

BREAKING THE PARADIGM

Drivers Behind the PLA's Current Period of Reform

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Closely embrace the building of a military that listens to the Party's commands, which can fight and win, with a superior work style.

—Third Plenum “Decision,” November 2013

In late 2015, Xi Jinping launched the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a period of much anticipated reform that will continue for many years. In 2016 alone, the PLA made significant changes to a legacy organizational structure that had its roots in the 1950s, when Soviet advisors helped to shape the People's Republic of China (PRC) defense establishment. Swept away were the four general departments—traditional bastions of authority over operations and training, Party work and personnel affairs, logistics, and equipment development.² In their stead emerged an expanded and more powerful Central Military Commission (CMC) that includes a newly formed Joint Staff Department, among other subordinate departments and organs.³

Also disestablished were the PLA's seven geographic military regions: ground force–dominated entities that harkened back to the immediate “post-liberation” period after 1949, when they were created to consolidate Communist rule after a long civil war and to defend the borders and coast of the newly established PRC against potential external attack.⁴ These have been replaced by five joint theater commands that will focus on planning and conducting operations outward along various “strategic directions.”⁵

These organizational changes have been accompanied by major adjustments in roles, authorities, and responsibilities. With the disestablishment of the four general departments, the CMC now has direct control over the five joint theater commands and services, the latter now serving as force providers responsible for training, equipping, and modernizing their respective organizations.⁶ Moreover, peacetime and wartime command and control relationships have been streamlined and authorities clarified, at least in theory.⁷ This is just the beginning of Beijing's ambitious military reform agenda.⁸ On December 2–3, 2016, President Xi convened and chaired the CMC Work Conference on Armed Forces Scale, Structure, and Force Composition Reform. This conclave launched the second tranche of major organizational reforms focused mostly on force reductions, a rebalancing among the services, a reorganization of major ground force units, and institutional reforms such as a reorganization of the expansive system of military academies.⁹

Beyond changes to the PLA's line-and-block chart, the heart and soul of this enterprise will be myriad institutional and systemic changes that were announced as part of the military reform agenda in the Central Committee's "Decision" at the Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress in November 2013, that were discussed at the November 2015 CMC Work Conference on Military Structural Reform, and that were included in the authoritative *Central Military Commission Opinion on Deepening Reform of National Defense and the Armed Forces*, which was issued on January 1, 2016.¹⁰ These institutional, systemic, and procedural reforms—some 46 identified in the Third Plenum Decision—cover major areas such as:

- national military strategy
- command and control relationships
- the balance of forces among the services
- service structure and size
- force deployments within China
- the ratio of combat to noncombat organizations

- the balance between officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted personnel
- the officer personnel management system (promotions and assignments)
- professional military education
- budget and finance
- oversight and compliance.

Although the PLA's timetable for enacting change in all of these areas is unknown, the year 2020 has been set as the target date for completion.¹¹

Needless to say, this is a bold undertaking. In some areas, such as organizational changes, the decisions to date have already gone far beyond previous periods of reform, and more developments are expected. For example, as initial versions of this chapter were being drafted, the PLA announced the establishment of the Joint Logistics Support Force under the CMC.¹² As for institutional reforms, that enterprise has just begun, but it will be marching over well-trampled fields. The PLA will seek to push through change in systemic problem areas that have long bedeviled China's armed forces. Overall, the range of issues on the reform agenda suggests the PLA is seeking to make significant adjustments to organizational, institutional, and operational attributes that have defined it for decades. They are looking to break out of old paradigms.

What is driving this current period of military reform? To what ends? Why now? This chapter argues that this period of reenergized military reform is being impelled by three drivers that are all interacting at a moment in time: domestic political factors, operational factors, and assessments of China's national security situation. When this process is complete, Beijing hopes to have a military that is more tightly tied to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and more operationally capable of winning joint, high-tech wars fought primarily in the maritime and aerospace domains.

The remainder of this chapter looks at each of these three drivers of reform in greater depth. The analysis is based almost exclusively on PLA and other Chinese materials that have been placed in the public domain,

mostly in the Chinese media. Indeed, PLA leadership and a wide range of officers have not been shy about discussing what they intend to achieve and why they need to achieve it through speeches, journal articles, and PLA media. While the details may be slow in coming (if at all in some cases), the general contours of what is transpiring are in the public domain.

The Political Dimensions of Military Reform

Four key and interrelated political drivers are behind this reform enterprise. First and foremost is a need to tighten the CCP-PLA linkage in an era of perceived internal and external challenges to the Chinese Party-state. Second is pulling the PLA into the larger national reform agenda that Xi and the CCP have set for the PRC. Third is strengthening Xi's personal power. Fourth is the need to preemptively roll over any potential resistance within the PLA to the military reform enterprise. Each is examined in turn.

Reaffirming Party Control of the PLA

Since this period of reform was announced at the Third Plenum in 2013, a significant dimension of the accompanying internal propaganda campaign directed at the PLA has focused on reinforcing fundamental political principles: that the PLA is a Party-army and the armed wing of the CCP. In short, the PLA needs to remain a force that “listens to the commands of the Party.” “Adhere to the correct political direction” was the first of the six “Basic Principles” for the reform outlined in the authoritative CMC “Opinion” issued on January 1, 2016:

Adhere to the correct political direction. 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 [Communist Party of China] Central Committee and in the Central Military Commission.¹³

It is easy to dismiss these reaffirmations of Party control of the PLA as standard CCP rhetoric [*tifa*, 提法], for there is nothing new at all in these exhortations. However, the amount of hand-wringing over this issue is worth noting. At a time when the CCP is facing a challenging domestic agenda, Party leadership appears determined that there be no slippage whatsoever in CCP-PLA connectivity.¹⁴ A strong CCP-PLA connection is considered especially critical at this point in time under “the new situation” [*xin xingshi*, 新形势] when the Party perceives that it is facing mounting internal and external security challenges, some of which are viewed as interconnected—an assessment that is captured in the CCP’s shorthand phrase “the two big situations” [*liangge da ju*, 两个大局].

There continue to be concerns that “anti-Party forces” from within and without China pose a real threat to the CCP-led regime. Xi Jinping has spoken of the need to “achieve political security as our fundamental task.”¹⁵ There is no dearth of public commentary about perceived threats to the political system. One authoritative example comes from the publicly released 2015 defense white paper that transmitted China’s national military strategy. The document declared that “China faces a formidable task to maintain political security” and that “anti-China forces have never given up their attempt to instigate a ‘color revolution’ in this country.”¹⁶ Besides persistent concerns about color revolutions, the example of the fall of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union stands as a stark reminder of what can happen when a Party-army loses its political direction. Party leaders no doubt also keep in the backs of their minds the momentary confusion in the ranks of the PLA at one point in 1989 when some units refused to obey orders to enforce martial law. In the face of these political threats and challenges, a PLA *not* loyal to the CCP could pose an existential threat to the regime, and so requires constant vigilance.

Second, and directly related to the above, over the past few years senior CCP and PLA leaders have felt a need to vociferously attack the notion of the “nationalization” or “de-politicization” of the PLA. In 2011, for example, the former director of the General Political Department, General Li Jinai, wrote a widely disseminated editorial in *PLA Daily* that lambasted the idea of depoliticizing the PLA as an attempt by “domestic and foreign hostile forces” to overthrow the CCP, a common theme.¹⁷ (In August 2016, an uncorroborated news report alleged General Li was arrested in retirement as part of the anticorruption campaign in the PLA.¹⁸) In August 2013, in a long article on military reform in *Seeking Truth* [*Qiushi*, 求是], the CCP’s flagship journal, then–CMC Vice Chairman General Fan Changlong warned that the PLA must “resolutely refute and reject the erroneous political viewpoints of ‘dissociating the military from the Party, depoliticizing the armed forces’ and ‘putting the armed forces under the state.’”¹⁹ And, of course, Xi’s speech at the All Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian in November 2014, 1 year after the Third Plenum and 1 year before the CMC Opinion on military reform, was a top-down exercise in “re-redding” the PLA.²⁰ Addressing concerns about “erroneous views” on depoliticizing the PLA in conjunction with the current period of reform is likely a combination of a periodic need to exorcise this ultimate demon that CCP and PLA officials have conjured up in their worst nightmares, a need to counter the arguments of some Western scholars who argue from time to time that the PLA cannot become a professional force until it is a national force, and possibly a response to a real discourse on this issue that may have been taking place in some quarters of the PLA, but into which outside observers have little visibility.²¹

