

USCC Hearing
China's Military Transition
February 7, 2013
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Introduction

This statement is submitted to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission to address issues related to the transition to the new top military leadership in China. The statement addresses the composition of the new Central Military Commission, important factors in the selection of the leaders, and highlights salient elements in the backgrounds of specific leaders. The statement also addresses important factors of civil-military relations, including the relationship of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to China's top political leadership, potential reform of the military-region structure of the PLA, and the likely competition for budget resources.

Composition of the China's New Central Military Commission

As expected, new Chinese Communist Party general secretary *Xi Jinping* was appointed in November 2012 as the Central Military Commission (CMC) chairman. Additionally, army general *Fan Changlong* and air force general *Xu Qiliang* were promoted to positions as vice chairmen of the CMC—Fan from Jinan Military Region commander and Xu from PLA Air Force commander. Other members of the new CMC include General *Chang Wanquan*, who will become the next Minister of National Defense when that position is confirmed in early spring 2013; General *Fang Fenghui*, chief of the General Staff Department (GSD), who previously had been Beijing Military Region commander since 2007; General *Zhang Yang*, director of the General Political Department (GPD), who comes to the job from the Guangzhou Military Region political commissar position and is the first new GPD director in at least twenty years who was previously not a GPD deputy director; General *Zhao Keshi*, director of the General Logistics Department (GLD), formerly commander of the Nanjing Military Region; General *Zhang Youxia*, who is director of the General Armaments Department (GAD), the former commander of the Shenyang Military Region, and the son of a famous Chinese general who had served with Xi Jinping's father, making Zhang a "princeling"; Admiral *Wu Shengli*, commander of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy, retained the same position on the CMC despite expectations that he might become a CMC vice chairman; General *Ma Xiaotian*, commander of the PLA Air Force and formerly the deputy chief of general staff in charge of intelligence and foreign affairs; and General *Wei Fenghe*, commander of the Second Artillery, China's missile force. No civilian vice-chairman was appointed, but if past practice holds, China's 6th generation paramount leader could be appointed as a vice chair of the CMC at a future party Congress plenum.

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Changing Relationship Between the PLA and China's Communist Party?

The PLA remains firmly a “party army” in that the loyalty of China’s military is pledged to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In many respects, the close relationship between the PLA and the Chinese Communist Party reflects the reality that the PLA *is* the Party, or at least is comprised of senior Party leaders. Almost all officers above company grade are Party members. Moreover, throughout their careers, PLA generals and admirals have directed or been central to the party committees that exist at every level of command. Perhaps most importantly, all CMC members – as well as more than fifty of the next top sixty military leaders – are full or alternate members of the Central Committee of the CCP. The military is a large “bloc” within the Central Committee; over the last four Party Congresses PLA members have consistently been about a quarter of the total number of Central Committee members. Central Committee membership often is an indicator of future promotion for those in the deputy military region grade position. For instance, although he just became a vice chair of the CMC in November 2012, General Xu Qiliang was already an alternate Central Committee member in 1992 at the 14th Party Congress; he became a full member a decade later at the 16th Party Congress in 2002 when he was a deputy military region grade officer as the Shenyang Military Region air force commander.

PLA leaders in regional command and leadership positions have ample opportunities to interact with local party and government leaders through the various civil-military interactions. Additionally, China’s top military leaders usually command or serve as a political commissar in a different military region from the one in which they spent the bulk of their career, thereby increasing the opportunities to interact with local political leaders. (There are exceptions, of course. Zhang Yang spent his entire career in the Guangzhou Military Region, ultimately rising to the position of military-region political commissar. And Zhao Keshi was in the Nanjing Military Region for his entire career before becoming the military region commander.) Because the political and military promotion systems both funnel successful cadres to central leadership roles in Beijing, relationships formed at earlier points in a career often translate into more partnerships at senior levels.

Outside observers overlook this dynamic when they emphasize the loyalty that a new three-star full general must feel toward the general secretary that pinned on his last star, suggesting that PLA officers are “politicized” at the point of promotion. In fact, the nature of the Chinese system serves to ensure that political-military relationships are formed and strengthened at much earlier points in an

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officer's career. By the point in his career that a PLA officer becomes a member of the CMC, he will have had extensive personal and professional interactions with a variety of political and Party leaders, and he is himself, by virtue of his Central Committee status, a Party leader in his own right.

