

# Initial Thoughts on the Reorganization and Reform of the PLA

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David M. Finkelstein".

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# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On December 31, 2015, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) began to execute a major and unprecedented reorganization, the result of many years of study and planning.

This paper provides some initial thoughts on the significance of the reorganization, the drivers impelling the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and PLA to move forward, some key features of the reorganization, and some of its basic implications. The paper is based primarily on information placed in the public domain by the CCP and the PLA. It is important to point out that this is the very beginning of what will be a long and complex process. Consequently, there is still much about the reorganization that is not known, is not clear, is not yet being announced, or is not fully understood.

The reorganization of the PLA should be thought of as a rolling process that will continue over the next few years: 2020 is the target date that has been set for all changes to be in place. Future changes will likely be unveiled with varying levels of granularity, or will not be announced at all. As PRC Ministry of National Defense spokesman Senior Colonel Yang Yujun put it, “This round of reform will be implemented according to plans and in stages. We will release reform information in due course in accordance with (the) reform process.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, as new data become available, this preliminary analysis will be adjusted.

One thing is certain: when this process is complete, the organization of the PLA as it has been known and understood for decades will have changed significantly, along with many previous insights about how this defense establishment organizes, manages, and polices itself. Whether the PLA will emerge as a more capable warfighting force, will remain an open question.

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<sup>1</sup> The views and opinions in this essay are strictly those of the author, and do not reflect those of CNA or its sponsors. The cutoff date for the information in this paper is January 15, 2016. While I am responsible for any errors or omissions, I recognize the assistance of CNA colleagues James Bellacqua, Alan Burns, Tim Ditter, Brendan Thornton, and Tamara Hemphill.

<sup>2</sup> Wang Jingguo, Sun Yanxin, and Huang Yifang. “Defense Ministry Spokesman Gives Detailed Explanation on Relevant Issues of Deepening National Defense and Army Reforms.” Xinhua. Jan. 1, 2016. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-01/01/c\\_1117646764.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-01/01/c_1117646764.htm).

## The significance of the reorganization

**The Chinese armed forces have begun to execute what is already shaping up to be its most sweeping and fundamental reorganization since the 1950s, when Russian advisors helped Beijing create a post-civil-war military modeled on the Soviet system.**

Past re-organizations of the PLA have been aimed at downsizing the force (such as in 1985, 1997, and 2003),<sup>3</sup> or creating new tactical-level units (such as group armies, *jituanjun* — 集团军— in the 1980s), or adding new national-level headquarters to the legacy organizational framework (as in 1998, when the General Armaments Department was created). The current reorganization is significantly different. When it is completed, the line-and-block chart of the PLA from the national level down to the theater level will be obsolete, because it is the key elements of the legacy organizational framework *itself* that are the objects of change.

More important than the new wiring diagrams will be the redefinition of the roles, missions, authorities, and relationships of (and between) the Central Military Commission, the services, and the new joint warfighting commands. According to the PLA, the most important outcome of this effort will be significant changes to command-and-control relationships for joint warfighting operations, and to the way that the non-combat support functions that manage, train, equip, and modernize the PLA will be organized, led, and refocused on supporting operations. The very authoritative *Central Military Commission Opinion on Deepening Reform of National Defense and the Armed Forces* (hereafter, *CMC Opinion*), published on January 1, 2016, underscores the point above.<sup>4</sup> In the words of a *PLA Daily* commentator article, “The utmost priority (of this reorganization) is the reform of the military leadership

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<sup>3</sup> By 1 million troops in 1985; 500,000 in 1997; 200,000 in 2003; and now another 300,000.

<sup>4</sup> “Central Military Commission's Opinions on Deepening Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces.” Xinhua. Jan. 1, 2016. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-01/01/c\\_1117646695.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-01/01/c_1117646695.htm).

and command system,” to include the creation of a new “joint operations command system.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wu Ming. “Remolding Our Military’s Leadership and Command Structure is a Necessary Choice for a Strong and Revitalized Military” (*chong su wo jun lingdao zhihui tizhi shi qiang jun xing jun de biran xuanze* 重塑我军领导指挥体制是强军兴军的必然选择). *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*). Nov. 30, 2015. [http://jz.chinamil.com.cn/n2014/tp/content\\_6791140.htm](http://jz.chinamil.com.cn/n2014/tp/content_6791140.htm). I am indebted to Alan Burns of CNA’s China Studies Division for his careful translation of this important *PLA Daily* commentary.

## Placing the reorganization in a larger context

**The reorganization of the PLA, and the myriad systemic reforms intended to accompany it, is not taking place in a vacuum. It should be viewed as part of the larger national and Party reform agenda that Xi Jinping rolled out at the Third Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in November 2013.**

From recent official releases about the reorganization, as well as the Party and PLA releases since the Third Plenum, it is clear that the reorganization and reform of the PLA is being driven by three imperatives, all of which are considered to be vital and mutually supporting by top Party and PLA leaders. These imperatives are political, institutional, and operational.

