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Gray Dragons: Assessing China's Senior Military Leadership

by Joel Wuthnow



Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs
Institute for National Strategic Studies
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Cover image: Chinese People's Liberation Army members and military delegates arrive at Great Hall of the People ahead of fifth session of 12th National People's Congress in Beijing, China, March 5, 2017
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Gray Dragons

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Executive Summary

This report analyzes more than 300 biographies of senior Chinese military officers from 2015 and 2021 to assess the composition, demographics, and career patterns of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) leadership. Key findings include the following points.

- The PLA is a conservative institution whose leaders waited their turn and achieved success in their services, and who have similar personal backgrounds.
 - ✦ Average senior PLA officers rose patiently through the ranks over the course of careers spanning more than four decades; there were few opportunities for “fast burners” to achieve quicker success. Central Military Committee (CMC) Chairman Xi Jinping has not skipped over a generation of people who had waited their turn to promote young Turks more familiar with modern conflict.
 - ✦ The surest paths to success were in senior service positions. Joint experience was not common—the PLA has not implemented its own version of the U.S. Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 mandate that officers become joint duty qualified.
 - ✦ Senior officers were homogenous in terms of age, education, gender, and ethnicity. Xi has not looked to a broader pool of talent to fill the senior ranks.
 - ✦ Leadership selections protect the institutional equities of different interest groups within the PLA.
 - ✦ There is a close correlation between service representation at the apex of the PLA hierarchy and manpower share in the PLA. No service is punching above or below its weight in China's military leadership.

- Senior PLA leaders are drawn relatively equally from the 5 theater commands and 13 group armies. Even though it is responsible for Taiwan, the Eastern Theater Command cannot be described as a “cradle of the generals.” This system ensures that the interests of different parts of the PLA are represented at a high level.
 - ✦ An increasing share of PLA officers are assigned to service headquarters, where they can be expected to lobby for their services' interests and bureaucratic agendas.

- PLA reforms left the army in a dominant position but increased opportunities for navy, air force, and Rocket Force officers to become senior leaders.

- ✦ Xi oversaw a massive overhaul of the PLA that resulted in the army suffering a decline of about 20 percent of its end strength. That service saw its share of senior leaders cut by roughly the same percentage.
- ✦ There have been some notable cases of non-PLA Army officers being appointed to senior positions, including theater commander and political commissar. Nevertheless, the army remains the dominant service in manpower and leadership representation. By contrast, the U.S. military has a more even service representation across key Joint Staff and combatant command assignments.

- PLA officers must continue to be responsive to Xi and the Chinese Communist Party.
 - ✦ All PLA officers are members of the Chinese Communist Party and must have enough political acumen to demonstrate loyalty to Xi and his agenda.
 - ✦ Xi has been personally involved in selections through his position as CMC chairman and has increased his control through anti-corruption investigations. Also, officers are rotated geographically to prevent patronage networks.
 - ✦ The top 25 or so senior officers serve on the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and in the National People's Congress, where they provide military advice and look after PLA equities.

- Future PLA operations could be hampered by officers with narrow perspectives.
 - ✦ Senior PLA officers tend to stay not only within their own services but also in their assigned functional areas. Operational commanders, for instance, rarely have career-broadening experience in logistics, and vice versa.
 - ✦ Relatively few officers in theater command positions have served in the CMC bureaucracy or in service headquarters.
 - ✦ Rigidity in PLA assignments could reduce China's effectiveness in future conflicts—especially those requiring a high level of jointness and adaptability, like the war that Russia launched against Ukraine in 2022—if Chinese military leaders lack perspectives beyond their own service, specialty, and department.

- Some change is inevitable over the next decade, but the PLA will find it difficult to overturn traditions to promote a new model of PLA officer.
 - ✦ The current cohort of PLA leadership is a transitional generation whose formative experiences were in the late Cold War period. Their successors will have

“grown up” in the post–Cold War era when the PLA was more focused on regional contingencies.

- ✦ Future leaders will have more experience with advanced technology and operational concepts. They may also be more confident in China’s capabilities and favor more risk-acceptant approaches to conflict.
- ✦ Nevertheless, producing a fundamentally different type of senior PLA officer would require the kind of changes to service traditions and organizational culture that have proved difficult even for the United States more than three decades after Goldwater-Nichols.

Introduction

Under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary and Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman Xi Jinping, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been transformed into a modern warfighting force with advanced capabilities and a revised organizational structure better suited for high-end joint operations.¹ But for militaries to be operationally effective, modernization and reform must be complemented by skilled leaders.² For years, the PLA has complained that its officers suffer from mediocre leadership abilities.³ To improve the situation, these officers have been given increasing experience with “combat-realistic” training and new educational programs focused on combat and management skills.⁴ Xi has also waged an extensive campaign against corruption, pledging that promotions—instead of being bought and sold by corrupt officials—would be based on officers’ “ability of leading soldiers to fight and win battles.”⁵

However, the reforms did not involve a radical transformation of the PLA's senior leadership. An older generation of officers whose formative experiences dated from the Cold War was placed in charge of the new organizations. Officers with stronger joint qualifications—referring to experience leading troops outside their own service or planning joint operations—were not prioritized.⁶ The surest paths to success remained in one's own service's chain of command. Officers also basically stayed in rigid career tracks, with commanders, for instance, having little exposure to logistics. Political qualifications, whether in terms of remaining a member in good standing in the CCP or demonstrating loyalty to Xi, were essential to survival and advancement. Consistency with the past reflected Xi's need to make do with the officers he had on hand, a desire to keep faith with an older generation who waited their turn, and traditions rooted in service culture and politics.