Third, there are intriguing hints, though based on thin gruel, that over the years the absolute power and authority of the CMC (and hence, the Central Committee) over the PLA had somehow been diluted and that the reorganization would correct this. One article in *PLA Daily* spoke of “overly concentrated power” in the four general departments resulting in them taking on some of the prerogatives of the CMC, and that the four general departments “in reality form[ed] an independent level of leadership” serving

as “a substitute for several functions of the CMC”—not an acceptable situation.²² As for the military regions, the same author used a historical-literary allusion from the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th BCE) to assert that as a result of the new organizational changes to the PLA, the “large military regions will also no longer have feudal powers over their domains.”²³

Pulling the PLA “Inside the Tent”

Another political dimension of the current military reform enterprise is bringing the military establishment inside the CCP’s “tent” and chipping away at what one might refer to as the PLA’s tradition of *bureaucratic exceptionalism*. What is meant by this term? To be clear, it is *not* meant to imply that the PLA is a rogue or independent actor within the Chinese Party-state system or to question its institutional loyalty to the CCP. It *does* mean that the PLA has been left mostly to its own devices to manage itself, regulate itself, and set its own institutional priorities with little or no oversight or accountability from outside the PLA. This extreme institutional autonomy has resulted in two significant problems for the PLA: rampant corruption throughout the officer corps (including at its highest levels) and a lack of political will to take on the deeply vested bureaucratic, institutional, and personal interests that have stood in the way of implementing reforms necessary to enhance the PLA’s capabilities as a warfighting organization.

The anticorruption campaign sweeping through the PLA and the mind-boggling number of senior officers who have been arrested speaks volumes to Xi Jinping’s determination that the PLA not elude the larger ongoing anticorruption campaign within the greater CCP. Through this campaign he is underscoring that the PLA, and especially its top leaders, is subject to the same type of Party discipline as civilian CCP members. A *PLA Daily* commentator article in October 2016 strongly suggested the anticorruption campaign in the PLA is far from over and will continue for some time to come.²⁴

As for the need to move forward on much needed military reforms, the PLA has been given its marching orders directly from the CCP to make

tough decisions and show progress despite the number of “rice bowls” that will be upended. Military reform and modernization have been made a part of Xi’s and the CCP’s larger national reform agenda—military reform is not just the PLA’s business at this point.

The importance of military modernization to the larger CCP agenda has been clear since the 18th Party Congress in 2012 and was reaffirmed at the Third Plenum in 2013. We recall that the 18th Party Congress work report called for “accelerating” defense reform and made its accomplishment “a strategic task of China’s modernization drive,” directing the PLA to “make major progress.”²⁵ The Central Committee’s “Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms” coming out of the Third Plenum placed military reform in the context of a larger national reform agenda that included the economic system, government functions, the fiscal and tax systems, urban-rural issues, the “socialist democratic political system,” the legal system, accountability of officials, social services, and environmental issues.

Announcing the key components of the current military reform effort at a Central Committee plenum, and not at an expanded meeting of the CMC as in the past, has been described by some PLA officers as unprecedented. Moreover, as one PLA analyst has written, this was the “first time China’s national defense and military reforms have been integrated into overall national reforms and been considered an important part of executing a national strategy.”²⁶ Finally, as students of Chinese affairs are well aware, an important component of the CCP’s “China Dream” [*zhong-guo meng*, 中国梦] is the “Strong Army Dream” [*qiangjun meng*, 强军梦]. Having been handed its own “Goldwater-Nichols moment” by the Party, the PLA must now produce results no matter how dislocating or painful it may be for various stakeholders.

Strengthening Xi’s Power

Finally, another result of the political muscle movements associated with this current PLA reform and modernization enterprise has been strengthening Xi Jinping’s control over the PLA, and hence his control over the Party

itself. Xi is chairman of the “CMC Leading Small Group for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform” [*zhongyang junwei shenhua guofang he jundui gaige lingdao xiaozu*, 中央军委深化国防和军队改革领导小组], an organ that was established after the Third Plenum to oversee the development and implementation of military reform and modernization plans. The implication is that Xi is personally involved in this process to make sure it happens. In the past, the four general departments were responsible for carrying out the stated military reform objectives of the CMC. This usually resulted in foot-dragging or less than bold initiatives. This time, overseeing and enforcing change has been taken over by the CMC chairman himself (Xi), who has taken the four general departments out of the process, disbanding them and absorbing many of their former functions and responsibilities into the CMC. Second, the PLA and Party literature explaining the new organizational and command and control arrangements are awash with explanations of the need to strengthen the “chairman responsibility system” [*junwei zhuxi fuze zhi*, 军委主席负责制]—that is, placing more authority in the hands of the CMC chairman, namely Xi. As one article put it, the new arrangements “will be more advantageous to strengthening the concentrated unified leadership of the CMC, and better implementing the chairman responsibility system . . . to safeguard the firm grasp of the highest leadership and command authority over the nation’s armed forces of Chairman Xi and the CMC.”²⁷ Third, the anticorruption campaign and the netting of such high-level generals as former CMC Vice Chairmen General Xu Caihou and General Guo Boxiong make clear to everyone in uniform how powerful Xi is. Indeed, Xi is getting tough with the PLA just as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping did. The symbolism of Xi convening the November 2014 All Army Political Work Conference in Gutian, the site of one of Mao’s early triumphs over the Red Army (1929), could not have been lost on those who attended (and the rest of the officer corps not in attendance, thanks to a barrage of articles in *PLA Daily*). Xi’s alleged criticisms of the PLA are reminiscent of Deng, especially Deng’s famous 1975 speech, “The Task of Consolidating Our Army,” in which he

famously criticized the PLA for “bloating, laxity, conceit, extravagance, and inertia.”²⁸ Finally, because of the reorganization, Xi is the first CMC chairman to take on the title commander-in-chief of the Joint Operations Command Center.²⁹

At this point, there should be no question in the PLA (or the CCP) about who is in charge of the armed forces. Nothing says “I’m in charge” like arresting active-duty and retired generals, chairing the group overseeing the reform enterprise, having your expositions on national defense and army-building published and studied, taking on new titles, and disestablishing organizations that have provided the bases for personal power and institutional authority for decades. To oppose or stand in the way of military reform is to oppose the will of the Central Committee and Xi Jinping. Such a large degree of political power behind the military reforms is considered a necessary prerequisite for a successful reform program simply because of the challenges of bureaucratic inertia and resistance to change based on vested interests. The PLA has been attempting many of these reforms for decades, but unsuccessfully due at times to resistance from within the armed forces. CMC Vice Chairman General Xu Qiliang, an important political voice of the reform, has hammered home the need to get with the program as directed by the CCP. Typical of his exhortations: “It is necessary to break through the restrictions of traditional thoughts, break through the obstruction of vested interests, and muster up the courage of blazing a trail when facing a mountain.”³⁰ And a steep mountain it is that the PLA is trying to climb, for the guts of this enterprise is aimed at enhancing the PLA’s capability to conduct a type of warfare it has never fought before.

Operational Imperatives

The most significant driver of this reform enterprise is the need to improve the operational capabilities of the PLA as a joint warfighting force—one that can prevail in information-intensive joint operations in the maritime-aerospace domains, and other high-tech battle spaces. In addition to strengthening the CCP-PLA linkage, the PLA must come out the other end

of this period of reform more capable of prosecuting joint warfare, an objective it has been pursuing for over two decades. In addition to prevailing in a joint, high-tech fight, the PLA is being told to better position itself to deal with an expanding list of nontraditional security threats faced by Beijing and to be able to secure Chinese national interests, many of which are increasingly abroad. All of these missions require enhanced operational capabilities.

The demand signal from the CCP for such a military is captured in the opening paragraph of the section on defense and military affairs in the work report of the 18th Party Congress:

Building a strong national defense and powerful armed forces that are commensurate with China's international standing and meet the needs of its security and development interests is a strategic task of China's modernization drive. China is faced with interwoven problems affecting its survival and development security as well as traditional and nontraditional security threats. To address these problems and threats, we must make major progress in modernizing national defense and the armed forces.³¹

At bottom, the PLA is being told that it must become a force that can “fight and win.” It is Xi himself who is demanding that the PLA enhance its actual operational capabilities and focus its energies on warfighting.

