

XI'S ARMY: REFORM AND LOYALTY IN THE PLA

ABOUT

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

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

Each issue of *China Analysis* focuses on a specific theme and draws mainly on Chinese mainland sources. However, it also monitors content in Chinese-language publications from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which occasionally include news and analysis that is not published in the mainland and reflects the diversity of Chinese thinking.

Introduction

by Mathieu Duchâtel

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

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

long it will take for the newly created entities in the PLA to work together smoothly? In a way, the commentators do not dare to speculate much beyond what is outlined in the official document issued by the Central Military Commission (CMC), which, itself, acknowledges that the reform programme touches upon “deep interests”.

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

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

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

The internal re-organisation of the forces and regions deals a major blow to the Army (land forces), which have traditionally dominated the PLA, both politically and culturally. The reforms mean that the Army is downgraded to the same rank as the Air Force and the Navy. China's current military modernisation and strategy is geared towards joint

operations, and given Chinese national security priorities in maritime regions in East Asia and its new ambition to protect “overseas interests”, the Navy, the Air Force, the Rocket Force and electronic warfare units are increasingly gaining in strategic importance. The sources analysed in this issue of *China Analysis* give a few insights into some of the PLA's operational weaknesses and vulnerabilities as they are perceived by Chinese commentators. For example, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance of foreign forces approaching Chinese waters remains a concern, which partly explains the construction of artificial islands and radar facilities in disputed areas of the South China Sea.

Taken together, the articles indicate that Xi Jinping is playing a risky game with a degree of caution but a clear sense of direction – a direction that was set a long time ago by Mao (in the form of absolute Party control over the military) and by Chinese generals (in the form of anti-access and area denial as the key operational priority for the PLA's modernisation). Looking ahead, the reorganisation of the military and the greater level of central oversight will strengthen Xi Jinping's already considerable power to select loyal generals who will faithfully implement the reform package of the Central Military Commission.

Will the PLA reforms succeed?

Cristina Garafola

At the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2013, major reforms to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) were announced. Beginning in September 2015, elements of the reform programme have been made public and the process is expected to last until 2020. The changes challenge a number of established interests, including by restructuring the Military Region system as well as the four General Departments, which have been blamed for facilitating patron-client ties in the PLA.

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

Overhauling the PLA

Since they began in September, the reforms have already brought about large-scale changes to the force structure, organisation, and operational command of the PLA. On 1 January 2016, the Central Military Commission (CMC) released an "Opinion on Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces" (hereafter, the "Opinion"), which provides the rationale, objectives, and priority areas for the reform programme.¹ The "Opinion" states that the reforms represent the only way to achieve the rejuvenation of the military as well as China's national-level goals, including the goals of becoming a "moderately prosperous society" (小康社会, *xiaokang shehui*) by 2021, and becoming a "modern socialist country" by 2049.² The reforms are also necessary to overcome the structural and policy barriers that exist in the current national defence system.

According to the "Opinion", the main principles of the reforms are to reorient the PLA to the "correct political direction" of Party control and to improve combat capability by creating an integrated joint operations system that can fight and win wars. Other areas targeted for reform include strengthening innovation and promoting a "rule by law" mindset, so that the reforms are seen within the context of a system of laws and regulations. Policy changes are to

be complemented with reforms to organisational systems, and these reforms are to be introduced incrementally, so as to ensure the stability of the armed forces and effective integration with them.

Three of the reforms are particularly significant for the near-term future. First, the roles of national-level, theatre-level, and service-level organisations have been redefined. The description of the new delineation of powers is that "the CMC manages, the theatre commands focus on warfighting, and the services focus on building [the forces]" (军委管总、战区主战、军种主建, *junwei guanzong, zhanqu zhuzhan, junzhong zhujian*). The CMC has greater authority over the four old General Departments, whose functions have now been reorganised into 15 bodies that are under the direct control of the CMC.³ The Theatre Commands (战区, *zhanqu*) replace the seven

military regions.⁴ They will conduct combat operations under the "joint operations command system" (联合作战指挥体制, *lianhe zuozhan zhihui tizhi*), as part of an effort to improve joint warfighting operations in contrast to the old, peacetime-focused Military Regions. The services have also been profoundly transformed. An Army headquarters has been established for the first time, aligning it with other services. The Second Artillery Force, which controlled China's nuclear and conventional missiles, has been elevated to the level of a separate service called the Rocket Force. Along with the Navy and the Air Force, this brings the total number of services to four. The services will focus on force "building", or manning, training, and equipping the armed forces. Finally, the newly-created Strategic Support Force will focus on cyber, information and electromagnetic warfare, and possibly some areas of space operations as well.

"The changes challenge a number of established interests, including by restructuring the Military Region system"

Second, the PLA as a whole is continuing to decrease in size, though (it is hoped) to increase in quality; a new 300,000 personnel reduction follows two similar cuts in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The reform programme has also introduced policies aimed at improving talent recruitment and development within the armed services. It is likely that a significant portion of these cuts will apply to the PLA Army, although no specifics have been announced yet with regard to any major reductions.