Nevertheless, the PLA leadership is seeing incipient changes, and more are likely in the coming decades. Naval and air force officers now occupy a larger share of senior billets; the ground forces have been the “biggest loser” of the reforms in terms of officer assignments.⁷ The retirement of the current CMC after the 20th Party Congress in October 2022 will set in motion a transition to a new generation of officers with formative experiences after the Cold War. New training, educational, and organizational arrangements in the post-reform military mean that younger officers will have different skills than their predecessors. The CMC's recent adoption of new officer guidelines covering the assignment system could indicate changes in career management, which might emphasize joint and cross-functional experience.⁸ Deeper changes,

however, would require the sort of cultural shift in the PLA that has proven elusive even in the U.S. military after Goldwater-Nichols.⁹

This report surveys patterns in the senior PLA leadership, defined as the top 100 to 200 military officers, during the Xi era. It asks: How have reforms affected the basic structure and composition of the military leadership? What are its demographic patterns? What kinds of professional experience have officers gained during their careers? What are the dominant pathways toward the PLA's senior-most positions? How can we describe the influence of Party membership and political indoctrination on leadership development? What is Xi's role in the process, and what influence do patronage networks have?

The literature on the PLA leadership has been confined to studies by a small coterie of experts who closely follow appointments. Most research has focused on profiles of individual PLA officers or small groups selected on the basis of promotion ceremonies.¹⁰ There have been only a few larger studies over the past 20 years—which typically covered only certain segments of the leadership, such as military region leaders and naval commanders—and most were completed prior to the structural overhaul of the PLA that began at the end of 2015.¹¹ A final problem is that these reports usually assess leadership only at a specific point in time, making it difficult to understand whether there have been changes over time and if the current leaders are normal or exceptional by historical standards.

This report offers a comprehensive assessment of the entire top echelon of PLA leaders in 2021, numbering 155 officers. It compares qualities possessed by those officers with those of the last cohort to occupy senior positions prior to the reforms, in 2015, which totaled 182 officers. Biographies were systematically compiled on the basis of details available in Chinese media and cross-referenced against annual U.S. Department of Defense publications on Chinese military personalities.¹² Generally, the report focuses on officers at theater command (TC) deputy leader grade and above, as shown in table 1, because biographical data are most complete for these personnel.¹³ The focus was on the past 10 years of their careers, which are most consistently documented in open sources, and not on their earlier experiences. The report does not make specific predictions for individual promotions but identifies key patterns and sets a baseline for analyzing future changes.

The report proceeds in five sections. The first describes the structure of the PLA leadership in terms of billets, service composition, and ratios of officers assigned to different components of the PLA. The second describes key demographic patterns, including formative experiences, average age, career lengths, educational backgrounds, and gender and ethnicity. The third section turns to career patterns, discussing the frequency of officer rotations, career

Table 1. PLA Grade Structure

Grade	Primary Rank	Secondary Rank
CMC chairman [军委主席, <i>junwei zhuxi</i>] Vice chairman [军委副主席, <i>junwei fu zhuxi</i>]	N/A GEN [上将, <i>shangjiang</i>]	N/A
CMC member [军委委员, <i>junwei weiyuan</i>]	GEN [上将, <i>shangjiang</i>]	
TC leader [正战区职, <i>zheng zhanqu zhi</i>] Former MR leader [正大军区职, <i>zheng da junqu zhi</i>]	GEN [上将, <i>shangjiang</i>]	LTG [中将, <i>zhongjiang</i>]
TC deputy leader [副战区职, <i>fu zhanqu zhi</i>] Former MR deputy leader [副大军区职, <i>fu da junqu zhi</i>]	LTG [中将, <i>zhongjiang</i>]	MG [少将, <i>shaojiang</i>]
Corps leader [正军职, <i>zheng jun zhi</i>]	MG [少将, <i>shaojiang</i>]	LTG [中将, <i>zhongjiang</i>]
Corps deputy leader [副军职, <i>fu jun zhi</i>]	MG [少将, <i>shaojiang</i>]	SCOL [大校, <i>daxiao</i>]
Division leader [正师职, <i>zheng shi zhi</i>]	SCOL [大校, <i>daxiao</i>]	MG [少将, <i>shaojiang</i>]
Division deputy leader [副师职, <i>fu shi zhi</i>]	COL [上校, <i>shangxiao</i>]	SCOL [大校, <i>daxiao</i>]
Regiment leader [正团职, <i>zheng tuan zhi</i>]	COL [上校, <i>shangxiao</i>]	LTC [中校, <i>zhongxiao</i>]
Regiment deputy leader [副团职, <i>fu tuan zhi</i>]	LTC [中校, <i>zhongxiao</i>]	MAJ [少校, <i>shaoxiao</i>]
Battalion leader [正营职, <i>zheng ying zhi</i>]	MAJ [少校, <i>shaoxiao</i>]	LTC [中校, <i>zhongxiao</i>]
Battalion deputy leader [副营职, <i>fu ying zhi</i>]	CPT [上尉, <i>shangwei</i>]	MAJ [少校, <i>shaoxiao</i>]
Company leader [正连职, <i>zheng lian zhi</i>]	CPT [上尉, <i>shangwei</i>]	1LT [中尉, <i>zhongwei</i>]
Company deputy leader [副连职, <i>fu lian zhi</i>]	1LT [中尉, <i>zhongwei</i>]	CPT [上尉, <i>shangwei</i>]
Platoon leader [排职, <i>pai zhi</i>]	2LT [少尉, <i>shao wei</i>]	1LT [中尉, <i>zhongwei</i>]

Source: Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, "A New Step Forward in PLA Professionalism," *China Brief* 21 no. 5 (March 2021), 15.

Note: The PLA refers to navy admirals as "navy generals"; hence the lack of U.S. Navy terminology in the ranks.

movement across geographic and functional boundaries, joint experience, and pathways to becoming a CMC member, service commander, and theater commander. The fourth section discusses the political dimensions of the senior leadership, including political indoctrination, the role of Xi and *guanxi* networks, and concurrent positions in civilian Party organs. The final

section considers the implications for China's military effectiveness and develops indicators for assessing whether, and to what degree, the leadership is moving in a new direction.