Xi is quoted ad infinitum in articles in the PLA media and professional military journals emphasizing that all facets of the military reform program must be focused on the Party's “strong army objective” [*qiangjun mubiao*, 强军目标] and that the most important criterion for moving forward with a reform initiative is whether it will unleash combat power and meet the “warfighting standard” [*zhandouli biao zhun*, 战斗力标准]. The following passage from *The Selected Important Expositions of Xi Jinping on National Defense and Army Building* (cited by a PLA author) makes the point indelibly clear:

The military must develop the ability to fight and win wars. We must strengthen the ability of officers and men to fight wars, to

lead troops in battle, and train soldiers in a warfighting way of thinking. We must firmly establish warfighting capability as the fundamental and sole standard. We must build according to the requirements of warfighting; grasp preparations; and ensure that the army will respond to the call, fight, and win.³²

Xi reportedly underscored this point at the first meeting of the CMC's Leading Small Group on Military Reform (March 15, 2014) when he stated that:

it is necessary to firmly grasp the focal point of being able to fight and win. Persistently take preparations for military struggle [PMS] as the lead, persistently adhere to the orientation of problem solving, focus reforms on settling crucial and difficult issues in preparations for military struggle and overcoming the weak links in combat power building.³³

There are two phrases in the statement that merit comment. The first phrase of note is “preparations for military struggle” [*junshi douzheng zhunbei*, 军事斗争准备], which some also translate as “military combat preparations.” This PLA term speaks to the need to be able to equip, train, and especially employ a military force to engage in a specific *type* of conflict. It is a capabilities-based perspective.³⁴ To a large extent, many if not all of the facets of this current period of military reform are centered on the need to be able to fight a specific type of conflict. What type of conflict is the PLA being told to prepare for? The answer was provided by Beijing in the publicly released 2015 defense white paper. The paper told readers that China's current military strategy (“Military Strategic Guideline of Active Defense Under the New Situation”³⁵) requires the PLA to prepare to fight “informationized local wars, highlighting maritime military struggle and maritime PMS.”³⁶

There is no dearth of PLA writing or analyses to help us understand what type of conflict the Chinese armed forces are being told to prepare for. Briefly, first and foremost, it means a joint fight that integrates all of PLA services and key capabilities. It means a high-tech and information-dominant conflict.

It is anticipated by the PLA that operations will primarily be fought in the maritime-aerospace domains, with actions also taking place in cyberspace, outer space, and across the electromagnetic spectrum. The ability to fight and win this type of fight is what the PLA reform enterprise must accomplish.

The second phrase of note in Xi's statement is *overcoming the weak links in combat power building*. This is important to highlight because the PLA currently assesses that it is not yet where it needs to be when it comes to fighting and winning the kind of joint conflict it currently identifies as the "focal point" for its "preparations for military struggle."

Those who are steeped in Chinese military literature and who regularly read the comments and articles of commanders, political commissars, and Chinese military analysts appreciate that there is no greater critic of the PLA than the PLA itself. PLA expert Dennis Blasko has written and commented extensively on this point.³⁷ The PLA (and Xi Jinping) have multiple self-critical phrases that capture the PLA's various self-assessed shortcomings. One of the most common is the "two incompatibles" [*liangge buxiang shiying*, 两个不相适应], which assesses that the PLA's level of modernization is not yet at the point of being able to win information-based local wars, nor can the PLA fulfill all of its new "historic missions in the new phase of the new century."³⁸ Another common phrase is "the two big gaps" [*liangge chaju hen da*, 两个差距很大], which states that there is still a large gap between the capabilities of the PLA and the overall demands of national security and between the PLA's state of modernization compared with the world's most advanced militaries.³⁹

What seem to be the problems? Where are the "weak links" Xi Jinping spoke of that must be addressed during this urgent period of military reform? Even a cursory answer to these questions is far beyond the scope of this chapter. However, to oversimplify, they reside in two big bins: technologies (weapons and systems) and institutions (organization, people, and processes).

On the technologies side, the PLA is not satisfied that it has the weapons and systems it needs to sustain and prevail in modern warfare. For example, there are still problems with China's defense industrial system,

with indigenous innovation, and in manufacturing key components of some weapons systems or platforms. Aircraft engines are one persistent example where there is still difficulty in the defense industrial sector. The current reforms aim to address the perennial problems in China's defense industrial sector *again* (as they have been attempting to do for almost three decades). The emphasis in the current period of reform on enhanced "civil-military integration" [*junmin ronghe*, 军民融合] as part of the solution is not a new concept; it goes back decades (see the respective chapters by Cheung and Lafferty in this volume).

Moreover, the PLA speaks of itself as unevenly modernized across a force of some 2 million personnel (after the 300,000-troop cut that Xi Jinping announced in September 2015 has been implemented). The PLA still describes itself as only partly mechanized and partly "informationized"—not only in equipment but also in operational mindsets. The PLA views itself as a force operating in two military epochs simultaneously: the previous age of mechanization and the current information era, with some forces only partially residing in either. In the year 2013, when this period of reform was launched, the PLA was not where it planned to be in making these transitions, even in achieving full mechanization, as called for in its own 30-year military modernization plan known as the "three step development strategy" [*san buzou fazhan zhanlüe*, 三步走发展战略], promulgated in 1997.⁴⁰

These problems notwithstanding, there has been great progress on the weapons and systems fronts over the years that the current reform enterprise aims to build on and accelerate. China's defense industries have demonstrated that they can indigenously produce (or reverse engineer and reproduce) impressive weapons, systems, components, and technologies that today give the PLA more reach, more punch, and more situational awareness than at any time in the past. The Chinese have demonstrated the *capacity* to field systems credible enough to elicit concerns and reactions from among the foreign defense establishments in China's neighborhood and beyond, to include the United States. The U.S. Department of Defense's

annual reports to Congress on Chinese military power, and other types of publications, are replete with examples of impressive systems being fielded by the PLA (and the high rate by which they are being produced): various types of missiles, surface vessels, submarines, aircraft, tanks, long-range artillery, satellites and antisatellite systems, radars, cyber capabilities, and a nuclear force that is being modernized. The list goes on.⁴¹ And there are certainly pockets of excellence in defense innovation, so positive strides are being made in some sectors in China.

The more vexing issues for the PLA seem to reside on the institutional front. There appear to be deep-seated concerns, and a full appreciation, that the *capacity* to produce first-rate weapons and systems does not automatically translate into operational *capability*. The latter is the result of real operational know-how (experience), coupled with the necessary command and control assets, and organizational structures that allow commanders to employ, integrate, and manage forces on the modern battlefield. In short, the PLA is concerned about the practical but increasingly complex matters associated with *operational art*, to borrow a term from the U.S. military. The PLA is painfully aware that it has not been tested in battle for many years, and there are questions in its own mind about how it might fare in real-world operations. As a commentator article in *PLA Daily* put it, “it should be noted that our military forces have not fought any major battle for over 30 years, and have not undergone the tempering of actual operations under informationized conditions.”⁴² Some of the comments attributed to Xi Jinping about the capabilities of the PLA’s operational commanders are both blunt and surprising. For example, PLA press articles often refer to Xi pointing out that many PLA commanders suffer from the “five cannots” [*wuge buhui*, 五个不会]. These commanders cannot:

- analyze a situation
- understand higher echelon intent
- make a decision on a course of action

- deploy forces
- handle unexpected situations.⁴³

Beyond technological shortfalls and the lack of recent real-world operational experience, the literature surrounding this current period of reform strongly suggests that the CCP and PLA leadership believe the real inhibitors to generating operational capability and combat power are systemic. There is an acute acknowledgment that the PLA's legacy organizational structures, processes and procedures, and even its institutional culture and the level of operational acumen of its personnel (especially commanders) are such that they are inhibiting the generation of combat power. This is borne out by a careful read of the military section of the Central Committee's Decision from the Third Plenum. Almost all of the areas identified as needing reform or change are organizational, institutional, procedural, or administrative in nature. The CMC's authoritative Opinion on Reform (2016) speaks of the necessity of "resolving systematic obstacles, structural contradictions, and policy problems that constrain national defense and military development."⁴⁴ Writing in *People's Daily* over a year before the Opinion was published, CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang used almost the same language, calling for the pressing need to "break through the restrictions" to accruing combat power and operational capability caused by "institutional obstacles," "structural contradictions," and "policy-related problems."⁴⁵

The persistence of institutional and systemic problems inhibiting warfighting capability must be a source of great frustration, for the PLA has been working at resolving a host of these issues for decades. This is not the first time in recent memory that the PLA has attempted to surge its reform efforts. Students of Chinese military affairs will recall the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the PLA introduced myriad systemic changes to doctrine, organization, personnel management, training, logistics, professional military education, and "civil-military integration" in the realm of defense industries.⁴⁶ Among some analysts of the PLA, this author included, 1999 was referred to as "the year of regulations" in recognition of the amount of systemic change the

PLA was attempting to undergo by enacting new administrative regulations and guidelines as well as new operational doctrine. All of these areas (and others) are being looked at again during this current reform period. One can only surmise that the fixes of the past did not solve the problems they were intended to mitigate, were not actually put into place or enforced, or did not keep up with the rapidly changing nature of global military affairs. One must also surmise that the political will to enable bold but necessary changes was not present until recently (see the chapter by Wuthnow and Saunders in this volume for an overview of the changes being discussed).

