Updated - The PLA's New Organizational Structure: What is Known, Unknown and Speculation, Parts 1 & 2

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These articles are part of a series examining changes to China's Military organizational structure and personnel. Part 1 examines what is known and unknown. Part 2 contains speculation as to changes that may occur in the future.

On December 31, 2015, the China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) began its eleventh major reorganization since 1952. Most previous reorganizations focused on reducing the size of the infantry and bloated higher-echelon headquarters, turning over entire organizations, such as the railway corps, to civilian control, and transferring units to the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and the People's Armed Police (PAP). **[1]** To date, most Western analysis of the current reorganization has addressed the reasons for and policy implications of the current reorganization. Instead, this article addresses what is known about changes to the PLA's organizational structure—the essential factor needed to inform any credible analysis of the reasons for and the implications of the current reorganization. **[2]**

Although there are lots of media reports and blogs writing about the reorganization, much of what has been written has been incorrect or based on speculation. As a result, the "known" component of this article is based on official Chinese reporting in Chinese and English from the Ministry of National Defense's (MND) website, *China Daily*, and Xinhua.

Another issue arising from the variety of reporting on the reorganization is terminology. One example is the "official" English translation for the geographic groupings that are replacing China's military regions (军区). For example, the PLA officially has translated the term "*zhanqu*" (战区) as "theater of war," "theater," and "battle zone"; however, various Western analysts have translated it as "war zone" and certain unofficial media reports have used "combat zone" (Bowen, January 9). **[3]** Due to the use of "Theater Command" in an article published by the Chinese MND announcing the official "standing up" ceremony on February 1, this article will use "Theater Command" (MOD, February 1).

What is "Known"

In November 2013, the Third Plenum of 18th Party Central Committee announced the decision to "optimize the size and structure of the army, adjust and improve the balance between the services and branches, and reduce non-combat institutions and personnel." This rebalance is meant to correct the domination of the PLA Army, which with the Second Artillery, currently has 73 percent of the PLA's total troops, followed by 10 percent for the Navy (PLAN) and 17 percent for the Air Force (PLAAF). The Central Committee also announced creation of a "joint operation command authority under the Central Military Commission (CMC), and theater joint operation command system" and to "accelerate the building of new combat powers, and deepen the reform of military colleges" (CNTV.com, November 16, 2015). This announcement pointed to upcoming changes in four main categories: 1) PLA personnel size and force structure, 2) command organization and structure from the CMC down to the unit level, 3) modern military capabilities as found in "new type combat forces," and 4) the PLA professional military education system of universities, academies, colleges, and schools.

Nearly two years passed before CMC Chairman Xi Jinping announced the first details of these reforms. At the September 3, 2015 military parade in Beijing, Xi proclaimed a reduction of

300,000 PLA personnel, bringing the size of the active duty PLA down to two million. An MND spokesman further clarified the cuts would be completed by the end of 2017 and would mainly affect "troops equipped with outdated armaments, administrative staff, and non-combatant personnel, while optimizing the structure of Chinese forces" (Xinhuanet, September 3, 2015). The only specific unit reported so far to have been eliminated is the Nanjing Military Region Art Troupe, one of numerous performing arts troupes, which have traditionally provided entertainment for PLA units (Global Times, January 25).

In November 2015, Xi declared the "current regional military area commands [also known as Military Region headquarters] will be adjusted and regrouped into new battle zone commands supervised by the CMC." A three-tier combat command system from the CMC to theater commands to units would be created. But this system will be separate from the administrative chain of command running from the CMC to the four service headquarters to units. As such, service headquarters are responsible for "construction" functions, such as organizing, manning, and equipping units (Xinhuanet, November 26, 2015). These changes will take place over the next five years through the year 2020. **[4]**

On the last day of 2015, Xi presided over the establishment ceremonies for the PLA Army's leading organ (national-level headquarters) (PLAA), the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), and the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) and named their respective commanders and political commissars (Chinamil.com, January 1). The Army headquarters was charged to transform from "the regional defensive type to the full-spectrum combat type" and the Rocket Force, identified as China's "core strategic deterrence power," was upgraded to a full service (军种) from its former status of "an independent branch treated as a service," (兵种). Later the *PLA Daily* indicated Rocket Force units would be the same as the former Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) (www.81.cn, January 10). As a service, the Rocket Force eventually could be expected to have its own distinctive uniform.

Though buried in an article about the reforms, another important target of the reforms was mentioned: reducing the size of the militia (Chinamil.com, January 1). The militia is not part of the PLA, but one of three elements of the Chinese armed forces (the other elements being the active and reserve units of the PLA and the PAP). Militia units are commanded by the system of local PLA headquarters from provincial Military Districts down to Military Sub-districts/Garrisons to People's Armed Forces Departments (PAFD) in counties and below. No details of the militia reduction have been announced, but this development opens the door for potential reductions also in local headquarters, particularly at the Military Sub-district/garrison and PAFDs at county and grassroots levels.

On January 11, 2016, a new CMC organization with 15 functional departments, commissions, and offices was announced (Chinamil.com, January 11). One significant detail included was that the new CMC National Defense Mobilization Department will be responsible for "leading and managing the provincial military commands [i.e., also known as Military Districts]," a task previously assigned to Military Region headquarters. A photograph accompanying the announcement showed a total of 69 uniformed officers, of which 58 were PLAA/PLARF, six were PLAN, and five were PLAAF, which is not an auspicious start for greater jointness at the most senior levels of the PLA command structure.

On February 1, at a ceremony attended by the entire CMC, five new "theater commands" were established and their commanders and political commissars (PC) announced. In what appears to be their protocol order, the new headquarters are the Eastern (东部), Southern (南部), Western (西部), Northern (北部), and Central (中部) Theater Commands. **[5]** The new headquarters have been tasked to respond to security threats from their strategic directions, maintain peace, deter wars and win battles, and assist in "safeguarding the overall situations concerning the national security strategy and the military strategy" (Chinamil.com, February 1). All theater commanders and PCs were senior Army officers. The theater commands will have Army, Navy, and Air Force components based, respectively, on the "relevant naval fleets" and air forces of the former Military Regions (MR)—Rocket Forces were not mentioned. On February 2, PLA Daily reported the formation of the Army headquarters under the Eastern Theater Command (东部战区陆军) in Fuzhou, Fujian Province, but the ceremony to establish the new headquarters had been held earlier on January 24. This first Army headquarters to be set up in one of the new theater commands is commanded by LTG Qin Weijiang (秦卫江), son of former Defense Minister GEN Qin Jiwei, with MG Liao Keduo (廖可铎) as PC (81.cn, February 2). **[6]** PLAAF Commander Ma Xiaotian presided over the creation of five PLAAF theater commands on February 5 (81.cn, February 5).