Structure of the PLA Leadership

The PLA senior leadership consists of the military's top 100 to 200 officers, who sit at the apex of an officer corps in the hundreds of thousands and an active-duty PLA of 2 million.¹⁴ They occupy the top 4 of the PLA's 15 officer grades, as depicted in table 2, and hold senior positions in each of the PLA's three major components: the CMC and its subordinate departments, the services, and the TCs, as shown in figure 1. They are similar in importance to U.S. three- and four-star officers.¹⁵ Like all PLA officers, senior leaders have both a grade and a rank, but the former is the primary determinant of status and authority—officers at a higher grade are always superior to those at a lower grade, but the same is not always the case with rank.¹⁶ Grade and rank promotions have typically occurred on different cycles, but beginning in 2021, the PLA was taking steps toward holding promotions at the same time.¹⁷ Promotions at this level require approval from Xi in his role as CMC chair, with selectees recommended by the political work system.¹⁸

Before they reach the senior levels, PLA officers progress systematically through the lower grades. Upon commissioning, they are categorized into five specialties—military affairs, political, logistics, equipment, and technical specialist.¹⁹ This model has been in place since the 1980s, but 2021 reforms made an adjustment to the first category, which has been rebranded as “command and management officers” [指挥管理军官].²⁰ The addition of the phrase “management” [管理] reflected the bifurcation of authority by which the TCs are in the operational chain of command and the service headquarters have been confined to management functions, though in practice officers in this specialty continue to rotate between the TCs and the service headquarters (more on this below). Depending on their billet, they may lead troops (in the TCs) or focus more on “force building” (in the services).

The major structural reforms that took place in the PLA beginning in late 2015 had several implications for the structure and responsibilities of the officer corps. Prior to the reforms, grades were well aligned with the PLA organizational structure: division leaders, for instance, typically led divisions as commanders or political commissars. However, the replacement of a four-tiered (corps-division-regiment-battalion) with a three-tiered (corps-brigade-battalion) model that covered most of the ground forces and some of the air force, combined with the retention of a system of 15 officer grades, implied that officers would need to spend more time in staff positions before being eligible for promotion to the next command level.

Table 2. Positions Associated with the Top Four PLA Grades (March 2021)

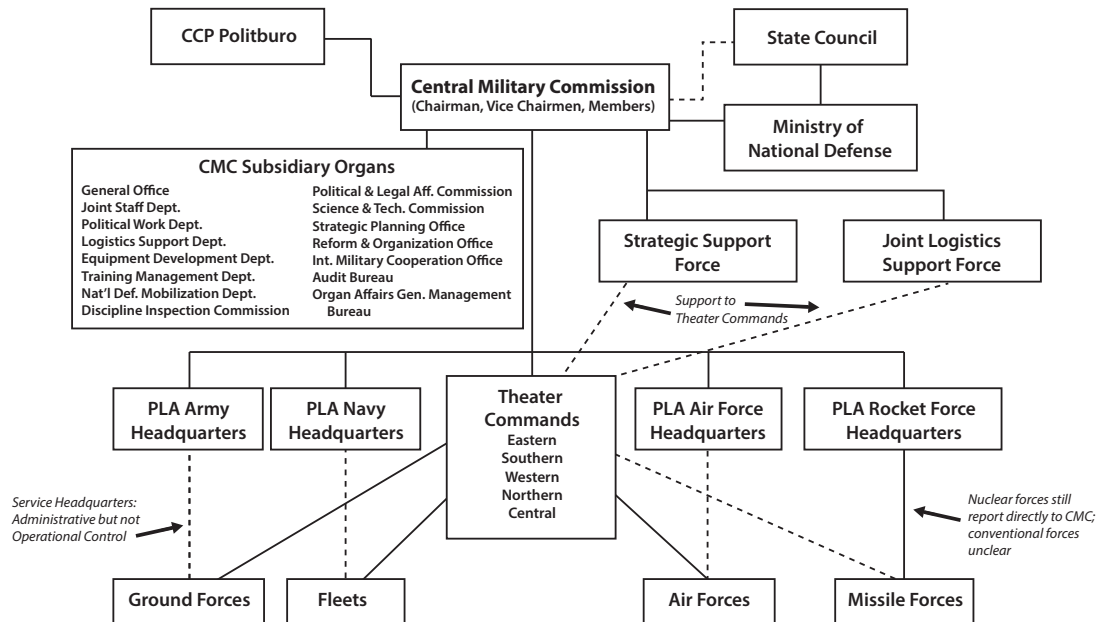
Grade	CMC Positions	TC Positions	Service Positions
CMC Vice Chairman	CMC Vice Chairman (2)		
CMC Member	Joint Staff Dept. Chief of Staff, Political Work Dept. Director, Defense Minister, Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary		
TC Leader	Equipment Development Dept. Director, Logistic Support Dept. Director/PC, NDU/AMS Commandant	TC Commander and PC (10)	Service Commander and PC (including SSF) (10)
TC Deputy Leader	General Office Director, Joint Staff Dept. Deputy Chief of Staff, Political Work Dept. Deputy Director, Logistic Support Dept. Deputy Director, Equipment Development Dept. Deputy Director, Training and Administration Dept. Director, National Defense Mobilization Dept. Director, Discipline Inspection Commission Deputy Secretary, Science and Technology Commission Director, Political and Legal Affairs Commission Director, NDU Deputy Commandant, NDU PC, AMS PC and Deputy PC	TC Deputy Commander and Deputy PC (~10), TC Chief of Staff (5), TC Political Work Dept. Director (5), MR Transition Office Director and PC (~10)	JLSF Commander and PC, Service Deputy Commander and Deputy PC, Service Staff Dept. Chief of Staff (5), Service Political Work Dept. Director (5), Service Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary (5), Tibet and Xinjiang Military District Commanders and PCs, Beijing Garrison Commander, and PC

Key: AMS: Academy of Military Sciences; CMC: Central Military Commission; JLSF: Joint Logistic Support Force; NDU: National Defense University; PC: Political Commissar; SSF: Strategic Support Force.