### The political imperative

**Politically, the reorganization is being touted as a means to “perfect” and “enhance” CCP control over the military.**

A *leitmotif* in the very public but internally directed political campaign associated with the reorganization is that it will result in the enhancement of Central Committee control over military affairs. Purportedly, it will do so by re-concentrating power and authority over the armed forces in the Central Military Commission (a Central Committee organ), specifically placing ultimate command authority in the person of the CMC chairman, currently Xi Jinping. This is being referred to as the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” (*junwei zhuxi fuze zhi*; 军委主席负责制).<sup>6</sup> Of the six “basic principles” laid out in the *CMC Opinion* for carrying out the reorganization, the very first principle is that the process will “adhere to the correct political direction.”

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<sup>6</sup> “China Releases Guideline on Military Reform.” Xinhua. Jan. 1, 2016. [news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/01/c\\_134970353.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/01/c_134970353.htm). According to Xinhua, the Guideline states that the “CCP’s absolute leadership of the armed forces” must be “consolidated and perfected.”

It is necessary to consolidate and perfect the basic principles and system of the Party's absolute leadership over the military, maintain the nature and purposes of the people's military, carry forward our military's glorious traditions and excellent work style, comprehensively implement the Central Military Commission chairmanship responsibility system, *and ensure that the supreme leadership right and command right of the military are concentrated in the CPC Central Committee and in the Central Military Commission.* (Emphasis added.)<sup>7</sup>

On the surface of it, asserting the primacy of the CCP over the military should not be surprising. However, as the reorganization process has unfolded, the PLA press has given us glimpses of possible concerns on this account. For example, one attention-grabbing commentary in the official newspaper of the PLA General Political Department (*PLA Daily*) suggested that some authorities of the CMC had devolved down to the four general departments over the years. As a result, a layer of authority had developed between the Central Committee's CMC and the operating forces, and this needed to be corrected. Moreover, and equally eye-catching, the same article employed a historical-literary allusion to the Western Zhou Dynasty (11<sup>th</sup> century BC), to suggest that the seven military regions exhibited semi-autonomous prerogatives.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, since the November 2014 "All-Army Political Work Conference" (chaired by Xi Jinping, and held in Gutian), the PLA press has steadily reaffirmed CCP control of the military beyond the customary extent. So, there is clearly a political dimension—a Party-PLA relations dimension—at work in this reorganization that is not well understood, at least not by this author.

What *is* clear, and has been clear since the Third Plenum and reinforced in the *CMC Opinion*, is that Party control of the PLA is viewed as a prerequisite for pushing through this reorganization and reform because so many institutional and personal

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<sup>7</sup> "Central Military Commission's Opinions on Deepening Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces," 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Wu, "Remolding Our Military's Leadership and Command Structure is a Necessary Choice for a Strong and Revitalized Military," 2016. On the military regions, the commentary stated that the "large military regions will also no longer have feudal powers over their domain" (大军区也不再是权力很大的"一方诸侯"). As we learned during the research for this paper, in popular Chinese culture, the term *yifang zhuhou* (一方诸侯) originates from the Western Zhou Dynasty, and is a reference to the emperor's siblings and other relatives, the nobles, and other key personages. These individuals had high autonomy over their lands, including military rights, not unlike a small nation, but they also had to report to the emperor and pay taxes and support military expenses on a regular basis. Today, the term is used to describe someone with great influence or power over a certain area. I am indebted to James Bellacqua of CNA for assisting with this explication.

interests throughout the military are going to be adversely affected. Party discipline will be required in order to make and execute tough choices.

## The institutional imperative

**Institutionally, the reorganization is intended to enhance the professionalism of the force, to overcome the “organizational and institutional contradictions” inhibiting the generation of combat power and force modernization, and to address the systemic causes of corruption in the military.**

If the only focus of this enterprise were major adjustments to command-and-control relationships, that, in itself, would be considered historic as well as ambitious. There is, however, much more that the PLA aspires to accomplish by 2020. This involves making adjustments to, or instituting major changes to, a very long list of the policies, processes, and procedures by which the military manages its resources and personnel and to the way in which the PLA conducts oversight of its own activities. Doing so will also require many organizational adjustments. In short, there will be significant institutional changes to accompany the political and operational dimensions of this endeavor.

The section of the *CMC Opinion* entitled “General Objectives and Main Tasks of Reform” goes through a long list of major focus areas where adjustments will be made. While general statements of intent are offered, details remain absent. Nevertheless, reading through the *CMC Opinion* reveals the breadth of issues that will be addressed.<sup>9</sup> Focus areas for change, reform, or adjustments will include:

- The organization and role of the CMC and the roles of the services
- The logistics system
- The PLA armaments, equipment development, and R&D communities
- The size of the armed forces and the balance between the services
- The ratios of officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted personnel
- The locations and compositions of PLA force deployments within China

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<sup>9</sup> “Central Military Commission’s Opinions on Deepening Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces,” 2016. The bulleted list provided is not entirely literal. It condenses and combines some focus areas and uses U.S. military terminology in some cases where the meaning of the Chinese phrase might not be readily apparent to non-specialists.