More general information about the reforms is expected to be announced officially over time, but many operational- and tactical-level details likely will only be learned by close analysis of the Chinese media. Since an objective of the reforms is to improve the "joint operation command authority" of the force, it will be necessary to restructure PLA officer corps billets to create new opportunities for non-Army personnel to serve in senior joint command and staff assignments. The new force and personnel structure may require changes to the PLA's existing system of grades and ranks.

The Grade and Rank Foundation

The foundation for understanding the reorganization is the PLA's 15-grade structure shown in Table 1, which was last modified in 1988. **[7]** Under the existing system, every PLA organization and officer is assigned a grade from platoon level to CMC to designate their position in the military hierarchy. Organizationally, units can only command other units of lower grade levels. For example, a corps leader grade unit is authorized to command divisions, but not vice versa. Officers are assigned grades along with military ranks. Each grade from military region leader down has two assigned ranks, while some ranks, such as major general, can be assigned to up to four grades. On average officers up to the rank of senior colonel are promoted in grade every three years, while they are promoted in rank approximately every four years. In the PLA, an officer's grade is more important than his rank. **[8]**

Part 2 of this article will address the options for changes in the grade and rank systems that appear likely to accompany the extensive changes anticipated in the PLA organization and structure. Table 1 is included here to assist in understanding the organizational changes already underway and discussed in Part 1.

Table 1: PLA's 15-grade Structure since 1988

Grade	Primary Rank	Secondary Rank
CMC Chairman (军委主席) Vice Chairmen (军委副主席)	None General	
CMC Member (军委委员)	General	
MR Leader (正大军区职)	GEN/ADM	LTG/VADM
MR Deputy Leader (副大军区职)	LTG/VADM	MG/RADM
Corps Leader (正军职)	MG/RADM	LTG/VADM
Corps Deputy Leader (副军职)	MG/RADM	SCOL/SCPT
Division Leader (正师职)	SCOL/SCPT	MG/RADM
Division Deputy Leader (副师职) (Brigade Leader)	COL/CPT	SCOL/SCPT
Regiment Leader (正团职) (Brigade Deputy Leader)	COL/CPT	LTC/CDR
Regiment Deputy Leader (副团职)	LTC/CDR	MAJ/LCDR
Battalion Leader (正营职)	MAJ/LCDR	LTC/LCDR
Battalion Deputy Leader (副营职)	CPT/LT	MAJ/LCDR
Company Leader (正连职)	CPT/LT	1LT/LTJG
Company Deputy Leader (副连职)	1LT/LTJG	CPT/LT
Platoon (排职)	2 LT/ENS	1LT/ENS

New CMC Organizations

As mentioned above, on January 11, 2016, CMC Chairman Xi Jinping met with all of the new leaders of the reorganized CMC's directly subordinate elements. Table 2 provides information about the 15 functional sections comprised of seven departments (including the important General Office), three commissions, and five directly affiliated offices. The new CMC structure expanded its former subordinated elements though the incorporation of many functions previously found in the former four General Departments, namely the General Staff Headquarters (also known as the General Staff Department [GSD]), General Political Department (GPD), General Logistics Department (GLD), and General Armament Department (GAD).

As can be seen from the new CMC structure, the biggest loser organizationally is the former General Staff Department and its leader, the Chief of the General Staff. The new Joint Staff Department has lost the GSD's oversight of military training and education, mobilization, strategic planning, and likely cyberwar and electronic warfare units, not to mention the personnel and functions transferred to the new Army headquarters. Moreover, the new Political Work Department is responsible for "human resources management," which implies that it has taken over the GSD's oversight of enlisted personnel in the former Military Affairs Department. If true, the new Political Work Department will be responsible for all personnel matters concerning both cadre and enlisted personnel.

Table 2 includes the current organization name, the name of the person who has been assigned as the leader, as well as that person's previous position and grade. Based on each person's previous grade, it is assumed that they are still filling a billet of the same grade. It is also assumed that the MR Leader Grade and Deputy Leader Grade will be renamed Theater Leader Grade (正大战区职) and Deputy Leader Grade (副大战区职), respectively.

While the new offices are identified as CMC "functional sections," it is not yet clear how the command or leadership relationships will work between the CMC leadership and the subordinate organizations. Also, while the general departments have gone away in name, the functions of all four departments continue under the new CMC structure and the new organizations have retained their same CMC member as the Chief of Staff (formerly Chief of the General Staff) or Director (for the GPD, GLD, and GAD). Only one of the functional sections—the Agency for Offices Administration—appears to be a new entity, probably because it is not clear where its component offices came from (possibly a management office from each general department). The other functional sections can be traced back to their former general department or office and, in many cases, they have retained the same leadership. As discussed elsewhere in this paper, it is not yet clear what the organizational grade of the 15 sections will be. For example, the corps-grade organizations listed in Table 2 could reasonably be expected to be raised to a higher grade reflecting their apparent enhanced status as a CMC-subordinate organization; however, any such change will affect every billet in the organization.