Note: Grades for some positions continue to change. For instance, in January 2022, the CMC Logistic Support Dept. political commissar was downgraded to TC deputy leader. Thanks to Rod Lee for this observation.

There were also several implications for the PLA’s senior leadership.²¹ The following sections review three effects. First, the reforms meant that the number of senior billets declined by more than 10 percent, showing that the senior leadership was not immune to the large cuts to the PLA carried out under Xi. Second, the share of ground force officers in senior positions declined by more than 20 percent, while the other services saw gains, cutting into the army’s

Figure 1. PLA Structure After the Reform



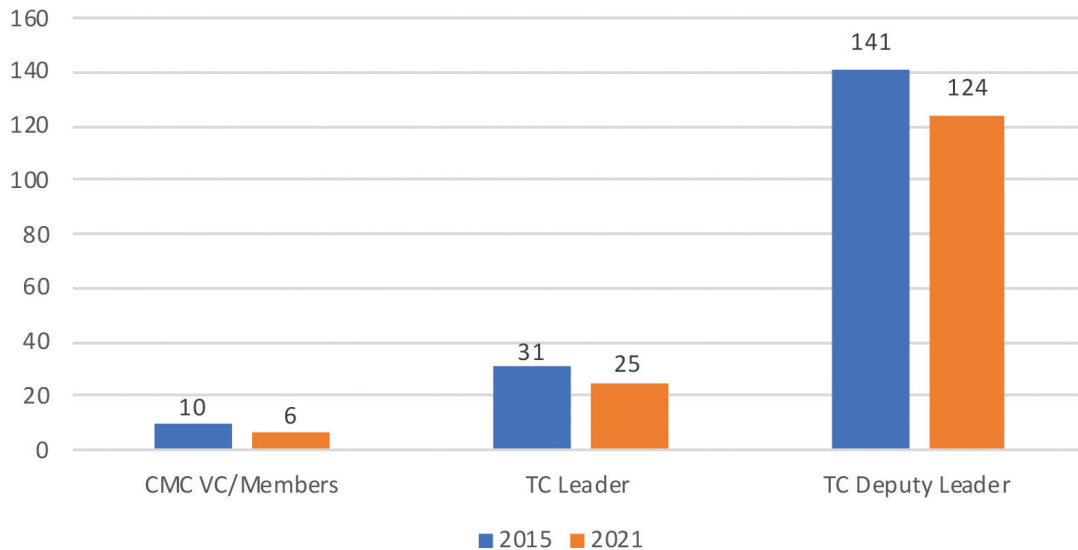
Source: Joel Wutnow and Phillip C. Saunders, *Chinese Military Reform in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications*, CSCMA Strategic Perspectives 10 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2017).

traditional dominance of key positions. Third, a larger percentage of senior officers are serving in service headquarters, which could have implications for interservice rivalry in the future.

PLA Reforms Have Led to a Smaller Senior Officer Corps

One consequence of the structural overhaul was a smaller number of senior officer billets. In 2015, 182 officers were serving in TC deputy leader and above grades, whereas in 2021, the figure had declined to 155, as shown in figure 2. The 13 percent reduction corresponded to the overall reduction in PLA manpower that occurred during the same time frame, from 2.3 million to 2 million personnel. The senior leadership was not spared from the reformers' desire to cut the officer corps—PLA reports suggested that more than half of the 300,000-person reduction came from the officer ranks.²² After the reform, some senior leaders whose positions disappeared were temporarily reassigned to positions at equivalent grades (such as in new TC deputy leader grade “military region transition offices”) but allowed to retire at the normal retirement ages.²³ (The PLA also established mechanisms to identify civilian positions for junior or mid-level PLA officers who were required to leave active duty before retirement.²⁴)

Figure 2. PLA Senior Officers, by Grade (2015 and 2021)



Leadership reductions also involved the CMC itself. When Xi became CMC chairman in 2012, the CMC included 10 uniformed officers. Following the October 2017 19th Party Congress, that number dropped to six.²⁵ The directors of the Equipment Development Department and Logistic Support Department were removed, as were the navy, air force, and Rocket Force commanders. Remaining were two vice chairmen, the leaders of the Joint Staff Department (JSD) and the Political Work Department, and the defense minister. An addition was the director of the PLA Discipline Inspection Commission, underscoring Xi’s focus on anti-corruption as a tool of political control.²⁶

The reforms also led to a net loss of more than 20 TC leader and TC deputy leader positions.²⁷ The consolidation of seven military regions into five TCs resulted in 4 fewer TC leader billets and about 16 fewer TC deputy leader billets.²⁸ The conversion of 4 general departments into 15 smaller CMC departments, commissions, and offices had a similar effect; there were nine TC deputy leader and above billets in the General Armament Department in 2015, for instance, but only three in its successor department in 2021. Other positions were downgraded, such as JSD assistant chiefs of staff moving down a level to corps leader billets.²⁹ In 2022, several additional TC deputy leader billets, such as deputy directors of the CMC Logistic Support Department and the commander and political commissar of the Beijing Garrison, were reduced to corps leader positions, suggesting that the senior leadership continues to contract.³⁰ The PLA

National Defense University (NDU) and Academy of Military Sciences were downgraded to TC deputy leader organizations, losing 10 senior positions in the process.³¹ Another eight TC deputy leader billets will be lost when the military region “transition offices” are closed.³² PLA officers, in short, must now compete for fewer positions at the top of the pyramid.

The Ground Force’s Dominance of the Senior Leadership Has Diminished

A second consequence of the reforms was redistribution of the share of senior positions held by the services. The PLA was long an army-dominant organization, with ground force officers holding most key positions in the general departments and military regions (though, in a symbolic gesture of “jointness,” the service chiefs were added to the CMC in 2004). In some ways, the army remains more influential in PLA decisionmaking than the other services. Of the six individuals on the 2017–2022 CMC, four were career army officers (although two members—Zhang Shengmin and Miao Hua—subsequently transferred to the Rocket Force and navy, respectively, as political officers). Most of the 15 CMC departments, commissions, and offices have also been led by army officers. Moreover, in terms of force composition, the ground forces remain the largest PLA service, holding a double-digit advantage in personnel share over the navy and air force.

