

THE NEW PLA LEADERSHIP

Xi Molds China's Military to His Vision

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In October 2017, the 19th Party Congress resulted in dramatic changes to the Central Military Commission (CMC), China's highest military decisionmaking body. Outsiders looking in can only speculate that the deliberations surrounding the selection of these top generals involved a high-stakes negotiation involving sensitive and critical questions of competence, loyalty, and the future direction of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Although we may never know the content of these debates, the outcome of those negotiations—the new CMC structure and leadership lineup—is a window into the whims of the country's top leaders on political loyalties, Party-military relations, and China's military modernization.

Overall, the changes to China's high command reflect leaders giving priority to joint operations and emphasis on having capable, well-rounded commanders from across the services take charge of a rapidly modernizing force. They also reveal a concerted effort by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), especially since 2012, to accelerate the careers of a new generation of senior military officers who are in lockstep with President Xi Jinping's agenda and who apparently avoided the worst of the endemic corruption that reached to the highest echelons of the PLA. Over the next 5 years and

beyond, these new leaders will oversee the PLA's continued expansion into a capable, global military that is attempting training and overseas missions that are unprecedented in recent Chinese history. They will also be expected to meet key goals, including a 2020 deadline for implementing the most comprehensive changes to the PLA's command structure in recent decades.

Background: PLA Priorities and Party-Military Relations under Xi

To understand the mindset of Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders involved in making these selections ahead of the 19th Party Congress, it is worth examining the changes that have taken place in the PLA during the past 5 years. The incoming Party leadership that rose to power at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 did not delay in announcing its priorities for the PLA. On November 16, 4 days after the congress concluded in Beijing, newly appointed CMC Chairman Xi Jinping and his outgoing predecessor, Hu Jintao, addressed an enlarged session of the CMC. After thanking Hu for his stewardship of the PLA, Xi first reminded military leaders that the PLA must “unswervingly adhere to the Party’s absolute leadership over the armed forces.” Second, Xi instructed the PLA to “resolutely complete various tasks of military struggle,” including safeguarding national security and sovereignty and raising combat capabilities. Finally, Xi exhorted the PLA to uphold the military’s “glorious tradition and fine style.” Xi included in this sentiment a warning to top generals to “take a firm stand against corruption,” foreshadowing a sweeping anti-corruption campaign across the Party and military.¹

Xi and the new leaders’ sense of urgency about reforming the PLA in part probably stemmed from issues in civil-military relations during Hu’s tenure, many of which were only brought to light after the 18th Party Congress. Headlining these were poor discipline and widespread corruption that apparently reached all the way into the top ranks. The rampant problems must have caused deep anxiety among Party leaders not only about the PLA’s loyalty, but also about the corrosive effect of shady procurement deals and buying positions on military readiness. The extent of corruption

in the PLA was revealed in dramatic fashion in 2014 and 2015 when the two highest ranking generals and top military advisors to Hu were arrested in retirement for corruption.²

As a result of these fears, in 2012 Party leaders led by Xi intensified efforts around these three priorities: Party control of the armed forces, combat capability, and discipline. First, the Party firmly reasserted its symbolic control over the PLA and bolstered propaganda around Xi's authority as commander in chief. On November 1, 2014, Xi convened a critical all-army political work conference in Gutian, Fujian Province. This historic location was the site of an important 1929 meeting where Mao Zedong cemented Party authority over the Red Army and which thus serves as a potent political symbol of the Party's control over the armed forces. Political propaganda before and after the meeting has stressed the principle of the Party leading the army, stridently rejected Western-style nationalization of the armed forces, and strongly reiterated the concept of the "CMC Chairman Responsibility System," which emphasizes the singular authorities of the CMC chairman (Xi) in running the military.³

Similarly, Xi formally was named commander in chief of the CMC Joint Operations Command Center, an honorific title signaling the chairman's place at the top of the operational command chain. From the start as head of the CMC, Xi also took an early and active interest in military affairs, frequently visiting military units and meeting with officers and soldiers. In July 2017, wearing military fatigues and riding in a jeep, he presided over a massive military demonstration to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the PLA's founding, during which he again exhorted the PLA to obey the Party's command and transform itself into an elite fighting force.⁴