Third, the "Opinion" discusses improvements to PLA

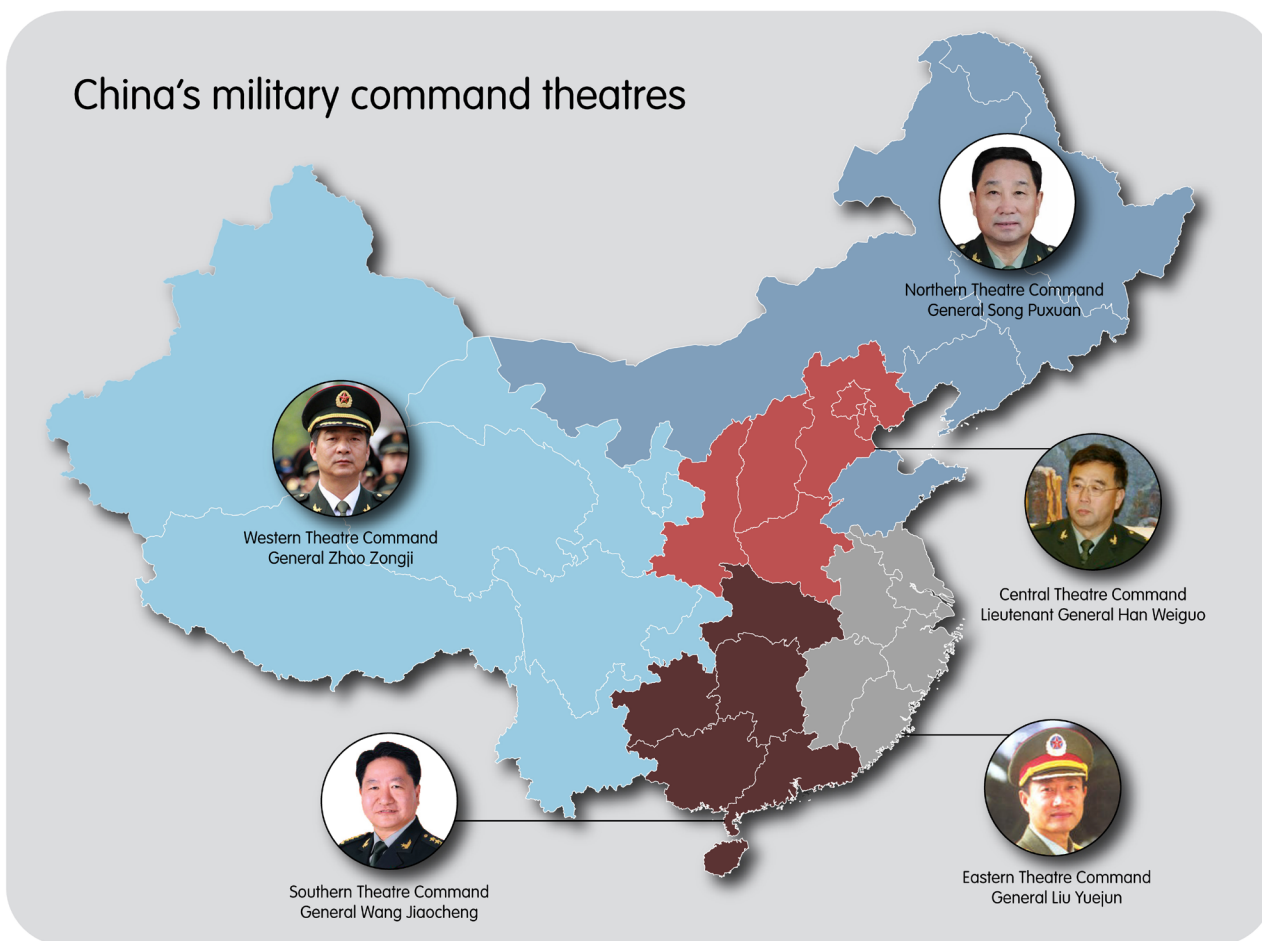
Third, the "Opinion" discusses improvements to PLA

¹ "Central Military Commission Opinion on Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces" (中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见, *zhongyong junwei guanyu shenhua guofang he jundui gaige de yijian*), Central Military Commission, 1 January 2016

² Xie Xiaonan, "Xi Jinping's Key Words on Governing the Country: The Two Centenaries; a Call of the Times Showing the Way Forward" (习近平治国理政关键词: 两个一百年 引领前行的时代号召, *xi jingping zhiguo lizheng guanjianci: lianggeyibai nian yin ling qianxing de shidai haozhao*), *Renminwang*, 18 January 2016, available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0118/c64387-28061711.html>. Xie Xiaonan is a journalist for *Renminwang*, the *People's daily* website.