Table 2: CMC Functional Sections

CMC Organization	Organization Assessed Grade	Leader	Leader's Previous Position	Leader's Previous Grade
General Office (办公厅)	Theater Deputy Leader	LTG Qin Shengxiang	Director CMC General Office	MR Deputy Leader
Joint Staff Department (联合参谋部)	CMC Member	Gen Fang Fenghui (房峰辉)	Chief of the General Staff	CMC Member
Political Work Department (政治工作部)	CMC Member	GEN Zhang Yang (张阳)	Director, GPD	CMC Member
Logistic Support Department (后勤保障部)	CMC Member	GEN Zhao Keshi (赵克石)	Director, GLD	CMC Member
Equipment Development Department (装备发展部)	CMC Member	GEN Zhang Youxia (张又侠)	Director, GAD	CMC Member
Training and Administration Department (训练管理部)	Theater Deputy Leader	MG Zheng He (郑和)	Deputy Commander, Chengdu MR	MR Deputy Leader
National Defense Mobilization Department (国防动员部)	Theater Deputy Leader	MG Sheng Bin (盛斌)	Deputy Commander, Shenyang MR	MR Deputy Leader
Discipline Inspection Commission	Theater Leader	Gen Du Jincai (杜金才)	Deputy Director, GPD & Secretary, CMC	MR Leader

(纪律检查委员会)			Discipline Inspection Commission	
Politics and Law Commission (政法委员会)	Theater Deputy Leader	LTG Li Xiaofeng (李晓峰)	Chief Procurator, PLA Military Procuratorate	MR Deputy Leader
Science and Technology Commission (科学技术委员会)	Theater Deputy Leader	LTG Liu Guozhi (刘国治)	Director, GAD S&T Commission	MR Deputy Leader
Office for Strategic Planning (战略规划办公室)	Corps Leader	MG Wang Huiqing (王辉青)	Director, GSD Strategic Planning Department	Corps Leader
Office for Reform and Organizational Structure (军委改革和编制办公室)	Corps Leader	MG Wang Chengzhi (王成志)	Director, GPD Directly Subordinate Work Department	Corps Leader
Office for International Military Cooperation (国际军事合作办公室)	Corps Leader	RADM Guan Youfei (关友飞)	Director, MND Foreign Affairs Office (Director, GSD Foreign Affairs Office; Director, CMC Foreign Affairs Office)	Corps Leader
Audit Office (审 计署)	Corps Leader	RADM Guo Chunfu (郭春富)	Director, CMC Auditing and Finance Department	Corps Leader?
Agency for Offices Administration (机关事务管理总)	Corps Leader	MG Liu Zhiming (刘志明)	Deputy Chief of Staff, Shenyang MR	Corps Leader

The Four Services and Strategic Support Force

Table 3 provides a list of the four services—PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF, and PLARF—and the PLASSF (MOD, January 1). The table includes the current organization name, the name of the person who has been assigned as the leader, as well as that person's previous position and grade. Based on each person's previous grade, it is assumed that they are still filling a billet of the same grade.

The PLAA now has an official headquarters at the same level as the PLAN, PLAAF, and PLARF. Previously, the four General Departments served as the Army Headquarters and the Joint Headquarters for all the PLA. Second, the PLASAF, which was previously an independent [Army] branch treated as a service, is now a full service equal to the PLAA, PLAN, and PLAAF. Third, the PLASSF does not appear to be a "service." It is a "force," a status similar to that of the former PLASAF. The key is the Chinese terms: Second Artillery Force and the Strategic Support Force are "*budui*" (部队), which the PLA translates as "force," while the PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF, and PLARF use the term "*jun*" (军) and "junzhong" (军种), which means "service." The Chinese use of the term "leading organ" for the PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF, and PLARF is because the PLA does not have an official term for "headquarters."

Table 3: PLA Services and Strategic Support Force

Organization	Organization Assessed Grade	Leader	Leader's Previous Position	Leader's Previous Grade
Army Leading Organ (aka PLA Army) (陆军领导**机关**)	Theater Leader	GEN Li Zuocheng (李作成)	Commander, Chengdu MR	MR Leader
PLA Navy (**海**军)	Theater Leader	ADM Wu Shengli (吴胜利)	Commander, PLA Navy	CMC Member
PLA Air Force (**空**军)	Theater Leader	GEN Ma Xiaotian (马晓天)	Commander, Air Force	CMC Member
PLA Rocket Force (**火箭**军)	Theater Leader	GEN Wei Fenghe (魏凤和)	Commander, PLA Second Artillery Force	CMC Member
PLA Strategic Support Force (战**略保障部**队)	Theater Leader	LTG Gao Jin (高津)	Commandant, Academy of Military Science	MR Leader

Theater Commands

The new theater command organizational structure is one more step in the consolidation and evolution of Military Regions that began with 13 MRs in 1955 and then reduced them to 11 MRs (1970) and 7 MRs (1985). **[9]** After extensive speculation, on February 1, CMC Chairman Xi Jinping presided over the inauguration ceremony formally establishing the five new "theater commands" or "zhanqu" (战区), replacing the previous seven Military Regions. Table 4 shows the five new theater commands in protocol order along with the new commanders' and political commissars' names and rank, as well as their previous position and grade. Of note, four of the five commanders came from an MR that was not part of the new theater command, while four of the five PCs came from the same MR that formed the base for the new theater commands.

Table 4: PLA Theater Commands

Organization	Organization Grade	Commander	Commander's Previous Position/Grade	Political Commissar	PC's Previous Position/ Grade
Eastern Theater Command (东**部**战**区**)	Theater Leader (正大军区级)	GEN Liu Yuejun (刘粤军)	Commander, Lanzhou MR/ MR Leader	GEN Zheng Weiping (郑卫平)	PC, Nanjing MR/MR Leader
Southern Theater Command (**南部**战**区**)	Theater Leader (正大军区级)	GEN Wang Jiaocheng (王教成)	Commander, Shenyang MR/ MR Leader	GEN Wei Liang (魏亮)	PC, Guangzhou MR/MR Leader
Western Theater (**西部**战**区**) Command	Theater Leader (正大军区级)	GEN Zhao Zongji (赵宗岐)	Commander, Jinan MR/ MR Leader	LTG Zhu Fuxi (朱福熙)	PC, Chengdu MR/MR Leader
Northern Theater (**北部**战**区**) Command	Theater Leader (正大军区级)	GEN Song Puxuan (宋普选)	Commander, Beijing MR/ MR Leader	GEN Chu Yimin (褚益民)	PC, Shenyang MR/MR Leader
Central Theater Command	Theater Leader (正大军区级)	LTG Han Weiguo (韩卫国)	Deputy Commander, Beijing MR/ MR Deputy Leader	GEN Yin Fanlong (殷方龙)	Deputy Director, GPD/MR Leader

(中部战区)					

At a press conference following the official announcement of the theater commands, the MND spokesman used the term "theater leader" (正大军区级) to identify the grade level of the new theater commands, which is the same term used for grade of the former MR leaders (www.81.cn, February 1). This arrangement suggests that Han Weiguo, shown as a LTG in the photograph of the establishment ceremony, likely will be promoted in rank and grade, even though he only received his second star in July 2015 and has been one of the Beijing MR deputy commanders.

