential roadblocks to the military reforms. These include resistance within organisational systems because of inertia, the difficulty of breaking through conflicts of interest, and the difficulty of measuring military effectiveness. The lack of recent wartime experience may also pose a problem, because the usefulness of reforms is difficult to test during
peacetime, as well as because a severe defeat can often provide the strongest impetus for reform. Tang cautions that reforms developed by a peacetime military may lack operational relevance, particularly since any idea can be rebranded as a reform, even if it represents outdated thinking. He also notes that it is difficult to undertake reforms within one’s own organisation, but considerably easier to ask them of others. When confronted with challenges to their interests, some military organisations will respond by exaggerating the threats they currently face so as to block implementation. They may also apply political pressure to the reformers, or shape the reforms in such a way as to benefit their organisation but alter the impact entirely – even, potentially, by adding inefficiencies rather than reducing them. Tang’s article is a warning that in its efforts to reform, the PLA must not end up actually becoming less efficient or less capable.

How effective will the reforms be?

The “Opinion” acknowledges the “unprecedented range of impact” of the reforms, saying that they “touch on deep interests” within the PLA. Despite the disruption to these entrenched interests, the reform process will likely succeed in the end, at least in the terms of success defined by the Party: creating a politically reliable modern force capable of joint operations. Such speculation seems credible because the reform programme provides the right balance of carrots and sticks to three core groups that can be identified within the PLA. The first group consists of officers who either see value in building a more capable fighting force or hope to advance their careers by implementing the new policy (or both). The second group includes senior officers who have risen to the top of the current system. Many senior officers have been placated by being allowed to hold onto their current privileged status until they retire; though for a few, such as Liu Yuan and Cai Yingting, the case is different. A third group of influential senior officers, who might otherwise resist reforms, will likely fall in line because of the threat of investigations, trials, or the worse fates that have befallen their disgraced colleagues.

However, even if the reforms are fully implemented, questions remain about the effects they will have on the PLA’s operational capability. The PLA Army, Navy, and Air Force headquarters will be focused on manning, training, and equipping their respective services, while the five new theatre commands are tasked with leading military operations. But the new commanders and political commissars of the five theatre commands all come from the ground forces. This implies a continuation of Army dominance over a system that is supposed to be improving the PLA’s ability to jointly prosecute conflicts by harnessing capabilities not only on land but also in the sea, the air, and other domains. As more details emerge about the leadership within each theatre command, one area to watch will be how Navy and Air Force officers are integrated into the leadership of the new commands.

Moreover, it is unclear how the PLA Rocket Force, China’s nuclear and conventional missile forces, fits into the guiding principle that “the CMC manages, the theatre commands focus on warfighting, and the services focus on building [the forces]”. The Rocket Force is now a service, but its predecessor commanded troops from bases that were largely outside the command structure of the seven military regions, now replaced by the theatre command structure. Given the importance of the nuclear mission set, the Rocket Force will likely retain its independence from the theatre command system. If this turns out to be the case, it will be important to assess how the theatre commands and the Rocket Force develop and test coordination mechanisms.

Thirdly, the relationship between the theatre commands and the Strategic Support Force is not yet understood. If the Strategic Support Force is to have operational control of troops, it is unclear how it will coordinate the operations of those units with the theatre commands during wartime.

In conclusion, the reforms underway within the PLA are in the process of delivering sweeping changes to its day-to-day operations, despite concerns held by some members of the military. Whether or not the overall implementation is successful as envisioned in the “Opinion”, assessing the operational implications of the reforms will require more time as details emerge from exercises and other activities in which the PLA puts “theory” into “practice”.

---

7 On these cases, see Jérôme Doyon’s article in this issue.
Reforming the army to preserve the system

The decision to reform the PLA was announced at the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP in November 2013. The Party presented the reform as having been prompted by the international and domestic environment, as well as by internal failures within the army. Major General Xiao Dongsong says that President Xi Jinping emphasised that China is faced with “three unprecedented situations” (三个前所未有, sāngé qiānshòu wéiyòu) as well as “three dangers” (三个危险, sāngé wéixiān). China is closer than ever before to being the centre of the world stage: it is closer to achieving its goals; and it now has the ability and the self-confidence to achieve its objectives. At the same time, China must deal with the danger of aggression, subversion, and division, the danger that its steady economic development may not last, and the danger of interrupting the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics.8