³ The General Staff Department, the General Political Department, the General Logistics Department, and the General Armaments Department previously formed the organisational structure of the PLA. The 15 new organisations are: the General Office; the Joint Staff Department; the Political Work Department; the Logistic Support Department; the Equipment Development Department; the Training and Administration Department; the National Defence Mobilisation Department; the Commission for Discipline Inspection; the Politics and Law Commission; the Science and Technology Commission; the Office for Strategic Planning; the Office for Reform and Organisational Structure; the Office for International Military Cooperation; the Audit Office; and the Agency for Offices Administration.

⁴ The seven military regions were Shenyang, Beijing, Lanzhou, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, and Chengdu. The new theatre commands are the Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, and Central Theatre Commands.



Source: Sohu News Agency, <http://news.sohu.com/20160201/n436594091.shtml>

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

Resistance to reform

PLA analysts and stakeholders have pointed out both the opportunities presented by the reforms and the challenges of implementing them. Largely in line with official commentaries, Xu Debin argues that the PLA needs to be open-minded and to consider the reforms in the light of the new challenges that China faces and the new requirements for the PLA in dealing with them.⁵ Xu draws a historical analogy: he contrasts nineteenth-century Japan's ability to grapple with outside concepts and reforms (including military reform) with the late Qing Dynasty's rejection of foreign ideas. Xu implies that the PLA has failed to incorporate foreign ideas about some aspects of modern warfare. He notes that since the "reform and opening" era began in the 1970s, China has not managed to develop a truly modern army or navy. Xu says that one of the main

areas of resistance to the current reform programme involves concerns about how the relationship between the theatre commands and the services will work in practice. The theatre commands are tasked with warfighting, while the services are supposed to build modern forces – but some fear that in view of this split, the services may pursue force modernisation efforts that are not relevant to warfighting requirements. Meanwhile, the theatre commands may not recognise the limits under which the services are operating due to personnel or costs. And it may be "difficult to focus [the new] command authorities" (难以集中指挥统领, *nanyi jizhong zhihui tongling*) in order to prosecute a conflict. These concerns may indicate that mechanisms for coordination between the theatre commands and the services have not yet been fully worked out.

Senior Colonel Tang Junfeng also points out potential roadblocks to the military reforms.⁶ These include resistance within organisational systems because of inertia, the difficulty of breaking through conflicts of interest, and the difficulty of measuring military effectiveness. The lack of recent wartime experience may also pose a problem, because the usefulness of reforms is difficult to test during

⁵ Xu Debin, "Military Reforms Recognise Inconsistencies: Worries That the Theatre Commands Do Not Care about the Influence of Personnel or Financial Powers on Combat" (军改认识误区：担心战区不管人权财权影响作战, *jungai renshi wuqu: danxin zhanqu buguan ren quancai yingxiang zuozhan*), *China National Defence Daily*, 7 January 2016. As of August 2014, Xu was working in the former Guangzhou Military Region's Political Department Office.

⁶ Senior Colonel Tang Junfeng is a researcher at the National Defence University Research Centre on the Theory and Organisation of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. His commentary was published by the main CCP Central Party School publication, *The Study Times*. Tang Junfeng, "Expert: The Inner Predicament of Modern Military Reforms" (专家：现代军事改革的内困境, *zhuanjia: xiandai junshi gaige de neikunjing*), *The Study Times*, 29 November 2015.

peacetime, as well as because a severe defeat can often provide the strongest impetus for reform. Tang cautions that reforms developed by a peacetime military may lack operational relevance, particularly since any idea can be rebranded as a reform, even if it represents outdated thinking. He also notes that it is difficult to undertake reforms within one's own organisation, but considerably easier to ask them of others. When confronted with challenges to their interests, some military organisations will respond by exaggerating the threats they currently face so as to block implementation. They may also apply political pressure to the reformers, or shape the reforms in such a way as to benefit their organisation but alter the impact entirely – even, potentially, by adding inefficiencies rather than reducing them. Tang's article is a warning that in its efforts to reform, the PLA must not end up actually becoming less efficient or less capable.

How effective will the reforms be?

The "Opinion" acknowledges the "unprecedented range of impact" of the reforms, saying that they "touch on deep interests" within the PLA. Despite the disruption to these entrenched interests, the reform process will likely succeed in the end, at least in the terms of success defined by the Party: creating a politically reliable modern force capable of joint operations. Such speculation seems credible because the reform programme provides the right balance of carrots and sticks to three core groups that can be identified within the PLA. The first group consists of officers who either see value in building a more capable fighting force or hope to advance their careers by implementing the new policy (or both). The second group includes senior officers who have risen to the top of the current system. Many senior officers have been placated by being allowed to hold onto their current privileged status until they retire; though for a few, such as Liu Yuan and Cai Yingting, the case is different.⁷ A third group of influential senior officers, who might otherwise resist reforms, will likely fall in line because of the threat of investigations, trials, or the worse fates that have befallen their disgraced colleagues.

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

leadership of the new commands.

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

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

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

⁷ On these cases, see Jérôme Doyon's article in this issue.

