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Xi Jinping and the 'Other' China

At the end of May, China held its annual Chinese Poverty Alleviation International Forum (中国扶贫国际论坛), which serves to draw attention to Chinese achievements in this area ([Xinhua](#), May 26). Poverty alleviation is likely to remain a key theme in state media as China prepares for the 19th Party Congress later this year. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has set for itself the ambitious goal of largely eradicating poverty by 2020. Its previous success in moving large numbers of Chinese out of poverty—largely due to Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening policies—

constitutes an important pillar of its domestic legitimacy. Not surprisingly, the CCP has launched a propaganda push in state media to highlight its progress.

At the center of much of the attention is the "core" of the Party, Xi Jinping, whose experiences in the countryside as a young man, and major policies have been offered up as proof of the Party's continuing ties to regular people and its commitment to China's urban and rural poor.

Xi Jinping, in particular, is being lauded as a major driver of these efforts. Xi has made sweeping economic reform and the expansion of the "moderately prosperous" class (小康) core planks of his policies, particularly as embodied

in the “Four Comprehensives” ([China Brief](#), February 23). Though he is well-known as a princeling—Xi’s father, Xi Zhongxun, held a number of high positions—state media has played up his connection to China’s rural areas and farmers ([Xinhua](#), May 22). His early experiences as a “sent-down youth” in rural Shaanxi province during the Cultural Revolution, then later as a village cadre, in particular, have been a focus of the reporting. **[1]**

In March, *People’s Daily* published a short video called “People’s Representative Xi Jinping” (人民代表习近平) about these experiences. The documentary emphasizes that “As a youth, Xi Jinping experienced life and endured hardships as a member of a country-side production team...spent several years undergoing challenging experiences with the masses ...[and] never put on any official airs..” ([CPCNews.cn](#), March 2).

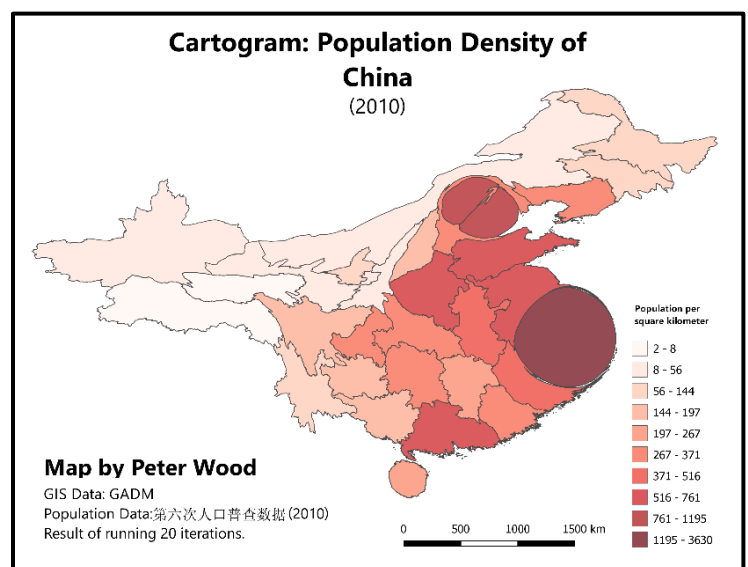
Xi’s focus on land reform is grounded in security and economic objectives. He has tied food security—bolstered by more efficient, larger farms—directly to his larger view of national security, which he terms the “Comprehensive Security Outlook” (总体安全观) ([People’s Forum](#), June 4, 2014). Land reforms can be credited with helping shift millions out of poverty. **[2]** Particularly as China shifts from export-based economy to a service economy that relies more on domestic consumption to drive growth, increasing the number of educated workers and raising productivity all become more important. According to [Xinhua](#), the size of China’s economy is expected to exceed \$13 trillion by 2020. And its middle class is expected to expand to include 400 million of its citizens ([Xinhua](#), March 13).

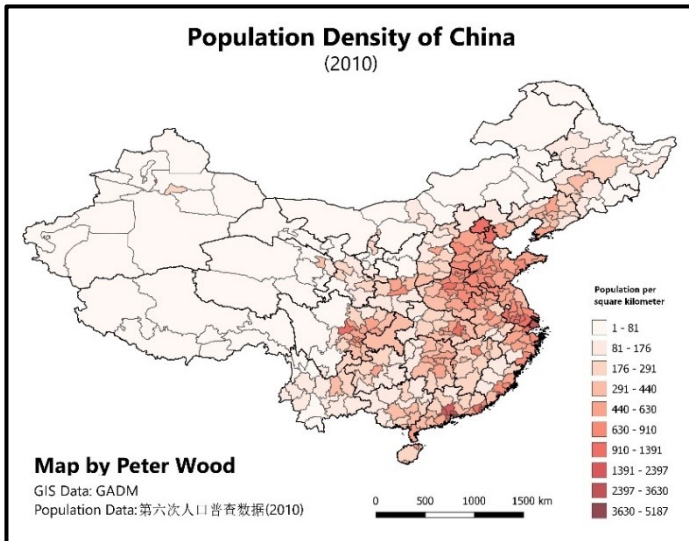
In Beijing, the view is that China has successfully modernized, and that policies are working. But despite major progress in improving the lives of

ordinary Chinese, inequality is rising, and the disparity between urban areas and the “other” China—rural areas—is increasing.

An annual survey from Peking University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences reports that China has a high level of economic inequality at the national level. The Gini coefficient—a statistical measure of inequality—for 2015 was .5. This has risen over the past 30 years from .3 in the early 1980s to .45 and above ([BBC Chinese](#), January 16, 2016). More troubling, however, is that the level of inequality is rising faster in the countryside. The report “China Family Panel Studies (中国民生发展报告, 2016), found that while incomes increased faster in rural households than in urban areas, inequality between incomes in the countryside and urban areas increased ([Sohu](#), March 21).

China’s demographic distribution exacerbates this problem. Its population, and wealth, are disproportionately concentrated on its east coast, mostly clustered around a few cities, a fact made clear by the accompanying cartogram. More granular data further reveals that even within China’s interior the population is densely clustered in just a few cities and prefectures. **[3]**





Moreover, the countryside is emptying, aging, and falling behind. Although in 2015 44 percent of Chinese still lived in rural areas that number is expected to fall to 30 percent by 2030 ([World Bank, 2015](#); [World Bank, March 25, 2014](#)).

The impacts of negative medium-and long-term trends fall disproportionately on the country-side. China's government debt-to-GDP recently reached 277 percent at the end of 2016, meaning that many county-level governments are deeply in debt just as economic opportunities in those regions are drying up ([SCMP, January 26](#)). Longer term, population aging will sap resources from the state and leave many farms without workers, since the average age of Chinese farmers is over 60. As exports decline as a source of growth and the price of living in urban areas increase, jobs that once waited in the cities are now harder to find and remittances back to families in rural areas decline. Rural governments are left with less revenue to provide services, such as pensions and law enforcement. This latter effect has resulted in a rise in criminality and drug-related gang activity ([China Brief, September 4, 2015](#); [China Brief, March 24, 2016](#)).

The most important driver of China's political behavior will continue to be its ongoing economic transition. With the pressure on to deliver clear progress ahead of the 19th Party Congress, the focus will likely continue to be the CCP's success in moving people out of poverty and generally improving living conditions. The economic transition is likely to hit China's rural areas the hardest, posing new challenges to the governments' legitimacy.

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Notes

1. Urban youth who were forced or volunteered to work in the countryside, and experience life as a peasant.
2. Kroeber, Arthur R. *China's Economy: What Everyone Needs to Know?*, Oxford University Press, 2016. Kindle edition. Locations 655-657.
3. Population data drawn from the 6th Population Census (2010). The author used this data, despite its age because it is more consistently available across provincial and prefectural lines. GADM GIS Data used for boundaries. In one instance—Chaohu Prefecture, Anhui—no longer exists and has been broken up among the surrounding Prefectures. This is not represented in the GIS data but an attempt to approximate the correct density by identifying the relevant county-level populations and recalculating.

Xi Jinping Promotes Protégés to Top Positions in Run-Up to 19th Party Congress

By Willy Lam

Much attention has been paid to how, in the wake of the seemingly isolationist tendencies of President Donald Trump, President Xi Jinping is highlighting Beijing's readiness to provide global leadership in areas ranging from boosting international trade to fighting climate change. Yet, for China's supreme leader, the top priority for the rest of the year is domestic politics: ensuring that enough members of his inchoate Xi Jinping Faction (XJPF) will be inducted into the Central Committee and the Politburo at the upcoming 19th Party Congress, which will endorse a wholesale reshuffle of top-level positions. Since late 2016 "core leader" Xi, who is also General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has been able to promote a large number of his protégés to strategic slots in the Party and government testifies to his tight grip on power (See [China Brief](#), November 11, 2016). However, his acolytes rise—despite an apparent lack of laudable track records—has opened Xi to criticism for violating Party rules about thwarting factionalism and upholding meritocratic norms for cadre selection.