- The management of human resources, especially officer management
- Professional military education (PME) and training and the PME establishment
- The conscript system, non-commissioned officer corps, and civilian personnel
- Budget, procurement, and service member pay and benefits
- PLA and civilian R&D sector synergies (“civil-military integration”)
- The reform and reorganization of the paramilitary People’s Armed Police
- The military justice system
- The PLA audit system
- The use of laws and regulations to guide behavior and establish policy.

Worthy of note, the reorganization also intends to address a self-described lack of checks and balances on the exercise of authority in the PLA, and to correct the current absence of independent oversight. The PLA’s own media have cited the absence of independent oversight as a major systemic shortcoming that has resulted in rampant corruption across the officer corps and within its upper reaches, as evidenced by high-profile cases made public over the past couple of years.<sup>10</sup> And, as we know, the eradication of corruption is a high-order issue for Xi Jinping in the Party as well as in the PLA.

It remains to be seen how much of the announced institutional reform agenda will require brand new initiatives, and how much will merely require adjustments to ongoing programs. The PLA is not starting from ground zero. Some of the focus areas identified in the *CMC Opinion* have been the objects of reform efforts for decades.<sup>11</sup> Even so, this is an extremely ambitious agenda.

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<sup>10</sup> Wu Ming, “Remolding Our Military’s Leadership and Command Structure is a Necessary Choice for a Strong and Revitalized Military,” 2016.

<sup>11</sup> For background on institutional reform initiatives that began in the late 1990s, see David M. Finkelstein, Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, et al., *Institutional Reforms of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army: Overview and Challenges*. Alexandria, VA: CNA, May 2002. CRM D0005777.A1/Final.

## The operational imperative

The PLA intends to come out of this major reorganization and reform effort a more capable warfighting organization.

**The core of the operational imperative for the reorganization is the need to streamline and clarify command-and-control authorities and responsibilities in order to better prosecute modern, information-intensive joint campaigns—especially in the maritime-aerospace battlespace domains, which are the domains in which PLA strategists believe China’s most pressing operational contingencies reside.**

The depth and breadth of the current enterprise, and the apparent need to make radical organizational changes, can be interpreted as tacit acknowledgment in Beijing that the legacy organizational structure of the PLA and its attendant command-and-control arrangements were deemed ill-suited to conduct 21<sup>st</sup>-century warfare. After working assiduously since the mid-1990s to develop the capacity to prosecute joint operations, it is likely that the PLA just could not effectively superimpose ad hoc joint warfighting command-and-control architectures onto the military regions—entities that have been joint in name only and that have mostly dealt with peacetime administrative, training, and support issues.

Consequently, the seven military regions are going to be disestablished (if they have not been already). They will reportedly be replaced by standing joint commands—“war zones” (or “theaters of operation,” depending upon how one translates the Chinese term *zhan qu*, 战区) that will report directly to the CMC. The four general departments will be disbanded, and warfighting command-and-control will go from the joint war zones directly to the CMC. This arrangement is being referred to as a “two-level joint operations command system” (*liang ji lianhe zuozhan zhihui tizhi*; 两级联合作战指挥体制).<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, through this reorganization, three major objectives will be pursued: (1) deepening the CCP Central Committee’s control over the military via a strengthened CMC with ultimate operational and managerial oversight of the PLA; (2) professionalizing and cleaning up the force through institutional and systemic changes; and (3) making the PLA a more effective joint warfighting organization by pushing through difficult, but necessary, organizational changes that include new joint warfighting command-and-control relationships.

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<sup>12</sup> “Central Military Commission’s Opinions on Deepening Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces,” 2016.

## Major features of the reorganization: still a lot of unknowns

This section identifies and comments on some of the key features of the reorganization as of this writing (January 15, 2016). By no means does it include all that is underway.

### A reconstituted and empowered Central Military Commission (CMC)

The CMC has been reconstituted organizationally and, as mentioned earlier, purportedly invested with enhanced roles and authorities for providing oversight of, and coordination between, the various parts of the PLA, including operational command and control via the newly established CMC Joint Staff Department.<sup>13</sup> Reading the PRC media, one discerns two reasons for restructuring the CMC: (1) to “perfect” control of the CCP over military affairs via the CMC; and (2) to streamline chains of command, staffs, and authorities, and better coordinate the various lines of effort across the military establishment.