The PLA reforms: Tightening control over the military

Marc Julienne

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been the army of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the end of the 1920s, long before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949. The reorganisation of Chinese armed forces, announced last year, is the largest that has been undertaken since 1950. How will the reforms affect the relationship between the Party and the Army? Cui Lianjie, vice president of the Nanjing College of Political Science, summarises the situation well: "Reforming is not changing direction, transforming is not changing colour" (改革不是改向, 变革不是变色, *gaige bushi gaixiang, biange bushi bianse*).⁸ The Party's authority over the army does not seem to be in question. On the contrary, the calls to uphold the "rule by law" within the army and the establishment of new governance institutions within the armed forces in fact gives the Party even greater control over the PLA.

Reforming the army to preserve the system

The decision to reform the PLA was announced at the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP in November 2013. The Party presented the reform as having been prompted by the international and domestic environment, as well as by internal failures within the army. Major General Xiao Dongsong says that President Xi Jinping emphasised that China is faced with "three unprecedented situations" (三个前所未有, *sange qiansuo weiyou*) as well as "three dangers" (三个危险, *sange weixian*).⁹ China is closer than ever before to being the centre of the world stage; it is closer to achieving its goals; and it now has the ability and the self-confidence to achieve its objectives. At the same time, China must deal with the danger of aggression, subversion, and division, the danger that its steady economic development may not last, and the danger of interrupting the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics.¹⁰

Xiao says that to address these risks and achieve the goal of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", Xi Jinping needs to build a strong army. To do so, Xi must tackle two problems within the army: the lack of ideology and the existence of corruption. The Central Military Commission (CMC) published an "Opinion on Deepening the Reform

of National Defence and the Armed Forces" on 1 January 2016, which said that the military must follow the "guiding ideology" of the Party.¹¹ Moreover, as Professor Zhang Xueli of the National University of Defence Technology phrases it, the CMC says it is important to "further consolidate and develop the PLA specifically high level of political dominance, to achieve the objective of a strong army, providing protection to the system (制度, *zhidu*) and the institution (体制, *tizhi*, i.e. the Party)".¹²

The all-powerful CMC and the three new control bodies

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

"The establishment of new governance institutions gives the Party even greater control over the PLA"

One of the main outcomes of the reform process is that the CMC has taken over the responsibilities of the four PLA General Departments

(the General Staff Department, the General Political Department, the General Logistics Department, and the General Armaments Department). The assignments previously held by the general departments have been split up between 15 new CMC departments, commissions, and offices. Four of these new departments retain the titles of the old ones; these departments have kept the same leaders, but they have lost a significant part of their prerogatives and autonomy. The shift in power means that the CMC now has direct control over the five new Theatre Commands (which replace the seven old Military Regions) and over the five services (the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Rocket Force, and the Strategic Support Force).¹⁵

The CMC's strengthened control over the armed forces is further ensured by three new bodies: the Commission for Discipline Inspection (军委纪委, *junwei jiwwei*), the Politics and Law Commission (军委政法委, *junwei zhengfawei*), and the Audit Office (军委审计署, *junwei shenjishu*).

⁸ Cui Lianjie, "The Reform is to Better Preserve the Party's Absolute leadership over the Army" (改革是要更好坚持党对军队的绝对领导, *gaige shi yao genghao jianchi dang dui jundui de jue dui lingdao*), *PLA Daily*, 28 December 2015.

⁹ Huang Kunlun (ed.), "Using the spirit of President Xi's important speech to converge energy for a strong army reform" (用习主席重要讲话精神汇聚改革强军正能量, *yong xizhu xi zhongyao jianghua jingshen huiju gaige qiangjun zheng nengliang*), *PLA Daily*, 4 January 2016 (hereafter, Huang (ed.), "President Xi's important speech"). This article is a report of a meeting organised by the *PLA Daily* between scholars from the National Defence University, the China Academy of Military Science, and the National University of Defence Technology, and officers from the PLA Rocket Force. Xiao Dongsong is the director of the Department of Marxism studies at the National Defence University (NDU).

¹⁰ Huang (ed.), "President Xi's important speech".

¹¹ "Central Military Commission Opinion on Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces" (中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见, *zhongyang junwei guanyu shenhua guofang he jundui gaige de yijian*), Central Military Commission, 1 January 2016.

¹² Huang (ed.), "President Xi's important speech".

¹³ In Chinese: 中央军委深化国防和军队改革领导小组, *zhongyang junwei shenhua guofang he jundui gegai lingdao xiaozu*.

¹⁴ Huang (ed.), "President Xi's important speech".

¹⁵ On the new theatre commands and services, see Cristina Garafola's article in this issue.

Xiao Dongsong explains that these three bodies will act as a decision-making authority (决策权, *juecequan*), an executive authority (执行权, *zhixingquan*), and a supervision authority (监督权, *jianduquan*).¹⁶ This will help to implement and uphold the Party's control over the army, and especially to fight the "expanding phenomenon of corruption".