In this regard, it might be inconsequential that neither of the two new vice chairmen comes from a political commissar background (although according to his biography, General Fan did fill a tour as a company level commissar early in his career.) While the CMC has had vice chairman with "political" backgrounds during parts of the past twenty years, it is difficult to ascertain that one portfolio is necessarily "political." It is likely a mistake to conclude that the absence of an officer with a strict political commissar background as a vice chairman of the CMC means that the PLA has become less of a Party organization.

Did Xi Jinping's ascension to CMC Chairmanship differ from that of his predecessors?

To be sure, some aspects of the leadership change in the PLA caught observers unawares. Perhaps the biggest news was that Hu Jintao did not follow the practice of Jiang Zemin and retain his CMC chairmanship after relinquishing his role as general secretary of the Communist Party and ranking member on the Politburo Standing Committee, the highest collective leadership body in China. Whether this was the result of a back-room deal to limit the influence of retired top political leaders such as Jiang Zemin—either because Hu Jintao saw the wisdom of avoiding the "twin centers" problem in military leadership that he himself had faced or because Xi Jinping built an effective coalition to prevent Hu from remaining on—we don't know. We do have a sense, however, that consolidating authority under Xi might help avoid some of the civil-military challenges that plagued China in the early years of Hu's CMC chairmanship.

Xi Jinping does have experience, albeit limited, with the PLA before becoming CMC chairman. He spent time as a junior staff officer in the CMC General Office as a mishu (essentially an aide-de-camp) to then minister of defense Geng Biao from 1979-1982, and this no doubt provides him with perspective on the activities of the CMC at its highest levels. Additionally, in his various party roles, Xi has supervised PLA units and served on joint party-army committees. However, while he certainly exudes more charisma than the reserved Hu Jintao, the degree to which Xi is able to personally impact PLA priorities and modernization programs will remain difficult to assess, especially in these early days.

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Xi Jinping's activities and initiatives after he became civilian vice chairman of the CMC in October 2010 at the fifth plenum of the 17th Party Congress do not shed a great deal of light on what his priorities might be as Chairman. For instance, he met with military chiefs of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization countries in Beijing in April 2011; joined CMC Chairman Hu Jintao in a promotion ceremony for officers promoted to general in July 2011; and traveled to Tibet and inspected army troops in July 2011, among other activities.

How does the PLA influence Politburo Standing Committee deliberations and decisions? Does this apply for issues that are not strictly military in nature?

Since the venerable Admiral Liu Huaqing retired in 1992, the uniformed PLA has not had direct representation on the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC). Additionally, beginning with the 17th Party Congress in 2007 there is no longer representation of the PLA in the Secretariat of the Central Committee, which manages the daily workflow of the Party. Absent those two direct points of access, today there are two structural means by which the PLA can influence PSC deliberations and decisions: 1) through their regular interactions with Xi Jinping in his role as CMC Chairman, 2) via the uniformed members of the CMC who are members of the larger Politburo (Generals Fan Changlong and Xu Qiliang are both Politburo members) and 3) through PLA participation in PSC-level leading small groups (including foreign affairs, national security).

As a Party organization subordinate to the PSC, the CMC does not have a mandate to interact and coordinate with other elements of the PRC governmental structure. To be sure, China's Ministry of National Defense (MND) does sit on the State Council, and coordinates with other ministries of the Chinese government on issues such as conscription, mobilization, education and demobilization, among others. But little to no coordination appears to occur on issues related to national security policy and operations. Consequently, many analysts have concluded that the PLA generally regards itself as accountable only to the top party leadership, perhaps even only to the party general secretary, who is also CMC chairman. The absence of a mandate to coordinate – the notion of a Chinese-style inter-agency process remains a far-off possibility – has resulted in high degree of autonomy for the PLA in the execution of defense and national security-related operations and policies. Typical of this approach would be the response of then CMC vice chairman and army general Guo Boxiong to criticisms about the PLA's anti-satellite launch in January 2007. Guo downplayed the event's significance and

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waved off any risk of space debris, in essence conveying that reactions to the launch were overwrought in the West. In the process, General Guo displayed a surprising lack of regard for the second- order consequences of seemingly autonomous PLA decisions, such as the thousands of pieces of space debris created as a result of the operation, as well as an apparent lack of appreciation for these decisions' impact on other states.