Xiao says that to address these risks and achieve the goal of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”, Xi Jinping needs to build a strong army. To do so, Xi must tackle two problems within the army: the lack of ideology and the existence of corruption. The Central Military Commission (CMC) published an “Opinion on Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces” on 1 January 2016, which said that the military must follow the “guiding ideology” of the Party.11 Moreover, as Professor Zhang Xueli of the National University of Defence Technology phrases it, the CMC says it is important to “further consolidate and develop the PLA specifically high level of political dominance, to achieve the objective of a strong army, providing protection to the system (制度, zhìdù) and the institution (体制, tīzhì, i.e. the Party).”12

The all-powerful CMC and the three new control bodies

The army reform programme was designed within the CMC’s Leading Small Group for Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces (hereafter, LSG).13 This group was established in March 2014 and is chaired by Xi Jinping himself. Xiao Dongsong says that in coming up with the reform measures, the LSG organised workshops and debates (more than 860 within 690 military research units), heard from 900 active and retired military officers and experts and surveyed more than 2,000 servicemen from local brigades and units.14

“The establishment of new governance institutions gives the Party even greater control over the PLA” One of the main outcomes of the reform process is that the CMC has taken over the responsibilities of the four PLA General Departments (the General Staff Department, the General Political Department, the General Logistics Department, and the General Armaments Department). The assignments previously held by the general departments have been split up between 15 new CMC departments, commissions, and offices. Four of these new departments retain the titles of the old ones; these departments have kept the same leaders, but they have lost a significant part of their prerogatives and autonomy. The shift in power means that the CMC now has direct control over the five new Theatre Commands (which replace the seven old Military Regions) and over five services (the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Rocket Force, and the Strategic Support Force).15

The CMC’s strengthened control over the armed forces is further ensured by three new bodies: the Commission for Discipline Inspection (军委纪委, jundui jiru), the Politics and Law Commission (军委政法委, jundui zhengfa weimi), and the Audit Office (军委审计署, jundui shenjishu).
Xiao Dongsong explains that these three bodies will act as a decision-making authority (决策权, juecequan), an executive authority (执行权, zhiqingquan), and a supervision authority (监督权, jianduquan).

This will help to implement and uphold the Party’s control over the army, and especially to fight the “expanding phenomenon of corruption”.

The CMC’s Commission for Discipline Inspection (CDI) is a replica of the Central CDI, which is under the supervision of the Politburo Standing Committee and is the organisation leading Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign. The CMC CDI was previously part of the PLA’s General Political Department (GPD), but it is now an autonomous commission directly under the supervision of the CMC. It is headed by Du Jincai, former vice-director of the GPD. Following the civilian CDI’s organisational model, the new military CDI is represented at every level of the army. The mission of the CMC CDI is to fight against corruption and to help promote the Party’s ideology within the army.

The CMC CDI was established in December 2015, and it got to work right away. During the Spring Festival in February 2016, it released its strategy of “open inquiries and secret investigation” (明查暗访, mingcha anfang). Under this strategy, the CDI has provided phone numbers that anyone can call to report behaviour that does not comply with Party law, and specifically, behaviour that conforms to the “four undesirable working styles” (四风, sifeng): formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism, and extravagance. The CDI provided some examples of these “undesirable working styles”, such as using public funds for banquets, travel, or entertainment, organising luxurious and extravagant ceremonies, receiving illegal gifts, or using army vehicles for personal use.

The CMC Politics and Law Commission (PLC) is analogous to the Central Politics and Law Commission (under Politburo supervision), which is China’s core institution for the supervision and control of state-run public security, justice, and judiciary organs, from central to local levels. Until December 2015, out of the 11 members of the Central PLC, only two were from the PLA: the vice-director of the GPD and head of the army’s discipline inspection body, and the commander of the People’s Armed Police. Within the PLA, the Military Procurator General and the President of the Military Court were also part of the Central PLC. But from now on, the CMC PLC is in charge of the military judicial courts and procuratorates at every hierarchical level, with the brief of ensuring “legal proceedings” within the military.

The increasing framing of political control in legal terms has been characteristic of Xi Jinping’s ruling style since he came to power in 2012. The Third Plenum of the CCP 18th Congress in November 2013 confirmed this policy of “ruling the country by the law” (依法治国, yi fa zhi guo), in the sense of exercising power through a strict legal framework with which every administration and individual must comply. The expansion of the “rule by law”, however, does not imply a concomitant rise of the “rule of law” in China. The legal framework in question is the Party law, which aims above all to safeguard the CCP. This is as true for the PLA as for civilian institutions, and all three of the new control bodies serve to enforce Party law.