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

The CMC CDI was established in December 2015, and it got to work right away. During the Spring Festival in February 2016, it released its strategy of "open inquiries and secret investigation" (明查暗访, *mingcha anfang*). Under this strategy, the CDI has provided phone numbers that anyone can call to report behaviour that does not comply with Party law, and specifically, behaviour that conforms to the "four undesirable working styles" (四风, *sifeng*): formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism, and extravagance.¹⁷ The CDI provided some examples of these "undesirable working styles", such as using public funds for banquets, travel, or entertainment, organising luxurious and extravagant ceremonies, receiving illegal gifts, or using army vehicles for personal use.¹⁸

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

the army.¹⁹ The new president of the CMC PLC is the former Military Procurator General, Li Xiaofeng.²⁰

The CMC Audit Office is headed by the former president of the PLA Logistics Academy, Guo Chunfu. It is mainly responsible for the financial audit of the army, but also for reforming and improving the audit system within the armed forces, in accordance with the Party's guidance.²¹

Ruling the army by the law

Official Chinese sources repeatedly refer to the Maoist idea of "the Party's absolute leadership over the army" (党对军队的绝对领导, *dang dui jundui de juegui lingdao*), which illustrates the continuity in Party-PLA relations.²² Along with this traditional way of referring to Party-PLA relations, a new major trend is the extensive use of judicial wording in Chinese sources. The constraining of the military by Party rules and institutions is more and more frequently presented in legal terms.

The increasing framing of political control in legal terms has been characteristic of Xi Jinping's ruling style since he came to power in 2012.²³ The Third Plenum of the CCP 18th Congress in November 2013 confirmed this policy of "ruling the country by the law" (依法治国, *yifa zhiguo*), in the sense of exercising power through a strict legal framework with which every administration and individual must comply. The expansion of the "rule by law", however, does not imply a concomitant rise of the "rule of law" in China. The legal framework in question is the Party law, which aims above

'ruling the army by the law' is the best way to address the lack of ideology within the military"

all to safeguard the CCP. This is as true for the PLA as for civilian institutions, and all three of the new control bodies serve to enforce Party law.

Xiao Dongsong explains that being strict in "ruling the army by the law" (依法治军, *yifa zhijun*) is the best way to address the lack of "ideology", "ideals and beliefs", and "sense of law and discipline" within the military. He says that servicemen must now work and behave in compliance with the "law and the system", instead of relying on past habits, previous

16 Huang (ed.), "President Xi's important speech".

17 Xi Jinping called for the rejection of formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism, and extravagance at his formal election as president in March 2013, and his Mass Line campaign launched in June 2013 was intended to be a "thorough cleanup" of these "undesirable working styles" within the CCP. See "China's new leader rejects 'hedonism and extravagance'", *CBS News*, 17 March 2013, available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/chinas-new-leader-rejects-hedonism-and-extravagance/>; "Xi: Upcoming CCP campaign a 'thorough cleanup' of undesirable practices", *Xinhuanet*, 18 June 2013, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-06/18/c_132465115.htm.

18 "CMC CDI deploys its multidisciplinary inquiry process for the period of the Spring festival", 军委纪委对春节期间明查暗访工作作出部署, *PLA Daily*, 2 February 2016.

19 "Exclusive decoding of the reorganisation of the CMC, why setting up 15 Departments? What are their functions?" (独家解读军委机关调整组建 15部门为何组建?有何功能? *dujia jiedu junwei jiguan tiaozheng zujian, 15 bumen weihe zujian? You he gongneng?*), *CCTV.com*, 11 January 2016, available at http://news.china.com.cn/2016-01/11/content_37550650.htm (hereafter, *CCTV.com*, "Exclusive decoding of the reorganisation of the CMC").

20 Jiang Ziwen and Yue Huairang, "Former Military Procuratorate inspector, Lieutenant General Li Xiaofeng, appointed Secretary of the newly established CMC CPL" (军事检察院原检察长李晓峰中将任新建中央军委政法委书记, *junshi jianchayuan yuan jianchazhang Li Xiaofeng zhongjiang ren zujian zhongyang junwei zhengfa wei shuji*), *The Paper*, 16 January 2016, available at http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1417771. Jiang Ziwen and Yue Huairang are both journalists for *The Paper*, a website created in 2014 by Shanghai's *Oriental Morning Post*.

21 *CCTV.com*, "Exclusive decoding of the reorganisation of the CMC".

22 For example, the slogan appears 14 times in Cui Lianjie's article, "The Reform is to Better Preserve the Party's Absolute leadership over the Army", *PLA Daily*, 28 December 2015.

23 On the relationship between politics and law in the early years of the Xi Jinping era, see *China Analysis: Law and Power in Xi's China*, ECFR, December 2013, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china_analysis_law_and_power_in_xis_china.

experience, and executive orders. Xiao believes that to solve the problem of corruption, the “problem of ideology” must first be solved. This problem will also be addressed through the upgrading of the PLA’s training system, something that Xi Jinping emphasised during the Third Plenum.²⁴

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

Personnel reshuffle in the PLA: The two promotions that did not happen

Jérôme Doyon

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

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

The sacrifice of Xi’s main ally in the PLA

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

²⁶ Minnie Chan, “PLA reform: China’s top brass set New Year deadline for military command restructure”, *South China Morning Post*, 8 December 2015, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1888202/pla-reform-chinas-top-brass-set-new-year-deadline>.