The various announcements have not yet included specific details on the organizational structure of the new theater commands. Also, to date, there has been no official announcement as to what provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities the theater commands will include, or where the headquarters are located. At least four different maps have been published in the unofficial Chinese and Western media showing different sets of boundaries for the new theaters (Tieba, January 15; nddtv.com, January 29; cjdby.net; Sina Blogs, January 27; Phoenix, February 1).

Prior to the establishment of the theater commands, activities taking place clearly indicated the change was imminent. For example, in mid-January, *PLA Daily* announced that all seven MR newspapers had ceased operations (China Daily, January 22). It is not clear whether the new theater commands will have their own newspapers or not. The websites for the former MRs were also shut down; however, they have been replaced by new theater websites (db.81.cn; nb.81.cn; xb.81.cn; b.81.cn, and zb.81.cn). Also, the Hong Kong-based *Wenweipo* published photographs of ceremonies transferring units from the Chengdu, Nanjing, and Lanzhou MRs, but did not specify where the units were now assigned (Weiwenpo, January 18). It is likely that similar ceremonies were held in the other military regions. Associated with the dissolution of the Military Regions, "transitional work offices" (善后办公室) were established to manage holdover personnel and property issues (Chinamil.com, February 2).

Unanswered Questions

Many unknowns concerning the reorganization remain. The following questions identify topics for further examination as the reforms unfold in the coming months and years.

The CMC:

Will the CMC departments/commissions/offices and theater headquarters become true "joint" organizations with a balanced mix among members from each of the four services plus the PLASSF?

The MND:

Has the role of MND been changed? Previously, the MND was not in the chain of command from the CMC to MRs to units. The latest official announcements do not insert the MND into the operational or administrative chain of command. In September 2015, a three-part series of articles laid out a very aggressive reorganization that basically took all non-combat and combat-support organizations and placed them under MND; however, it does not appear that this has occurred

(gwy.yjbys.com, September 2, 2015; gwy.yjbys.com; gwy.yjbys.com). Will there be any significant changes to the role of the MND in the new structure?

Personnel Cuts:

Although one of the first announcements Xi made about the reorganization concerned a 300,000-man downsizing, to date, no specifics have officially been announced other than the abolition of the performing arts troupe in the Nanjing MR (MOD, January 22). How will the remaining 2 million personnel be balanced among the services? Even if all 300,000 cuts were made only to the Army, it would still amount to some 63 percent of the 2 million-man force. Therefore, the other services would need to receive additional billets to better balance the force. This has done in the past by reassigning entire units from one service to another.

How will the PLA's 2 million personnel be divided among officers, uniformed civil cadre, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), and conscripts/volunteers? In 2003, the PLA implemented a 200,000-man downsizing, of which 85 percent were officers, including over 200 one-star generals and admirals. In addition, about 70 junior officer specialty billets were turned over to NCOs. To date, thousands of NCOs have now filled those billets; however, they are still called "acting" (代理) leaders.

Will the local headquarters system of provincial Military Districts, Military Sub-districts, and Peoples Armed Force Departments be altered?

Operational Units:

What operational units will be disbanded? A review of internet sources since January 1, 2016 indicates that all 18 group armies remain operational. Will there be any change to the organization and subordination of the PLAN's three fleets? Currently, all three fleets are reported operational. **[10]** There has been no official reporting on any changes in PLAAF units (MOD, February 2).

The Strategic Support Force:

To what headquarters (or CMC) is the PLASSF subordinate? What units comprise the PLASSF? What are the specific missions of the PLASSF? How many personnel are in the PLASSF? The reporting that the PLASSF will include responsibility for space-related activities as well as cyber/electronic warfare-related activities raises the likelihood that former GAD launch and monitoring bases and GSD Third Department Technical Reconnaissance Bureaus will be re-subordinated to the PLASSF, but this remain to be confirmed. Additionally, will any other operational units that previously were directly subordinate to the various General Departments be reassigned to the CMC functional departments, such as other intelligence, electronic warfare, political warfare, and logistics units?

Militia and the Reserves:

In addition to reductions in the militia, will PLA reserve units undergo change? Some active duty units equipped with older weapons could be transferred to either the reserves or militia.

Education:

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

Will PLA-wide guidance be issued establishing education and experience requirements for officers to be considered qualified as joint officers?

The People's Armed Police (PAP):

Will there be any changes to the CMC and State Council/Ministry of Public Security's dual command of the People's Armed Police? If so, this will require a change to the National Defense Law. Will the size and composition of the PAP remain the same?

Conclusion

As can be seen thus far, the PLA is in the early stages of an extensive and complex reorganization, the objective of which is to enhance CMC Chairman Xi Jinping's goal for "…conducting military reform and building a strong military… on the road of building a strong military with Chinese characteristics" (MOD, January 12). The amount of available information is limited, as the reorganization is being implemented in a deliberate step-by-step manner and details revealed piecemeal; the "unknowns" far exceed the "knowns." The changes are likely to continue through the 19th Party Congress in 2017 with full implementation possibly as far away as 2020—previously identified as the intermediate milestone year in the modernization process with the final goal of completion by the middle of the century. Part 2 of this report moves deeper in to the area of speculation and will discuss the options and ramifications of reforming the grade and rank system along with the prospects for reform of the CMC itself.