Xi's second exhortation to the military to "resolutely complete various tasks of military struggle" has been most vividly illustrated in the intensified training, exercises, missions beyond China's borders, and reforms to the PLA's command structure intended to equip the PLA to be able to defend evolving Chinese interests. In 2004, then-CMC Chairman Hu Jintao ordered the PLA to be prepared to perform new missions, including

defending China's overseas interests. Xi's guidance to the PLA, issued early and often during his tenure, to be able to "fight and win"⁵ compounds this guidance. It is both a reflection of the PLA's rapidly developing and externally facing capabilities and the leadership's need for a force that can defend China's growing domestic and overseas interests from threats. Chinese ships and aircraft now operate more frequently and farther from China's immediate borders than at any time in recent history—as China's growing presence in the East and South China Seas illustrates. Meanwhile, China's first overseas logistics hub in Djibouti and the 24th Counterpiracy Task Group to the Gulf of Aden, both completed in 2017, underscore China's growing global interests and the PLA's increasing global presence. Lastly, the whole-scale restructuring of the PLA that began in late 2015 finally abolished the military's outdated organizational structure and brought the high command in line with longstanding operational goals, such as refining joint operations.⁶

Finally, Xi and the leadership have taken a firm stand against corruption at all levels of the military. These measures have included inspections of military units across China, updated guidelines for proper behavior, more frequent political indoctrination sessions, and corruption investigations into top military leaders. In December 2012, the CMC announced 10 regulations to rein in bad behavior in the PLA, including banning alcohol at banquets. Since then, the campaign has netted dozens of officers whose names and crimes have been publicly announced in the Chinese press. In August 2017, corruption rumors emerged around two CMC members, Chief of the Joint Staff Fang Fenghui and Political Work Department Director Zhang Yang, when their names were not included on a list of representatives to the 19th Party Congress.⁷ The list instead contained a surprising percentage of first-time delegates from the PLA, by some accounts up to 90 percent. These developments suggest that leadership does not intend to slow down military anti-corruption efforts anytime soon; instead, anti-corruption measures are likely to have an enduring impact on all aspects of military life, including promotions.⁸

The Central Military Commission

The new CMC reflects the themes of Xi's tenure thus far. It was slimmed down from 11 to 7 members and retained a civilian chairman (Xi), two military vice chairmen, the defense minister, and the directors of the Joint Staff and Political Work Departments. The new structure added the secretary of the PLA's Discipline Inspection Commission, while the leaders of the Logistics Support Department, Equipment Development Department, navy, air force, and Rocket Force were removed. This structure and the backgrounds of the new elites provide some insight into the Party's considerations for military leadership selection and its goals for the PLA during the next 5 years and beyond.

Analyzing the New Leadership

Much can be said about the structure and membership of China's new CMC, but it is evident that it aligns closely with Xi's three-pronged agenda for the military: "follow the command of the Party, build capability to win battles, and maintain a fine work style."⁹ Although many will argue that cutting the CMC from 11 to 7 seats and displacing the service chiefs and half of the former general departments from the body reflect yet another example of Xi's personal drive to consolidate all authority under himself, a stronger case can be made that it enhances efficiency, decisionmaking, and clarifies roles in a much more effective way in the wake of ongoing structural reforms.

Atop a body of 15 CMC entities is now a smaller leadership core that can serve as an advisory body and focus more succinctly on oversight and issuing guidance to an overhauled PLA. The CMC leadership reflects the priorities that Xi views as most essential and is better positioned to ensure the success of the ongoing structural reforms. This is technically the smallest CMC since the 1930s, but it looks very similar to the 1982 body that Deng Xiaoping brought out of the bloated Cultural Revolution era and streamlined to the needs of the coming era.¹⁰ The CMC leadership structure was the last piece of the PLA not touched by reforms, and its new

membership finally reflects the PLA's shift into a new command structure. Analysts assessed the CMC would either become a larger Politburo-like body bringing on all the service chiefs, five theater commanders, and heads of new CMC departments, or become smaller and push some of its former responsibilities down. With their missions shifting to focus on administration, the services were bumped off the CMC, and it is now clear that logistics and equipment development are viewed as important yet secondary enablers compared to operations, Party affairs, and ensuring accountability and loyalty in the force.¹¹