In terms of “bold but necessary changes,” the recent disestablishment of the former seven “military regions” [*junqu*, 军区] and creation of the five “theater commands” [*zhanqu*, 战区] stands out as a prime example of what the PLA is attempting to achieve by way of improving its ability to conduct joint operations.

After working assiduously since the early-1990s to develop the capacity to conduct joint operations, a major stumbling block was apparently command and control arrangements. The wholesale disestablishment in February 2016 of the legacy military region system makes clear that the PLA assessed it was unable to effectively superimpose the requirements of joint warfighting onto the military region system, *especially* with respect to command and control arrangements. This is not surprising. The military regions were conceived in the late 1940s based on internal geographic and political considerations: internal political defense of the new CCP regime and the defense of the new Party-state’s borders and coastlines from attack or invasion. Moreover, throughout their existence, the military regions were ground force–centric entities, with other services and forces stationed in the military regions commanded or managed by their respective service headquarters, elements within the four general departments, or the military region headquarters. No arrangement could be less conducive to joint warfare.

The five newly created joint theater commands are conceptually different from the old military regions in various significant ways. (See the chapter by Burke and Chan in this volume.) The most important difference

is that they are joint entities focused on projecting military power externally against designated contingencies—“strategic directions” [*zhanlüe fangxiang*, 战略方向], in the parlance of the PLA. Along with new command and control relationships and authorities, the PLA hopes that this organizational change will do the following:

- Simplify command and control relationships by having the theater commands report directly to the CMC.
- Establish unity of command by giving the five joint theater commanders operational control over all forces assigned to their theaters.
- Achieve unity of effort by assigning specific strategic directions—that is, contingencies—to each theater command for planning and warfighting purposes.
- Focus warfighters on warfighting by making theater commanders responsible for war planning and joint training and relegating the services to the role of force providers.
- Quickly transition from peacetime training to wartime operations by creating standing joint theater staffs versus the previous ad hoc command and control arrangements.

This is but one example that underscores the operational factors behind the current reform period.

Before leaving this section of the chapter, it is important to state that the preceding discussion of the PLA’s self-assessment of its own operational or institutional shortcomings, and those pointed out, should not be misconstrued for an argument that the Chinese armed forces are not an increasingly capable, increasingly advanced, and potentially formidable force.

National Security Assessments: The Third Driver of Reform

The third major driver of this period of reform is a set of assessments that the CCP and PLA have made about China’s current security challenges, as well as concerns about the accelerating nature of the global revolution in military affairs. Both are justifying and adding a sense of urgency to the military reform enterprise.

The increasingly “stern,” “complex,” and “uncertain” security environment the Chinese state and CCP itself are said to be facing is being touted by Xi Jinping and senior PLA leadership as another critical reason why the military must “accelerate” reform and modernization while the “strategic window of opportunity” remains open. Then-CCMC Vice Chairman General Fan Changlong urged PLA personnel to think of the current reform period as “a race against time,” further stating, the “complexity and sternness of our country’s security situation require that substantial development be made in national defense and army building.”⁴⁷ A 2014 article in *PLA Daily* declared, “to successfully accomplish our mission in the relay race of history, our Party cadres in the military, no matter at what positions, should have a stronger sense of trouble and crisis and a stronger sense of mission, and dare to take on duties and commitments in work.”⁴⁸

The CCP still officially adheres to the ideologically important judgment that “peace and development” [*heping yu fazhan*, 和平与发展] remains the “keynote of the times” [*shidai zhuti*, 时代主题]. This judgment was made by Deng Xiaoping back in 1985 and revalidated in 1999 during an extended public and internal debate triggered by the errant North Atlantic Treaty Organization bombing of the PRC embassy in Belgrade. At its most basic level, this judgment holds that a world war that could involve China is not imminent and that China has the opportunity to develop in a fundamentally peaceful environment. That said, this larger judgment provides a good deal of analytic space for challenges to China’s national security interests. These include the possibility of local wars, regional conflicts, nontraditional security threats, and other breeches of the peace that could involve China or directly and adversely affect Beijing’s key national interests. Changes in assessments in this space can result in adjustments to foreign policy, military policy, and domestic security policies. Consequently, it is important to stay abreast of how the Chinese security community assesses its proximate security situation at any given time.⁴⁹

Since the military reform enterprise was launched at the Third Plenum, various assessments of China’s security situation placed in the public

domain strongly suggest that Beijing sees challenges to Chinese national security on the rise both externally and internally (the “two big situations,” in CCP speak). This is discernable in publicly released PRC government documents such as the defense white papers of 2012 and 2015. These concerns are especially driven home in much starker language in PLA-authored articles in military and Party journals as well as in editorials and commentaries in the PLA’s media complex—venues meant for internal consumption.

Beyond the need to fight a joint, high-tech, information-intensive war off China’s littorals, what other threats and challenges are being discussed? What are some of the other perceived challenges to Chinese national security that are currently being transmitted down through the PLA and are associated with the need for military reform and modernization? Below is a brief sampling, not comprehensive by any means.⁵⁰

The Rising Challenges of “Hegemonism, Power Politics, and Neo-Interventionism”

Both the April 2013 and May 2015 editions of the PRC defense white paper called out concerns about “hegemonism, power politics, and neo-interventionism.” In 2013 then-CCMC Vice Chairman Fan Changlong wrote that “Hegemonism, power politics, neo-interventionism are *on the rise*.”⁵¹ In 2014, the dean of the Nanjing Army Command Academy parroted this assessment in an article in *China Military Science*, stating that “Hegemonism, great power politics, and ‘new interventionism’ have all risen to some extent.”⁵²

External Pressures Aimed at Preventing China’s Rise

There is also an assessment often found in the PLA and Party literature that “outside powers” are working to undermine China’s ascension to great power status and retard China’s rise. A February 2014 commentator article in *PLA Daily* declared that “some Western countries are not willing to see socialist China’s development and strengthening, and try by all means to carry out strategic containment and encirclement against China.”⁵³ This assessment was made in the context of urging the PLA to study Xi Jinping’s

newly published *Expositions* on national defense and army building in 2014. A *PLA Daily* editorial on August 1, 2014, commemorating the founding of the PLA stated that “external hostile forces do not want to see China growing strong, and try by various means to contain and restrict China’s development.”⁵⁴ A variation on this argument is that as China continues to grow and gather strength, there will be pushback from outside powers—especially the United States. In May 2014, Major General Gao Guanghui (at the time commander of the 16th Group Army) made these arguments:

As the country’s comprehensive national strength has rapidly increased, so too the structure of its national interests produced great influence. The friction between containment and anti-containment continues to play out. This is especially true of the [U.S.] Asia-Pacific “Rebalance” strategy, which strengthens containment of China and brings about great change to the political, economic, and strategic situation in the Asia-Pacific region.⁵⁵

In an eye-catching passage from the 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy* (published by the PLA Academy of Military Science), the authors provided this admittedly low-probability but high-impact scenario when it comes to thinking about the possible conflicts China could find itself in:

At this crucial stage in our country’s peaceful development, our country cannot rule out the possibility of hegemonic countries inciting war *with the goal of delaying or interrupting our country’s rise*. The factors leading to war may be a crisis getting out of control and gradually escalating, or a premeditated plot that arises suddenly. The probability of this kind of conflict breaking out is low, but its degree of danger is high.⁵⁶ (Emphasis added).