Two recent appointments demonstrate Xi's use of personnel appointments to "stack the deck" with those loyal to him. The CCP Organization Department announced in May that Cai Qi (蔡奇; born 1953), who served under Xi in both Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, appointed to be the Party Secretary (PS) of the Beijing municipality. Cai's rise has few precedents in Party history. From 2013, when Cai was Head of the Organization Department of Zhejiang Province, he has been promoted every year: firstly, Cai was made

Executive Vice-Governor of Zhejiang, then Vice Director of the General Office of the Central National Security Commission (CNSC); then Executive Vice-Director of the General Office of the CNSC; then Acting Mayor of Beijing, Mayor of Beijing, and PS of Beijing. It took him just eight months to be elevated from acting mayor of Beijing to PS of the capital city. At the 19th Party Congress scheduled for this autumn, he is due to be inducted to the Politburo as an ordinary member. (The PSs of all four directly administered cities are usually Politburo members as well.) Cai, who is not even an alternate member of the Central Committee, will also be a rare example of a cadre getting into the Politburo without first becoming a member of the Central Committee ([Radio Free Asia](#), May 29; [Ming Pao \[Hong Kong\]](#), May 28).

The other example of Xi's proclivity for *yongrenweiqin* (用人为亲; "hiring officials based on favoritism") is Beijing police chief Wang Xiaohong (1957), who has also leapfrogged up the bureaucratic ladder. Just four years ago, Wang was a Vice-Mayor of Xiamen in Fujian Province, the same post held by Xi from 1985 to 1987. Wang has been promoted five times since 2013. He went from Assistant Governor of Henan to Vice-Governor of Henan, to Vice-Mayor of Beijing and head of the Beijing Public Security Bureau (PSB) until his appointment last month as concurrently Vice-Minister at the Ministry of Public Affairs, Vice-Mayor of Beijing, and Head of the Beijing PSB. It is possible that Wang may become Minister of Public Security soon after the 19th Party Congress. Like Cai Qi, his party rank has failed to reflect his fast-growing role in the government. Wang is expected to become a Central Committee member of the Congress ([MPS website](#), March 2; [People's Daily](#), March 30, 2015)

As Xi has reiterated, there are “careerists and conspirators” within the party who might form cliques that are prejudicial to the interest of the supreme leader. Xi has apparently attempted to insulate himself from these cliques by installing loyal cadres as Party Secretary of Beijing, as well as its police chief. At the same time and with extraordinary speed and efficiency has Xi placed 20 members of his own faction in positions to join the Politburo at the 19th Party Congress or at least gaining significant advancement in Party and governmental ranks.

Within the upper echelons of the Party, the political fortunes of a number of Xi followers are set to rise considerably. All of them served under Xi when he was a regional administrator in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai between 1985–2007, or when he was Head of the Central Committee Secretariat and President of the Central Party School from 2007–2012 ([Yazhou Zhoukan \[Hong Kong\]](#), May 7; [Radio Free Asia](#), April 30; [Ming Pao](#), January 9; [RFI Chinese Service](#), October 23, 2016; [Apple Daily \[Hong Kong\]](#), October 23, 2016).

- **Huang Kunming** (黄坤明, b. 1956), Executive Deputy Director of the Propaganda Department. Huang worked for Xi in Fujian and Zhejiang and is tipped to become Director of the Propaganda Department at the 19th Party Congress.
- **Chen Xi** (陈希, b. 1953), Executive Deputy Director of the Organization Department who will likely be promoted Director of the same department at the congress. Chen was Xi’s classmate at Tsinghua University from 1975 to 1979.
- **Ding Xuexiang** (丁薛祥; b. 1962), Executive Deputy Director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and Director of the Xi Jinping Office. Ding got to

know Xi in 2012 when the former was Director of the General Office of the Shanghai Party Committee. Ding will likely succeed Xi protégé Li Zhanshu as Director of the Central Committee General Office.

- **Li Shulei** (李书磊; b. 1964), who was named a Deputy Secretary of the Central Commission for Disciplinary Inspection (CCDI) earlier this year. Li worked closely with Xi when the latter was President of the Central Party School from 2007 to 2012.

While Xi has channeled economic and social policy-making to a number of central leading groups and central commissions at the apex of the CCP since 2013, the powers of the State Council or central government have correspondingly been truncated. Xi, not Premier Li Keqiang, runs the economy. While this goes against late patriarch Deng Xiaoping’s dictums about “separation of party and government,” Xi has taken steps to ensure that his close followers will occupy key positions within the government cabinet ([United Daily News \[Taipei\]](#), May 9; [HK01.com](#), February 23; [RFI Chinese Service](#), February 24; [Ta Kung Pao \[Hong Kong\]](#) December 31, 2014). The following four cadres are tipped for promotion in the State Council:

- **Liu He** (刘鹤; b. 1952) a principal economic adviser to Xi in his capacity as Director of the General Office of the Central Leading Group for Finance and Economics (CLGFE), Liu may become a Vice-Premier in charge of Finance (as well as an ordinary Politburo member). The U.S.-educated Liu went to the same high school in Beijing as Xi. His power over economic policy-making is said to be even bigger than that of Premier Li.

- **He Lifeng** (何立峰; b. 1955) was a close associate of Xi's when the latter served in Fujian. He was named Deputy Minister at the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) in 2014 – and then Minister in 2017. Given that the NDRC is one of the most powerful units of the State Council, He Lifeng may at the Party Congress also become a Vice-Premier with the party rank of Politburo member.
- **Zhong Shan** (钟山; b. 1955), Minister of Commerce. A former Vice-Governor of Zhejiang, Zhong also has experience as a state entrepreneur and trade negotiator.
- **Shu Guozeng** (1956), a former Deputy Secretary-General of the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee, is now Deputy Director of the General Office of LGFE. If Liu He earns a promotion at the Party Congress, Shu may take his place as Director of the General Office of the CLGFE, which is China's highest-level decision-making body on financial and economic issues.

One of the key measures taken by ex-President Hu Jintao to bolster and consolidate the power of his Communist Youth League Faction (CYLF) was through appointing trusted CYLF affiliates to senior positions in the country's 31 major administrative districts. Apparently taking a leaf from Hu's playbook, Xi has named a considerable number of his protégés to positions of party secretaries or governors and mayors in the regions ([Ming Pao](#), March 7; [Reuters](#), March 2; [China Times \[Taipei\]](#), February 28; [Radio Free Asia](#), February 27; [HK01.com](#), September 28, 2016). Those with the most potential for elevation at the 19th Party Congress include:

- **Chen Min'er** (陈敏尔; b. 1960), Party Secretary of Guizhou (former vice-governor of Zhejiang). A trusted protégé of Xi's,

Chen has been speculated upon as a "shoo-in" for a position at the Politburo – and even a possible inductee to the Politburo Standing Committee.

- **Ying Yong** (应勇; b. 1957), is Mayor of Shanghai and likely the next PS of the metropolis. Ying spent the bulk of his career in Zhejiang, where he gained the trust of Xi.
- **Li Hongzhong** (李鸿忠; b. 1956), Party Secretary of Tianjin. The former PS of Hubei has never worked with Xi. However, Li has become a trusted aide because he has gone out of his way to promote Maoist-era veneration for core leader Xi.
- **Li Qiang** (李强; b. 1959), Jiangsu Party Secretary (and former governor of Zhejiang). Throughout much of Xi's tenure as Party Secretary of Zhejiang Province, Li served as Xi's right-hand man in his capacity as Secretary-General of the Zhejiang Party Committee.
- **Gong Zheng** (龚正; b. 1960), Governor of Shandong (former vice-governor of Zhejiang and party boss of Hangzhou).
- **Lou Yangsheng** (楼阳生; b. 1959), Governor of Shanxi (former head of the United Front Department of the Zhejiang Party Committee)
- **Hu Heping** (胡和平; b. 1962), Governor of Shaanxi (former Head of the Organization Department of the Zhejiang Party committee).
- **Chen Yixin** (陈一新; b. 1959), a former member of the Standing Committee of the Zhejiang Party Committee and PS of Wenzhou, Chen was promoted Deputy Party Secretary of Hubei Province in 2016.
- **Liu Qi** (刘奇; b. 1957), a former mayor of the Zhejiang city of Wenzhou and PS of Ningbo, Liu became Governor of Jiangxi Province in 2016.