Notes

1. See Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen, eds, *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, p. 34, found at http://www.pla-org.com/downloads/.
2. See U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC) hearings on January 21, 2016 found at www.uscc.gov/Hearings/hearing-developments-chinas-military-force-projection-and-expeditionary-capabilities.
3. For the PLA's official definition see: *Military Terminology of the Chinese People's Liberation Army* (中国人民解放军军语), Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, September 2011, p. 77; The 2012 and 2015 Defense White Papers both referred to *zhanqu* simply as "theater"; an article in the official Chinese news agency Xinhua, by contrast, translated *zhanqu* as "battle zone" (Xinhua, November 26, 2015). Most recently, The PLA's English website used the term "Theater Command" (Chinamil.com, February 2).

4. This system of dual responsibilities is similar to, but not exactly the same, as the U.S. military's division of responsibilities between combatant commands and the services.
5. This order breaks from the previous precedence that reflected the sequence in which the various regions were brought under control from the Kuomintang.
6. Qin's previous grade was MR Deputy Leader; Liao's was Corps Leader.
7. Pollpeter and Allen, p. 19.
8. Pollpeter and Allen, pp. 10-15.
9. Pollpeter and Allen, p. 54.
10. Evidence of the status of the respective fleets can be found below:
    East Sea Fleet: http://navy.81.cn/content/2016-01/19/content_6862367.htm; North Sea Fleet: http://navy.81.cn/content/2016-01/26/content_6868961.htm; South Sea Fleet: http://navy.81.cn/content/2016-01/26/content_6868928.htm .

The PLA's New Organizational Structure: What is Known, Unknown, and Speculation Part 2

As discussed in Part 1, the "unknowns" about China's ongoing military reorganization far exceed the "knowns" as the major changes are revealed in a deliberate yet piecemeal fashion. Part 2 moves further into the realm of speculation, focusing on two key areas. The first area of speculation addresses the complex and understandably politically sensitive area of reforming the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) cumbersome grade and rank system to meet the requirements of the reorganized system. This process will affect every member and organization in the PLA; some will benefit and some will not. It is likely to be a challenging process. The second area of speculation examines the various ways that the top leadership organ of the PLA, the Central Military Commission (CMC), might evolve to better "command" as well as represent the interests of the PLA and Chinese armed forces overall. Understanding the dynamics of these two speculations, as well as the outcomes, will be essential building blocks for future analysis of the motives and the implications of this iteration of PLA reorganization and reform.

Possible Changes to the PLA's System of Grade and Ranks

In the PLA, every organization and officer is assigned a *grade* from the platoon level to the CMC to designate their position in the military hierarchy. Organizationally, units can only command other units of lesser grade levels. Officers are assigned grades along with military ranks. Each grade from military region leader down has two assigned ranks, while some ranks, such as major general, can be assigned to up to four grades. This is one of the PLA's defining features, as an officer's grade is more important than his rank. **[1]**

Although no official reports on the reorganization have mentioned a change to the grade system, there are at least four possible adjustments based on the changes that have occurred. First, the Military Region (MR) Leader and Deputy Leader grades will likely be renamed Theater Leader and Deputy Leader, respectively. Second, the Division Deputy Leader grade may be renamed Brigade Leader. This would reflect the fact that over the past decade the PLA has been shifting several components from a division and subordinate regiment structure to a brigade structure with

subordinate battalions. In addition, there is a third possibility that the entire structure may be reorganized by adding or eliminating both a Leader and Deputy Leader grade or adjusting units from one grade to another. For example, there has been speculation that all Corps Leader- and Deputy Leader-grade operational and support organizations, such as group armies and the 15th Airborne Corps will be downgraded to Division Leader; however, the Corps Leader and Deputy Leader grades likely will remain for functional and administrative departments (gwy.yibys.com, September 9, 2015). A fourth possible adjustment is to abolish the entire grade structure and rely solely on ranks. The grade structure originated with the PLA's predecessor, the Red Army, in the 1920s and underwent several adjustments since then; however, it will have to be replaced with some type of structure indicating rank. **[2]** One of the driving forces to change the grade structure is presumably the result of a previous round of reforms. In 2003, 200,000 personnel (85 percent of whom were officers) were downsized, their positions taken by an expanded corps of tens of thousands of noncommissioned officers (NCOs). Though they filled an important personnel gap, they currently have no grade themselves and are referred to as "acting" (代理) leaders.

There is also speculation that the entire rank structure may be altered in an attempt to clarify and simplify the personnel system and make seniority, authority, and responsibility levels more transparent. **[3]** As shown in Table 1 of Part 1, each grade up to MR Leader has a primary and secondary rank where, as a general rule, officers receive a rank promotion every four years up to colonel and a grade promotion every three years up to Regiment Leader (*China Brief*, February 4). After that, the rank and grade promotions, which are rarely simultaneous, are based on available billets, requirements and mandatory retirement ages. Furthermore, mandatory retirement ages are based on their grade, not their rank or time-in-service. **[4]**

One Grade, One Rank?

Based on a review of various unofficial media reports, one possibility for rank structure reform is that the PLA will cease to have two grades per rank, wherein one rank can be assigned to more than one grade. This is a logical step in rationalizing the PLA's rank system, a process that began with the PLA's eighth force reduction of one million personnel that started in 1985 and reduced the number of MRs from 11 to 7. As part of the 1985 reform, the PLA transitioned from 18 grades to 15 and reestablished ranks in the PLA in 1988. From 1988–1994, each grade had three ranks, before the system was simplified to two grades per rank.

Senior Colonel Rank

A second possible rank structure reform involves the abolition of the senior colonel (大校) rank, or that the PLA will re-introduce a new 4-star flag officer rank—or both (gwy.yibys.com, September 9, 2015). Senior colonels currently may have positions in the grades of division deputy leader, division leader, or corps deputy leader-level. Based on their grade and position, the retirement age for senior colonels ranges from 50–58 years old. Elimination of this rank would be a reasonable step to take in conjunction with the options for restructuring grades, units and responsibilities discussed elsewhere in this paper.