The autonomy in execution that the PLA appears to possess has been construed in some corners to mean that the PLA that has "gone rogue" or is out of control of the Party. I don't believe this to be the case, in large part due to the symbiotic relationship of the top Party and military leadership I described earlier, but the impression alone creates a problem for the political leadership that seeks to downplay regional concerns of a China threat.

The PLA does not appear to have the ability or inclination to shape the deliberations and decisions of the PSC on issues other than on defense and national security.

Priorities for the New Leadership to Consider

What are the issues that face China's new military leadership and how might their strategic direction differ?

To be sure, a transition to new military leadership suggests the possibility of new approaches, but many of the issues that confront the new leadership remain the same as before. Nonetheless, some aspects warrant highlighting.

First, the composition of the CMC is more "joint" than ever before. General Xu Qiliang is the first air force general to be a vice chairman. When his successor as Air Force chief, General Ma Xiaotian, is added to PLA Navy commander Admiral Wu Shengli, the number of non-Army officers on the ten person CMC increases from two to three, the most ever. At one point prior to the transition before it became known that Admiral Wu would remain as Navy commander, it appeared that two of the top three positions in the PLA would be held by non-Army leaders. (Some informed speculation has suggested that Fan Changlong was "helicopter promoted" from Military Region command precisely so that an Army general would remain in one of the CMC vice chairs.)

The increased number of air force and navy representation on the CMC notwithstanding, the PLA remains an army-dominated force, especially at the top

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leadership levels. Seven of the ten CMC leaders are army generals, all general department directors are army generals, and all seven military-region commanders are army generals as well. Indeed, nearly three-quarters of the fifty-odd top ranking officers in the PLA are army officers.

Second, the direction of PLA modernization likely will remain focused on the “goals and tasks of China's national defense in the new era” as outlined in the 2010 Defense White Paper. These goals are listed as:

- Safeguarding national sovereignty, security and interests of national development.
- Maintaining social harmony and stability.
- Accelerating the modernization of national defense and the armed forces, particularly to “attain major progress in informationization by 2020”.
- Maintaining world peace and stability.

While the new leaders are unlikely to reshape the aforementioned goals and tasks, they do bring their own particular background and experiences to these roles. For instance, General Fan Changlong was widely regarded as a top-notch commander who led important military exercises, spearheaded the PLA's operational response to the 2008 earthquake, and achieved key modernization initiatives in the Jinan Military Region. Those experiences could add impetus to further operational and doctrinal reforms.

General Xu Qiliang has been an advocate for advanced concepts of air force deployment, and promoted a strong role for the PLA air force in China's space program. He could contribute to an evolving PLA aerospace capability and doctrinal development.

Additionally, both leaders have extensive background in Northeast China's Shenyang Military Region bordering North Korea. General Xu commanded the military region's air force and General Fan spent 30 years in the MR, rising to the position of military-region chief of staff before taking command of the Jinan Military Region in 2004. While we might be tempted to conclude that North Korea's uncertain prospects prompted China's top political leaders to promote two leaders with on-the-ground experience in Shenyang, this analytical approach might overlook other factors in the selection process, including a desire to balance the geographic origins of the top military leadership. For instance, five of seven military regions are represented on the Central Military Commission.

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Modernization Issues with Civil-Military Implications

Even as the PLA continues its path of modernization, influenced and tweaked by the new leaders perhaps but not fundamentally altered, there are two additional issues that will have important bearing on the overall trajectory of PLA modernization. These are deliberations about 1) whether and how to undertake military-region restructuring and 2) the competition between the services for resources.

Military Region Restructuring

The impetus to undertake structural reform that goes beyond the tactical and operational-level restructuring of the last decade to address fundamental military-region structural reform is likely to grow in intensity. The current structure evokes the pre-modernization period in which PLA ground forces were essentially static garrison forces whose chief role was to carry out sectoral defense of Chinese territory and internal security and stability missions. However, China's regional security situation has changed dramatically from the 1950's: it faces no imminent military threat on its borders and the strategic challenge from the Soviet Union has been replaced with multilateral confidence building mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and clearly demarcated borders. In short, the defense against external threats rationale for the current military region structure has largely gone away.