“Core leader” Xi and his colleagues seem to have bent long-standing rules and conventions of the party so as to come up with cadre-promotion norms that favor members of the XJPF. Since 1949, the best-known criterion for promotion is that the candidate under consideration must be “both red and expert” (又红又专). After the Cultural Revolution, this has been changed to “having moral rectitude as well as ability and professional competence” (德才兼备). Moreover, the Hu Jintao administration (2002–2012) experimented with “public recommendation and public election” regarding the appointment of grassroots administrators. Candidates vying for a post must secure enough support—often in the forms of the casting of “votes”—from community leaders such as local members of the People’s Congress or Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). [1]

Particularly since Xi gained the status of “core leader” in late 2016, the most important criterion for promotion has become subservience to the will of the supreme leader. Thus, it was emphasized that cadres must “maintain a high level of unison in thoughts, politics, and action with the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as its core.” In addition, officials must have a “four-fold consciousness”: “political consciousness, consciousness about the overall national condition; consciousness about [obeying] the core [leader]; and consciousness about being in unison [with the core leader]” ([People’s Daily](#), November 29, 2016; [People’s Daily](#), April 5, 2016). Indeed, as early as 2014, the CCP Organization Department pointed out in a circular that seemed to put top priority on loyalty rather than solid achievements. “In deepening the reform of the system of selecting and promoting cadres as well as the system of assessment, we must solve the problem of picking officials ‘based solely on

the number of votes [the candidates get in public appraisals], the number of [assessment] marks, the GDP [of jurisdictions under the control of the candidates] and the age [of candidates]” ([People’s Daily](#), September 2, 2014).

It is indicative of President Xi’s formidable sway that members of other factions who want to stay in power—or who look forward to promotions at the 19th Party Congress have gone to inordinate lengths in extolling the virtues and wisdom of the core leader. Take the case of two senior members of the Communist Youth League Faction, Premier Li and Guangdong PS and Politburo member Hu Chunhua. In his Government Work Report to the NPC last March, Li paid homage to “the party central leadership with Comrade Xi Jinping as its core” nine times. Hu (b. 1963) went even further in his address to the Guangdong Party Congress held last month. The rising star cited Xi’s name 26 times and praised Xi’s exemplary role as “core leader” seven times ([South China Morning Post](#), June 3; [Southcn.com](#), May 23).

If, as a senior cadre running the party organs of units directly under the party-state apparatus said, “the foremost political task is upholding the core status of General Secretary Xi Jinping,” the personality cult being built around Xi has dealt a big blow to not only the Party’s ingrained organizational principles but also the future of the country. Cadres who take the helicopter ride to the top merely due to the fealty they have professed the supreme leader do not have a track record of conceiving and implementing innovative and reformist policies.

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Notes

1. For a discussion of the implications of the "public recommendation, public election" of local-level officials, see, for example, Kevin J. O'Brien and Suizheng Zhao, *Grassroots Elections in China*, Routledge, New York, 2011, pp. 196–197. Also see Kenneth G. Lieberthal, Cheng Li, and Yu Keping, *China's Political Development*, New York, Brookings Institution Press, 2014, pp. 297–299.

The Southern Theater Command and China's Maritime Strategy

By Nan Li

In January 2017, a long-anticipated reshuffle of the leadership of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) took place. The PLAN and its three fleets each received new commanders. Less noticed, but more significant, was the replacement of General Wang Jiaocheng with Vice Admiral Yuan Yubai (袁誉柏), former commander of the PLAN's North Sea Fleet, as commander of the Southern Theater Command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) ([Global Times](#), January 22; [Global Times](#), January 22). This is the first time in PLA history that a naval officer has been appointed to command the multi-service forces of one of its regional combatant headquarters ([China Brief](#), March 31). Most importantly, his appointment is indicative of the shift in China's

military posture from continental defense to maritime security, and the importance of the Southern Theater as a predominantly maritime arena for PLA operations ([China Brief](#), July 22, 2016).

Evolving Maritime Strategy

A major rationale for appointing a naval officer to command the PLA's Southern Theater has to do with the evolution of China's maritime strategy. From the late 1960s to mid-1980s, the PLA was required to prepare for an "early, total, and nuclear war" against a possible Soviet invasion from the North ([China Brief](#), May 15). In this continental defense-centered military strategy, the role of the PLAN, with its limited capabilities, was relegated to supporting a land-based war through coastal defense operations to slow down a Soviet invasion.

In 1985, as China's relations with the Soviet Union began to improve, Deng Xiaoping tasked the PLA with making the "strategic transition" from preparing for a major war against Soviet invasion to preparing for a "local war" over contingencies on the China's borders. As a result, the notion of "near-coast defense" ("近岸防御") was replaced by a "near-seas active defense" ("近海积极防御") strategy. Rather than primarily supporting land operations, the PLAN is required by the new strategy to build itself into a "strategic service" that can operate independently and effectively in its own maritime space, the three seas near China, namely, the South China Sea, East China Sea and the Yellow Sea. [1]

Since the early 2000s, China's maritime strategy has integrated the concept of "far seas protection" ("远海护卫") that requires the PLAN to develop capabilities that can safeguard the security

of expanding Chinese interests overseas, including “security of overseas energy and resources, strategic sea lanes, overseas Chinese investment, and overseas Chinese citizens and legal entities.” While “near-seas active defense” and “far-seas protection” underlie the expansion of China’s naval capabilities, near-seas security is considered the priority in the near term largely because of their proximity and centrality to the physical security of China. [2]

The reorganization of the PLA that began in late 2015 is largely an attempt to change the army-centric nature of the PLA, the result of the dominance of a military strategy centered on continental defense. The changes accommodate the expanding PLA naval and air capabilities to provide security to China’s newly defined maritime domain and interests, particularly in the near seas. A PLA Army (PLAA) headquarters, for instance, was established to take over the responsibility of running army units from the PLA’s regional combatant headquarters, so that the latter can become genuinely joint by integrating more officers from the non-army services. [3]

Unlike the abolished military region (MR) system which was dominated by army officers, the commanding officers of the three newly established PLA theaters with a maritime strategic orientation (the Southern, Eastern and Northern Theaters), are more balanced in service backgrounds, with PLAA, PLAN and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) each occupying one third of these positions. As the pool for selecting future PLA senior officers becomes more mixed in service backgrounds, so will the senior officer corps of the PLA, to the extent that positions for theater chiefs may be held by non-army service officers. [4] The appointment of Yuan to command the Southern Theater has cemented this trend.

Why the Southern Theater Command?

A major objective of reorganizing the PLA regional combatant headquarters from seven MRs to five theater commands is to reduce the overlap of missions among these headquarters. With this reorganization, “safeguarding sovereignty and interests in the South China Sea has become the most important mission that the Southern Theater shoulders” (“维护南海权益是战区肩负的最重要使命”) ([People’s Daily](#), February 28, 2016).

There are several major reasons why the Southern Theater became the first PLA regional combatant headquarters with a naval officer appointed to be its commander. First, the South China Sea straddles the vital sea lanes that connect East Asia with the Indian Ocean, on which major East Asian economies, including China’s, depend heavily on shipping energy, raw materials, and traded products. The security and control of these sea lanes are not only indispensable for the normal functioning of these economies in times of peace, but also of great importance to “gaining initiative” in times of crisis and war. [5] Although the Yellow and East China Seas constitute the maritime operational space of the PLA’s Northern and Eastern Theaters respectively and have important sea lanes, they are not comparable to those of the South China Sea in strategic vitality.

Second, Chinese analysts also regard the South China Sea as the ideal site to deploy China’s strategic ballistic missile submarines (SSBN). In comparison with the land-based nuclear deterrent, its sea-based counterpart is believed to be more credible because it is more concealed and more likely to survive the first nuclear strike. The deeper these “boomers” dive in the ocean within their safe limit, the more concealed they are

against the opponent's anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities.