4-Star Flag Officer

One of the driving forces for the adoption of a "4-star" flag officer rank is the PLA's growing foreign military relations program, such that a "4-star" general or admiral meets with his "4-star counterpart." Although this matters in terms of protocol from a visual perspective, it does not necessarily mean that they are co-equals. **[5]**

To date, one of the challenges for U.S. military leaders has been to figure out who their PLA counterpart has been. As a general rule, the U.S. Secretary of Defense (SecDef) and China's Defense Minister (DefMin) are considered counterparts and host each other; however, it is important to keep in mind that they are not true counterparts in terms of responsibilities. **[6]** In addition to hosting the DefMin, the SecDef has also hosted five of the six CMC vice chairmen during visits to the U.S. **[7]**

The question is who will receive four stars. One possibility is that all CMC vice chairmen and members and some Theater Leader-grade officers will receive a fourth star, while certain Theater Leader- and Deputy Leader-grade officers will have three stars, Corps Leader- and Deputy Leader-grade officers will have two stars, and Division Leader-grade officers will have one star. There are many other options, each with downstream consequences for rank, grade and structural reforms. For example, one alternative approach is that Corps Deputy Leader-grade officers could receive one star and the Senior Colonel rank could be eliminated; such a move would require redefining the organizational positions and associated rank for all billets at the colonel to major general levels—a major undertaking for any military. Table 1 shows a possible grade and rank structure and demonstrates the complexity of the system. For purposes of this article only, the following unofficial acronyms are used: DM (Defense Minister), JSD (Joint Staff Department), PWD (Political Work Department), LSD (Logistics Support Department), and EDD (Equipment Development Department), PLAA (PLA Army), PLAN (PLA Navy), PLAAF (PLA Air Force), PLARF (PLA Rocket Force), PAP (People's Armed Police), and HQ (headquarters).

Table 1: Possible Grade and Rank Restructuring

Grade	**Rank**	**Organizations**
CMC Chairman Vice Chairmen	None Possible 4-star general	
CMC Member	Possible 4-star general	DM, JSD, PWD, LSD, EDD
Theater Leader	Possible 4-star general	PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF, PLARF, PAP, 5 Theaters
Theater Deputy Leader	3-star general	3 Theater Navy HQ, 5 Theater Air Force HQ, possible Theater Missile Force HQ, some academic institutions, equipment research academies
Corps Leader	2-star general	Group armies; airborne corps; Rocket Force bases; some administrative and functional departments; some academic institutions
Corps Deputy Leader	Possible 2-star general	Naval bases; PLAAF bases and command posts
Division Leader	1-star general	Divisions, naval zhidui (flotillas), air divisions, airborne divisions, aircraft carrier
Brigade Leader	Colonel	Brigades, air wings, strategic missile subs

Regiment Leader	Lt Colonel	Regiments, naval dadui (squadrons) destroyers, nuclear powered subs
Regiment Deputy Leader	Major	Frigates, conventional powered subs
Battalion Leader	Major	Battalions; flight and maintenance groups
Battalion Deputy Leader	Major	
Company Leader	Captain	Companies; fight and maintenance squadrons
Company Deputy Leader	Captain	
Platoon Leader	1st lieutenant	Platoons

Who Will Be on the CMC?

One of the biggest unanswered questions so far is who will be on the "new" Central Military Commission and when will it reflect the new PLA force structure. Currently, the two vice chairmen and eight members of the CMC since the 18th Party Congress in 2012 continue to serve in their same positions (MOD, January 1; www.81.cn, January 28). Table 2, which provides a matrix with eight possible CMC manning options (O-1 to O-8) ranging from a very small CMC to a large CMC, demonstrates the complexity of the process. Each option poses a different set of senior level personnel issues with potential political as well as interpersonal ramifications for the leadership.

Prior to 2016, the leaders of the General Staff Department (GSD), General Political Department (GPD), General Logistics Department (GLD), and General Armament Department (GAD) were CMC Members because that was the grade of their organization, while the commanders of the PLAN, PLAAF, and PLA Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) were "upgraded" based on a "policy promotion" (政策升级) to CMC Member grade even though the grade of their organization was only a MR Leader grade. As a result, it is reasonable to anticipate that anyone who serves as the leader of a CMC Member-grade organization in the future will also be an automatic CMC Member. It is also reasonable to expect that commanders of the services will continue to serve on the CMC. However, it is not necessary that every Theater Leader grade officer will automatically become a CMC Member. For example, there is no indication that the Theater-grade leadership positions at the Academy of Military Science, the National Defense University and the People's Armed Police will be added to the CMC.

It is assumed that the CMC will continue to have two uniformed vice chairman; however, this too could change. For example, during the 1980s and 1990s, there were various uniformed vice chairman-level billets, including a secretary general, deputy secretary general, first vice chairman, executive vice chairman, and first secretary. **[8]** In addition, the number of uniformed vice chairmen has also ranged from six or more in the 1970s to three in the 1990s and early 2000s. As such, there would be a precedent for adding a third vice chairman.

The following bullets briefly discuss the information in each option.

- Option 1: The CMC retains the same members as prior to the reorganization.
- Option 2: The PLA Army commander is added.

- Option 3: The commander of the Strategic Support Force is added. This would follow the precedent set by the inclusion of the commander of the Second Artillery commander on the CMC.
- Option 4: The commanders of the five theaters are added; however, to further confuse the issue, if the Central Theater is, in fact, only a Theater Deputy Leader-grade organization, then the possibility exists that it the commander will not be able to be a CMC Member, because he would have to "skip a grade."
- Option 5: Given the increasing emphasis on the People's Armed Police (PAP) as a component of the CMC, there is a slight possibility that the commander could be added.
- Option 6: Given that the reorganization focuses on a three-tiered structure of "CMC—theater commands—troops" command system and an administration system that runs from the CMC through various services to the troops, the commanders of the administrative organizations (PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF, PLARF, and PAP) are not included, such that only the operational commands (e.g., theaters) and PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) are included (www.81.cn, November 26, 2015).
- Option 7: The Commander of the Strategic Support Force is not included because the Strategic Support Force is not a service.
- Option 8: Only the Defense Minister, Chief of Staff (e.g., Chief of the Joint Staff), and Director of the Political Works Department are included (Sina.com, January 11). **[9]** This is a possibility, because the Logistics Support Department and Equipment Development Departments may be downgraded to Theater Leader, since the previous General Logistics Department and General Armament Department were already one-half step below the General Staff Department and General Political Department, and their counterparts from the MR Leader down to the Regiment Leader grade organizations were all one full grade below the Headquarters Department and Political Department.