²⁷ On the relationship between Xi and Princelings in the PLA, see Jérôme Doyon, “Xi Jinping and the Princelings”, *China Analysis*, December 2013, available at www.ecfr.eu/page/-/China_Analysis_Law_and_Power_in_Xis_China_December2013.pdf.

²⁴ Huang (ed.), “President Xi’s important speech”.

²⁵ Dai Xu is the vice-director of the Institute for Strategy at the National University of Defence. Huang (ed.), “President Xi’s important speech”.

China's military commanders



Army commander
General Li Zuocheng



Navy commander
Admiral Wu Shengli



Air Force commander
General Ma Xiaotian



Rocket Force commander
General Wei Fenghe



Strategic Support Force commander
Lieutenant General Gao Jin



The entire PLA comprises a total of 2.3 million personnel, making it the biggest armed forces in the world. The army command alone includes 1.6 million personnel. The Chinese army boasts 6,450 battle tanks. China is, comparatively to other services, investing less in technology for the ground forces and is estimated to cut 300,000 troops over the next few years.



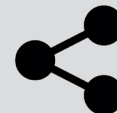
The Chinese navy has a total staff of 235,000, including 10,000 marines. The navy has four submarines equipped with ballistic missiles, and 56 tactical submarines. It has one aircraft carrier, with a second, locally designed, currently under construction. It also has 73 other cruiser, destroyer and frigate ships. After stages of innovation, it now produces them in series.



The air force has 2,306 combat capable aircraft, including 150 bombers. China is indigenously developing two types of fifth-generation fighters (J-20, J-31), and it has engaged conversation with Russia about purchasing 24 of its Su-35 multi-role combat aircraft. It would be the first foreign force to have purchased the aircraft. The air force has 398,000 total troops.



100,000 troops operate China's missile force, which is comprised of 62 ICBMs, with a minimum range of 5,500 kilometres. China also commands 351 shorter-range missiles. China is domestically developing new models of ICBM, as well as anti-ship ballistic missiles, such as the nuclear capable DF-26 missile which was shown off at China's Victory Day parade.



The strategic support force was introduced in December 2015 to provide all military commands with information and strategic support. Its missions include target tracking and reconnaissance, operation of satellite navigation, the management of space-based reconnaissance assets, as well as cyber and electronic warfare.

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2016*

Because of his key role in the fight against corruption, Liu Yuan was an ideal candidate to become head of the new Commission for Discipline Inspection (CDI) in the PLA, which is to be under the direct control of the CMC.²⁸ According to the Hong Kong magazine *Zhengming*, Xi put forward Liu as his only candidate for the CDI leadership during the Party-State leadership's Beidaihe meeting in August 2015.²⁹ At the meeting, the members also discussed making Liu a CMC member at the Fifth Plenum of the 18th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress, which took place in October 2015. His promotion was put to the vote among the CMC's 11 members in October. For major decisions like this, a minimum of 75 percent "yes" votes is required, and this minimum was not reached at the meeting. Five members voted for Liu's nomination to the CMC, three voted against, and three abstained. In November, the CMC voted again, but Liu still did not get the votes. General Fan Changlong, the CMC's number two, voted against Liu's nomination, highlighting the tense relationships between Liu and other high level officers. The *Zhengming* article points out that Liu Yuan made a lot of enemies in the PLA by zealously fighting corruption even before Xi started his campaign in 2013.³⁰

²⁸ On the CMC's Commission for Discipline Inspection, see Marc Julienne's essay in this issue.

²⁹ Qin Qiming, "Inside Liu Yuan's retirement announcement" (劉源宣佈退役內情, *Liu yuan xuanbu tuiyi neiqing*), *Zhengming*, January 2016 (hereafter, Qin, "Liu Yuan's retirement").

³⁰ Qin, "Liu Yuan's retirement".

Liu Yuan's retirement was announced on 16 December 2015, apparently as a result of the resistance to his nomination to the CMC. According to *Zhengming*, Liu Yuan met twice

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

with Xi Jinping in December, and the two decided that Liu would have to sacrifice his career to facilitate the implementation of the PLA reforms.³¹ Yu Zeyuan, a Beijing-based journalist for a Singaporean newspaper, says that Liu Yuan's retirement at the height of his career sets an example for other officers. If he could sacrifice himself for reform, other officers have little excuse to block it for their own interests. Indeed, any manoeuvres for personal gain would “look petty in comparison” (相形见绌, *xiangxingjianchu*).³²

Even so, Yu Zeyuan says that more than Liu's retirement will be needed if the PLA reforms are to be successful.³³ In particular, the officers and soldiers who will be displaced in the reorganisation will need to be given guarantees that they will not lose their status in the process. The reforms

³¹ Qin, "Liu Yuan's retirement".

³² Yu Zeyuan, "Does the PLA reform bring with it a major personnel reshuffle?" (中国军改迎来人事大变动?, *zhongguo jing'ai yingtai renshi da biandong?*), *Lianhe Zaobao*, 30 December 2016 (hereafter, Yu, "PLA reform personnel reshuffle").