To posture the PLA more effectively for future operations in the maritime and aerospace domains, however, reformers reduced the size of the ground forces, which absorbed the bulk of the 300,000 cuts, while increasing navy, air force, and Rocket Force personnel strength.³³ There was a corresponding redistribution of service representation in senior positions, as shown in figure 3. Notably, the share of ground force officers at the TC deputy leader and above grades dropped from 69 percent in 2015 to 48 percent in 2021, mirroring nearly exactly the decline in the army’s share of total manpower. Perhaps the biggest winner was the Rocket Force, which saw its share double (from 4 percent to 8 percent), while the navy and air force also saw gains.

An example of the army’s declining influence can be found in key joint operations positions, namely those within the JSD and the TCs.³⁴ Prior to the reforms, the army dominated these roles through its leadership of the former General Staff Department and the military regions. However, as figure 4 indicates, the army’s share of TC leader grade billets in the successor organizations declined from 90 percent to 75 percent. Navy and air force officers became theater commanders for the first time in 2017, though by late 2021, all five theaters were once again led by army officers.³⁵ At the TC deputy leader level, the percentage of army officers saw an even steeper decline, from nearly 80 percent to 43 percent. This reflected an influx of navy and air force officers as theater deputy commanders (see appendix 4) and in other TC deputy

Figure 3. PLA Senior Officers, by Service (2015 and 2021)(%)

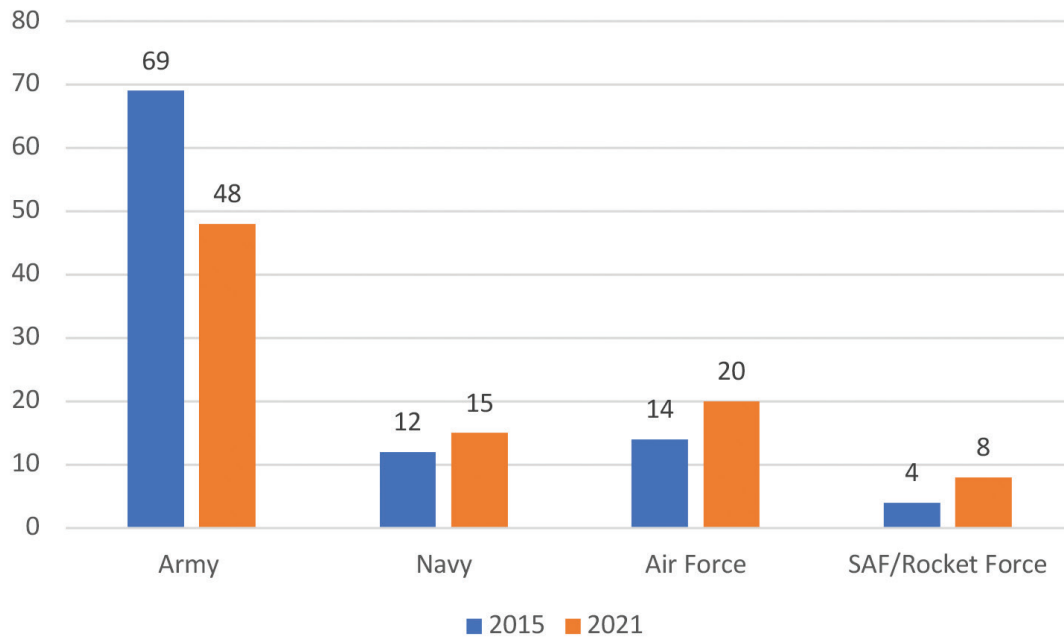
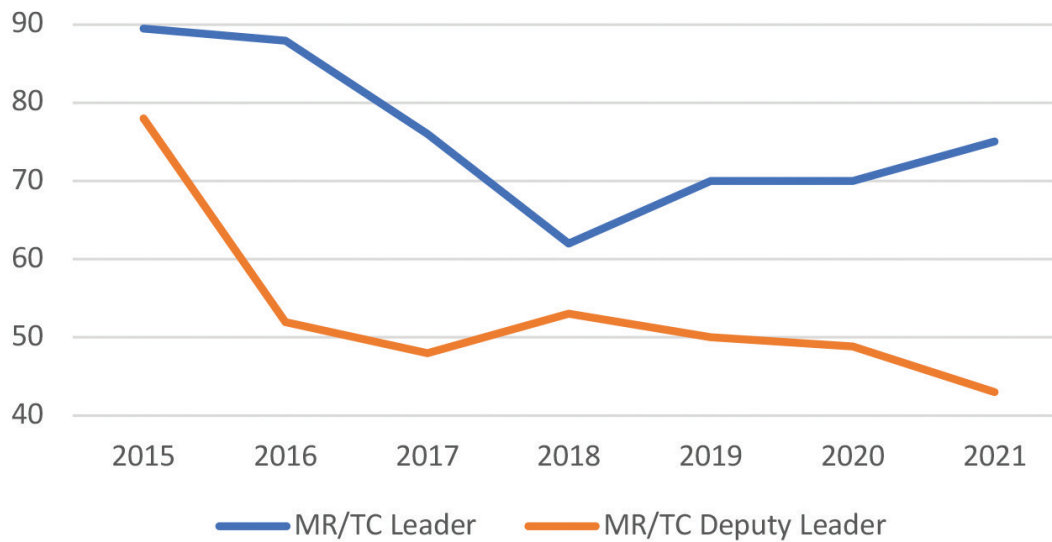


Figure 4. Ground Force Officers in Key Joint Operations Positions (2015–2021) (%)