The average depth of the Yellow Sea is only 40 meters—too shallow to conceal China's SSBNs. The average depth of the East China Sea is 350 meters, and it can be as deep as 2,000 meters near the Okinawa Trough. Such a depth is quite appropriate for SSBN deployment. The numerous shore-based air and naval bases of the PLA's Eastern Theater can also offer protection for SSBNs. However, the Yellow Sea's proximity to Japanese and U.S. bases and their effective ASW capabilities make the area unsuitable for SSBN patrols. These capabilities, for instance, can diminish the credibility of China's SSBNs by keeping them exposed and vulnerable. In comparison, the average depth of the South China Sea is 1,200 meters. The countries that form the first island chain are relatively weak and do not possess highly capable ASW platforms against Chinese submarines. In comparison with the Yellow and East China Seas, South China Sea is clearly a more secure site to deploy China's sea-based, retaliatory nuclear capabilities ([The Paper](#), July 21, 2016).

Chinese analysts also believe that South China Sea is deep, wide and open enough to accommodate PLAN's heavy surface warships. Besides its relative depth, South China Sea encompasses an area of around 3.56 million square kilometers. The sea is also quite open to transit into and out of the Western Pacific because the countries that constitute the first island chain lack effective intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and naval blockade capabilities over the transit straits. **[6]** In comparison, the Yellow and East China Seas are much smaller in scope, covering 380,000 square kilometers and 770,000 square kilometers respectively. These seas are generally narrow and partially enclosed. The transit straits

to the Western Pacific, for instance, are closely monitored by the robust ISR capabilities of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) in peace time and can be effectively blocked by JMSDF in times of crisis and war.

New thinking in the PLA about how to conduct operations may also shed light on why the PLAN regards South China Sea as an ideal site for its operations. PLA operations, for instance, are now guided by the new concept of "information system-based system of systems operations" ("基于信息系统的体系作战"), which highlights the integration of various service forces into a PLA "system of systems" capable of multi-spatial and variable distance deployment and presence. **[7]** Latterly networked and enhanced by a common information system or C4ISR architecture, this operations system should achieve battlefield transparency-based "information superiority," which allows for synchronized, parallel operations by multi-service forces, thus enabling "battlefield initiative" against the opponent. **[8]**

Reflected in the maritime domain, this concept may explain the PLA's ambitious effort to develop its maritime operations system of systems (海上作战体系) by constructing and deploying a large number of major surface ships, including aircraft carriers. PLA analysts believe that a carrier-based battle group is an ideal maritime operations system of systems. With escorts such as guided missile destroyers, frigates, and nuclear attack submarines, this system of systems is capable of air operations, surface strikes, submarine and ASW warfare, air and missile defense, and electronic and cyber warfare. If well integrated by a common information system, all individual weapons platforms together can not only constitute operational synergy against the opponent but also offer support and protection to reduce each other's vulnerabilities. **[9]**

An isolated surface ship or submarine, for instance, may be vulnerable to air, missile and submarine attacks. However, if integrated into a carrier-based system of systems, this vulnerability may be reduced. An aircraft carrier, for instance, provides air capabilities that can compete for air superiority and provide air cover for surface operations. These air capabilities can also be deployed against the opponent's air ASW capabilities, thus protecting one's own submarine operations. Moreover, a carrier's air ASW capabilities can be deployed against the opponent's submarines, thus providing protection for one's own surface ships and submarines. In the meantime, the surface and subsurface escorts of the battle group can work to reduce the vulnerability of the carrier itself. The deep, wide and open South China Sea, with its vast strategic depth, is a desirable location for conducting such "maritime system of systems operations."

Finally, for the past few years, China has undertaken extensive dredging and building of artificial islands on the reefs that China controls in the Spratlys, and construction and upgrading of airfields, helipads, ports, radar and communications facilities in the Spratlys and Paracels. At the same time, China's claims in the South China Sea remain opaque. The seeming change of status quo due to these activities has already triggered countermeasures from the U.S. Navy such as freedom of navigation and overflight operations near China-controlled islands and reefs in the South China Sea. The Spratlys are about 1,000 km away from the southern tip of Hainan Island, and Paracels are about 340 km. To provide security for these so far-flung maritime frontier outposts and facilities that face major challenges from the U.S. Navy clearly requires substantial naval and air power projection and sustainability capabilities. The long distance, U.S. challenges and lack of clarity of Chinese claims have made

the South China Sea situation unpredictable and volatile. In comparison, the Yellow and East China Seas are relatively close to China's mainland. When there are tensions over Taiwan and Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, the "red lines" against major escalations also remain relatively clear, making these tensions more predictable and manageable.

These reasons may explain why when meeting U.S. Chief of Naval Operations John Richardson in July 2016, then PLAN commander ADM Wu Shengli stated that "we will never sacrifice our sovereignty and interests in the South China Sea. It is China's 'core interest' and concerns the foundation of the party's governance, the country's security and stability, and the Chinese nation's basic interests ... We will never stop our construction on the Nansha Islands halfway" ([Xinhuanet](#), July 18, 2016).

Similar reasons may explain why ADM Yuan Yubai, a nuclear submariner who also has extensive experience in commanding PLAN's surface combatant flotillas, replaced an army officer to command the PLA's Southern Theater, a strategic and operational arena that is predominantly maritime in nature and has become more contentious with maritime issues. [10]

Major Challenges

Appointing a naval officer to command the Southern Theater has also presented major challenges. The appointment is clearly based on the institutional lens of the PLA, which regards South China Sea as a maritime arena of strategic and military competition for "gaining control and initiative," particularly in the worst case scenarios of crisis and war. Such a narrow institutional lens may be a major driver for activities

such as the building of artificial islands in Spratlys and construction and upgrading of facilities in Spratlys and Paracels. These activities have already caused alarm among China's maritime neighbors in Southeast Asia and triggered U.S. countermeasures such as freedom of navigation operations. The increased tension clearly contradicts China's foreign policy goal of creating a benign external environment for the continued development of China's economy. Mitigating the narrow institutional perspective of the military by strengthening civilian control of foreign policy has apparently become a major challenge for China's leadership.

Finally, the dominance of a theater command by naval officers is unprecedented in PLA history ([The Paper](#), March 27). In addition to ADM Yuan, other senior theater commands from the navy include South Sea Fleet Commander Wang Hai who also serves as deputy commander of the Theater, and Rear Admiral Dong Jun, deputy commander who possibly acts as chief of staff of the Southern Theater Command. This may cause discontent among PLAAF and PLAA officers, and heighten inter-service rivalry. There is therefore a need to integrate these services into the primary missions of the Theater Command to alleviate the prospect of such a rivalry.

PLAAF has already been conducting long-range patrols of Spratlys and Scarborough Shoal with H-6K bombers, Su-30 fighter-bombers, air-refueling tankers and early-warning and reconnaissance aircraft ([Xinhuanet](#), August 6, 2016). However, integrating PLAA into primary missions of the Southern Theater may be more difficult. Southern Theater Army headquarters is located in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi province, indicating that the theater's army forces are primarily deployed to handle contingencies on the land borders with Vietnam and Burma. [11] At

the strategic level, this deployment can generate pressure or diversion from the land flank if China's dispute with Vietnam over reefs in the South China Sea escalates. Integrating the theater army forces at the operational level may prove to be a major challenge for the Theater Command's commanding officers.

Conclusion

Appointing a naval officer to command a theater in unprecedented in PLA history, further confirming the shift of China's military posture from continental defense to maritime security. Moreover, ADM Yuan's position as commander of the Southern Theater Command indicates the relative importance of South China Sea in the eyes of the PLA, particularly as a suitable bastion for its growing SSBN force and as an ideal operational space for its expanding surface fleet.

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Notes

1. See Nan Li "The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From "Near Coast" and "Near Seas" to "Far Seas," *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (May 2009).
2. See Nan Li, "China's Evolving Naval Strategy and Capabilities in the Hu Jintao Era," in Roy Kamphausen, et al., eds., *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014).
3. See Nan Li, "Xi Jinping and PLA Restructuring," *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (October & December 2016).
4. Ibid.
5. Conversations with Chinese naval analysts in Beijing in August 2016
6. Ibid.

7. For an in-depth study of “System of Systems,” see Kevin N. McCauley, “PLA System of Systems Operations: Enabling Joint Operations,” The Jamestown Foundation, January 2017, available here: <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/System-of-Systems-Enabling-Joint-Operations.pdf>
8. See Li, “China’s Evolving Naval Strategy and Capabilities in the Hu Jintao Era.”
9. Chinese analysts cited in Li, “China’s Evolving Naval Strategy and Capabilities in the Hu Jintao Era.”
10. For Yuan’s nuclear submarine background, see citation of Yuan in “Chinese Nuclear Submarines Sets Sail from Here” (“中国核潜艇从这里起航”), Xinhuanet, October 27, 2013.
11. For an exercise by Southern Theater’s army forces on Sino-Burmese border, see “PLA Conducts Live Fire Exercise on Sino-Burmese Border” (“解放军在中缅边境实弹演习”), *Global Times*, March 29, 2017.