³³ On the broader challenges to the PLA reforms, see Cristina Garafola's article in this issue.

have an effect on a range of different entrenched interests. The four General Departments, which the reforms are set to impact, were widely seen as “golden rice bowls” (金饭碗, *jinfanwan*) because of the opportunities for corruption available to their leaders. The early retirement of Liu Yuan, who was portrayed as an exemplary officer and princeling, should at least give other officers less leeway to fight the reforms to maintain their own privileges.³⁴

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

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

A mysterious demotion

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

Like Liu Yuan, Cai Yingting was seen as a serious candidate for CMC membership, and his demotion is even more mysterious. Overseas Chinese media sources have spread numerous rumours about the reasons behind Cai's downfall. One frequent rumour is that Cai Yingting was the personal secretary of Zhang Wannian, former vice-chair of the CMC and a close ally of Jiang Zemin, and Xi saw Cai as being too close to the former leader and doubted his loyalty.³⁷ Still, no explanation is given as to why this

proximity would suddenly matter now and not before – Cai was one of the first officers to be promoted by Xi Jinping, in 2013. Another rumour is that Cai's patriotism and reliability have been called into question because of his daughter's recent marriage to a Frenchman.³⁸ The reliability of this rumour is highly dubious, but it is symptomatic of the increasing suspicion in Xi's China towards officers and cadres with transnational connections.

Yu Zeyuan says that there is a possibility that Cai Yingting's transfer could in fact not be wholly negative – it might be only a temporary move. Given his career so far, and his status as one of the PLA's main Taiwan specialists, Cai is still a serious

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

candidate for CMC membership in 2017. His transfer could be a way to round out his military experience and especially his knowledge of

China-United States strategic relations. It could also be a way to upgrade the political status of the Military Academy itself.³⁹

Loyalty is everything

Cai Yingting's position remains uncertain, but his situation is unique. The six other former commanders of the military regions have been transferred to at least equivalent positions, as reported in *Caixin wang*.⁴⁰ General Li Zuocheng, the former commander of the Chengdu Military Region, was even appointed commander of the newly established PLA Army headquarters. Li is a decorated hero of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and was promoted to the rank of general in 2015 by Xi Jinping.⁴¹

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

³⁴ Content is blocked in mainland China.

³⁵ Duowei, “Cai Yingting”.

³⁶ Yu Zeyuan, “The former commander of the Nanjing Military Region Cai Yingting to head a military think tank” (原南京军区司令蔡英挺或主管军方智库, *Yuan Nanjing junqu siling cai yingting huo zhuguan junfang zhiku*), *Lianhe Zaobao*, 3 February 2016.

³⁷ “Six military regions commanders assume their new positions” (六名正大军区级将领履新, *liuming zheng dajunquji jiangling luxin*), *Caixin wang*, 3 February 2015, available at <http://china.caixin.com/2016-01-02/100895211.html> (hereafter, *Caixin wang*, “Six military regions commanders”).

³⁸ *Caixin wang*, “Six military regions commanders”.

³⁹ The four services are the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Rocket Force.

⁴⁰ *Caixin wang*, “Six military regions commanders”.

⁴¹ Ma Xiaotian and Wu Shengli both have a princeling background. See Cheng Li, “China's Midterm Jockeying: Gearing Up for 2012 (Part 3: Military Leaders)”, *China Leadership Monitor*, 33, Summer 2010, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2010/06/~ /media/Research/Files/Opinions/2010/6/29%20military%20lead->

both scheduled to retire in 2017 due to seniority limits, but Yu Zeyuan argues that it is very possible that Xi will change the rules in order to keep them as CMC members for two more years. This would be a way to ensure stability at a time of huge reforms and to keep close allies in top positions.⁴⁵

Xi has been able to compromise in order to push forward PLA reform and to set aside allies, but he does not compromise on the reliability of his subordinates. As one anonymous military officer told Bowen Press: “Xi Jinping does not believe that ability is a key criterion for appointment – the only one is loyalty”.⁴⁶

Integrating the forces: The PLA Navy as a first step

Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix

Training is a poorly understood area in the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) modernisation programme. However, Chinese sources are becoming more helpful in explaining the topic. In recent years, the three fleets of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) have moved away from their previous strict regional approach. They have been conducting more exercises in each other’s areas, as well as more joint exercises, including beyond the first island chain and as far as the second island chain.⁴⁷ This trend began to intensify in 2014 with the first large-scale joint exercises of the three fleets around Japan, in the context of tense relations with Tokyo.⁴⁸ The trend towards increased military engagement and integration of the Navy with other forces fits in well with the new PLA reforms announced at the end of 2015, which called for the establishment of a “joint operation command system”.⁴⁹

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

The July 2015 exercises

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

“It was not launched against any country, but the exercise should serve as a warning”

ership%20li/0628_military_leadership_li.PDF.