Ostensibly, the CCP Central Committee will deepen its control over military affairs through the newly empowered CMC and the “CMC chairman responsibility system” (*junwei zhuxi fuze zhi*; 军委主席负责制). In this new set-up, according to the PLA, the leadership of the armed forces will be “in the hands of the CCP Central Committee and the CMC.” The *CMC Opinion* states (without much background or explanation) that the CMC “takes charge of the overall administration” not only of the PLA but

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<sup>13</sup> For an official listing of the new CMC departments, commissions, and offices, and brief explanations of their functions in Chinese, see the MND press conference hosted at [http://news.mod.gov.cn/headlines/2016-01/11/content\\_4636184\\_2.htm](http://news.mod.gov.cn/headlines/2016-01/11/content_4636184_2.htm). For information in English, see “MND holds press conference on CMC organ reshuffle.” *China Military Online*. Jan. 12, 2016. [English.china.mil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-01/12/content\\_6854444.htm](http://English.china.mil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-01/12/content_6854444.htm).

also of the militia and reserve forces, and the People's Armed Police.<sup>14</sup> It is not yet clear what is meant by the "CMC chairman responsibility system" or how this is very different from previous arrangements as far as CCP control of the PLA is concerned. More apparent are the changes to the CMC's role, its new organizational arrangements, and the basic division of labor between the CMC and other major PLA organs.

On the basic division of labor, the ubiquitous phrase in the Party and PLA press is that the "Central Military Commission performs general management, theaters are mainly in charge of operations, and military branches are mainly in charge of force building" (*junwei guan zong, zhanqu zhu zhan, junzhong zhu jian*; 军委管总、战区主战、军种主建).<sup>15</sup>

There is no doubt at this point that the CMC will exercise more direct control and supervision over all of the PLA's major lines of effort: operational command and control, management and administrative functions, force modernization, and institutional oversight.<sup>16</sup> This is a result of the disestablishment of the former four general departments (the General Staff Department, GSD; General Political Department, GPD; General Logistics Department, GLD; and General Armaments Department, GAD) and the subsuming of many of their functions directly into the new CMC organization (see the table below).

As the *CMC Opinion* put it, "...the CMC organs will be transformed from a 'PLA General Headquarters [Department] system' to a 'multi-departmental system' and from... 'highly concentrated power in the leading organs of the PLA General Headquarters' to (power) being highly concentrated in the CMC's general organs with checks on power." In a speech on January 11, 2016, to leaders of the departments of the newly constituted CMC, Xi Jinping reportedly drove home this point of CMC primacy by characterizing the CMC as exercising "concentrated (alternate translation,

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<sup>14</sup> "Central Military Commission's Opinions on Deepening Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces," 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> In the *CMC Opinion*, four chains of command are referenced: "command" (*zhihui*; 指挥, meaning warfighting and operations), "building" (*jianshe*; 建设, meaning force modernization and professionalization, as in *jundui jianshe*; 军队建设), "management" (*guanli*; 管理), and "supervision" or oversight (*jiandu*; 监督). The objective is to separate the four chains and make lines of responsibility clearer. According to various PLA media reports, under the traditional system of four general departments, there was a good deal of overlap in these lines of effort, which were dispersed across various organizations without central control.

centralized) and unified leadership” (*jizhong tongyi lingdao*; 集中统一领导) over the military.<sup>17</sup>

The New Central Military Commission Organization <sup>18</sup>		
CMC General Office	<i>junwei bangong ting</i>	军委办公厅
CMC Joint Staff Dept.	<i>junwei lianhe canmo bu</i>	军委联合参谋部
CMC Political Work Dept.	<i>junwei zhengzhi gongzuo bu</i>	军委政治工作部
CMC Logistics Support Dept.	<i>junwei houqin baozhang bu</i>	军委后勤保障部
CMC Equipment Development Dept.	<i>junwei zhuangbei fazhan bu</i>	军委装备发展部
CMC Training & Management Dept.	<i>junwei xunlian guanli bu</i>	军委训练管理部
CMC National Defense Mobilization Dept.	<i>junwei guofang dongyuan bu</i>	军委国防动员部
CMC Discipline Inspection Commission	<i>junwei jilu jiancha weiyuanhui</i>	军委记律检查委员会
CMC Politics & Law Commission	<i>junwei zhengfa weiyuanhui</i>	军委政法委员会
CMC Science & Technology Commission	<i>junwei kexue jishu weiyuanhui</i>	军委科学技术委员会
CMC Strategic Planning Office	<i>junwei kexue jishu bangongshi</i>	军委战略规划办公室
CMC Reform & Organization Office	<i>junwei gaige he bianzhi bangongshi</i>	军委改革和编制办公室
CMC International Military Cooperation Office	<i>junwei guoji junshi hezuo bangongshi</i>	军委国际军事合作办公室
CMC Audit Office	<i>junwei shenjishi</i>	军委审计署
CMC Office Affairs General Administration	<i>junwei jiguan shiwu guanli zongju</i>	军委机关事务管理总局

<sup>17</sup> Li Xuanliang. “Xi Jinping Meets with Responsible Comrades at Various Departments of the CMC Organ, Emphasizing the Requirements of Stressing Politics, Striving to Win, Rendering Services, Playing an Exemplary Role, Endeavoring to Build a CMC Organ with ‘Four Iron Qualities.’” Xinhua. Jan. 11, 2016. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-01/11/c\\_1117739283.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-01/11/c_1117739283.htm).