Xiao Dongsong explains that being strict in “ruling the army by the law” (依法治军, yi fa zhi jun) is the best way to address the lack of “ideology” within the military.

The new president of the CMC PLC is the former Military Procurator General, Li Xiaofeng. The CMC Audit Office is headed by the former president of the PLA Logistics Academy, Guo Chunfu. It is mainly responsible for the financial audit of the army, but also for reforming and improving the audit system within the armed forces, in accordance with the Party’s guidance.

**Ruling the army by the law**

Official Chinese sources repeatedly refer to the Maoist idea of “the Party’s absolute leadership over the army” (党对军队的绝对领导, dang dui jun jui de juedui ling dao), which illustrates the continuity in Party-PLA relations. Along with this traditional way of referring to Party-PLA relations, a new major trend is the extensive use of judicial wording in Chinese sources. The constraining of the military by Party rules and institutions is more and more frequently presented in legal terms.

The increasing framing of political control in legal terms has been characteristic of Xi Jinping’s ruling style since he came to power in 2012. The Third Plenum of the CCP 18th Congress in November 2013 confirmed this policy of “ruling the country by the law” (依法治国, yi fa zhi guo), in the sense of exercising power through a strict legal framework with which every administration and individual must comply. The expansion of the “rule by law”, however, does not imply a concomitant rise of the “rule of law” in China. The legal framework in question is the Party law, which aims above all to safeguard the CCP. This is as true for the PLA as for civilian institutions, and all three of the new control bodies serve to enforce Party law.

Xiao Dongsong explains that being strict in “ruling the army by the law” (依法治军, yi fa zhi jun) is the best way to address the lack of “ideology” within the military.

The new president of the CMC PLC is the former Military Procurator General, Li Xiaofeng. The CMC Audit Office is headed by the former president of the PLA Logistics Academy, Guo Chunfu. It is mainly responsible for the financial audit of the army, but also for reforming and improving the audit system within the armed forces, in accordance with the Party’s guidance.

**Ruling the army by the law**

Official Chinese sources repeatedly refer to the Maoist idea of “the Party’s absolute leadership over the army” (党对军队的绝对领导, dang dui jun jui de juedui ling dao), which illustrates the continuity in Party-PLA relations. Along with this traditional way of referring to Party-PLA relations, a new major trend is the extensive use of judicial wording in Chinese sources. The constraining of the military by Party rules and institutions is more and more frequently presented in legal terms.

The increasing framing of political control in legal terms has been characteristic of Xi Jinping’s ruling style since he came to power in 2012. The Third Plenum of the CCP 18th Congress in November 2013 confirmed this policy of “ruling the country by the law” (依法治国, yi fa zhi guo), in the sense of exercising power through a strict legal framework with which every administration and individual must comply. The expansion of the “rule by law”, however, does not imply a concomitant rise of the “rule of law” in China. The legal framework in question is the Party law, which aims above all to safeguard the CCP. This is as true for the PLA as for civilian institutions, and all three of the new control bodies serve to enforce Party law.

Xiao Dongsong explains that being strict in “ruling the army by the law” (依法治军, yi fa zhi jun) is the best way to address the lack of “ideology” within the military.
Xiao believes that to solve the problem of corruption, the “problem of ideology” must first be solved. This problem will also be addressed through the upgrading of the PLA’s training system, something that Xi Jinping emphasised during the Third Plenum.24

The PLA reform programme is aimed not only at improving and modernising the armed forces’ operational capabilities, but also at upholding the Party ideology and supporting its leadership, embodied by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping. The main innovation in the relationship between the Party and the PLA is the “judicialisation” of armed forces governance, which allows a tighter control of the Party over the army. The outcome of reform is summed up by Dai Xu, who quotes another Maoist slogan: “the Party commands the gun” (党指挥枪, dang zhihui qiang). 25