Reform of the existing structure would doubtless be a complex process, which would likely include an evaluation of strategic and regional security as well as the domestic security situation, assessments of the capabilities of existing units and structures, and alignment of units with the roles and missions that a modified structure might permit. The potential outcomes that might be considered range from reducing the number of military regions from seven to five (or less) all the way to consideration of an entirely functional capabilities structure.

An updated capabilities-based structure could more easily accomplish a variety of tasks, including the positioning of forces capable of responding to border contingencies and projecting land power around China's periphery. A capabilities-based structure also presents opportunities to reduce redundant or superfluous forces and organizational structures, allowing for resource reallocation or savings. And ground-force exercise patterns of the last several years have demonstrated that cross military region operations are increasingly becoming the norm, suggesting that fixed military region boundaries may become less relevant, which

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could be the first step in a restructuring process.

The outcome of this debate will have important ramifications for the degree to which the PLA, particularly the ground forces, becomes more expeditionary. However, the debate will hinge on much more than a clear-eyed assessment of roles, missions and capabilities of the PLA in the new era because the military-region structure serves more roles than simply to help prepare for operational contingencies. Indeed, the military-region structure is a central feature of civil-military relations in China and would not easily be changed. The provincial military districts and their subordinate military districts and sub-districts perform critical civil-military roles related to mobilization for national defense, disaster relief, civil defense, conscription and demobilization and thus represent entrenched bureaucracies that might prove difficult to dislodge. And as mentioned above, it is at the provincial-military region level where important political-military relationships are often initially formed. Thus, any significant changes to the military-region structure are likely to be contentious events.

Nonetheless, the pressure from a purely military and operational perspective to begin reform will likely intensify during this CMC's tenure. Although five new CMC members come directly from military-region commander or political commissar postings, it might be hasty to conclude that they are either solid supporters of the status quo or ardent reformers. In any case, their recent experiences as military-region commanders will doubtless inform their thinking.

Second, related to but distinct from military-region restructuring, we may also see intra-PLA struggles between the land forces, surging navy, Second Artillery, and air force over resources and priorities. This dynamic would intensify in future years if downward budget pressures on defense expenditures come to pass. The land forces still constitute the bulk of the PLA (some 60% of manpower, units, resources), serve as the Communist Party's link to its revolutionary past, and are charged with the fundamental national security missions of defending China's sovereignty and the rule of the Communist Party. Yet, as we have seen, the number of ground forces in place to carry out these missions is outsized for the tasks themselves, suggesting an opportunity for further realignment of forces. This realignment, or "rebalancing" between the army, navy, air force, and Second Artillery, becomes more justifiable as the PLA looks to secure China's national security interests on a global scale.

In many respects, the allocation of resources between the services will provide insight into how expeditionary China's CMC hopes the PLA will become. An

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outsider can easily conjure up a variety of scenarios and approaches through which a future PLA might seek to project power—for instance, from a modest regional power- projection posture in which land forces still play a significant role, all the way to a full-scale global capability in which a blue water navy and robust air force and Second Artillery (the latter of which might be promoted to a full service) are more prominent. Will we see a more joint orientation? Will the regional air forces and fleets come out from under their subordination to the military regions, perhaps adopting an “expeditionary force” model of air strike groups with a mix of fighters, bombers, and early-warning aircraft? Moreover, might the PLA Air Force contest for a role in managing China’s space mission, currently controlled by the GAD and GSD, as the country seeks to pursue its aerospace strategy of “integrated air and space operations, being prepared for simultaneous offensive and defensive operations”?

There is good reason to believe these issues are being debated internally though there is limited evidence of the debate. But as with the case of military region restructuring, the ultimate outcome will be a result of much more than just a consideration of the military factors involved. Domestic politics and the competition between services, albeit if different in character from that of Western democracies, will play a huge, even decisive role in the final determination of programmatic requirements and budgets. And we can expect that the competition between the services will manifest itself in the tenor of civil-military relations in coming years.

China's new military leaders attitudes toward foreign powers and international experience.