<sup>18</sup> The English names of the CMC’s subordinate organs are the result of looking at English- and Chinese-language reporting on the new CMC organization. For the CMC Office Affairs General Administration, an English translation was chosen to best convey the function of that office. See MND press conference hosted at [http://news.mod.gov.cn/headlines/2016-01/11/content\\_4636184\\_2.htm](http://news.mod.gov.cn/headlines/2016-01/11/content_4636184_2.htm). For information in English, see “MND holds press conference on CMC organ reshuffle.” *China Military Online*. 2016. See also (in Chinese) 新华社北京1月11日电 (记者 李宣良) 中共中央总书记、国家主席、中央军委主席习近平11日在接见调整组建后的军委机关各部门负责同志时强调, 要紧紧围绕党在新形势下的强军目标, 贯彻新形势下军事战略方针, 牢记使命、牢记责任, 当好军委的战略参谋, 努力建设具有铁一般信仰、铁一般信念、铁一般纪律、铁一般担当的军委机关, 为实现中国梦强军梦作出贡献。

## Military regions disbanded, standing joint war zone commands to be established

The seven military regions will be disbanded.<sup>19</sup> In their place will be established new entities called *zhanqu* (战区), which in English can be rendered as either “war zones” or “theaters of operation.” The Chinese name is what matters most. The character *zhan* (战) in the term *zhanqu* makes clear that these organizations will be focused on warfighting and operations.

There is no official word on how many new theaters will be established; neither are the boundaries, internal organizations, staffing, or force structures of these entities known at this point. As yet unsubstantiated rumors in the Hong Kong press and beyond suggest five theaters: North, East, South, West, and Central war zones or theaters. We will have to wait to see what transpires.

One assumes that these entities will be standing joint organizations, with a staff that is joint in composition and has assigned forces from more than one service. Apparently, these organizations will report directly to the CMC, thereby establishing a joint command system that will flow from the theater of operations directly to the CMC with no stops (the former four general departments) in between. As the MND spokesman said in a January 12, 2016 press conference, the “defects” in former organizational set-up had “become increasingly prominent.”<sup>20</sup> Strictly in the realm of speculation, based on their geographic locations, one could envision each of these new entities focused on specific contingencies along the specific “strategic directions” (*zhanlüe fangxiang*; 战略方向) that are the focal points of PLA operational planning.

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<sup>19</sup> These are the Beijing, Shenyang, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Lanzhou military regions.

<sup>20</sup> “MND holds press conference on CMC organ reshuffle,” *China Military Online*, 2016.

## The services: primary role as force modernizers and providers

The major roles of the (now four) services (PLA Army, PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, and PLA Rocket Force) will be to modernize their respective forces, according to the Chinese media. In the words of *PLA Daily* commentator Wu Ming, “The distinction between the joint operations command of the theaters and the construction function of the services needs to be made clear.”<sup>21</sup> The *CMC Opinion* states, “It is necessary to improve military services (*junzhong*; 军种) [and the] leadership management system, optimize organ function arrangement and the organization setup of military branches,” and ensure that the services will have a major role in force modernization, management, and logistics. Not much more detail has been provided beyond this.

At the risk of mirror-imaging the U.S. system, it may not be too much of a stretch to speculate that the services will have responsibility not only for modernizing their forces, but also for manning, organizing, training, and equipping them, and for providing forces to the warfighting commands in the war zones (theaters of operation). Also strictly in the realm of speculation, as mentioned already, one could envision some elements of the former general departments that were focused on service-specific issues being sent to the services’ staffs and headquarters: the PLA Army, PLAAF, PLAN, and PLA Rocket Force. However, this level of detail has not been placed in the public domain, and may not be.

## A new service: the PLA Rocket Force

On December 31, 2015, the former Second Artillery Force (*er pao*; 二炮), a branch (*bingzhong*; 兵种) of the PLA ground forces was disestablished. In its place, a new service (*junzhong*; 军种) co-equal to the Army, Navy, and Air Force was established: the People’s Liberation Army PLA Rocket Force (*Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun Huo Jian Jun*; 中国人民解放军火箭军).

The PLA Rocket Force will be responsible for China’s nuclear missiles and conventional missiles. It is *not* clear whether this includes the nuclear assets of the PLA Air Force and PLA Navy. The PRC Ministry of National Defense claims that the

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<sup>21</sup> Wu Ming, “Remolding Our Military’s Leadership and Command Structure is a Necessary Choice for a Strong and Revitalized Military,” 2016.

creation of the PLA Rocket Force will not change China's doctrine for the employment of nuclear weapons. As stated by the MND spokesman:

China always pursues the policy of not using nuclear weapons first, adheres to a self-defense and defensive nuclear strategy, and always maintains its nuclear force at the lowest level of safeguarding national security requirements. China's nuclear policy and nuclear strategy are consistent, and there will be no change to that.<sup>22</sup>