The new high command with Xi sitting unchallenged at its apex is well-balanced between an old guard of three CMC veterans and an inbound group of three newcomers who have seen their careers fast-tracked during Xi's tenure. For the first time, the top PLA officer did not rise up through the ground forces, but has been at the forefront of a modernizing military that has taken on an increasingly joint appearance. A decade ago it would have been unthinkable for a Rocket Force commander to become China's primary face for external engagement, but Wei Fenghe was named China's defense minister during the National People's Congress in March 2018. Finally, the easily dismissed resonance of the CMC having two "war heroes" with rare combat experience and the elevation of the Discipline Inspection Commission (led by a Rocket Force star) could not more clearly signal Xi's priorities for a military he wants to be "world class" by 2050.¹²

The Old Guard: Precursor to a New Era

Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang (born 1950/CMC member since 2007). The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) fighter pilot could have been pressed to retire after serving two-full CMC terms. On the cusp of hitting the informal "seven up, eight down" retirement norm, Xu is the first officer to serve this length on the high command since former Vice Chairman Chi Haotian. Xu is the PLAAF golden boy who always was the youngest, fastest rising officer in his cohort. Younger than his successor, Ma Xiaotian, he has made a career of hitting "firsts" within China's modernizing force. It was in 2004 when

the service chiefs were first elevated to the CMC that Xu and former navy commander Wu Shengli were the first non-ground force officers named as deputy chiefs to the then-General Staff Department. This gave them the requisite grade level for promotion to the CMC and clarified their designation as the heirs-apparent to lead their services. During the course of his five-decade military career, Xu has been in the vanguard of a rapidly evolving PLA, reflecting reform and modernization priorities put forward by Jiang Zemin, Hu, and now Xi. It is only apropos that this military prodigy who joined the PLA at age 16 and achieved milestones in so many areas of joint representation should become the PLA's top officer today.

According to his official biography, Xu was born March 1950 in Linqu, Shandong. He trained at three of the PLAAF's aviation schools to become a pilot in the late 1960s. During the early 1980s, he served in the PLAAF's 4th Army Air Corps and was chief of staff (COS) of its Shanghai base. After attending the basic course at China's National Defense University (NDU) from 1986 until 1988, Xu was transferred to the 8th Army Air Corps in Fuzhou where he ultimately became its commander from 1990 to 1993. Xu took his first staff job in 1993 when named as a deputy COS of PLAAF headquarters, a corps-level assignment, and then as COS from 1994 to 1999. Xu was transferred to the Shenyang Military Region (MR) in 1999, where he was dual-hatted as a deputy MR commander and as the PLAAF MR air force commander until 2004. In June 2004, he was promoted to become a deputy chief of the General Staff Department (GSD) for 3 years before being named commander of the PLAAF and CMC member in 2007.¹³

Xu, like all in the new CMC lineup, received some higher education. He consistently pursued educational opportunities throughout his career including coursework at the Air Force Command College and four separate study stints at China's NDU.¹⁴ Although not a combat veteran, one source suggests his air force unit may have mobilized in 1979 in Guangxi in support of the war against Vietnam.¹⁵

Although much has been made of (and speculated about) Xu's ties to Xi Jinping, his air force career really started to take off during Jiang's tenure and,

according to some reports, with the direct help of Deng ally and PLA stalwart, Zhang Zhen. Zhang, who was charged by Deng to oversee the establishment of NDU in 1985, apparently took a liking to Xu when Xu was in the first class of the basic course at the school with other rising cadre like future PLAAF Commander Ma Xiaotian and Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff Zhang Qinsheng. It was during Zhang's tenure as CMC vice chairman (1992–1997) that Xu was transferred out of the Nanjing MR to PLAAF headquarters to help lead air force operations, first as a deputy COS and then as COS. During Hu Jintao's 8 years atop the military, Xu became the first air force officer to join the GSD leadership, after which Hu selected him over more senior competitors to helm the PLAAF and to join the CMC.¹⁶

Xu probably developed some ties to Xi Jinping in Fuzhou between 1990 and 1993 when Xi was the Party chief of the city and Xu was COS and later commander of the 8th Army Air Corps. At the time, Xi served concurrently as the Fuzhou military district's first Party secretary. It is not clear to what extent they remained in touch afterward, and Xi probably would not have been well positioned to support Xu until decades later. More likely, Xu's rise came from his stellar reputation as a first-rate fighter pilot, serving for decades in units across from Taiwan, who embodied the skills and leadership traits that Chinese leaders were looking for in building a modern air force.