The reform of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), launched in November 2015, is mainly aimed at organisational transformation, but also has a significant impact on personnel politics. The sweeping changes underway within the army have provided Xi Jinping with what would seem like an excellent opportunity to promote his followers and demote others. However, the early retirement of General Liu Yuan and the apparent demotion of General Cai Yingting have attracted a lot of attention, because they appear to run counter to this rationale. Both men are seen as being close to Xi Jinping, and both seemed to be set for a bright future in the PLA, but neither were promoted. Liu Yuan, previously political commissar of the General Logistics Department, was expected by analysts to become the head of the new PLA Commission for Discipline Inspection under the Central Military Commission (CMC). Cai Yingting, head of the former Nanjing Military Region, was expected to lead the Joint General Staff Department.26

The sidelining of these two heavy-weights could be interpreted as the first sign that Xi Jinping’s hold over the PLA might not be as strong as had been thought. Speculative articles in the Hong Kong and Singapore press give nuance to this idea, putting forward claims that there may be a potential strategic rationale behind it. An analysis of these commentaries will put forward that Xi Jinping is not all-powerful, and must make compromises for the implementation of his PLA reform, even if he does still retain the upper hand.

The sacrifice of Xi’s main ally in the PLA

General Liu Yuan is the son of Liu Shaoqi, president of the People’s Republic of China from 1959 to 1968. As such, Liu Yuan is one of the main representatives of the “princelings”, an influential group made up of the children of Party and military leaders from the Mao era. He is seen as a close associate of Xi Jinping, who is himself the son of former revolutionary leader Xi Zhongxun.27 Liu Yuan led the anti-corruption charges within the PLA. Even before Xi took power, he was a key player in the charge against Gu Junshan, former deputy director of the PLA General Logistics Department, who was removed from office in May 2012. This opened the way for Xi’s massive anti-corruption campaign within the PLA, which led to the arrest of General Xu Caihou and General Guo Boxiong, two former vice chairmen of the CMC.

24 Huang (ed.), “President Xi’s important speech”.
25 Dai Xu is the vice-director of the Institute for Strategy at the National University of Defence. Huang (ed.), “President Xi’s important speech”.
Because of his key role in the fight against corruption, Liu Yuan was an ideal candidate to become head of the new Commission for Discipline Inspection (CDI) in the PLA, which is to be under the direct control of the CMC. According to the Hong Kong magazine Zhengming, Xi put forward Liu as his only candidate for the CDI leadership during the Party-State leadership’s Beidaihe meeting in August 2015. At the meeting, the members also discussed making Liu a CMC member at the Fifth Plenum of the 18th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress, which took place in October 2015. His promotion was put to the vote among the CMC’s 11 members in October. For major decisions like this, a minimum of 75 percent “yes” votes is required, and this minimum was not reached at the meeting. Five members voted for Liu’s nomination to the CMC, three voted against, and three abstained. In November, the CMC voted again, but Liu still did not get the votes. General Fan Changlong, the CMC’s number two, voted against Liu’s nomination, highlighting the tense relationships between Liu and other high level officers. The Zhengming article points out that Liu Yuan made a lot of enemies in the PLA by zealously fighting corruption even before Xi started his campaign in 2013. Liu Yuan’s retirement was announced on 16 December 2015, apparently as a result of the resistance to his nomination to the CMC. According to Zhengming, Liu Yuan met twice with Xi Jinping in December, and the two decided that Liu would have to sacrifice his career to facilitate the implementation of the PLA reforms.

“The retirement of Liu Yuan should give other officers less leeway to maintain their own privileges”

Even so, Yu Zeyuan, a Beijing-based journalist for a Singaporean newspaper, says that Liu Yuan’s retirement at the height of his career sets an example for other officers. If he could sacrifice himself for reform, other officers have little excuse to block it for their own interests. Indeed, any manoeuvres for personal gain would “look petty in comparison” (相形见绌, xiangxingjianchu).

Even so, Yu Zeyuan says that more than Liu’s retirement will be needed if the PLA reforms are to be successful. In particular, the officers and soldiers who will be displaced in the reorganisation will need to be given guarantees that they will not lose their status in the process. The reforms

32 Qin, “Liu Yuan’s retirement”. 33 On the broader challenges to the PLA reforms, see Cristina Garafola’s article in this issue.