Recent Developments in the Chinese Army’s Helicopter Force

Dennis J. Blasko

In November 2016, Chinese internet sources showed photos of a ceremony in the (former) 13th Group Army of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Army accepting the 1,000th helicopter into the force ([NetEase](#), May 23). This nice round number demonstrates the growth of the Army Aviation Corps over the past decade. Along with Special Operations Forces (SOF), Army Aviation is one of the “new-type combat

forces” given priority for development. The increase in the number of Army helicopters accompanies expansion of the force in the latest round of reforms. **[1]** In roughly a month’s time, half of all Army Aviation units have experienced some sort of organizational change. However, even as the numbers of helicopters rise, the size of the Army Aviation force is still small for a ground force that will probably number around a million personnel by 2020. **[2]** The recent changes are an attempt to improve and expand a force that underpins a number of important capabilities from tactical mobility and special operations to logistics support.

Background

The PLA’s Army Aviation Corps was established in 1986 by inheriting helicopters from the Air Force ([ChinaMil](#), September 8, 2016). It began with a single regiment and by the middle of the following decade had expanded to seven operational regiments (and a few training units), composed of about 135 helicopters and some Y-5 biplanes. **[3]** By early 2017 (prior to changes in the structure of PLA operational units), operational helicopter units had grown to 12 operational units, including five regiments and seven brigades, and a few training units.

The first Army Aviation brigade was formed in the former Lanzhou Military Region in 2009 by expanding an existing regiment ([Sina](#), May 19, 2009). This trend continues into the current round of reform with one exception. Over the past eight years, along with expanding regiments into brigades, a new regiment was formed in the former 41st Group Army in mid-2016 ([ChinaMil](#), July 26, 2016).

According to an unofficial source, an Army Aviation regiment has four to six flight groups (大

队), with 12 helicopters in each group; a brigade has six to eight groups (Sina, August 12, 2016). The variation in size among both regiments and brigades allows for the units to expand as new aircraft and pilots become available. Each unit is composed of a variety of helicopter types.

According to *The Military Balance 2017*, the entire force is composed of nine varieties of light, medium, heavy, and attack helicopters, with some produced in China and others imported from, or jointly developed with, foreign sources. Approximately 300 Russian-produced Mi17-series and Mi-8s comprise the largest proportion of the force, followed by some 255 Chinese-produced Z-9s (armed and transport versions), 85 locally manufactured Z-8s, plus 53 AS350 *Ecureuil* and 8 SA342L *Gazelles* from France, 15 Eurocopter H120 *Colibri* (jointly developed with China), and less than 20 S-70C Blackhawks purchased from the U.S. in the early 1980s. Two types of dedicated attack helicopters are new to the force, with the first WZ-10 being introduced in 2011, followed by the WZ-19; currently there are approximately 120 of each type.

Prior to current structural changes when the PLA had 18 group armies and 12 Army Aviation units, only nine group armies had an Army Aviation unit assigned. One Army Aviation brigade was subordinate to the former General Staff Department (GSD) and a brigade was assigned to the Xinjiang Military District and a regiment to the Tibet Military District. However, only six group

armies and the two Military Districts mentioned had *both* an Army Aviation unit and a SOF unit.

New/Old Group Army	Theater	Army Aviation Brigade or Regiment April 2017	Army Aviation Brigade or Regiment May 2017	SOF Brigade or Regiment
71st GA/12th GA	Eastern			Brigade
72nd GA/1st GA	Eastern	Brigade	Brigade	
73rd GA/31st GA	Eastern	Regiment	Brigade	Brigade
Disbanded 14th GA	Southern			
74th GA/41st GA	Southern	Regiment	Brigade	
75th GA/42nd GA	Southern	Brigade		Brigade
76th GA/21st GA	Western		Brigade*	Brigade
77th GA/13th GA	Western	Brigade	Brigade	Brigade
Disbanded 47th GA	Western			
78th GA/16th GA	Northern			Brigade
79th GA/39th GA	Northern	Brigade	Brigade	Regiment
80th GA/ 26th GA	Northern	Regiment	Brigade	Brigade
Disbanded 40th GA	Northern			
81st GA/65th GA	Central		Brigade**	
82nd GA/ 38th GA	Central	Brigade	Brigade	Brigade
83rd GA/54th GA	Central	Regiment	Brigade	
Disbanded 20th GA	Central			
Disbanded 27th GA	Central			
Beijing Garrison	Central	GSD Brigade†		
Tibet MD	Western	Regiment	Regiment	Regiment
Xinjiang MD	Western	Brigade‡	Unknown	Brigade
Total		7 Brigades/ 5 Regiments	11 Brigades/ 1 Regiment	9 Brigades/2 Regiments

* Likely from Xinjiang MD | ** Possibly Former GSD Brigade | † Possibly to 81st GA | ‡ Possibly to 76th GA

Army Aviation units support both conventional and SOF units, probably spending more time training with the SOF than with conventional units, with one exception: the 3rd Motorized Infantry Brigade in the former 1st Group Army appears to receive more training with helicopters than other infantry units and eventually may be designated the Army's first airmobile brigade. It is noteworthy that the 1st Group Army did not have an organic SOF unit, which may explain the 3rd Motorized Infantry Brigade's experimentation in helicopter operations. An operational airmobile unit, operating from forward bases near the coast, would be extremely useful in any operation against Taiwan (*China Brief*, March 6, 2015). However, the Army Aviation Corps has only begun experimenting with using forward operating bases for arming and refueling.

Despite the growth in the number and size of units and in the total number of helicopters, the lack sufficient aircraft to perform all the tasks necessary to conduct modern campaigns is a

known shortcoming. As a result, continued growth in the Army Aviation Corps is necessary and expected.

Recent Developments

In the month since the April 2017 announcement of changes to the PLA's "84 corps-level units," Army Aviation units have undergone some of the most visible observed changes. Of the 18 former group armies that were reduced to 13, significantly none of the five disbanded group armies were assigned either an Army Aviation or SOF unit (*China Brief*, May 11). In the few weeks since the reduction of group armies was announced, multiple changes in Army Aviation units have been publicized.

Prior to April, there were seven Army Aviation brigades and five regiments. In late May, the count of Army Aviation units is 11 brigades and one regiment. The before and after numbers of Army Aviation and SOF units (so far unchanged) is summarized in the table below.

All four of the former Army Aviation regiments in group armies have been reported as expanded to brigades and it appears that the former GSD Army Aviation brigade and the brigade assigned to the Xinjiang Military District have been transferred to group armies.

Specifically, in mid-May 2017, the former regiment in the 26th Group Army has been described as an "army aviation brigade under the PLA 80th Group Army" and a week later the former regiment in the 54th Group Army was described as an "army aviation brigade under the PLA 83rd Group Army" (*ChinaMil*, May 18; *CCTV*, May 26).

The former GSD Army Aviation brigade now appears to be "an army aviation brigade of the PLA 81st Group Army in Beijing" (*ChinaMil*, May 19). At the same time, the Army Aviation regiment in the former 31st Group Army/current 73rd Group Army was reported to be an "army aviation brigade under the PLA Eastern Theater Command" (*ChinaMil*, May 19).

Additionally, Chinese television reported the former regiment in the old 41st Group Army (the regiment most recently created) is now a brigade in the 74th Group Army (*CCTV*, May 27). The same news broadcast reported on an Army Aviation brigade of the 76th Group Army in the Western Theater Command. The 76th is the former 21st Group Army, which previously did not have an Army Aviation unit. This change could be the result of either the transfer of the complete Army Aviation brigade in the Xinjiang Military District to 76th Group Army command or elements of that brigade have been transferred to the 76th to become a seed organization eventually to grow into a full brigade.

The Near Future by 2020

It seems likely that the new reforms will seek to assign both an Army Aviation brigade and a SOF brigade to each of the 13 group armies at the very least. With the exception of two group armies, this has already been accomplished by expanding four regiments to brigades and the reassignment of units (such as appears to have occurred with the former GSD Army Aviation brigade and the Xinjiang Military District Army Aviation brigade).

New units will need to be established for the 71st and 78th Group Armies. This process might entail transferring elements from existing units

to establish "starter" brigades in the group armies (or other organizations) that currently do not have helicopter assets, unless the civilian defense industries and foreign helicopter purchases can come up with relatively large numbers of airframes to outfit a complete unit at one time.