He reached the rank of major general by age 41 and was voted as an alternate member of the CCP Central Committee at age 44, the same year he was named PLAAF headquarters COS. On his watch, the PLAAF undertook some of its most critical modernization efforts and emerged as a force aligned to support China's evolving national security interests. Viewed as a young innovator by several top civilian and military leaders, Xu even caused ripples in 2009 for his reported advocacy for the air force to develop both defensive and offensive space warfare capabilities and his belief that the eventual militarization of space was inevitable.¹⁷

Xu, in his role as CMC vice chairman during the past 5 years, has overseen at least two of Xi's top priorities for the PLA: cleaning up the force and implementing the largest structural reorganization since the 1980s. Since

2012, Xu has headed the CMC Leading Group for Inspection Work, giving him responsibility for monitoring discipline inspection, judicial, auditing, and supervision.¹⁸ Xu also was tasked as the point person for implementing the reform plan as the executive secretary of the CMC Leading Group for Military Reform.¹⁹ Regardless of any previous ties to Xi, he clearly has earned Xi's trust as his top military aide.

Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia (born 1950/CMC member since 2012). Zhang, the princeling perhaps best known for his family connections to Xi, has taken a relatively modest profile since his elevation to the high command 5 years ago. First as the head of the General Armament Department and then as head of its post-reform version, the Equipment Development Department, Zhang appears to have quietly but successfully pressed ahead in meeting objectives for China's weapons modernization program. The rare PLA officer who can tout combat experience, even in the less than complex battle environment along the Sino-Vietnamese border, he is arguably the PLA's most experienced operator after nearly 50 years split between command postings in the Chengdu MR in China's rugged southwest and since the mid-2000s in the Beijing and Shenyang MRs.²⁰

Appointed to the CMC in 2012, the low key Zhang has shown little to corroborate the claims in some media sources that he is Xi's "sworn brother" and staunchest ally on China's top military body.²¹ Notwithstanding the credibility of reports about his enduring family connections to Xi, Zhang, like Xu, probably benefited just as much from the support of Hu Jintao and military patrons from previous generations, including the disgraced former CMC Vice Chairmen Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou. In fact, the launching point for Zhang's rise was his transfer to be a deputy commander in the Beijing MR in 2005, years before Xi had a toehold in either the Party or military leadership. It was also during Hu's tenure that Zhang was elected to the Party's Central Committee in 2007 and that same year given the trusted post of commander of the Shenyang MR bordering the Korean Peninsula.²² Xi probably would only have been positioned to indirectly help Zhang until 2010, when he was named to the CMC as the

first civilian vice chairman under Hu. Notably, other princelings with rumored ties to Xi such as Liu Yuan, Zhang Haiyang, and Liu Yazhou all retired when they reached the requisite age.

Zhang was born in Weinan, Shaanxi Province, according to his official biography.²³ Like Xu, he attended the basic course at the PLA Military Academy (the precursor to NDU) and attained a junior college education early in his career. Zhang served nearly three decades in command posts in the 14th Group Army (GA) near Kunming in the Chengdu MR. After taking additional training in combined arms operations at NDU in the mid-1990s, Zhang moved to the 13th GA near Chongqing, where from 1994 to 2005 he served as deputy commander and then commander. Picked by leaders in Beijing for greater things, he was sent to the Beijing MR as a deputy commander in 2005 before serving a full 5-year term as Shenyang MR commander in advance of joining the CMC in 2012.²⁴

We do not know what part Zhang's family connections may have played in advancing his career, but he has longstanding ties to Xi's family and many others associated with the revolution. Zhang's father, Zhang Zongxun, led the PLA General Logistics Department in the 1970s and commanded the Northeast Army Corps (or First Field Army) in 1947 when Xi's father was its political commissar. Both Zhang and Xi are Shaanxi natives and second-generation revolutionaries with family who were later purged in the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, Zhang made a name for himself early, when at the age of 26, as a company commander, he led his unit into combat during the border war with Vietnam in the late 1970s and in later skirmishes in the 1980s.²⁵ His service in three different MRs gave him a wide-ranging background in critical security issues such as Tibet, China's sometimes lawless southwest border, capital defense, and North Korea. Since 2012, in leading the PLA's weapons development and acquisition programs he has emphasized civil-military integration and emerging issues such as space and lunar exploration.²⁶ Relatedly, Chinese press claims he attended the first class focused on high-tech training at the National University of Defense Technology in 1998.²⁷

Minister of National Defense Wei Fenghe (born 1954/CMC Member since 2012). As with all officers rising through the secretive Second Artillery Force (now the PLA Rocket Force), we have only modest details on Wei Fenghe's background and career.²⁸ The nuclear officer rose to prominence in late 2010 when he was named as the first Second Artillery Force officer to fill one of several prestigious posts as a deputy chief of the General Staff Department. The promotion to the GSD—giving him the requisite grade increase needed for promotion to the CMC—all but guaranteed his later promotion to commander of his service in 2012.