The “Three Main Dangers”

According to some Chinese public domain articles, Xi Jinping himself has articulated the need for the Party and PLA to remain vigilant in defending

against the “three main dangers.” In a long 2015 interview with *Huanqiu Wang*, Admiral Sun Jianguo, a deputy chief of the General Staff whose PLA portfolio included military intelligence and foreign affairs, asserted that “President Xi has made a general survey of today’s changing world and has clearly presented strategic determinations such as ‘three major trends,’ ‘three unprecedented situations,’ and ‘three main dangers.’” In the interview, Admiral Sun states, “looking at the matter from the point of view of the threats facing national security, the main dangers are the nation being invaded, being subverted, and being split; the danger of the overall state of reform, development, and stability being damaged; and the danger of an interruption in the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics.”⁵⁷ This formulation has appeared in other PLA-authored articles. For example, in a May 2014 article in *China Military Science*, Major General Wang Pei and Major General Zhang Zhihui, both of the Nanjing Army Command Academy, wrote the following under the heading “The Security Situation Has Grown Severely Complicated, Presenting New Demands for the Military’s Warfighting Capabilities”:

We face a severely complex national security situation. We must ensure that the country is not invaded, subverted, or split up; ensure that the general situation of reform and development is not broken; and ensure that the process of building socialism with Chinese characteristics is not interrupted.⁵⁸

In yet another variation on this theme, the deputy political commissar of the PLA National Defense University argued in a January 2014 article that the PLA must enhance its ability to fight and win informationized local wars “so as to guarantee that our nation will not be turned into a target of aggression, subversion, and division.”⁵⁹

The near verbatim verbiage of these and other statements strongly suggests that this language is contained in official internal study materials associated with the military reform enterprise, perhaps in Xi’s *Expositions* (published in February 2014) on national defense or some other speeches

not in the public domain. One notes the three dangers cover the physical security of China, China's development, and political security—issues in line with Xi's concept of "holistic security" [*quanmian anquan guan*, 全面安全观] as articulated in his April 2014 speech at the first meeting of the National Security Commission.⁶⁰

Political Subversion and Threats to Sovereignty

Related to the three main dangers are concerns about political subversion—specifically, the undermining of CCP rule. This is not a new worry, but it has been a prominent theme associated with the internal propaganda campaign associated with the current military reform program. As mentioned, China's military strategy, as transmitted in the 2015 defense white paper, called out "anti-China forces" that are alleged to be "attempting to instigate a 'color revolution'" in China.⁶¹ In his aforementioned interview with *Huanqiu Wang*, Admiral Sun Jianguo likened the "occupy" movement in Hong Kong to a color revolution and then went on to explain the concern in more detail:

Instigating "color revolutions" is a customary trick of certain Western nations to fly the flag of "democratization" and subvert the regimes of other nations. With China's constant development, their aim to infiltrate and harm China has become all the clearer, their activities are all the more rampant, and they are stepping up the implementation of an online "cultural Cold War" and "political genetic engineering." Struggles in the area of ideology are acute and complex—iron-forged souls vs. the souls of termites, solid roots vs. the roots of destruction. The contest is growing more intense and is becoming a major danger facing China's political security and regime security.⁶²

Related to the concern about the subversion of China's political and ideological unity are concerns about "separatist forces" determined to undermine China's geographic unity. PLA articles continue to emphasize

challenges posed by separatist cliques and forces operating within and outside of China to separate Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang from the mainland. The challenges in Xinjiang in particular are associated with the incantation of the “three evil forces” [*san gu shili*, 三股势力]: terrorism, separatism and extremism. As stated by Major General Wang Pei:

the “three evil forces” are interlinked within and outside of Chinese territory. They have intensified separatist movements, repeatedly produced incidents, and posed serious threats to the political security and social stability of the country. This demonstrates that China’s security problems are becoming more integrated, complex, variable, and unprecedentedly strong.⁶³

Beyond the various forms of threats and challenges to China’s geographic, political, and “developmental” security, the evolving “global revolution in military affairs” is touted as another reason why the PLA must make significant progress in modernization and reform. Specifically, the Chinese argue that the global revolution in military affairs continues to forge ahead, China must keep up, China is not necessarily keeping up in all domains, and various other nations are making progress that, in some cases, is troubling. From a 2014 *PLA Daily* commentator article:

The accelerating development of the world’s new revolution in military affairs also poses a stern challenge to our national defense and armed forces building. With the rapid development of new and high technologies with information technology as the core, military technologies and the pattern of war are also undergoing revolutionary changes. The major countries in the world are all stepping up their military transformations in an attempt to seize the commanding heights in the future military competition. At present, there remains a substantial gap between the modernization level of our military and the world’s advanced military level.⁶⁴

Then–CMC Vice Chairman Fan Changlong used much the same language in his own 2013 *Qiushi* article, writing that the “world’s new revolution in military affairs is still accelerating. All major countries are stepping up military transformation. *This poses a stern challenge to our military.*”⁶⁵ Fan’s then-colleague, CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang, has also beat this drum, stating that “deepening national defense and military reform is an urgent need in adapting to the accelerating development of the world’s new revolution in military affairs and the profound evolution of the war-fighting patterns and operational forms.”⁶⁶ In particular, the United States, Russia, and Japan are commonly cited in PLA articles as nations whose progress in military modernization bears China’s attention, for they are often touted as being on the leading edge of the global revolution in military affairs. For instance, one PLA author argues in *China Military Science* that:

Currently the new worldwide revolution in military affairs has developed quickly. Competition [among] countries in the speed of advancement and development of quality is increasingly fierce. The American military relies on the continuous development of science and technology, draws support from enriched combat practices, and continues the revolution in military affairs. It openly emphasizes “we must ensure that the U.S. military is a few steps ahead of any potential opponent.” Russia has announced that it must speed up the process of its military “stepping into the 21st-century electronic world,” so that [it] can return to a place as one of the world’s most influential powers. . . . Japan is accelerating the pace of its military reforms and attempting to build an offensive force that can operate regionally and globally. India is committed to promoting “a military capable of exerting influence both regionally and globally.” Faced with these severe challenges and pressing situations, we must view matters soberly.⁶⁷

What usually follows these narratives of progress among the world’s top militaries is the “sober” assessment of China’s lack of progress and the

invoking of the various self-critical phrases mentioned earlier, such as the “two incompatibles” or laments about the lack of progress in reaching “full mechanization” and “informationization” as called for in the PLA’s “three step strategy” for modernization of the force. “The foundations of army building are weak. We are still engaged in the complex development stage of mechanization, semi-mechanization, and informationization,” wrote Major General Gao Guanghui.⁶⁸ Moreover, a *PLA Daily* commentator article stated:

The major countries in the world are all stepping up their military transformations in an attempt to seize the commanding heights in the future military competition. At present, there remains a substantial gap between the modernization level of our military and the world’s advanced military level; the modernization level of our military is still not in keeping with the requirement of winning local wars under informationized conditions.⁶⁹

For his part, Fan Changlong argues that the PLA is getting closer to its modernization objectives, but is not there yet:

We are now so close to the strong army dream like never before, and are more confident in and more capable of fulfilling the goal [of] strengthening the military. However, we should be soberly aware that, at present, our military is situated at the stage of having not yet accomplished mechanization and also accelerating the development of informationization, there remains a substantial gap between our military’s modernization level and the world’s advanced military level, and our current condition remains out of keeping with the requirement of national security.⁷⁰

And so it goes. As one reads through PLA and Party materials, it is clear that the sense of urgency in moving forward with the military reform enterprise is being driven by assessments that China’s threat environment is becoming more acute, that the state of PLA modernization is

inadequate, that the global revolution in military affairs is accelerating, but that there is still a window of opportunity for China to make substantial progress if the PLA can just push through some bold reforms. How much of this threat assessment does the Party and PLA truly believe, and to what extent are these fears and concerns being hyped to justify some tough decisions? The answer is probably a mix of both. What really matters is that this is what the PLA is telling itself, this is what the officers and troops are imbibing, this is the narrative being carried in important Party media outlets—and one strongly suspects also being expounded on in internal Party-PLA documents.