28 On the CMC’s Commission for Discipline Inspection, see Marc Julienne’s essay in this issue.
30 Qin, “Liu Yuan’s retirement”.
31 Qin, “Liu Yuan’s retirement”.
have an effect on a range of different entrenched interests. The four General Departments, which the reforms are set to impact, were widely seen as “golden rice bowls” (金饭碗, jinfanwan) because of the opportunities for corruption available to their leaders. The early retirement of Liu Yuan, who was portrayed as an exemplary officer and princeling, should at least give other officers less leeway to fight the reforms to maintain their own privileges.34

On 25 February 2016, Liu Yuan was officially appointed vice-chairman of the National People’s Congress’s Economic and Finance Committee. This kind of appointment is common for retiring senior officials and underlines the fact that Xi Jinping values his “sacrifice”.35

In the end, it was General Du Jincai who was named as head of the new CDI under the CMC. Since 2012, Du has been the secretary of the old CDI, under the auspices of the PLA’s General Political Department, and so, like Liu, he too has been active in the anti-corruption campaign. As a result of his new appointment, he should soon become a CMC member, and as he will not have reached the seniority limit he could remain a member after the 19th CCP Congress scheduled for 2017.

A mysterious demotion

Another change of personnel that seems to go against Xi’s interests is the transfer of Cai Yingting from the role of commander of the Nanjing Military Region to that of president of the PLA Academy of Military Science. While his new position is prestigious, it does not compare to his previous role in terms of operational power. This transfer is particularly surprising since Cai Yingting was particularly close to Xi. He was a key member of the so-called Nanjing faction, made up of figures from the Nanjing military region, which includes provinces in which Xi Jinping worked for a long time and in which he has a strong network.36

Like Liu Yuan, Cai Yingting was seen as a serious candidate for CMC membership, and his demotion is even more mysterious. Overseas Chinese media sources have spread numerous rumours about the reasons behind Cai’s downfall. One frequent rumour is that Cai Yingting was the personal secretary of Zhang Wannian, former vice-chair of the CMC and a close ally of Jiang Zemin, and Xi saw his new position in terms of operational power. This is unique. The six other former commanders of the military regions have been transferred to at least equivalent positions, as reported in Cai was one of the first officers to be promoted by Xi Jinping.41

Yu Zeyuan says that there is a possibility that Cai Yingting’s transfer could in fact not be wholly negative – it might be only a temporary move. Given his career so far, and his status as one of the PLA’s main Taiwan specialists, Cai is still a serious candidate for CMC membership in 2017. His transfer could be a way to round out his military experience and especially his knowledge of China-United States strategic relations. It could also be a way to upgrade the political status of the Military Academy itself.39

Loyalty is everything

Cai Yingting’s position remains uncertain, but his situation is unique. The six other former commanders of the military regions have been transferred to at least equivalent positions, as reported in Cai was one of the first officers to be promoted by Xi Jinping.41

Looking at the profile of the new commanders of the four military services, as well as the Strategic Support Force, it is clear that Li Zuocheng is not an exception.42 The commanders are in general old allies of Xi or else have seen their career advance rapidly with Xi’s support. Wei Fenghe, who commands the Rocket Force, was the first officer promoted by Xi after he took the leadership of the CMC in 2012. Gao Jin, who heads the PLA Strategic Support Force, was raised to the rank of lieutenant general by Xi in 2013.43 The commanders of the Navy and Air Force, Wu Shengli and Ma Xiaotian, both have longstanding ties with Xi.44 They are 

---

34 Yu, “PLA reform personnel reshuffle”.
tary-spearhead-against-corruption-takes.
36 On the Nanjing military region faction, see Willy Lam, “Xi Jinping Consolidates Pow-
37 Leng Qingshan, “Cai Yingting did not get Xi Jinping’s approval, who doubts him be-
cause his daughter married a foreigner” (蔡英挺没有得到习近平的认可，他怀疑蔡是因为女儿嫁给外国人，Cai Yingting mei guo Xi Jinping zheguan, yi yi nü'er huangguo hangju), Duowei, 17 Feb-
proximity would suddenly matter now and not before – Cai was one of the first officers to be promoted by Xi Jinping, in 2013. Another rumour is that Cai’s patriotism and reliability have been called into question because of his daughter’s recent marriage to a Frenchman.40 The reliability of this rumour is highly dubious, but it is symptomatic of the increasing suspicion in Xi’s China towards officers and cadres with transnational connections.