Table 2: CMC Member Options

Grade	O-1	O-2	O-3	O-4	O-5	O-6	O-7	O-8
CMC Member	DM JSD PWD LSD EDD	DM JSD PWD LSD EDD	DM JSD PWD LSD EDD	DM JSD PWD LSD EDD	DM JSD PWD LSD EDD	DM JSD PWD LSD EDD	DM JSD PWD LSD EDD	DM JSD PWD
Theater Leader	PLAN PLAAF PLARF	PLAA PLAN PLAAF PLARF	PLAA PLAN PLAAF PLARF PLASSF	PLAA PLAN PLAAF PLARF PLASSF 5 Theaters	PLAA PLAN PLAAF PLARF PLASSF PAP 5 Theaters	PLASSF 5 Theaters	5 Theaters	

When determining who can serve as a CMC Member, both time-in-grade and time-in-rank must

be taken into consideration. The July 2010 group of promotions demonstrated the path to full general, which combines rank and grade promotions consisting of three observable steps (*China Brief* July 22, 2010, and *China Brief*, August 5, 2010):

- Step One: Lieutenant generals (LTGs) in a MR Deputy Leader-grade *move laterally* to a second position in the same grade.
- Step Two: After three or so years, they receive a *grade promotion* to an MR leader-grade position, and
- Step Three: After three years or so as a LTG in an MR leader-grade position, they receive a *rank promotion* to full general. **[10]**
- In order to become a CMC member-grade officer, an officer first serves in one of the above MR leader-grade billets; however, not every officer who serves in one of these billets becomes a CMC member.

Historically, previous CMC Members have held their 3-star rank for a minimum of two years before they became CMC Members. Therefore, although at least four of the theater commanders and the new PLA Army commander currently have held the grade of MR Leader for more than two years, they only received their third star in July 2015 and may not be eligible to receive a *policy promotion* to CMC Member until they have at least two years' time-in-rank, which means mid-2017 (*China Brief* July 22, 2010, and *China Brief*, August 5, 2010). **[11]** In recent practice, however, there have been a number of exceptions to the time-in-grade and time-in-position standards that appeared to be the pattern in 2010. **[12]**

It is not yet clear who will become members of the CMC and exactly when the change in personnel will occur. This may be a phased in process over the next 20 months, or it might not occur until the 19th Party Congress in late 2017 when several members are due to retire. Whatever happens, there should be a large changeover in the CMC. Based on the existing pattern of age requirements (retire at age 68; continue to serve at age 67), six members should retire, while four members of the current CMC could stay on based on age, including Fang Fenghui (April 1951), Zhang Yang (August 1951), and Wei Fenghe (February 1954). Zhang Youxia (July 1950) will be 67 and, although on the cusp of retirement, should also still be eligible to remain. A potential CMC lineup in 2017 would include Fang Fenghui and Zhang Yang as vice chairmen, Zhang Youxia as the Defense Minister and perhaps vice chairman, and Wei Fenghe continuing as commander of the Rocket Force.

The timeline for revamping the CMC, should it happen before the 19th Party Congress, has several possible steps. Prior to 2017, in conjunction with changes now underway, the CMC might be expanded from 10 uniformed vice chairmen/members to 11 or 12 with the addition of the Army (GEN Li Zuocheng) and possibly the Strategic Support Force commander (LTG Gao Jin). **[13]** These changes would pose two "process" issues in that Li is not a member (full or alternate) of the Party Central Committee–and the CMC is a Central Committee organization. And LTG Gao, while an alternate member of the Central Committee, has only been in an MR leader grade position as President of the PLA Academy of Military Science (AMS) for one year and only a LTG since Aug 2013.

The expansion of the CMC at this time remains in question. One possible course of action is that Li could be added to the Central Committee at the next plenum in the fall of 2016 and Gao could be promoted to full general this summer, paving the way for him to also be promoted to the CMC at the next plenum. Alternatively, any change to the CMC could wait until 2017 permitting due course retirements and reducing policy exceptions for promotions.

Conclusions

Although official Chinese and PLA media articles have laid out the general policy issues and reforms at the CMC, service headquarters, and theater command levels, there has been no indication about who will become the new generation of CMC leaders. Other important details, such as the organizational structures of the services and theater commands or the details of how operational units will be affected by the reforms, have also not yet been announced. Even after the official announcements are made, many gaps in the information made public, such as the structure for the first-, second- and third-level administrative and functional departments for the various organizations, remain. Constant close attention and continuing analysis is necessary to better understand the inner complexities of this complex bureaucratic structure.

The past two years must have been a period of high anxiety for many PLA personnel as they awaited word on how their jobs would be affected by the reforms. Some, though probably not all, operational units equipped with older generations of weapons likely will be cut from the active force; some units, such as large caliber towed antiaircraft artillery units in the Army and Air Force, may be transferred to the reserves. A variety of local headquarters could also be consolidated or eliminated. Some personnel billets traditionally allotted to the Army could be assigned to the other services to better balance the force.

In the next few years, those who were not demobilized will nonetheless have to cope with even more change as units are shifted among headquarters and possibly reorganized internally. As the various headquarters become operational, it will likely take some time for all the functional offices to adjust to their new duties and de-conflict overlapping responsibilities. At the same time, many personnel will feel increased scrutiny from the super-charged discipline inspection and audit agencies tasked to root out corruption.

A peacetime objective of the reforms is to reduce graft and corruption in the PLA. Success in this regard will be visible through disciplinary actions taken against those identified through more active inspection and auditing protocols. However, the PLA's success in its battle with corruption will be hard for outsiders to judge, given the sensitivities surrounding the problem and its relationship to larger political issues in the Party and country as a whole.

In this period of transition from the old to new system, it is possible that combat readiness in some units could suffer until all the kinks are works out. While the stated goal is to increase the deterrence and combat capabilities of the PLA, the true effectiveness of these reforms cannot be judged until the PLA is put to the test of modern, extended combat against a capable opponent.