According to several official and unofficial biographical sources, Wei was born in Liaocheng, Shandong Province. He reportedly has served in a variety of command posts associated with China's nuclear forces. For example, he may have risen through the 54th Base located near Luoyang, serving as COS from 2001 to 2002. Prior to that, he served in an unidentified brigade as COS then as its commander between 1990 and 1994. He then led the 53rd base near Kunming until 2004.²⁹ In 2004, he was named to the leadership of the Second Artillery headquarters as a deputy COS before taking the COS post in 2006. Wei was promoted to the rank of major general in 2004, lieutenant general in 2008, and general after joining the CMC in 2012.³⁰ During several periods of his career, he took time to pursue educational and training opportunities. For example, he attended the Second Artillery Command Academy from 1982 to 1984 and NDU in 2006 and in 1997–1999 for full-time study.³¹

Like Xu Qiliang and the air force, Wei has served at the forefront of the Rocket Force's growing representation across the PLA, taking on responsibilities never previously available to officers from his service. As the youngest deputy among the GSD leadership, Wei spent substantial time supporting China's military-to-military relations with other nations. From late 2010 until the fall of 2012, he was involved in extensive foreign engagement both at home and abroad including supporting CMC Vice Chairmen Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, as well as then-defense minister Liang Guanglie. In fall 2011, Wei joined Guo on a trip to Cuba, Colombia,

and Peru and traveled with Xu to Mongolia in May 2012.³² In June 2011, Wei joined Liang as a “key member” of the PLA delegation to the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore.³³

It is unclear how well Xi Jinping knew Wei before 2012, though Xi’s first promotion as CMC chairman was promoting Wei to general. Under Xi, Wei and fellow Rocket Force officers Zhang Shengmin and Gao Jin have risen to unprecedented seniority in the PLA hierarchy. Heading two services and holding two of the six seats on the new CMC, the once backwater missile men have arrived.

The New Guard: Bridging the Past and Future

Joint Staff Department Chief Li Zuocheng (born in 1953/CMC member since 2017). Perhaps more a late riser than a newcomer, Li was promoted to chief of the Joint Staff Department in late August 2017, replacing Fang Fenghui. He rose to prominence in 1979 as the company commander who successfully led an offensive against Vietnamese forces during a month-long battle along the border. Li sustained multiple injuries and was later awarded the honorific title of “Combat Hero” by the CMC for his bravery.³⁴ The distinction apparently also earned him a seat on the dais as part of the 12th Party Congress presidium at age 29 in 1982.³⁵

Li made major general in 1997 but saw little movement with his career until 2008, when he was transferred out of the Guangzhou MR after four decades to become a deputy commander of the Chengdu MR. In 2009, he was promoted to lieutenant general, appearing to benefit from the support of then-CMC Chairman Hu Jintao and top military leaders, even though he did not make the cut for selection to the Central Committee. However, Li has seen his career take off during Xi’s tenure.³⁶

Born in Meicheng, Hunan Province, Li received an undergraduate degree in Marxist theory and graduate degree from NDU later in his career. During the fight that made him famous in 1979, he reportedly captured four enemy personnel along with enemy supplies. Li rose through the 41st GA in Guangxi in the Guangzhou MR and was named the unit’s commander

in 1998. From 2002 to 2008, he served as a deputy COS of the Guangzhou MR before his transfer to the Chengdu MR. After his combat exploits, he developed a reputation as a skilled administrator who successfully oversaw several disaster relief efforts, such as responding to massive flooding in Guangxi in 1994 and along the Yangtze River in 1998.³⁷