“Xi Jinping does not believe that ability is a key criterion for appointment – the only one is loyalty”

---
both scheduled to retire in 2017 due to seniority limits, but Yu Zeyuan argues that it is very possible that Xi will change the rules in order to keep them as CMC members for two more years. This would be a way to ensure stability at a time of huge reforms and to keep close allies in top positions.\footnote{Yu, “PLA reform personnel reshuffle”.}

Xi has been able to compromise in order to push forward PLA reform and to set aside allies, but he does not compromise on the reliability of his subordinates. As one anonymous military officer told Bowen Press: “Xi Jinping does not believe that ability is a key criterion for appointment – the only one is loyalty”.\footnote{Officer interviewed by the US-based Chinese-language website Bowen Press. “Exclusive: The resignation of Liu Yuan will help the implementation of Xi’s military reforms” (刘源辞要职助习近平推军改, Liu yuan ci yaozhi zhu Xi Jinping tui jungai) Bowen Press, 24 December 2015, available at http://bowenpress.com/news/bowen_50895.html.}

Training is a poorly understood area in the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) modernisation programme. However, Chinese sources are becoming more helpful in explaining the topic. In recent years, the three fleets of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) have moved away from their previous strict regional approach. They have been conducting more exercises in each other’s areas, as well as more joint exercises, including beyond the first island chain and as far as the second island chain.\footnote{The first and second island chains refer to strategic lines delimited by major archipelagos out from the East Asian continental mainland coast. The first chain begins at the Kuril Islands and includes Taiwan, while the second chain is situated in the middle portion of the Pacific Ocean.}

This trend began to intensify in 2014 with the first large-scale joint exercises of the three fleets around Japan, in the context of tense relations with Tokyo.\footnote{On the 2014 drill, see “Why PLA keeps low profile about exercise in Western Pacific?”, China Military Online, 17 December 2014, the English version is available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-12/17/content_6274732.htm.}

The trend towards increased military engagement and integration of the Navy with other forces fits in well with the new PLA reforms announced at the end of 2015, which called for the establishment of a “joint operation command system”.\footnote{On the “joint operation command system”, see Cristina Garafola’s article in this issue.}

The PLA commentaries discussed in this essay focus on two major exercises carried out in 2015. These exercises exemplify the new cooperative approach, since both drills involved coordination with other services.

### The July 2015 exercises

After a large amphibious exercise in the disputed South China Sea on 26–27 July 2015, more than 100 PLAN warships were deployed to the area on 28 July, for what seems to have been a first: a one-day joint exercise with China’s strategic missile force (then called the Second Artillery Corps, renamed the Rocket Force in December 2015) and with electronic warfare units from the Guangzhou Military Region. The forces faced off against each other as “blue” and “red” teams in an exercise that simulated a confrontation aimed at achieving control of the sea in a “complex electromagnetic environment” (复杂电磁环境, fuza dianci huanjing). One PLAN officer who was involved in the exercise said that it was aimed at testing intelligence and counter-intelligence, jamming and counter-jamming, and real-time reconnaissance. The officer also said that the exercise tested the use

“It was not launched against any country, but the exercise should serve as a warning”
of surface ships and submarines in conducting anti-submarine warfare, the successful interception of incoming supersonic anti-ship missiles, the use of naval aviation against low-flying targets, and the air defence capability of the PLAN’s new frigates.50

PLAN Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo, a frequent commentator in the Chinese media, said that the exercise was designed to test the capability of the Second Artillery Corps (now the Rocket Force) to sink enemy warships.51 Yin discussed the DF-21D ballistic missile, known as “the carrier killer”, which was developed by Changfeng Mechanics and Electronics Technology Academy to target and sink large warships. Yin said that the DF-21D missiles are extremely hard to intercept after they are launched, and he said that the Second Artillery Corps has the right to deploy these missiles should China’s mainland and islands be attacked.

China’s new warships were also tested during the exercises. Yin said that the abilities of the Type 052C and D guided-missile destroyers and of the Type 054A guided-missile frigates to defeat enemy aircraft, missile, and electronic reconnaissance were tested in coordination with naval aviation and the Second Artillery Corps. Yin added that the Chinese warships had successfully disabled the radar systems of the enemy’s early warning aircraft with the assistance of the electronic warfare units in Guangzhou Military Region.52 In another interview, Yin said that the exercise helped the PLAN develop its ability to compensate for its relatively weak anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capacity. The ASW part of the exercise involved surface ships, submarines, and navy surveillance aircraft.53

Ministry of Defence spokesperson Liang Yang said that drills of this kind were in line with international law and practice, and that the navy would continue to hold similar drills in the future.54 But Yin indicated that the exercise was launched for political reasons, in order to prove that China can defend its territory: “It was not launched against any country, but the exercise should serve as a warning.” He gave a further veiled warning, although he reassured readers that China would not escalate as if the drills already went far enough: the exercise was launched, he said, “to simulate a campaign-level combat situation [...] even if a war between China and other nations really starts in the region of the South China Sea, it will not go beyond this level.”55 The following day, a PLA Daily editorial pointed out the increasing “possibility of chaos and war” near China’s shores in a “more complex maritime security environment”.56 Continuing to develop and practice amphibious capabilities will be vital to China’s ability to respond to threats to its territorial claims and to other maritime security issues.