At this early juncture, it is difficult to ascertain the specific views that new leaders might have toward foreign powers, especially the United States. We know that CMC Chairman Xi Jinping apparently has fond memories of his visit to Muscatine, Iowa in the 1980's, memories that were warmed during his return visit last year. The two new vice chairman also have had some exposure to the U.S. Fan Changlong made an official visit to the United States in September 2011 as the leader of the Jinan Military Region delegation. General Xu Qiliang visited the US in 1997 as Chief of Staff, PLA Air Force. As commander of the PLA Air Force, he was supposed to visit the US in 2008, but that trip was cancelled due to the Sichuan earthquake. (The last PLA Air Force commander official visit to the U.S. occurred in 1995; the U.S. Chief of Staff of the Air Force visited China in 1998.) More recently, General Xu met with a delegation of retired US admirals

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and generals in December 2012.

The degree to which these visits resulted in positive views toward the U.S. is even more difficult to know, and may not matter a great deal, because of the degree to which the individual views of top leaders are constrained within China's collective leadership model. While positive views of the U.S. would be nice, we should also be looking for a clearer understanding of the U.S. that would inform their views articulated in internal "debates" or "discussions" to the extent they take place among CMC members.

What impact will the domestic political corruption scandals in the last year have on the CMC and the PLA?

As a political structure that is subordinate to the Party, the political corruption events of the past year will inevitably have an impact on the PLA. Already, we have seen the promulgation of new regulations that limit the ability of PLA leaders to engage in extravagant activities at banquets or during travel. While largely symbolic, the new rules suggest a more restrictive environment for military leaders. Moreover, the widely publicized intra-PLA anti-corruption efforts like those led by General Logistics Department Political Commissar Liu Yuan imply that the PLA leaders are under scrutiny like their political counterparts. What will be interesting to watch is whether the anti-corruption efforts make headway against some of the pernicious "pay for promotion" schemes that are allegedly rampant within the PLA.

The much-discussed "princeling" phenomenon may also be relevant to this issue. Military princelings, the children or in-laws of current or former political or military leaders, were "born red" after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and are often well connected with political cadres of similar lineage. Of the new slate of CMC leaders, CMC vice chairman Xu Qiliang is the son of the late air force lieutenant general Xu Lefu; PLA air force chief Ma Xiaotian is the son of Ma Zaiyao, former dean of the Political Institute of the PLA; and the new GLD director, Zhang Youxia, is the son of General Zhang Zongwun, a revolutionary general. But not all eligible princelings were promoted. For instance, neither General Liu Yuan, political commissar of the General Logistics Department and the son of former state president Liu Shaoqi, nor Zhang Haiyang, political commissar of the Chengdu Military Region and the son of legendary general Zhang Zhen, was selected to become director of the General Political Department, despite both being highly rated candidates. While some candidates

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might suppose that their princeling connections with deposed Chongqing leader Bo Xilai doomed their prospects for promotion, other factors may have played a role as well. In General Liu's case, for instance, the zeal with which he pursued a high-profile anti-corruption campaign, which resulted in the sacking of Lieutenant General Gu Junshan, deputy director of the GLD, may have alarmed some leaders enough to prevent his promotion. The reality is that not everyone can be promoted to a limited number of positions, and a candidate's princeling connections appear to be only one of several determining factors in how new leaders were selected.

Do you foresee a changing role for the Ministry of National Defense?

In short, I do not anticipate fundamental changes to the functions of the Ministry of National Defense (MND). Rather, I see an evolution of functions and inclusion of new roles in keeping with the traditional externally-focused role of the MND. The PRC's Ministry of National Defense has always been the "face of the PLA" to foreign militaries and the outside world. Its traditional roles have centered around the management of the PLA's international relations, via the MND Foreign Affairs Office. These include high-level interactions, functional military professional visits, strategic dialogues, and so on. In recent years the MND has added an Information office /spokesperson office which manages the public image of the PLA and disseminates periodic multi-lingual information updates (the office is staffed by former MND Foreign Affairs Officers) and a Peacekeeping Center which manages China's participation in UN-sponsored peacekeeping missions. Both functions are essentially in line with the historic foreign affairs functions of the PLA in that they manage some international aspects of the PLA.

Within the PLA branches and services, have there been any leadership or organizational changes with particular strategic significance?

The most interesting development was that Admiral Wu Shengli retained his position as Commander of the PLA Navy, and as a result, remained a CMC member, rather than become one of the two uniformed vice-chairman of the CMC. The speculation as to why he did not move up includes several possibilities such as his contentment with continuing to shape the development of the PLA Navy, or that the bureaucratically entrenched and ground force-centric PLA was unable to contemplate two non-Army CMC vice chairmen.