But developing mature, experienced pilots and crews, especially in complex night and low-level operations, takes longer than building a helicopter. If existing Army Aviation brigades do not have the full complement of the reported eight subordinate groups, it is likely the smaller brigades will add additional aircraft as they (and pilots and aircrew) become available. For SOF units, existing regiments likely will be expanded to brigades and the two group armies without SOF units likely will convert conventional infantry units to SOF brigades (some of which might come from existing infantry units in disbanded group armies). Like helicopter pilots, developing proficient SOF personnel and units also takes years. Both Army Aviation and Special Operations Forces Academies (or Colleges) have been established to meet increasing demands for properly trained and educated officers and NCOs in these specialties.

Thus, in the near future we are likely to see reports of Army Aviation brigades in the 71st and 78th Group Armies. The Army Aviation regiment in Tibet could also be expanded, though geographic conditions make air operations at that altitude more difficult than in lower regions (so it may remain a regiment). If the Army Aviation brigade in Xinjiang has not been transferred in full to the 76th Group Army, it will likely be restored to full strength, or a new unit created, since the size of the Western Theater Command is so large additional helicopter assets would be logical. Likewise, new SOF brigades are likely to

be found in the 72nd, 74th, 79th (an expansion from the current regiment), 81st, and 83rd Group Armies and smaller SOF battalions or companies added to divisions and brigades. [4] These new SOF units are likely to be converted from former infantry units and personnel.

Since Army Aviation assets are increasingly important to modern joint and combined arms operations, the PLA could augment additional organizations with helicopters of all types. For example, the five joint Theater Commands and the five Theater Command Army headquarters each could probably use organic helicopter units, perhaps smaller in size than a full brigade (such as a regiment or group) for a variety of purposes, including command and control, attack, transport, electronic warfare, medical evacuation, logistics, and reconnaissance tasks. The three major garrison cities of Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai and other important cities also could probably use smaller helicopter units for similar purposes, as well as during disaster relief missions. Border and coastal defense units would likely find helicopter units very useful in monitoring their border regions as well as for logistics. The newly formed Joint Logistics Support Force would benefit from having helicopters available to directly support the Wuhan Joint Logistics Support Base and five Joint Logistics Support Centers.

Though it has been suggested for years, the current round of reform could also establish one or more airmobile units that integrate infantry and helicopter units, with the necessary support, into one (or more) organic unit, perhaps at the group army or corps-organizational level.

Conclusions

The more the PLA Army trains and operates using helicopter and SOF units, the more it will understand how vital they are to modern operations. They will constantly be reminded of the lesson from the 2008 Sichuan earthquake relief effort of the need for even more helicopters for effective and efficient operations. The Army, however, is constrained by the ability of the civilian Chinese aviation industry to produce enough aircraft and develop new models to rectify shortcomings in medium- and heavy-lift helicopters. The addition of attack helicopters in recent years greatly increases the lethality of the force but also complicates tactics and logistics. The distances and speed at which Army Aviation and SOF units can move adds new capabilities to the PLA.

On the other hand, more and larger Army Aviation and SOF units will be much more expensive to man, organize, equip, and maintain than former infantry units. Realistic training for these units will also demand a larger slice of the defense budget at the same time the other services are training more and further from China's borders. So as the PLA draws down to 2 million people and its responsibilities extend to distances farther from China, we should not expect to see decreases in future defense budgets.

Properly organized, trained, and equipped Army Aviation and SOF units will be able to contribute to joint maritime or land campaigns beyond China's borders. While doctrine allows for such operations, additional modifications based on new capabilities and technologies likely will be required. However, exercises over the past few years have determined that many tactical and operational commanders are not yet properly trained and ready to employ the helicopter and

SOF assets assigned to them. For example, the PLA media routinely reports that some commanders do not know how to employ "new-type combat forces" or do not dare or are unwilling to do so (81.cn, July 31, 2016). Part of the reason for this problem likely is, that in the past there were so few Army Aviation and SOF units available, commanders up to battalion level, who were trained almost exclusively in their own branch functions, had little opportunity to interact with Army Aviation and SOF personnel or units. As the PLA Army grows smaller, "new-type combat forces" will become a larger percentage of the force and more commonly seen in training. Nonetheless, changing commanders' mindsets on the integration of Army Aviation and SOF into traditional operations will not magically occur overnight.

It has taken roughly 20 years for the Army Aviation Corps to expand from seven units with 135 mostly transport helicopters to 12 operational units with over 1,000 helicopters of all types including dedicated attack helicopters. It seems likely that the force will grow faster in the coming years than over the first two decades of the Army Aviation Corps' existence. Because they are among the "new-type combat forces," Army Aviation and Special Operations Forces units will be in the news frequently as they train and operate together. However, by the time this article is published, there will probably be new developments announced, which will require constant attention by foreign analysts.

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Notes

1. The PLA Navy and Air Force also have helicopter units; *The Military Balance 2017*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, pp. 283–285, estimates the total Navy helicopter force to be about 94, with about 79 in total Air Force. PLA Navy Marine units reportedly will also receive helicopters in the current batch of reforms. An aviation transport brigade has been added to the Air Force's 15th Airborne Corps, probably increasing the number of helicopters in the force. See "Paratroopers jump out of Y-8 transport aircraft," http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-05/25/content_7617895.htm.
2. For comparison, the approximately 475,000-strong U.S. Army, according to *The Military Balance 2017*, p. 48, has approximately 4,000 helicopters.
3. *The Military Balance 1996/97*, p. 179.
4. Some infantry and armored divisions and brigades already have small SOF units.

Waiting in the Wings: PLAAF General Yi Xiaoguang

Kenneth Allen and Jana Allen

Central Military Commission (CMC) Member and People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force (PLAAF) Commander, General Ma Xiaotian (马晓天), will reach his mandatory retirement age later this year and will likely retire in conjunction with the 19th Party Congress. While much of the PLA's promotion process remains opaque, tran-

sition of the top PLAAF leadership may be becoming more predictable. Ma's most likely successor is General Yi Xiaoguang (乙晓光), who currently serves as a Deputy Chief of the Joint Staff (formerly General Staff) Department. If appointed, Yi would become the 12th Commander of the PLAAF since it was created in November 1949. If recent precedent is followed, he would likely also receive a grade promotion from Theater Command Leader to CMC Member and serve concurrently as the Deputy Secretary of the PLAAF's Party Standing Committee. **[1]**

A review of his background and career progression in comparison with previous PLAAF commanders strongly suggests that Yi is the most logical successor to Ma. Yi has extensive operational and leadership experience and professional military education. He has rapidly risen in grade and rank since 2001 and since 2014 has held key positions that qualify him to serve at the next higher grade. Since 2012, he has also been an alternate member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 18th Party Congress. Additionally, it has already been established that top PLAAF leadership are expected to represent the service to foreign counterparts. **[2]** Yi is well prepared to fill this role. He is a strategic thinker who has published on a range of technology-related issues, and in contrast with most of his peers, he has broad experience representing the PLAAF overseas as well as hosting foreign military delegations in China. While his career has followed a similar trajectory to other top PLAAF leaders, Yi is representative of the generational and educational change that is occurring within the PLAAF and being pushed to help build a "strategic air force".

A Rising Star

Born in June 1958 in Jiangsu Province, Yi joined the PLAAF at age 15. He began his career as a pilot and has been stationed in four different Military Region Air Forces (MRAFs)—Shenyang, Chengdu, Guangzhou, and Nanjing—as well as PLAAF Headquarters. [3] Yi is a highly experienced fighter pilot and is qualified in multiple aircraft. Over the years, Yi has flown the PLAAF's Mig-15, J-5, J-6, J-7, Su-27, and Su-30. He is a special-grade pilot (特级飞行员), an all-weather qualified flight instructor (全天候飞行教员), and is qualified as a flight controller in the tower (飞行指挥员). [4] It is clear that Yi was identified as a promising officer early in his career, although the reasons are less apparent. He has extensive leadership experience, having commanded a flight squadron, flight group, air regiment, air division, and command post. Additionally, Yi participated in Peace Mission 2005 (和平-2005) with Russia on the Shandong Peninsula, which afforded him the opportunity to help manage and oversee a combined exercise with a foreign military. [5] In September 2015, Yi was the senior officer in charge of the first Sino-Malaysian combined military exercise in Malaysia, identified as Friendship 2015 (和平使命-2015), which lasted six days and involved a PLA Navy destroyer, a frigate, a hospital ship, four transport aircraft and three helicopters and 1,160 PLA personnel (*Straits Times*, September 19, 2015).