**The December 2015 exercises**

Repeating the drills of 2014, on 16–17 December 2015, the PLAN organised a series of naval and air exercises involving the South Sea fleet and the East and North Sea fleets. The East and North Sea fleets took the part of the aggressor, the “blue” forces, while the “red” forces, the South Sea fleet, represented the defenders. The scenario obviously simulated an incoming American Task Group – played by the East and North Sea fleets – trying to test the defences of the South Sea Fleet. The articles published after the exercises provided many details on the difficulties encountered by the parties and their efforts to cope with the situation. The training focused on reconnaissance, early warning, command and control, submarine attack, anti-submarine warfare, mine warfare, logistics, and the defence of a task force in a multi-threat environment.57

The exercise began on the morning of 16 December, in the middle of Typhoon Jasmine, with strong winds and high waves. The Chinese press gave a number of operational details about the exercise: the red side used submarines to defend itself and a new early warning aircraft (AWACS) protected by a fighter escort to locate the blue forces. The red side allegedly maintained radio silence throughout. However, when its early warning aircraft was lost, the reds were unable to provide the necessary intelligence support. Chinese commentators said that the AWACS plane was the reds’ preferred means of reconnaissance; other means, such as passive detection by satellite, were used only as an alternative. The blue side took advantage of the reds’ lack of intelligence to fire a missile over the horizon against the red destroyer Hengyang. Hengyang took evasive manoeuvres, zigzaging at high-speed, firing flares and close-in weapons to fight the incoming missile, while its shore-based aviation looked for the attackers. But just when the red side appeared to be winning, the flagship Lanzhou was hit and disabled. The disabled Lanzhou was replaced as the command ship by the guided-missile frigate Linyi, and the exercise continued with air...
defence and anti-submarine drills before concluding with minesweeping and submarine rescue operations.

Detachment commander Liu Jie explained the difficulty of mating a Deep Submarine Rescue Vehicle (DSRV) to a sunken submarine and successfully opening the hatches to evacuate and treat a crew in a state of shock. Red side fleet commander Admiral Li Yan, deputy chief of staff of the South China Sea fleet, commented that the battle was conducted in very unfavourable conditions, which had provided “the realistic conditions that would help win a real war”. Yin Zhuo agreed: “the future of our military operations depends on this grouping and no longer on the implementation of administrative group exercises. Moving the three fleets together and giving them the opportunity to operate jointly is very important, especially when one does not know the area”.

Overall, the PLA offered a more candid and credible description than usual of its efforts to improve training and interoperability, admitting to the difficulties it encountered. These exercises also carry a strong message for the United States, Taiwan, and China’s neighbouring countries: China is determined to deter and if necessary to fight against foreign interference in its sovereignty disputes.

About the authors

Mathieu Duchâtel is senior policy fellow and deputy director of the Asia & China Programme at the European Council of Foreign Relations. He can be reached at mathieu.duchatel@ecfr.eu.

Cristina Garafola is a project associate at the RAND Corporation. Cristina has previously worked at the US Department of State, the US Department of the Treasury, and the Freeman Chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. She can be reached at Cristina_Garafola@rand.org.

Marc Julienne is a research fellow at the Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS) in Paris. His research focuses on China’s security policy, especially terrorism, military affairs and foreign policy. He can be reached at m.julienne@frstrategie.org.

Jérôme Doyon is the editor-in-chief of China Analysis, and an associate policy fellow for the ECFR’s Asia & China Programme. He can be reached at jerome.doyon@ecfr.eu.

Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix is a researcher-lecturer at the French Defense Historical Service.

ECFR would like to thank Justine Doody for her help in preparing the text for publication.

This paper does not represent the collective views of ECFR, but only the view of its authors.

Copyright of this publication is held by the European Council on Foreign Relations. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires prior written permission.

© ECFR 2016

Contact: london@ecfr.eu