At the inaugural ceremony of the PLA Rocket Force, Xi Jinping reportedly told the assemblage that the mission of this new service is to

enhance credible and reliable nuclear deterrence and counter nuclear strike capability in accordance with the strategic requirements of nuclear and conventional missiles and of full-area war deterrence, strengthen medium and long-range precision strike force building, increase strategic checks and balance capability, and strive to build a powerful modernized rocket force.<sup>23</sup>

## A new command organ for the ground forces

As of December 31, 2015, the PLA Army (*Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Lujun*; 中国人民解放军陆军), has its own dedicated service headquarters or “leading organ” (*lingdao jigou*; 领导机构), as the PRC media refers to it. The army—which, having been established in 1927, is the oldest service—will no longer be led, managed, and modernized collectively by the former four general departments (now disbanded) as it has been for decades. This headquarters will have the same responsibilities of the services noted above, and might also absorb some of the army-specific elements of the former four general departments. As of this writing, no official public statements have been made about the organization or the composition of the new headquarters.

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<sup>22</sup> Wang, Sun, and Huang, “Defense Ministry Spokesman Gives Detailed Explanation on Relevant Issues of Deepening National Defense and Army Reforms,” 2016.

<sup>23</sup>, Li Xuanliang, Zhang Xuanjie, and Li Qinghua. “Meeting on Establishment of Army Leading Organ, Rocket Force, Strategic Support Force Held in Beijing; Xi Jinping Confers Military Banners to Army, Rocket Force, Strategic Support Force Units of the People's Liberation Army and Delivers Speech.” Xinhua. Jan. 1, 2016. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-01/01/c\\_1117646667.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-01/01/c_1117646667.htm).



## A new Strategic Support Force: high-technology warfare

Also established on December 31, 2015, was the Strategic Support Force (*Zhanlüe Zhiyuan Budui*; 战略支援部队), which is a completely new entity. Of all the official information released by Beijing to date, the PLA has been most vague about the missions, organization, and composition of this new force. It is not even clear at this point whether the Strategic Support Force is a service-level organization like the navy and air force, or an independent functional command.<sup>24</sup> Its name in Chinese would suggest the latter.

From what can be gleaned from official commentary, the Strategic Support Force is going to have several mandates, none of which have been spelled out in any detail. These include the following: some unspecified role in logistical support to the warfighting forces, some responsibility for “civil-military integration,” and responsibility for “the building of a new type of combat operation force.”<sup>25</sup> The latter two functions strongly suggest that the Strategic Support Force will be responsible for developing, managing, and possibly deploying the most modern, high-technology assets that define modern warfare to the warfighting commands. Our biggest hint is the term “new type operational forces” (*xinxing zuozhan liliang*; 新型作战力量).

In the parlance of the PLA, “new type operational forces” generally refers to those key capabilities or units which are characterized by cutting-edge technologies and are deemed essential for prosecuting modern, high-technology, and information-intensive campaigns. Without such assets, according to various PLA writings, a military force fights under a great disadvantage. Examples usually given are cyber space, outer space, the electro-magnetic spectrum, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) assets, and precision-guided munitions. The term is sometimes applied to special operations forces, special aviation, and maritime assets such as unmanned aerial and underwater vehicles (UAVs, UUVs), and electronic countermeasures units.

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<sup>24</sup> We note that the Strategic Support Force does not have the character “*jun*” (军) in its name, but rather uses *budui* (部队), meaning a force or unit of a certain level.

<sup>25</sup> Wang, Sun, and Huang, “Defense Ministry Spokesman Gives Detailed Explanation on Relevant Issues of Deepening National Defense and Army Reforms,” 2016, and Li, Zhang, and Li, “Meeting on Establishment of Army Leading Organ, Rocket Force, Strategic Support Force Held in Beijing; Xi Jinping Confers Military Banners to Army, Rocket Force, Strategic Support Force Units of the People's Liberation Army and Delivers Speech,” 2016.

These capabilities and units reside at the heart of what the PLA refers to as “informationized local wars” (*xinxihua jubu zhanzheng*; 信息化局部战争), which the PLA’s new military strategy (published in May 2015) has identified as the type of modern warfare that the Chinese armed forces must be able to prosecute, and which, from an operational perspective, this entire reorganization is meant to facilitate.<sup>26</sup>

The need for these types of high-technology assets and capabilities also undergirds the call for enhanced “civil-military integration” in research and development and production, which means that the development of new technologies in the civil and military research and development sectors should be better coordinated and mutually supportive. Hence, this may be one reason why “civil-military integration” is listed under the auspices of the new Strategic Support Force.

So, an informed guess is that the Strategic Support Force is where cyber space, outer space, and other high-tech capabilities will reside. We will simply have to wait and see how this new command shapes up.