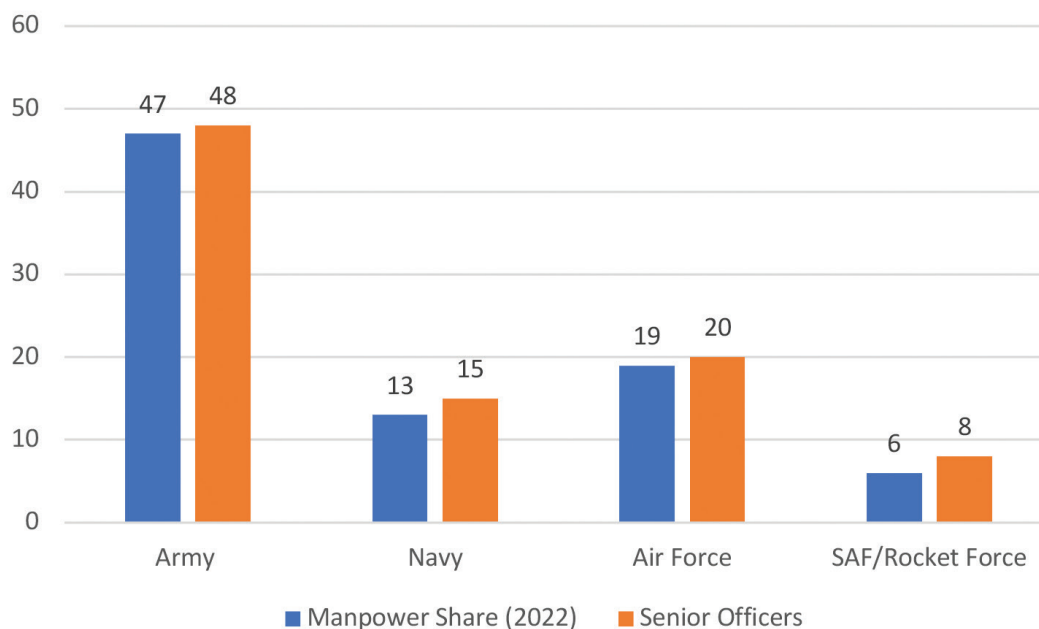
leader roles such as theater chief of staff.³⁶ At the corps leader level, non-army officers have also been appointed as provincial military district commanders, marking a precedent that could undermine the army’s traditional dominance in these roles.³⁷

The distribution of senior positions across services remained closely aligned with the service composition of the PLA. As depicted in figure 5, there was no more than a two-point differential between a service’s share of total manpower and its share of senior positions in 2021. No service was punching above (or below) its weight in the senior leadership.

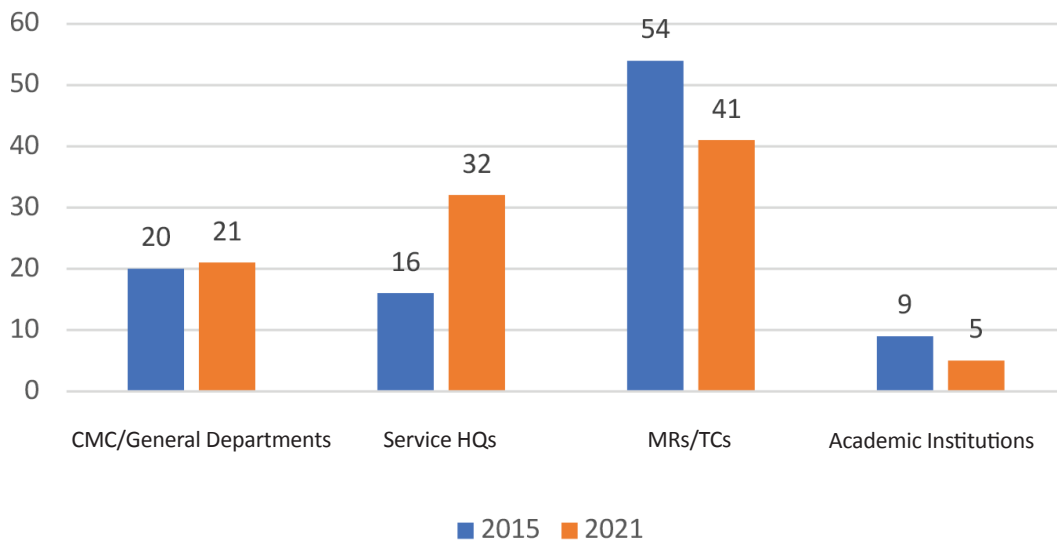
A Greater Share of the Post-Reform PLA Leadership Is in Service Headquarters

A final consequence of the reforms was that the senior PLA leadership has become concentrated in different PLA components. The most significant change, as shown in figure 6, is the doubling of the share of officers assigned to a service headquarters, from 16 percent to 32 percent. This reflects the creation of a new headquarters for the army (ground force functions were previously handled by the General Staff Department) and headquarters for the new Strategic Support Force (SSF) and Joint Logistic Support Force (JLSF). Under the new system, officers assigned to army, navy, and air force headquarters are primarily responsible

Figure 5. PLA Senior Officers, by Service vs. Service Manpower Share (2022) (%)



Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2022* (London: IISS, 2022), 255.

Figure 6. PLA Senior Officers, by Type (2015 and 2021) (%)

for force building—manning, training, and equipping troops—though in practice the service headquarters, rather than the TCs, oversee various “national assets.” (For example, the air force supervises the airborne corps while the navy manages the marine corps.³⁸) The SSF and JLSF function as quasi-services that build forces but also have an operational mandate. In a different sense, roughly a third of senior PLA officers are now in roles that involve advocating for service interests, signaling a potential intensification of interservice competition.

Meanwhile, senior PLA officers are relatively less occupied with theater affairs. In 2015, more than half of the senior PLA leadership was assigned to military region positions, but the consolidation of the theaters meant that this figure declined to 41 percent in 2021. Those remaining in the theater headquarters were more operationally focused, as reflected in the phrase “the theaters command forces” [战区主战].³⁹ The creation of TC army service components, however, meant that there was a rebalancing of theater personnel from headquarters to service component positions (which are responsible both for training and operations, like the Service components in the U.S. geographic combatant commands). Nevertheless, the reforms did lead to an expansion of joint positions within the theaters and JSD at more junior levels; a question for the future development of the officer corps is whether the occupants of those roles will ascend to higher command, or the promotion pathways will run through the services (more on this below). In sum, the reforms have had some implications for the structure of the senior leadership, though as the next sections indicate, there has also been much consistency.