In addition to wide-ranging command experience, Yi has held important positions as a staff officer throughout his career, likely to prepare him for leadership at the next level. He served as a Deputy Chief of Staff in Chengdu MRAF prior to becoming the commander of Wuhan Base/Command Post. Yi then served as a Deputy Chief of Staff in Guangzhou MRAF before be-

coming the Commandant of the Air Force Command College. He has also served as Deputy Chief of Staff for the PLAAF, one of the assistants to the Chief of the General Staff, and is currently one of the Deputy Chiefs of the Joint Staff (formerly General Staff). Based on his travel abroad as well as his participation in meetings held in Beijing, it appears that Yi's portfolio includes United Nations peacekeeping and certain relations with NATO ([Baidu Baike](#) [accessed May 30]; [MOD](#), November 16, 2015; [ECNS](#), April 23, 2015). As with Ma, Yi's experience on the Joint Staff likely gives him important insight into the military's overall situation, foreign relations, joint military training, and inter-service coordination. [6]

Yi was twice selected for professional military education (PME). He was chosen for a two-year program at the PLAAF Command College in 1984, and he later obtained a master's degree from the PLA NDU. [7] Typically senior PLAAF officers have only a senior technical degree (equivalent to an American associate's degree) or possibly a bachelor's degree and receive only a certificate while attending PME institutions for less than one year. Yi's military education distinguishes him from most other senior PLAAF officers, as do his publications. Yi has been a frequent writer during his career. For example, between 1992 and 1995, he wrote a 100,000-word *Air Force Pilot's Common-use Chinese to English Small Dictionary* (空军飞行员常用汉英小词典). He also authored *Stealth Aircraft and Their Nemesis* (隐形飞机及其克星) and *Armed Helicopters and Their Nemesis* (武装直升机及其克星), and co-authored a series of publications called *21st Century High-technology Main Weapons Nemesis Series* (21世纪高技术主战兵器克星系列丛书). [8] Yi's academic credentials likely contributed to his selection as the Commandant of the

PLAAF Command College during 2004-2008. Indeed, it appears that his long-term portfolio has involved military education and training issues. Earlier in his career, in 1989, Yi was the Director of the newly created Chengdu MRAF's Flight Transition Training Base, and from 1996-2001 he served as the Director of the Military Training Department in the PLAAF HQ's Headquarters Department.

Yi has been on the fast track for several years, as evidenced by the timing of his grade and rank promotions since the early 2000s. **[9]** Regarding promotions in grade, Yi became a Corps Deputy Leader-grade officer in January 2002, which made him the second youngest officer in that grade in PLAAF Headquarters. He then progressed to Corps Leader-grade in March 2004, to Military Region Deputy Leader-grade in December 2010, and Theater Command Leader-grade (renamed from Military Region Leader in Sep 2016) in August 2014. At the same time, Yi was also advancing in rank. He received his first star in July 2001, when he was promoted to Major General as a Division Leader-grade officer. In July 2012 Yi was promoted to Lieutenant General (2 star), at which time he was a Military Region Deputy Leader-grade officer and was the youngest 2-star general on active duty. Finally, in July 2016, when he was a Theater Command Leader-grade officer, Yi was promoted to General (3 star), at which time he was the youngest 3-star general on active duty.

Interactions with Foreign Counterparts

The PLAAF commander plays an important role in military diplomacy, promoting the service's relations with foreign counterparts, typically through traveling abroad and hosting foreign delegations in China. Historically, the PLAAF commander has traveled abroad once per year

to one to three countries. **[10]** From 1979-2012, PLAAF commanders visited over 35 different countries, including several countries more than once. Ma Xiaotian diverged from this precedent while serving as PLAAF Commander. Upon assuming the commander's position, he publicly announced that he was not going to travel abroad because he had traveled frequently when he was the Deputy Chief of the General Staff and was responsible for foreign relations, and, as such, he wanted to spend his time focusing on key PLAAF issues. Although Ma has not traveled abroad, he has hosted an average of eight foreign air force leaders per year in Beijing. **[11]**

Senior PLAAF leaders benefit from international exposure earlier in their careers, and participation in multiple official PLAAF delegations, particularly if they accompany senior leaders, can be an indicator that an officer is being considered for a more senior leadership role. In contrast to most PLAAF officers, who rarely travel abroad in an official capacity, Yi has traveled overseas at least seven times, and in some instances was the lead officer for the delegation. In 1997, Yi was part of a delegation led by then Chief of the General Staff, General Fu Quanyou, who visited the Pentagon, West Point in New York, Fort Bragg in North Carolina, Norfolk Naval Base and Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, and Pacific Command in Hawaii ([RAF](#), November 16, 2010). **[12]** While in Hawaii, he flew in an F-15. In 2000, he was part of a delegation that visited Greece and Turkey, where he flew in a Mirage 2000, a Mirage F1 simulator, and an F-16 simulator. In November 2010, Yi led a PLAAF delegation to England, where they visited Royal Air Force (RAF) Cosford. The delegation specifically asked for permission to visit RAF training establishments and gain a broad overview of the aca-

demic organization of the RAF air training system. In October 2011, Yi accompanied then-CMC Vice Chairman Guo Boxiong, then-Deputy Chief of the General Staff Wei Fenghe and others on a visit to Cuba, Columbia, and Peru ([ChinaNews](#), October 23, 2011).

More recently, in May 2014, Yi was part of a five-member delegation led by CMC Member and Chief of the General Staff, General Fang Fenghui, which visited the United States as guests of then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey ([ChinaMil](#), May 14, 2014). The delegation visited San Diego, Washington DC, Fort Bragg, and New York. In November 2015, he was part of a five-member delegation to Russia that was led by CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang, where a contract was signed for the purchase of 24 Su-35 fighters ([Chinamil](#), November 16, 2015; [Global Times](#), November 15, 2015; [MOD](#), November 16, 2015; [DefenseWorld](#), November 19, 2015). Finally, in September 2016, he led a delegation to Belarus to observe personnel training ([Belta](#), September 22, 2016).

During 2015–2016, Yi also hosted at least two foreign delegations in China. In June 2016, he hosted a meeting in Beijing with the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations ([Chinamil](#), June 7, 2016). In April 2015, he hosted a meeting with visiting Director General of the NATO International Military Staff Air Marshal Sir Christopher Harper ([ECNS](#), April 23, 2015). Additionally, in late 2016, he attended meetings in Beijing for Russia's and Brunei's Defense Ministers, which were respectively hosted by Defense Minister General Chang Wanquan and CMC Vice Chairman General Xu Qiliang ([MOD](#), [November 24, 2016](#); [October 13, 2016](#)). Given his experience interacting with foreign counterparts at home and abroad, Yi is well prepared to fill the role of promoting the PLAAF's

relations with foreign militaries.

The Road to the Top

In order to understand why Yi is the most likely candidate to serve as the next PLAAF commander, it is useful to examine the career progression and general qualifications needed for the position, as established by a review of the current and past PLAAF Commanders' career paths. While there is no one size fits all formula for promotion to PLAAF commander, a review reveals commonalities and milestones along the road to the top. All PLA officers work their way up the 15-grade career path until they reach their mandatory retirement age based on their grade (*China Brief*, February 4 and 23, 2016). Promising officers are typically identified early in their careers and then given opportunities to prove themselves, further hone their leadership abilities, and obtain the breadth of operational and staff experience needed to be successful at the highest level. Additionally, loyalty to the Party and to the leader of the CMC are considered core criteria when selecting top military leaders ([SCMP](#), December 30, 2015).