Who Are the Architects of Reform?

To this point, this chapter has focused on the reasons for the reform enterprise. An equally important question is *who* is behind these reforms. Who devised these changes? As far as any single individual or specific group of officers goes, the answer to this question is unclear, at least to this author. Nevertheless, some brief speculation is in order.

Certainly, Xi Jinping's fingerprints are indelibly stamped on this military reform enterprise, and it will undoubtedly be part of his legacy. Like other aspects of the Chinese Party-state, Xi is attempting to move the PLA into the post-Dengist era. His *Expositions* on national defense and "army building" serve as a political primer to justify the reforms, and his chairmanship of the CMC Leading Small Group for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform places him in the center of all major decisions on military reform. Overall, it would not be unreasonable to posit that Xi is the most engaged CMC chairman since Deng Xiaoping, and there should be no question that Xi's role in this reform process has been vital. Specifically, Xi has served as the enabling and catalyzing agent who has provided the political muscle necessary to force the PLA to overcome its own bureaucratic inertia and force it to move forward with significant organizational and institutional reform. Nevertheless, Xi is not the architect of these reforms, deft Marxist theoretician though he may be.

The reforms we have seen to date, and those yet to be announced, could only have come from the military professionals within the PLA itself. However, one is hard-pressed to point to any single general officer or group of officers publicly identified as being highly influential in the current reform effort as in the past. In the 1980s, for example, General Li Jijun was closely associated with the creation of the group armies [*jituan jun*, 集团军] and combined arms doctrine for the ground forces. Also in the 1980s, General/Admiral Liu Huaqing was associated with the modernization of the PLA Navy. In the late 1990s, General Chen Bingde was sometimes associated with the new iteration of operational doctrine that was issued circa 1999 (specifically, the “new generation operations regulations” [*xin yidai zuozhan tiaoling*, 新一代作战条令]). Today, the PLA professionals who devised the current reform program remain largely anonymous.

Without question, this current reform enterprise is the result of a protracted institutional effort across the PLA. It is undoubtedly based on many years of study, experimentation, and planning. Lessons learned from the practices of militaries abroad were clearly studied by the cohort of military analysts and scholars who comprise the PLA’s foreign military studies community. We should assume the PLA military intelligence community supported that effort. PLA journal articles strongly suggest that military reforms and operational practices of the armed forces of Russia and the United States in particular were carefully followed and studied. More than likely, PLA delegations traveling abroad and PLA officers studying at foreign institutions of professional military education would have had ideas to offer. So too would officers participating in combined exercises with other nations’ militaries be in a position to understand best practices from abroad.

More than anything else, perhaps, the results of nearly two decades of joint exercises and experimentation were probably critical in formulating fixes to the PLA’s more intractable operational problems, especially those associated with joint command and control arrangements. The exercises involve not only forces in the field but also observers and analysts from Beijing and other centers of operations research throughout the PLA.

One can imagine organizations such as the Academy of Military Science, National Defense University, PLA Navy Research Institute, various service-level command academies across China, and other organizations that comprise the PLA's large military research complex all working on the key problems, both through their focused research efforts and as observers in field settings.

Staff officers in the former four general departments must have played a role in thinking through the operational and administrative challenges of the reorganization effort, likewise for officers in headquarters of the former military regions. One does wonder with hindsight whether the establishment of the PLA's Strategic Planning Department [*zhanlüe guihua bu*, 战略规划部] in November 2011 was a harbinger of serious preparation for the reorganization of late 2015 and the accompanying reforms.

Moreover, professionals from across the PLA were invited to write papers and do their own research, a sort of "mass line" [*qunzhong luxian*, 群众路线] approach to gathering good ideas for change and practical fixes to vexing problems. Some officers associated with the reforms have asserted that the PLA has indeed taken a bottom-up as well as top-down approach to seeking solutions to its problems. This becomes quite apparent when reading the titles of articles in the table of contents in *China Military Science* over time, especially between 2013 (post-Third Plenum) and continuing over the following 3 years, especially under the journal's section heading of "National Defense and Armed Forces Building." Many of these articles identify shortcomings in various practices and offer solutions. And, of course, as is the proclivity of the PLA, one imagines interminable conferences, meetings, symposia, workshops, and seminars at which ideas were floated, rejected, adjusted, refined, and then sent up the chain of command as recommendations.

Undoubtedly, the CMC Leading Small Group for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform, as well as the new CMC Reform and Organization Office [*junwei gaige he bianzhi bangongshi*, 军委改革和编制办公室], have played a critical role in gathering data, taking in recommendations,

and sending decision papers up to Xi and the top leadership of the Leading Small Group—whose full membership remains unpublicized, although General Fan Changlong and General Xu Qilaing were both reported to be vice chairmen.

This is the best we can do using public domain data: speculate about how this process may have taken place, without knowing who the creative military professionals are who devised the blueprints of the most ambitious reform and reorganization enterprise in the history of the PLA. Hopefully, that institutional history will be written one day and available.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the drivers behind the current military reform enterprise—the reasons why the PLA is being told this is necessary and why modernization must be accelerated. Three major drivers have been identified: political factors, operational factors, and national security assessments. There are undoubtedly other ways that the catalysts for the current reform effort could have been parsed, presented, or analyzed. These three were chosen because they represent how the PLA is explaining the need for significant systemic change to itself.

For many outside observers, certainly for countries in the Asia-Pacific region and for the United States, the operational imperatives for Chinese military reform will undoubtedly be the most important. A PLA that is better organized, equipped, and trained to conduct joint operations along various strategic directions—especially in the maritime-aerospace domains beyond the Chinese littoral—will have a wide range of strategic and operational implications. And truly, reorganizing and reforming to become a military that “can fight and win” is at the heart of this endeavor.

Yet the Chinese would surely say that the political drivers are equally important. The survival and protection of the CCP as the ruling political Party of China is Beijing’s number one national security priority: “political security,” to borrow a phrase from the PLA and Party literature. One is struck by the degree to which Party and PLA leaders see the CCP itself as

the real target of internal and external threats. Consequently, a PLA that is tightly tied to the CCP and that will defend the regime from political threats both from within China and from abroad is deemed absolutely essential. This is likely why the paramilitary People's Armed Police was brought under the sole control of the Central Military Commission in January 2018, whereas previously it was under the dual command of the CMC and State Council.

The sober assessments of China's national security situation (even as the Chinese judge that they are still in "a period of strategic opportunity") are clearly being used to justify why military reform must be accelerated and why extraordinary measures are necessary. So too with the judgment that the global revolution in military affairs is moving quickly and that the PLA cannot miss this opportunity. Indeed, one gets the sense that they believe that if they do not fix their biggest problems now, they will only find themselves further behind than they believe they are now compared to other modern militaries.

The need to maintain the momentum in military modernization and reform was reiterated as a political task by the CCP in the work report of the 19th Party Congress in October 2017. The year 2020 was set as the time by which the PLA must achieve full "mechanization" and significant progress toward "informationization." The report deemed the year 2035 as the point at which the PLA will "basically realize modernization of national defense and military." By mid-century, the CCP aim is to have "a world-class military" [*shijie yiliu jun*, 世界一流军]. These are ambitious objectives.⁷¹

What the PLA actually initiated with the issuing of the *Central Military Commission Opinion on Deepening Reform of National Defense and the Armed Forces* on January 1, 2016, is a generational undertaking. Being joint is not merely changing the line and block charts; it is a capability born of a deep set of professional and operational experiences, a product of the professional military education system, adjustments based on training experiments and real-world operations, and sustained by institutional incentives that reward joint service.

How this will unfold for the PLA will depend on many factors, not least of which is the quality, training, and capabilities of personnel in the force, especially its commanders. From a professional and institutional perspective, some of the more interesting reforms coming down the road will be those that address the PLA's perpetual problems with attracting, training, managing, and retaining the personnel it needs to fight the high-tech wars it is convinced it must be able to fight (see the chapter by Wuthnow and Saunders in this volume). As Jiang Zemin is alleged to have once stated about the PLA, "Everything will be empty talk without qualified personnel and knowledge." Yet for all of its problems, the PLA continues to demonstrate that it is a "learning organization." For those of us who study this fascinating military organization, the next few years will hold our attention.