Demographic Patterns

The 2021 cohort of senior PLA leaders had different formative and professional experiences from their predecessors but were demographically similar. This section begins by noting that the current leadership was the first to have joined the PLA primarily during the “reform and opening” era (1979–present); their careers were shaped by China’s changing military strategy before and after the end of the Cold War. It then compares age, career length, and education with those of the 2015 cohort. Finally, it notes that the senior officer cadre continues to be entirely male and predominantly Han Chinese.

Senior PLA Officers Belong to a Post–Cultural Revolution “Professional” Generation

The most recent cohort of PLA senior leaders represents the first generation whose professional experience dates primarily from the reform era (1979–present). Only 18 of 155 senior officers in 2021 joined the PLA at some point during the Mao era (1949–1976). They are all now in their mid-60s to early 70s and will soon retire. Most senior officers arrived in the PLA in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the youngest having joined in the mid-1980s. This means that they were typically children or adolescents during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and, unlike their predecessors, did not lose their educations to the chaos of that period—most schools reopened by 1970. It also means that a diminishing share of officers has had any experience in China’s Cold War–era conflicts. Only a few senior officers in 2021 participated in the 1979 Sino-Vietnam border war or clashes with Vietnam in the 1980s.⁴⁰

The PLA that China’s senior leadership experienced during the reform era was one in transition. During the Cultural Revolution, the PLA was dispatched to run the country after the civilian bureaucracy had been disrupted by the Red Guards. Deng Xiaoping, who became CMC chairman in 1981, returned PLA personnel to their barracks and urged them to focus on modernization (although military modernization was the last of his “four modernizations” and PLA budgets remained low in the 1980s).⁴¹ They also survived successive rounds of reductions that took place from the mid-1980s through the Xi era.

Professionally, most current senior PLA officers began their careers by preparing for large-scale conflict against the Soviet Union, which was China’s primary adversary in the late Cold War. Unlike their predecessors, they were less likely to have been educated in Russia or to speak Russian, given the Sino-Soviet split (which began in 1960). These officers were on duty in the 1980s, when the PLA engaged in significant military cooperation with the United States, but they also experienced the rupture of Sino-U.S. relations that occurred after the 1989 Tiananmen

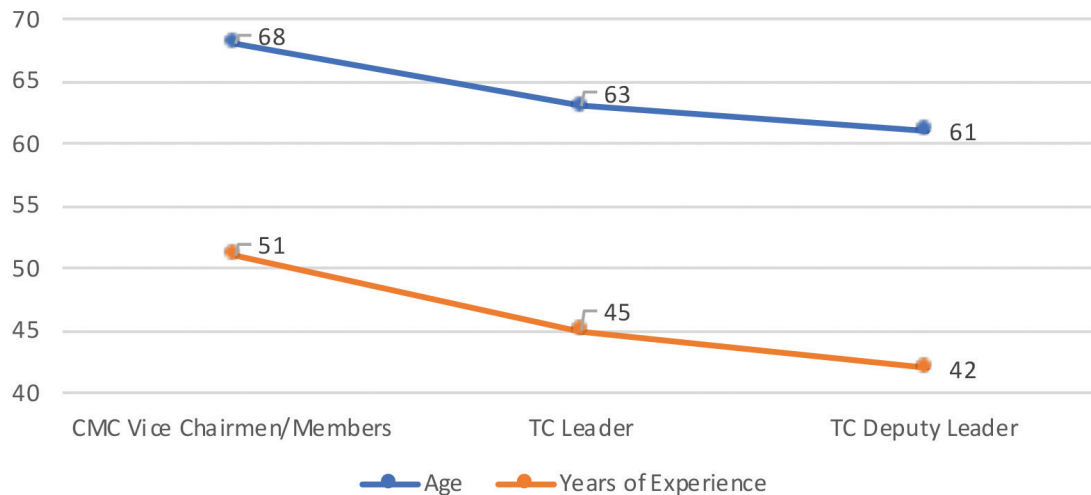
Square massacre, in which some likely participated. Many would have become more familiar with Russia after relations were normalized in 1989 and as China began purchasing advanced Russian military hardware in the 1990s. This was also a period in which the PLA did not emphasize joint operations and officers largely focused on their own services and branches.

These were mid-career officers, with 10 to 15 years of experience, in 1993, when the CMC adopted a new military strategy focused on high-tech joint warfare along China's periphery, with a special emphasis on Taiwan.⁴² Some officers then serving in the former Nanjing Military Region would have had firsthand experience in the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis or in later exercises focused on Taiwan. Others gained experience in other contingencies, such as 2008 Sichuan earthquake relief operations, suppressing riots in Xinjiang and Tibet in 2008–2009, or overseeing low-intensity operations in the South or East China seas. None of them have experienced modern combat.⁴³ These officers thus belong to a transitional generation, with one foot in the late Cold War and another in the post–Cold War era.

Reforms Had No Impact on the Average Age, Experience, or Education of Senior Leaders

In 2021, the post-reform PLA leadership belonged to a younger generation but had similar demographic characteristics. The typical age of PLA senior officers was similar before and after the reforms. On average, these officers were 60 in 2015 and 61 in 2021.⁴⁴ There was little variation in either year by service affiliation or PLA component (see appendices 1 and 2). Average ages increased by grade level, with the typical officer within a year or two of the mandatory retirement age for his grade. As depicted in figure 7, in 2021, the average TC deputy leader was 61 (with a retirement age of 63), TC leaders were 63 (65), and CMC members were 68 (68). Thus, the PLA was not looking to a younger generation of officers to lead the CMC departments, services, and theaters; one still needed to wait his turn.⁴⁵ Xi perhaps had the opportunity to make more radical changes but might have concluded that the costs to Party-army relations or support for his agenda would have outweighed the benefits.