## New oversight organizations directly under the CMC

The reorganization of the PLA is also meant to address systemic shortcomings that are believed to have resulted in corruption or abuse of command authority going unchecked. One major problem identified by the PLA is the absence of independent organs to provide oversight, as the following scathing commentary from *PLA Daily* asserts:

For a long time, there have been problems of abuse of power among leaders of some units and organs, the phenomenon of methods that break regulations, discipline, and law, and the “four customs” (*si feng*; 四风) and corruption have developed and spread. In the end, an important reason for this is a lack of mechanisms that effectively limit and oversee power, especially in regards to leadership organs, as the limits on and oversight of leading cadres exist in name only (*xingtongxushe*; 形同虚设).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *China’s Military Strategy*. Beijing: State Council Information Office, People’s Republic of China, May 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Wu Ming, “Remolding Our Military’s Leadership and Command Structure is a Necessary Choice for a Strong and Revitalized Military,” 2016. The term “four customs” probably refers to

To begin to correct this systemic issue, it has been decided that organs providing oversight of the PLA will henceforth be directly subordinate to the CMC. These organizations will include the new CMC Audit Office, the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, and the CMC Politics and Law Commission, with the latter commission also having oversight of the PLA military court and procuratorate (*jianchayuan*; 检察院) systems.<sup>28</sup> The intention is that auditors and other inspectors from the CMC will be dispatched throughout the PLA—starting with the CMC’s own departments, extending across the services, and drilling down into the theaters of operation, in order to make “independent assessments free from command influence,” to borrow a term from the U.S. military.<sup>29</sup>

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“formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism, and extravagance,” which have been identified in the past as deleterious behaviors to be eliminated from the PLA.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> “Xi Urges Breakthroughs in Military Structural Reform.” Xinhua. November 26, 2015. [news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/27/c\\_134859198.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/27/c_134859198.htm).

## **Some issues raised by the reorganization**

### **Xi Jinping and the military: more “red” and more “expert”**

It would not be unreasonable to posit that Xi Jinping is the most engaged CMC chairman since Deng Xiaoping. Like the rest of China, Xi is taking the PLA into the “post-Dengist” period, and it appears that he intends to make the PLA both more “red” (closer to the CCP) and more “expert” (better warfighters).

The wholesale reorganization of the PLA to be better positioned to engage in modern, high-tech joint operations, while also fighting corruption and recentralizing military authorities in the person of the chairman of the CMC, is no small feat. It will be a major legacy of Xi’s (assuming it is successful). Doing so in the face of strong vested interests is a bold move, suggesting very strong support for Xi among some group of senior PLA leaders who also believe that such major changes are necessary and long overdue.

Xi Jinping undoubtedly approved the major contours of this unprecedented reorganization, and may have been very involved in following the details and brokering the deals that had to be made; however, in this author’s opinion, the essence of what needed to be done could only have come from within the PLA itself: the professionals who have seen the need for change for some time.

In this regard, Xi has become the critical enabling agent of military reform by providing the political muscle necessary to overcome resistance to change within the ranks. So, one could say that he has handed the PLA its own “Goldwater-Nichols moment.” Just as it took a literal act of Congress to transform the U.S. military into the joint force it is today, it has taken the authority of the Central Committee led by Xi Jinping — via the “decision” of the Third Plenum in November 2013 and subsequent actions — to provide the political mandate to compel the PLA to enact much-needed and painful reform measures that it probably would not have taken if left to its own devices.

Also on Xi Jinping's watch as CMC chairman (since 2012), the PLA has adjusted China's national military strategy (the Military Strategic Guidelines) and Xi has led the charge in the "re-redding" of the PLA as a Party army, as evidenced by the Gutian conference of November 2014.

## **A litmus test of political loyalty**

Because of its scope, this reorganization is going to impinge on a wide array of vested interests in the military. The concerns about push-back can be measured by the intensity of the political work campaign that, ever since the Third Plenum almost two and a half years ago, has aimed at preparing the force for sweeping changes and for the reality that there will be institutional and personal "winners" and "losers" created in the process. While the PLA leaders rightly assert that the ultimate success of the reorganization will be measured in terms of increased combat effectiveness, the unspoken metric for wholeheartedly carrying out some very painful changes will likely be political loyalty. One suspects that those officers who are not fully on board will have a short shelf-life in the new PLA. Many retirements are likely to follow.

## **The reorganization will affect key relationships**

Changes to the PLA's structure have the potential to affect three key sets of relationships: Party-PLA, civil-military, and PLA-PLA.

First, the fundamental principle of the subordination of the PLA and military affairs to Party control and discipline is a critical dimension and objective of the reorganization. One way the leadership intends to accomplish this is by removing some of the key intermediate layers of authority that have existed between the CMC (and its chairman) and the force. A second way is by having the CMC maintain direct control over the various organs responsible for overseeing discipline and inspection as well as creating a CMC office responsible for ensuring that the reorganization itself is carried out. Third, the Party committee system will be strengthened. How the leadership will measure the efficacy of their efforts on the political front, and what success will look like, is an open question. It is clear, however, that

professionalization without “a correct political orientation” will be unacceptable. We can expect that the PLA will enter a prolonged period of intensified political work.<sup>30</sup>