Notes

¹ The formal name of the "Decision" of the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee is "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms," November 12, 2013, available at <www.china.org.cn/china/third_plenary_session/201401/16/content_31212602.htm>.

² The four general departments were the General Staff Department [*zong canmo bu*, 总参谋部], General Political Department [*zong zhengzhi bu*, 总政治部], General Logistics Department [*zong houqin bu*, 总后勤部], and General Equipment Department [*zong zhuangbei bu*, 总装备部].

³ The Central Military Committee (CMC) is a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) organization, an organ of the Central Committee. Its formal name is Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party [*zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang junshi weiyuanhui*, 中国共产党中央军事委员会]. It is usually chaired by the General Secretary of the CCP.

⁴ The number of military regions and their borders have changed over the years (in 1985, there were 11). Until their recent disestablishment, they were the most important and powerful sub-national organizations in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) structure.

⁵ In the PLA doctrinal lexicon the term "strategic direction" [*zhanlüe fangxiang*, 战略方向] is used to identify either a general direction from the mainland

from which China perceives a military threat that requires preparations or a specific contingency. For example, since at least 1993, the PLA has identified Taiwan as its “main strategic direction” [*zhuyao zhanlüe fangxiang*, 主要战略方向]. For more on strategic directions, see David M. Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy: An Overview of the Military Strategic Guidelines,” in *Right-Sizing the People’s Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), 69–140.

⁶ The PLA’s four services are the PLA Army, PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, and PLA Rocket Force.

⁷ Other key organizational changes included the elevation of the former Second Artillery (hitherto a branch of the ground forces) to an independent service [*junzhong*, 军种], the establishment of a separate headquarters for the ground forces (the PLA Army), the creation of the Strategic Support Force, and a Joint Logistics Support Force. Other new organizations may be announced as time rolls on.

⁸ For analyses of the first tranche of changes that took place in the first half of 2016, see David M. Finkelstein, *Initial Thoughts on the Reorganization and Reform of the PLA* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2016); and Dennis J. Blasko, “Integrating the Services and Harnessing the Military Area Commands,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, nos. 5–6 (August 3, 2016), 685–708.

⁹ See David M. Finkelstein, *Get Ready for the Second Phase of Chinese Military Reform* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2017).

¹⁰ For reportage on the November 2015 conference, see Cao Zhi, Li Xuanliang, and Wang Shibin [曹智, 李宣良, 王士彬], “At CMC Reform Work Meeting, Xi Jinping Stresses: Comprehensively Implement Reform and Military Strengthening Strategy, Resolutely Take the Path to a Strong Military with Chinese Characteristics” [在中央军委改革工作会议上强调习近平: 全面实施改革强军战略 坚定不移走中国特色强军之路], *Xinhua*, November 26, 2015, available at <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/1127/c64094-27861889.html>>. The CMC “Opinion” was published by *Xinhua* on January 1, 2016, under the title “Central Military Commission’s ‘Opinions on Deepening Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces’” [中央军委“关于深化国防和军队改革的意见”系统阐述为什么改、改什么、怎么改], available at <www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-01/01/c_128588726.htm>.

¹¹ Wang Jingguo, Sun Yanxin, and Huang Yifang [王经国, 孙彦新, 黄益方], “Defense Ministry Spokesman Gives Detailed Explanation on Relevant Issues of Deepening National Defense and Army Reforms” [国防部新闻发言人详解深化

国防和军队改革有关问题], Xinhua, January 1, 2016, available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-01/01/c_1117646764.htm>.

¹² “Make Vigorous Efforts to Build a Strong Modern Logistics Support Force” [努力建设一支强大的现代化联勤保障部队], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], September 14, 2016, available at <www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-09/14/content_156621.htm>.

¹³ “Central Military Commission’s ‘Opinions on Deepening Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces.’”

¹⁴ The CCP’s challenging domestic agenda is laid out in the same Decision from the Third Plenum (2013) that also included the requirement for military reform.

¹⁵ “A Holistic View of National Security,” speech by Xi Jinping to the first meeting of the National Security Commission, April 15, 2014, in *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2014), 220.

¹⁶ See *China’s Military Strategy* (Beijing: People’s Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, May 26, 2015), available at <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Defense-News/2015-05/26/content_4586748.htm>.

¹⁷ “No Nationalization of Military in China: Senior PLA Officer,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, June 20, 2011, available at <www.china-embassy.org/eng/gdxw/t832372.htm>.

¹⁸ Minnie Chan and Choi Chi-yuk, “Two More of China’s Former Top Commanders Taken Away for Corruption Investigation: Military Sources,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), August 5, 2016, available at <www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1999535/two-more-chinas-former-top-commanders-taken-away>.

¹⁹ Fan Changlong [范长龙], “Strive to Build the People’s Army That Obeys the Party’s Orders, Is Able to Fight Victorious Battles, Keeps a Good Style—Study and Implement Chairman Xi’s Important Thinking on the Party’s Strong Army Goal Under the New Situation” [为建设一支听党指挥能打胜仗作风优良的人民军队而奋斗：学习贯彻习主席关于党在新形势下的强军目标重要思想], *Qiushi* [求是], no. 15 (August 2013).

²⁰ For an overview of the Gutian Conference of 2014, see James C. Mulvenon, “Hotel Gutian: We Haven’t Had That Spirit Here Since 1929,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 46 (Winter 2015), available at <www.hoover.org/research/hotel-gutian-we-havent-had-spirit-here-1929>.

²¹ See Peter Mattis, “Is China Scared of a Coup?” *The Diplomat*, July 4, 2012, available at <<https://thediplomat.com/2012/07/is-china-scared-of-a-coup/>>; and Liz Carter, “Whom Should the Chinese Army Serve—the Party or

the State?” *The Atlantic*, October 25, 2012, available at <www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/10/whom-should-the-chinese-army-serve-the-party-or-the-state/264104/>.

²² Wu Ming [吴铭], “Remolding Our Military’s Leadership and Command Structure Is a Necessary Choice for a Strong and Revitalized Military” [重塑我军领导指挥体制是强军兴军的必然选择], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], November 30, 2015, available at <www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2015-11/30/content_130735.htm>.

²³ On the military regions, Wu Ming stated that the “large military regions will also no longer have feudal powers over their domain” [大军区也不再是权力很大的“一方诸侯”]. The term *yifang zhuhou*, 一方诸侯 is said to originate from the Western Zhou, and is a reference to the king’s siblings and other relatives, the nobles, and other key personages. These individuals had high autonomy over their lands, including military rights, not unlike a small nation, but they also had to report to the king and pay taxes and support military expenses on a regular basis. Today, the term is used to describe someone with great influence or power over a certain area. The author is indebted to James Bellacqua of CNA and Alice Miller of the Hoover Institution for their help in understanding this obscure reference.

²⁴ “Continuously Enhance Consciousness and Firmness to Thoroughly Purge the Pernicious Influence of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou” [不断增强全面彻底肃清郭伯雄徐才厚流毒影响的自觉性和坚定性], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], October 16, 2016, available at <www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-10/11/content_158578.htm>.

²⁵ “Hu Jintao’s Report at 17th Party Congress,” October 15, 2007, available at <www.china.org.cn/english/congress/229611.htm>; “Full Text of Hu Jintao’s Report at 18th Party Congress,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, November 27, 2012, available at <www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/18th_CPC_National_Congress_Eng/t992917.htm>.

²⁶ Conference paper by a PLA author, 2014. See also Xiong Zhengyan, “Admiral Sun Jianguo: China Is in Danger of Being Invaded; Using Struggle to Seek a Win-Win for China and the United States” [孙建国上将: 中国有被侵略危险用斗争谋中美共赢], *Huanqiu Wang*, March 2, 2015, available at <<http://mil.huanqiu.com/observation/2015-03/5793682.html>>. In this interview, Admiral Sun stated, “For the first time, national defense and armed forces reform has been incorporated into the national reform layout, upgrading it to the will of the Party and national action.”

²⁷ Wu, “Remolding Our Military’s Leadership and Command Structure Is a Necessary Choice for a Strong and Revitalized Military”; James C. Mulvenon,

“The Yuan Stops Here: Xi Jinping and the ‘Chairman Responsibility System,’” *China Leadership Monitor*, vol. 47 (Summer 2015), available at <www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor>.