After 5 years as a deputy commander, Li was promoted to Chengdu MR commander in July 2013 in the first notable shuffle of senior military personnel under Xi. Along with Li, 31st GA veteran Wang Ning was named a GSD deputy chief and Song Puxuan was appointed NDU commandant. None of these officers were members of the Central Committee, suggesting Xi was already seeking to advance the careers of officers outside established PLA leadership circles.³⁸ Li's career also appears to have risen in parallel with Eastern Theater Commander Liu Yuejun. Both officers come from Guangxi and fought in the Sino-Vietnamese war, then served together in the 41st GA.³⁹

Until his promotion to the high command, Li's biggest achievement—and a signal that Xi viewed him as having potential for greater things—was his appointment as the inaugural commander of the new PLA Army headquarters, established after top-level organizational reforms were announced in December 2015. This followed his promotion to general earlier that summer.⁴⁰

It is clear that Xi and Chinese leaders value the symbolism of Li's war hero status and his reputation as an experienced veteran who has seen the reality of combat. At the same time, Li brings to his new role a plethora of more practical experiences from his decades commanding units in China's rural southern and western regions. His tenure in Chengdu from 2008 to 2015 gave him a leading role in disaster relief campaigns and managing ethnic unrest. He almost certainly played a key part in the response to the uprisings in Tibet in 2009 and the Sichuan earthquake in 2010.⁴¹ According to Xinhua and local news reports, Li also helped facilitate the Chengdu MR's involvement in the 2010 Mission Action mobility exercise where units crossed through multiple MRs on a deployment that extended 2,000

kilometers.⁴² Li has also authored works on civil-military integration, an important element in Xi's military strategy.⁴³

Li probably also would have had some association with former CMC member and Political Work Department head Zhang Yang (who committed suicide in November 2017 while under investigation for corruption), as they both spent decades in the Guangzhou MR. This speaks to the difficulty of understanding why some officers have been targeted even as their peers have risen.

Political Work Department Director Miao Hua (born 1955/CMC member since 2017). A clear Xi favorite among the next generation of military leaders, Miao is one of only two members of the new CMC who is eligible to serve another term on the military's top body starting in 2022, if retirement norms hold. Miao is the first among an elite group of officers who earned their spurs toiling in the 31st GA in the Nanjing MR near Xiamen. Under Xi, with his close association to that area, Miao and others, like Wang Ning and new PLA Army Commander Han Weiguo, have seen their careers fast-tracked. Miao, born in Fuzhou, is a career political officer who spent almost his entire tenure in the Nanjing MR, including stints as the political department director of the 31st GA (1999–2005) and political commissar (PC) of the 12th GA.⁴⁴

In late 2010, Miao was transferred to the Lanzhou MR to serve as the director of the political department. The timing notably coincided with Xi's appointment that fall to the CMC. In mid-2012, Miao was promoted to a deputy PC of the Lanzhou MR and secretary of its discipline inspection commission. In July 2012, he was made the MR's PC. Considering that the Lanzhou MR was long seen as Guo Boxiong's powerbase, Miao may have had a role in supporting the investigation against Guo and removing remnants of his influence in the region. Miao was made major general in 2001 and then lieutenant general in 2012. He was a member of the larger Central Discipline Inspection Commission body overseen by Wang Qishan from 2012 to 2017. He has a bachelor's degree in project management from the National University of Defense Technology.⁴⁵

Miao was among the dozens of senior PLA leaders who in April 2014 published articles in the same paper pledging loyalty to Xi.⁴⁶ A political track officer from the ground forces, Miao was transferred in late 2014 to the PLA Navy to serve as its PC.⁴⁷ The move appears similar to others like Wang Ning's crossover to become the People's Armed Police (PAP) commander, which may reflect Xi's placement of trusted outsiders in service headquarters to monitor and clean up malfeasance and fix lingering issues with graft. Reflecting his candidacy for CMC elevation, Miao was promoted to the rank of admiral in mid-2015 alongside others who have benefited from Xi's trust, including Li Zuocheng, Wang Ning, and Song Puxuan.⁴⁸

Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary Zhang Shengmin (born 1958/CMC member since 2017). Arguably the most surprising and impactful move in the unveiling of the new CMC and its membership was the elevation of the newly appointed head of the PLA's Discipline Inspection Commission, Zhang Shengmin. Zhang is the youngest member of the high command and, alongside Miao, he is well-positioned to serve two terms through at least 2027. Hailing from Shaanxi Province like Xi and Zhang Youxia, his 42 years in the PLA represent the shortest tenure among his CMC peers.