Next, civil-military relations have the potential to be affected on various levels, both in positive ways and in potentially stressful ways. On the positive side, the call for closer and better “civil-military integration” in research and development in the high-technology sector could result in resources and synergies that benefit the PLA armaments community, the state-owned defense industrial sector, and the private sector firms that can develop or supply end items with military applications for the PLA’s “new type operational forces.” Also, the PLA will create a civil service-like system that will bring an unknown number of civilians into the force, thereby creating a new civil-military dynamic within the PLA itself.<sup>31</sup>

On the negative side of the ledger, there is going to be a demobilization of at least 300,000 people. The local governments and the state-owned enterprises will be responsible for finding jobs for these individuals, some of whom will transfer (*zhuanye*; 转业) to different civilian government positions. The Party is already warning the state-owned enterprises not to shirk their duty in this regard. Civil Affairs Minister Li Liguo has stated that finding positions for demobilized soldiers is a matter of military modernization as well as “social harmony and stability.”<sup>32</sup> However, placing these disenfranchised personnel may not be as easy as it sounds. There may also be separations from service with no government-to-government transfers, which could place the burden on local governments to find ways to integrate these former service members into the civilian community.

Also on the difficult side of the ledger, there may be a “BRAC-like” impact when the military regions are stood down, possibly creating second-order negative impacts on the local civilian economy. It is unclear how the dismantling of the decades-old military region system may affect the surrounding civilian communities.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For a deep look at the PLA political work system, see Kristen Gunness, James Bellacqua, and Julia Rosenfield. *Not Just Party Propaganda: An Institutional Overview of the Political Work System in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army*. Alexandria, VA: CNA, Aug. 2006. CRM D001475.A3/1Rev; and David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, co-editors. *Civil-Military Relations in Today’s China: Swimming in a New Sea*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> A few years ago, the PLA established a working group under the Cadre Department of the General Political Department to study and develop plans for bringing civilians into the PLA.

<sup>32</sup> Yao Jianing. “State-owned Enterprises Not Allowed to Refuse Veterans.” *China Military Online*, Dec. 29, 2015. [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-12/29/content\\_6835935.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2015-12/29/content_6835935.htm).

<sup>33</sup> BRAC is the acronym for the U.S. Department of Defense’s congressionally mandated “Base Realignment and Closure” program, whereby military facilities are consolidated or closed for

Finally, relations *within* the PLA and between service members could be affected, especially at the higher ranks, as authorities are transferred, resources are relinquished or gained, and the trappings or definitions of professional prestige inevitably change.

## **The reorganization is bound to create organizational dislocations**

A reorganization as deep as the one the PLA is undergoing, and the changing relationships and authorities that come with it, is certain to create a period of institutional uncertainty and entropy. Added to the reorganization is the ongoing anti-corruption campaign. It remains to be seen how much turmoil will be created. This issue is not lost on the Party and the PLA. The *CMC Opinion* makes clear that the Party and PLA leadership understand that the armed forces are going to undergo a period of difficult transition over the next few years. In the face of the self-acknowledged difficulties and dislocations to come, it is not unreasonable to assume that the timing of this difficult transition was connected to a risk assessment that determined that the armed forces could undergo a period of reorganization and still be capable of dealing with any external military challenges that might need to be met.

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fiscal and operational reasons. It is politically contentious because of the negative impact on local economies, and often involves members of Congress who lobby on behalf of their constituents not to lose military installations in their districts.

## Brief concluding thoughts

### For the PLA: a long road ahead

The year 2020 is the target date the PLA has set for having its new organizations, processes, and joint command system in place. But, 2020 will not be a terminal point for the Chinese joint force. In some respects, 2020 may only be a starting point. Even when the new structures, organizations, and relationships are in place, it will probably take some time, perhaps years, to be able to exercise the new system efficiently. As the United States has learned, “jointness” takes practice and is an ever-evolving endeavor; it is a process, not an end point. Nevertheless, assuming that the PLA can make all of this work, when key dimensions of this reorganization are completed the PLA will likely be in a better place operationally than it is at the moment.

### For PLA specialists: a need to rebuild understanding

Our insights into and understanding of the Chinese defense establishment, carefully built over decades since “reform and opening up,” are about to change. We simply do not yet appreciate how *much* at this point. Specialists who follow Chinese military affairs will have to spend a lot of time trying to understand how this massive defense establishment is changing. They will then have to assess the impact on the various equities and interests at stake. Long-standing assumptions will need to be revisited — the PLA, like the rest of China, is entering a new era. Confidence levels will need to be revalidated, as what we have believed about the PLA in the past may no longer be true, or may not be true for much longer. Open minds will be the order of the day as the changes unfold.



## **For U.S. – China military relations: changes could be felt quickly**

The results of the reorganization will undoubtedly manifest very quickly in the relationship between the PLA and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD)—and with other militaries around the world, for that matter. Specifically, DOD will have to assess, ideally with the assistance of the PLA, how counterparts between the two military establishments have or have not changed, whether programs in motion will be affected by the disestablishment of certain national-level organizations, or whether *new* counterpart positions are now in play, given the creation of the PLA Army command organ, a joint staff under the CMC, and other entities.

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