So far, there is little evidence pointing to the emergence of a more balanced, truly joint force before 2020. Even after personnel reductions and organizational changes are finished, the Army will likely be more than twice as large as any other service. For some time into the future, Army officers will continue to dominate the CMC and theater command headquarters indicating the degree of difficulty the PLA faces as it attempts an historic shift to abandon the "traditional mentality that land outweighs sea," as proclaimed in the 2015 white paper on "China's Military Strategy." Increasing the percentage of non-Army officers in senior leadership positions, especially at the CMC level and potentially including theater commands, will be a gradual process taking many years. It will also require changes in the PLA's system of academies and universities to better prepare officers from all services to assume joint leadership and staff assignments.

Nonetheless, the senior PLA leadership appears to be cognizant of the problems it faces and recognizes that this series of reforms will take years to implement and fine-tune. More changes will be necessary in the decades ahead. These reforms are but the latest chapter in a multi-decade, multi-generational military modernization and transformation process that began in the late 1970s and is scheduled to continue until the mid-century target of 2049, the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. **[14]**

Notes

1. See Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen, eds, *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, p. 10–15. <http://www.pla-org.com/downloads/>.
2. Zhu Jianxin, Guo Fei, Ji Haitao, Officer System: Comparison and Reforms (军官制度:比较与改革), Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, December 2006, pp. 36–37.
3. The PLA did not have a rank system until 1955 and subsequently abolished it in 1965. The current rank system was implemented in 1988.
4. Xu Ping, ed., *Record of New China Implements Military Rank System* (新中国实行军衔制纪实), Beijing: Gold Wall Press, June 2010. According to the *Chinese Military Encyclopedia*, the first ranks Regulations were passed on July 1, 1988 and amended on May 12, 1994. The Regulations were amended again on July 1, 1998. The Regulations were last amended on December 20, 2002. The 1988 Regulations re-established officer ranks after they were abolished in 1965. Of note, the National People's Congress (NPC) passed a Military Service Law in May 1984 that laid the ground work for reinstituting ranks, but the follow-on PLA Officer Rank Regulations were not implemented until 1988. The 1984 Law was amended on December 29, 1998. Song Shilun and Xiao Ke, eds., *Chinese Military Encyclopedia* (中国军事百科全书), Beijing: Academy of Military Science Publishers, July 1997, Volume 4, p. 392. <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/zhuanti/xian/450665.htm>; <http://www.bl.gov.cn/doc/rwb/2002_12_20/76725.shtml>. The Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国兵役法）was adopted on May 31, 1984 by the Second Session of the Sixth National People's Congress.
5. Pollpeter and Allen, Chapter 3 on the Ministry of National Defense, p. 85–116.

6. See Kenneth W. Allen, Christopher M. Clarke, John F. Corbett, Jr., and Lonnie D. Henley, "China's Defense Minister and Ministry of National Defense," in Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen, eds., *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, <www.pla-org.com/downloads/>.
7. Kenneth Allen and Phillip C. Saunders, "PLA Foreign Relations under Xi Jinping: Continuity and/or Change?," National Defense University, *Forthcoming* mid-2016; Other examples of the mis-match between U.S. and Chinese counterparts during state-to-state visits include the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), heads of the Air Force and Navy, and commander of Pacific Command. The CJCS has been a rough equivalent to the two CMC vice chairmen, but was also considered a counterpart to the former Chief of the General Staff (COGS), who served as the director of the General Staff Department. It is not clear who CJCS's new counterpart will be under the reorganization. The responsibilities of the new Joint Staff Department (JSD) and its Director are much more limited in scope than the responsibilities of the former General Staff Department and the COGS. At least five functional subdepartments were removed from the GSD and resubordinated to become new CMC functional organs. Other GSD responsibilities were assigned to the new Army Headquarters and the Strategic Support Force. As such, while the Director of the JSD may be first among the leaders of the CMC subordinate staff elements (except perhaps for the Director of the General Office) it does not appear that he will be a true counterpart to the U.S. CJCS in terms of duties and responsibilities. Whereas the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) and the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) have direct PLA counterparts (e.g., the PLAAF and PLAN commanders, respectively), the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) previously did not have a direct counterpart until the new Commander of the PLA Army was appointed in January. Meanwhile the Commander of Pacific Command (COMPACOM) has visited China more than any other person holding a leadership position. Although he does not have an exact counterpart, various Deputy Chiefs of the General Staff (DCOGS) and MR Commanders have hosted him and vice versa. He will most likely continue to deal with the new theater command commanders and Deputy Chiefs of the Joint Staff Department.
8. "The Central Military Commission," in Hu Guangzheng, ed., *China Military Encyclopedia* Version 2, *Military Organization* (军制) Volume 1. Beijing: China Encyclopedia Publishing House, July 2007, p. 22–31.
9. Although the head of the former General Staff Department was identified as the Chief of the General Staff (总参某长), the head of the new Joint Staff is known only as the Chief of Staff (参谋长).
10. Since the rank-to-grade adjustment in 1994, all Military Region (MR) leader-grade officers in the PLA have received their third star, but it is not always at the same time they assume their billet.
11. Li Zuocheng, Song Puxuan, Liu Yuejun, and Zhao Zongji were all promoted to full general on July 31, 2015. The commander of the Central Theater, Han Weiguo only received his second star at the same time.
12. Six of the ten officers promoted to full general/admiral in 2015 were exceptions. ADM Miao Hua moved to a MR-grade position in 2014 with less than two years as a LTG; then was promoted to full admiral having served in two MR-grade positions in one year. Five others were promoted after having only served two years or less as a LTG and/or less than

three years in a MR-grade position. In hindsight, one could speculate these were "policy" exceptions preparing the way for the current reorganization now underway.

13. Generals Li and Gao were born in October 1953 and April 1959 respectively, meaning that they would be eligible for the CMC based on mandatory dates of retirement. Dates of birth are from DOD's *Directory of PRC Military Personalities*, March 2015.
14. See Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, "A First Cut at the Organizational Restructuring of the Chinese Military," National Defense University's *Joint Forces Quarterly, forthcoming*, early 2016, for additional information about the reorganization.

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