As with his Rocket Force counterpart Wei Fenghe, Zhang's career details are shrouded in mystery. According to an unofficial biography from Phoenix News and other reports, Zhang got his start in the Lanzhou MR before taking a staff officer post in the then-General Political Department's General Office. Starting in 2004, in just a decade, he served in senior political posts at four separate missile bases (Bases 55, 53, 56, and 54) across China. During one of those years, Zhang served as the PC of the Rocket Force Command College. By late 2014, Zhang was leading the political department of the then-Second Artillery Force headquarters.⁴⁹

Despite his diverse career spanning multiple bases and MRs, in recent years no other officer has benefited more from the top-level changes necessitated by the reform effort than Zhang. His positioning as a rising star probably helped beforehand from major shuffles in a number of top

positions in the Second Artillery in 2014 and 2015, possibly spurred by corruption concerns and moves to remove the lingering influence of Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong.⁵⁰ The late 2014 shuffle appeared to be focused on the navy, Second Artillery, PAP, senior PLA academies, and the Beijing MR. The personnel overhaul represented the first time that all senior officers at the MR-leader level were born after 1950.⁵¹ The changes also included a number of transfers and swaps of posts that probably were conducted in place with an eye on 2017 and the revamped military leadership structure. For example, among those moving alongside Zhang were Gao Jin, Miao Hua, and Wang Ning—some of whom were on their second posting within a year. This was the first tangible sign that Xi and his top military deputies were intent on resetting the promotion lineup in the coming years.⁵²

Zhang has served in several newly created posts since the PLA was reorganized in late 2015. In just 2 years, his status has soared as he was first named the inaugural PC of the new CMC Training and Administration Department in early 2016, then only a few months later in October was reassigned to replace Xi ally and anti-corruption champion Liu Yuan as the new CMC Logistic Support Department PC.⁵³ The move coincided with a number of other top-level changes in the navy and among the political officer corps. In March 2017, not even a year later, Zhang was elevated again to become the PLA's top graft-buster as the secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission. This was part of another sweeping personnel overhaul that saw dozens of senior officers step down from their posts.⁵⁴

The elevation of the PLA's Discipline Inspection Commission to the CMC aligns its prestige to that of its parent organization, the Central Discipline Inspection Commission, whose leaders serve on the Politburo Standing Committee. It also tracks with the bolstering of the PLA's inspection, judicial, and audits mechanisms since 2012, including giving them the authority and imprimatur of Xi and other CMC leaders. Zhang, with his CMC seat and sitting atop a department with responsibilities now viewed on par with operations and Party matters, should have a freer hand to institutionalize the military's anti-corruption processes and use his 10 roving

inspection teams to ensure that PLA officers are following Xi's exhortation to "conduct themselves well."⁵⁵ In January 2018, Xinhua announced that full-time inspection teams will start supervising Party members at and above the corps level, including organizations under the CMC, underscoring a continued emphasis on discipline through Xi's second term.⁵⁶

Outlook and Implications

Xi's work report at the opening of the 19th Party Congress called for the PLA to perfect its new post-reform joint command system in the face of "profound changes" in China's security environment. This may have caused leaders to opt for modest continuity in the midst of historic organizational change for the military. Despite rumors to the contrary before the congress, the leadership stuck with its decade-long practice of maintaining two uniformed vice chairman posts and did not appoint a potential successor to Xi as a civilian vice chairman.⁵⁷ Similar to the civilian transition, the final results of the CMC turnover appear to reflect a balanced lineup of relatively clean, competent, and loyal officers with diverse career experiences. The age 67 norm was also upheld on the military side, with older generals such as Fan Changlong stepping down and Vice Chairmen Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia, both 67, selected to serve on the Politburo through 2022.

Retaining a mix of seasoned veterans while injecting new blood into the CMC is not unusual, yet it suggests Xi wants to maintain momentum on military reforms as he cultivates a diverse generation of talented leaders. Xi's friendship and decades-long familiarity with the two vice chairmen also affords him trusted, capable officers he can rely on during a pivotal time for China's rise—a major contrast to the adverse circumstances Hu Jintao faced when dealing with Jiang Zemin's appointees in the Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou era.⁵⁸ In addition to spending years together in China's coastal provinces and overlapping with Xi on the CMC since 2010, Xu Qiliang was an early, vocal proponent of the military's reform efforts even before serving as Xi's top deputy on the PLA reform leading group. Zhang Youxia in his former role embraced calls for improved civil-military integration and technological

development, two of Xi's top priorities for the coming years outlined in his marathon speech during the congress. Furthermore, the combat experiences of Zhang and Li Zuocheng, albeit dated, will prove valuable in setting an example if hot spots flare up on China's periphery during their tenures.