45 Yu, “PLA reform personnel reshuffle”.

46 Officer interviewed by the US-based Chinese-language website *Bowen Press*. “Exclusive: The resignation of Liu Yuan will help the implementation of Xi’s military reforms” (刘源辞要职助习近平推军改, *liu yuan ci yaozhi zhu Xi Jinping tui jun gai*) *Bowen Press*, 24 December 2015, available at http://bowenpress.com/news/bowen_50895.html.

47 The first and second island chains refer to strategic lines delimited by major archipelagos out from the East Asian continental mainland coast. The first chain begins at the Kuril Islands and includes Taiwan, while the second chain is situated in the middle portion of the Pacific Ocean.

48 On the 2014 drill, see “Why PLA keeps low profile about exercise in Western Pacific?”, *China Military Online*, 17 December 2014, the English version is available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-12/17/content_6274732.htm.

49 On the “joint operation command system”, see Cristina Garafola’s article in this issue.

of surface ships and submarines in conducting anti-submarine warfare, the successful interception of incoming supersonic anti-ship missiles, the use of naval aviation against low-flying targets, and the air defence capability of the PLAN's new frigates.⁵⁰

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

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

Ministry of Defence spokesperson Liang Yang said that drills of this kind were in line with international law and practice, and that the navy would continue to hold similar drills in the future.⁵⁴ But Yin indicated that the exercise was launched for political reasons, in order to prove that China can defend its territory: “It was not launched against any country, but the exercise should serve as a warning.” He gave a further veiled warning, although he

⁵⁰ “The Navy opposes real troops in a training exercise in the South China Sea and its air-space” (海军在南海某海空域举行实兵对抗演练, *haijun zai nanhai mouhai kongyu juxing shibing duikang yanlian*), *PLA Daily*, 29 July 2015.

⁵¹ “Expert: The exercises of the Navy in the South China Sea are at the level of actual warfighting” (专家: 海军南海演习属战役级, *zhuanjia: haijun nanhai yanxi shu zhanyi ji*), *Renminwang*, 30 July 2015, available at <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2015/0730/c1011-27384352.html> (hereafter, *Renminwang*, “The exercises of the Navy in the South China Sea”).

⁵² *Renminwang*, “The exercises of the Navy in the South China Sea”.

⁵³ Qiu Yue, “The Chinese anti-submarine warfare capabilities are improving” (中国海军反潜能力提高, *zhongguo haijun fanqian nengli tigao*), *Renminwang*, 30 July 2015, available at <http://military.people.com.cn/n/2015/0730/c1011-27384230.html>.

⁵⁴ “Don't excessively interpret South China Sea drill”, *Xinhua*, 26 July 2015, the English version is available at http://www.chinadaily.com/china/2015-07/26/content_21409466.htm.

reassured readers that China would not escalate as if the drills already went far enough: the exercise was launched, he said, “to simulate a campaign-level combat situation [... but] even if a war between China and other nations really starts in the region of the South China Sea, it will not go beyond this level”.⁵⁵ The following day, a PLA Daily editorial pointed out the increasing “possibility of chaos and war” near China's shores in a “more complex maritime security environment”.⁵⁶ Continuing to develop and practice amphibious capabilities will be vital to China's ability to respond to threats to its territorial claims and to other maritime security issues.

The December 2015 exercises

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

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

⁵⁵ *Renminwang*, “The exercises of the Navy in the South China Sea”.

⁵⁶ Editorial, *PLA Daily*, 1 August 2015.

⁵⁷ Huang Zijuan, “The exercises of the three fleets in South China Sea are very close to warfighting” (三大舰队南海演习似实战, *sanda jiandui nanhai yanxi si shizhan*), *Renminwang*, 22 December 2015, available at <http://www.chinanews.com/mil/2015/12-22/7682314.shtml> (hereafter, Huang, “The exercises of the three fleets”).

defence and anti-submarine drills before concluding with minesweeping and submarine rescue operations.

Detachment commander Liu Jie explained the difficulty of mating a Deep Submarine Rescue Vehicle (DSRV) to a sunken submarine and successfully opening the hatches to evacuate and treat a crew in a state of shock.⁵⁸ Red side fleet commander Admiral Li Yan, deputy chief of staff of the South China Sea fleet, commented that the battle was conducted in very unfavourable conditions, which had provided “the realistic conditions that would help win a real war”.⁵⁹ Yin Zhuo agreed: “the future of our military operations depends on this grouping and no longer on the implementation of administrative group exercises. Moving the three fleets together and giving them the opportunity to operate jointly is very important, especially when one does not know the area”.⁶⁰

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

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⁵⁸ “The Navy’s three fleets gather in the South China Sea” (海军三大舰队齐聚南海, *haijun sanda jiandui jiju nanshai*), *Renminwang*, 20 December 2015, available at <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2015/1220/c1011-27951709.html> (hereafter, *Renminwang*, “The Navy’s three fleets gather”).

⁵⁹ *Renminwang*, “The Navy’s three fleets gather”.

⁶⁰ Huang, “The exercises of the three fleets”.

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