²⁸ Deng Xiaoping, “The Task of Consolidating Our Army,” speech at an enlarged meeting of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, July 14, 1975, in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, 1975–1982* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1984), 27.

²⁹ “China’s Xi Jinping Takes Commander in Chief Military Title,” BBC News, April 21, 2016, available at <www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-36101140>.

³⁰ Xu Qiliang [许其亮], “Firmly Push Forward Reform of National Defense and the Armed Forces” [许其亮: 坚定不移推进国防和军队改革], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], November 21, 2013, available at <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/1121/c64094-23610085.html>>.

³¹ “Full Text of Hu Jintao’s Report at 18th Party Congress.”

³² This citation from p. 92 of *The Selected Important Expositions of Xi Jinping on National Defense and Army Building* comes from an article written by Major General Hu Yang, at the time Jilin Military District Political Commissar. See “Key Issues on Implementing Standards for Warfighting Capability in Peacetime,” *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], May 2014. *The Selected Important Expositions of Xi Jinping on National Defense and Army Building* is not in the public domain. According to *PLA Daily* (February 21, 2014), it was published in February 2014, but its distribution was restricted to PLA officers at and above the regimental level. See “‘The Selected Important Expositions of Xi Jinping on National Defense and Army Building’ Issued by the Army General Political Department, Calling for Members of the Armed Forces to Conscientiously Organize Their Studies” [“习近平关于国防和军队建设重要论述选编”印发全军总政治部下发通知要求全军和武警部队认真组织学习], available at <www.mod.gov.cn/auth/2014-02/21/content_4491893.htm>.

³³ “Xi Jinping Presides Over the First Meeting of the CMC Deepening Defense and Armed Forces Reform Leading Small Group, Emphasizes Applying the Military Strengthening Objective to Direct Reforms, Push Forward Reforms Around Military Strengthening Objective, Provide Strong Institutional Support for Building and Consolidating National Defense and a Powerful Armed Forces” [习近平主持召开中央军委深化国防和军队改革领导小组第一次全体会议强调 坚持以强军目标引领改革围绕强军目标推进改革为建设巩固国防和强大军队提供有力制度支撑], *Xinhua*, March 15, 2014, available at <<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2014-03-15/150629715381.shtml>>.

³⁴ As opposed to a contingency-based perspective that speaks to planning for specific campaigns against a specific enemy. For a detailed explanation of this term, see Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy.”

³⁵ Liu Hang [刘航], ed., “The Military Strategic Guideline of Active Defense Under the New Situation” [新形势下积极防御军事战略方针], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], August 12, 2015, available at <www.81.cn/jmywyl/2015-08/12/content_6625850_4.htm>.

³⁶ *China’s Military Strategy*.

³⁷ See, for example, Dennis J. Blasko, “The ‘Two Incompatibles’ and PLA Self-Assessments of Military Capability,” *China Brief* 13, no. 10 (May 9, 2013), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/the-two-incompatibles-and-pla-self-assessments-of-military-capability/>>.

³⁸ The PLA’s “new historic missions” refer to the expanding set of traditional and nontraditional security missions the PLA must address as China’s role as a global economic and political power grows. For more on the missions, see Daniel M. Hartnett, “The ‘New Historic Missions’: Reflections on Hu Jintao’s Military Legacy,” in *Assessing the People’s Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2014).

³⁹ See Dennis J. Blasko, “The New PLA Joint Headquarters and Internal Assessments of PLA Capabilities,” *China Brief* 16, no. 10 (June 21, 2016), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/the-new-pla-joint-headquarters-and-internal-assessments-of-pla-capabilities/>>.

⁴⁰ According to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) Web site “National Defense Policy”: “China pursues a three-step development strategy in modernizing its national defense and armed forces, in accordance with the state’s overall plan to realize modernization. The first step is to lay a solid foundation by 2010, the second is to make major progress around 2020, and the third is to basically reach the strategic goal of building ‘informationized’ armed forces and being capable of winning ‘informationized’ wars by the mid-21st century.” Available at <www.china.org.cn/english/features/book/194485.htm>. See also “Defense Policy,” People’s Republic of China Ministry of National Defense, available at <www.eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/defensePolicy/index.htm>.

⁴¹ For the most recent report, see *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2017* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017), available at <www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017_China_Military_Power_Report.PDF>.

⁴² Xi Jinping, “Start the New March in the Course of Military Strengthening and Development; Deeply Study and Implement Chairman Xi’s Important Expositions on National Defense and Armed Forces Building” [深入学习贯彻习主席关于国防和军队建设的重要论述], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], February 17, 2014, available at <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0217/c83083-24376791.html>>.

⁴³ Many thanks to colleague Dennis J. Blasko and Alan Burns for multiple references for this phrase.

⁴⁴ “Central Military Commission’s ‘Opinions on Deepening Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces.’”

⁴⁵ Xu, “Firmly Push Forward Reform of National Defense and the Armed Forces.”

⁴⁶ For an overview of key systemic reforms during these years, see David M. Finkelstein et al., *Institutional Reforms of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army: Overview and Challenges* (Alexandria, VA: CNA, 2002). See also David M. Finkelstein and James C. Mulvenon, eds., *China’s Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army* (Washington, DC: Beaver Press, December 2005).

⁴⁷ Fan, “Strive to Build the People’s Army.”

⁴⁸ Xi, “Start the New March.”

⁴⁹ For the significance of the determination that “peace and development” remains the “keynote of the times,” see David M. Finkelstein, *China Reconsiders Its National Security: The “Great Peace and Development Debate” of 1999* (Alexandria, VA: CNA, December 2000).

⁵⁰ Not all of these perceived challenges may be new ones. Even if not new, they are being articulated as part of the ideological campaign supporting the military reform effort.

⁵¹ Fan, “Strive to Build the People’s Army.” Emphasis added.

⁵² Wang Pei and Zhang Zhihui, “Adhere to the Sole and Fundamental Standard of Warfighting Capability—A Thorough Study of Xi Jinping’s Important Expositions on the Standard of Warfighting Capability,” *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], May 2014, 22–31.

⁵³ Xi, “Start the New March.”

⁵⁴ “Faithfully Perform the Missions and Tasks Assigned by the Party and the People—Warmly Celebrate the 87th Anniversary of the Founding of the PLA” [忠实履行党和人民赋予的使命任务——热烈庆祝中国人民解放军建军87周年], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], August 1, 2014, available at <www.81.cn/fjfbmap/content/2014-08/01/content_83384.htm>.

⁵⁵ Gao Guanghui [高光辉], "Consideration on Adhering to the Standard of Warfighting Capability in the New Situation" [新型式下坚持战斗力标准的思考], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], May 2014, 32–41.

⁵⁶ *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2013), 99. Emphasis added.

⁵⁷ Xiong, "Admiral Sun Jianguo."

⁵⁸ Wang and Zhang, "Adhere." Also see the editorial "Faithfully Perform the Missions and Tasks Assigned by the Party and the People," which used nearly identical language, stating that military reform is necessary to ensure that China "will not fall into a target of aggression, subversion, division; the overall interests of reform, development, and stability will not be harmed; [and] the development process of socialism with Chinese characteristics will not be interrupted."

⁵⁹ Major General Wu Jieming, "Adhere to the Party's Mass Line, Strive to Achieve the Goal of Military Strengthening," *Qiushi* [求是], January 16, 2014.

⁶⁰ "Xi Jinping Chairs First Meeting of CPC Central Committee's National Security Commission" [习近平主持召开中央国家安全委员会第一次会议] *Xinhua*, April 15, 2014.

⁶¹ *China's Military Strategy*.

⁶² Xiong, "Admiral Sun Jianguo." These comments help to explain the mindset behind recent PRC laws governing foreign nongovernmental organizations operating in China.

⁶³ Wang and Zhang, "Adhere." For more on China's terrorism concerns, see Murray Scot Tanner and James Bellacqua, *China's Response to Terrorism* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2016).

⁶⁴ Xi, "Start the New March."

⁶⁵ Fan, "Strive to Build the People's Army." Emphasis added.

⁶⁶ Xu, "Firmly Push Forward Reform of National Defense and the Armed Forces."

⁶⁷ Gao, "Consideration on Adhering to the Standard of Warfighting Capability in the New Situation." Emphasis added.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Xi, "Start the New March."

⁷⁰ Fan, "Strive to Build the People's Army."

⁷¹ Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017, available at <www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm>.