Wei Fenghe, who was named defense minister in March 2018, is no stranger to foreign engagement and is well-postured to serve as the face of China's military diplomacy abroad. In addition, Li Zuocheng's selection represents a refreshing change compared to the old-school officers formerly responsible for PLA operations. His relative youth and combat experience, combined with his recent tenure as the first army service chief, prepare him to address readiness issues precipitated by reform implementation. In the next few years, he should be able to apply these lessons learned by translating Xi's guidance to the PLA and prepare to "fight and win."

Finally, Miao Hua's transfer from navy headquarters to run political affairs and Zhang Shengmin's elevation to oversee PLA discipline strongly imply the anti-corruption campaign has become further institutionalized at the highest levels of the military and is likely to become ingrained for years to come. The success of Miao and Zhang in their respective posts will be vital if Xi hopes to complete a once-in-a-generation cultural shift in the PLA.

The new lineup, however, still leaves observers with some important questions. For example, it remains to be seen how the absence of service chiefs on the CMC will affect operational decisionmaking, particularly during a crisis. It is also unclear how and from whom Xi intends to receive service-specific advice during CMC gatherings or through which venues the service chiefs will advocate for service priorities in acquisitions. However, the new leaders previously occupied top positions in the services, which probably made this change more palatable. Relatedly, it is unclear how a CMC that appears to be more joint, at least symbolically, will practically improve the military's ability to conduct joint operations in the timeline Beijing has unveiled. In reality, this transition probably will take several years, if not decades.

We also do not know what, if any, political concessions or compromises were hammered out in the deliberations about the CMC. From a management perspective, the choice to have a smaller CMC membership overseeing an expanded CMC organization with 15 disparate organs seems counterintuitive. The leaders probably will have to rely on the CMC General Office more than ever if they hope to coordinate across a sprawling bureaucracy, arbitrate disputes over missions and resources, and implement troop cuts in the coming years. To this end, Xi has named Zhong Shaojun, a civilian and trusted advisor who has worked closely with Xi for more than a decade, to lead the General Office. In 2012, when Xi became CMC chairman, he picked Zhong to lead his personal office and gave him the rank of senior colonel.⁵⁹ Previous Chinese leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao also kept an eye on the PLA by appointing confidantes to the General Office, but the large-scale changes afoot in the military arguably make Zhong's job more complicated than it was for his predecessors.

The removal of Fang Fenghui and Zhang Yang unveiled the first investigations during Xi's tenure into members of the CMC and sends a strong message to younger leaders about a new level of scrutiny in promotions and new expectations for officers at all echelons. The generals' downfall affected the final outcome, as both were eligible to remain on the CMC.⁶⁰ In addition, the dramatic revelations about Zhang's suicide and Fang's investigation punctuated an overhaul of military representatives in the Central Committee to include new and younger officers. In fact, according to Cheng Li of the Brookings Institution, the congress may have been the "largest-ever turnover of military elite in the history of the PRC."⁶¹ This generational change probably affected associates of Zhang, Fang, and the old guard, and signals that the anti-corruption campaign in the PLA is far from over.

If Xi's exhortations to the PLA during the 19th Party Congress are any indication, the new military leadership has a challenging agenda to accomplish. With a new leadership team in place, Beijing is well-poised to address its goals for modernizing and reforming the PLA to address future security challenges. The congress produced one of the smallest leadership lineups in

the PLA's history and enshrined the CMC Chairman Responsibility System into the Party's constitution, reflecting the culmination of Xi's efforts to centralize the CMC's authority—and his own—over the entirety of the armed forces. This should make Xi even better poised to push his priorities for the PLA than at the start of his tenure. What remains to be seen is what Xi will do with that added authority over an increasingly capable and global military. However, there is little doubt Xi and his generals emerged in a stronger position to steer the PLA toward fulfilling its part in the “great rejuvenation” of the Chinese nation.

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