All previous PLAAF commanders joined the PLA relatively young, between the ages of 15 and 19 years old. **[13]** Of the first 11 commanders, the third commander (Ma Ning – 1973-1977) was the first aviator, while the fourth commander (Zhang Tingfa – 1977-1985) was a career political officer. All of the commanders either initially served a few years as enlisted members until receiving a direct promotion to become officers, or those who became aviators began their careers as aviation cadets. The latter group attended flight training for one to three years, then became officers and were assigned to operational units as pilots (*PLAAF 2010*, NASIC;

Chinese Communist Party Previous Central Committee Member Dictionary 1921-2003). Once they became pilots, they moved up the career ladder as flight squadron (company), flight group (battalion), air regiment / independent flight group, and air division deputy commanders and commanders. After that, they served in various corps deputy leader- or leader-grade billets, and then Military Region deputy leader-grade billets, including deputy chief or chief of staff (e.g., leaders of the Headquarters Department), deputy commander, or commander billets in bases, MRAFs, PLAAF Headquarters, or academic institutions. Starting with Wang Hai, all commanders served as an MRAF commander and/or a PLAAF deputy commander, which are both MR deputy leader-grade billets. Holding two different billets in the same grade helped broaden their experience. **[14]**

As shown in the following bullets and Table 1, there is no single path to becoming the PLAAF commander. **[15]** There are, however, patterns in terms of grade and rank promotions to reach the commander's position. For example, of the 11 commanders:

- Three served as political officers and as the PLAAF political commissar (PC)
- Five served as a concurrent CMC member
- Two served as a Deputy Chief of the General Staff (Joint Staff) Department
- One served as the commandant of the National Defense University (NDU)
- Six served as a PLAAF deputy commander
- Six served as an MRAF commander
- Three served as a base commander

Table 1: Commanders' Career Path For Corps and Above Billets

Commander	Aviator	PC	CMC MBR	Deputy Chief GSD	NDU CDT	PLAAF Deputy CDR	MRAF CDR	Base CDR
Liu Yalou			X					
Wu Faxian		X						
Ma Ning	X							X
Zhang Tingfa		X	X			X		
Wang Hai	X					X	X	
Cao Shuangming	X						X	
Yu Zhenwu	X					X	X	X
Liu Shun Yao	X					X	X	X
Qiao Qingchen	X	X	X			X	X	
Xu Qiliang	X		X	X			X	
Ma Xiaotian	X		X	X	X	X		

Although Liu Yalou and Zhang Tingfa were CMC members, the PLA did not regularize the appointment of PLAAF, PLAN, and Second Artillery (now Rocket Force) commanders as CMC members until 2004. Since that time, as the PLAAF Commander, both Xu Qiliang and Ma Xiaotian received grade promotions from Military Region (now Theater Command) Leader to CMC Member. If this precedent is to continue, then the next PLAAF commander needs to be qualified to serve in this higher grade. In Xu and Ma's case, they both served in Theater Command leader-grade billets for at least two years before becoming the commander. Specifically, both Xu and Ma served as a Deputy Chief of the General Staff (now Joint Staff). Ma also served as the Commandant of the NDU. In addition, they both received promotions in rank to general prior to assuming the commander's billet.

Importantly, Yi meets the requirements for promotion to the next higher grade. He has served as a Deputy Chief of the Joint Staff, which is a Theater Command leader-grade billet, since Au-

gust 2014. He was promoted to the rank of general in July 2016, at which time he became the youngest 3-star general on active duty. Finally, he has been an alternate member of the CCP 18th Party Congress (中共第十八届中央委员会候补委员) since October 2012. Although Yi has not served as a PLAAF deputy commander, he appears fully qualified to assume the commander's billet, receive a grade promotion from Theater Command Leader to CMC Member, and replace Ma on the CMC.

Conclusion

General Ma Xiaotian will reach his mandatory retirement age and likely retire later this year in conjunction with the 19th Party Congress. Although his successor cannot be predicted with complete certainty—as evidenced by the PLA Navy leadership transition earlier this year—General Yi Xiaoguang appears to be the most likely candidate. His career path has followed a similar trajectory to that of past commanders, and he has held key positions that would prepare him to serve in a top leadership billet. Yi is already a 3-star general, an alternate member of the CCP 18th Party Congress, and is qualified to be promoted in grade to CMC Member. He stands out from other senior officers because of his operational expertise and leadership experience, rapid advancement, professional military education, and his multiple opportunities to represent the PLAAF with foreign counterparts at home and abroad.

While Yi's elevation to PLAAF commander is widely anticipated ([SCMP](#), December 30, 2015), the timing of the transition remains unclear. Ma will reach his mandatory retirement age in August, likely before the 19th Party Congress has convened. Yi may become the PLAAF Commander before Ma officially retires, as was the

case in January when Vice Admiral Shen Jinlong became the PLAN commander but outgoing commander Admiral Wu Shengli remained on the CMC ([China Brief](#), March 2 and 16, 2017). It is difficult to predict the composition of the CMC after the Party Congress, but if Yi is the sitting PLAAF commander and recent precedent is followed, he will likely be among its new members ([China Brief](#), February 4 and 23, 2016). This would require a grade promotion from Theater Command Leader to CMC Member and he would serve as the deputy secretary of the PLAAF standing committee.

Yi would assume command at a very interesting time, when the PLA at large is undergoing historic organizational reforms aimed at improving the military's warfighting capability. Chinese President and CMC Chairman Xi Jinping has communicated his expectations for the PLAAF to accelerate its modernization, strengthen exercises, and be prepared for combat—while maintaining absolute loyalty to Party leadership. Xi has described the PLAAF as a strategic military service that plays a vital role in safeguarding national security, and has urged the service to speed up air-space integration and sharpen its offensive and defensive capabilities ([Xinhua](#), [April 14, 2014](#); [April 15, 2014](#)). To date the reforms have primarily focused on headquarters above the corps level, including reorganizing the former seven Military Regions into five Theater Commands and establishing 15 organs directly subordinate to the CMC. Yi would lead the PLAAF through the next phase of reforms and would likely also be called upon to further institutionalize the new PLA organizational construct, which calls for service chiefs to focus primarily on training and equipping the force, empowering theater commanders to focus on wartime missions. Importantly, Yi would have the opportunity to shape the PLAAF's organizational

culture and further solidify the PLAAF's vision of itself as an independent warfighting service, capable of playing a decisive role in protecting China's national interests as a "Strategic Air Force".

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Notes:

1. The PLA has 10 ranks and 15 grades; grades are more important than ranks; rank and grade promotions are separate; each grade has 2 ranks—a primary and secondary rank.
2. Kenneth Allen, "China's Air Force Foreign Relations Program and Implications for Interaction with the U.S. Air Force," *Foreign Area Officer Association Journal of International Affairs*, Mar 2015.
3. Yi's family has a history of military service; his paternal grandfather and uncle fought in the "War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression" (抗日战争) and the "War of Liberation" (解放战争) <http://china.caixin.com/2016-07-29/100972472.html>
4. An all-weather qualified pilot is one who can fly during day and night under IFR and VFR conditions. It does not relate to actual weather conditions.
5. Concerning Peace Mission 2005, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_Mission_2005. Peace Mission 2005 was the first ever joint military exercise between China and Russia. The exercise started on August 19, 2005, and consisted of combined land, sea, and air elements simulating an intervention in a state besieged by terrorists or political turmoil. It concluded on August 25, 2005. The force practiced air and naval blockades, an amphibious assault, and occupying a region. Approximately 8,000 Chinese troops took part along with 2,000 Russians troops. China initially wanted to hold the exercise near the Taiwan Strait, Russia wanted to hold the exercise in Northwestern China near central Asia, but instead settlement was made on the Shandong Peninsula.
6. You Ji, "Meeting the Challenge of the Upcoming PLAAF Leadership Reshuffle" in *The Chinese Air Force - Evolving Concepts, Roles, and Capabilities*, 2012.
7. Although Yi Xiaoguang was selected for a two-year program of study at the PLAAF Command College in 1984, the PLA did not offer master's degrees programs until 1986, so Yi likely received a master's equivalent certificate for this period.
8. Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications*, National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, *China Strategic Perspectives* 11, June 2017.
9. For example, after Liu Shunyao accompanied Minister of Defense and CMC Vice Chairman Chi Haotian to the United States in November 1996, he was promoted from deputy commander of the PLAAF to commander the following

month. In September 1998, PLAAF Deputy Political Commissar Qiao Qingchen accompanied CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Wannian to the United States and then became the political commissar three months later. He later became the PLAAF commander. See Kenneth W. Allen and John F. Corbett, "Predicting PLA Leader Promotions," in Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel, eds., *Civil-Military Change in China: Elites, Institutes, and Ideas After the 16th Party Congress*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, September 2004).

10. These are not official English titles but are translated titles.
11. Kenneth Allen, "China's Air Force Foreign Relations Program and Implications for Interaction with the U.S. Air Force," *Foreign Area Officer Association Journal of International Affairs*, Mar 2015. *PLA Foreign Relations under Xi Jinping: Continuity and/or Change?*, with Phillip C. Saunders and John Chen, Washington, DC: National Defense University Strategic Perspectives Series, to be published in early 2017.
12. Shirley A. Kan, U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress, January 5, 2015.
13. Dictionary of China's Communist Party Central Committee Members for 1921-2003, (中国共产党历届中央委员大辞典), Beijing: Chinese Communist Party History Press, 2004.
14. In the PLA chief of staff and deputy commander billets are equal in grade.
15. *PLAAF 2010*, NASIC; *Chinese Communist Party Previous Central Committee Member Dictionary 1921-2003* (中国共产党历届中央委员大辞典 1921-2003).

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