As in any military, there is also a subset of high-achieving PLA officers promoted faster than their peers. This finding implies higher-level confidence in these officers as well as greater remaining time in their careers; their careers are thus often watched more closely. PLA “fast burners” can be defined as officers who are four or more years younger than the average for their grade.⁴⁶ By this definition, in 2021, there were 15 fast burners out of 124 TC deputy leaders (age 57 or younger) and 3 out of 25 TC leaders (age 59 or younger). At 53, the youngest PLA leader was Zhong Shaojun, a former Xi civilian aide now in charge of the CMC General Office, where

Figure 7. PLA Senior Officer Age/Years of Experience, by Grade (2021)

he serves as a gatekeeper to Xi (a post where he will likely remain, because he does not have an operational background).⁴⁷ Others included Chang Dingqiu (54), a JSD deputy chief of staff later elevated to air force commander, Zhang Mingcai (56), deputy ground force commander, and Guo Puxiao (57), political commissar of the CMC Logistic Support Department in 2021 who was later appointed as the PLA Air Force political commissar.⁴⁸

As with age, there was also consistency in years of experience. In 2015, the average senior leader had been on active duty for 44 years, having joined the PLA at 16 or 17. The figure in 2021 was the same. There was almost no variation across services and component (see appendices 1 and 2). By grade, TC deputy leaders in 2021 had an average of 42 years of experience, TC leaders 45 years, and CMC members 51 years (see figure 7).

Senior officers mostly enlist as teenagers and periodically return to PLA academies to receive branch and combined arms education.⁴⁹ As division leader grade officers, they typically enroll in a joint campaign course at the PLA National Defense University.⁵⁰ However, consistency in terms of years of experience between 2015 and 2021 indicates that the PLA was not providing greater opportunities for civilian university graduates who joined the PLA at an older age.⁵¹ This is not surprising, because civilian-educated officers are probably more likely to leave early,⁵² and militaries generally promote those with similar backgrounds, including education.⁵³ Exceptions included Liu Guozhi, director of the CMC Science and Technology Commission, who joined the PLA in 1986 at age 26 after graduating from Tsinghua University,⁵⁴ and SSF Deputy Commander Shang Hong, who entered active duty in 1982 as a 22-year-old graduate of

China North University. A question for the PLA is whether it will retain its civilian graduates, especially in positions that require strong science and technology skills.⁵⁵

PLA Senior Leaders Are All Male and (Almost) Entirely Han Chinese

The PLA's senior leadership is male-dominated, as is consistent with the patriarchal leadership structure of the Chinese Party-state. In 2022, for instance, there were no women on the Politburo Standing Committee, and there was only 1 on the 25-person Politburo.⁵⁶ None of the highest-ranking PLA officers were women in 2015 or 2021. It is unlikely that there has ever been a woman in an operational role at this level of the Chinese military,⁵⁷ though a few have served in less senior roles, such as military academics or leaders of song and dance troupes (including Xi Jinping's wife, Peng Liyuan, who was a corps leader grade civilian cadre in the former PLA Song and Dance Troupe).⁵⁸ To be sure, most militaries are male-dominated, but the PLA suffers from a greater gender imbalance than the U.S. military, which counted 9 women out of 199 three- and four-star officers in 2022.⁵⁹

China's military leadership also lacks ethnic diversity. The Chinese state categorizes individuals into 56 ethnic groups, with the predominant being Han Chinese (91 percent).⁶⁰ The next most populous group accounts for only 1.4 percent of the population, and all others are under 1 percent.⁶¹ To increase non-Han representation, the PLA has offered preferential policies for ethnic minorities and has sometimes appointed Uyghur and Tibetan officers at senior levels in the Xinjiang and Tibet military districts.⁶² These officers have reached corps leader positions (senior colonels or major generals) but not higher grades.⁶³ In 2021, publicly available biographies of 123 of the 155 TC deputy leader and above officers identified ethnicity. Among these, 122 (99 percent) were Han Chinese. The exception was SSF Deputy Commander Rao Kaixun, who belongs to the Hui minority.⁶⁴

Career Patterns

PLA senior leadership careers unfold predictably, with only minimal changes since the reforms. This section describes three patterns. First, officers rotate every 2 or 3 years but largely stay in the same career field. Rotations between theaters have long been a way for the PLA to broaden senior officers' perspectives while preventing the growth of patronage networks. Second, PLA officers typically undertake joint assignments only at the TC deputy leader level, with experience before that grade focused on service positions. Third, there are common stepping-stones to theater and service commander, with a tour as theater service component commander particularly valuable for career progression. However, one post-reform innovation is that a few

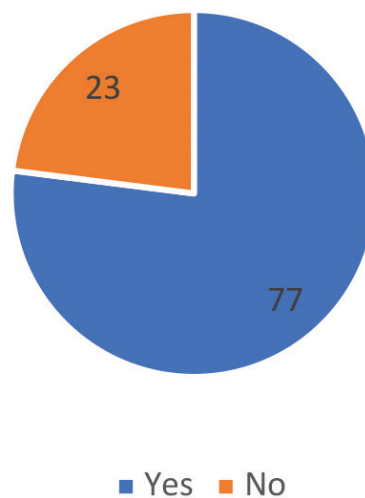
officers have gained more joint experience as full-time theater deputy commanders who are not dual-hatted as theater service component commanders.

PLA Senior Officers Frequently Rotate but Stay in the Same Career Track

PLA senior officers usually rotate to a new assignment every two or three years. This pattern, evident in both 2015 and 2021, is consistent across service and position type (see appendices 1 and 2 for details). In 2021, most officers were near the mean of four assignments over the previous decade, but the range was significant. Out of 155 senior officers, 12 had held only two positions, including CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang, whose only positions were air force commander, dual-hatted as a CMC member (2007–2012), and CMC vice chairman (2012–present). On the other end, 20 officers had held six or more assignments. At the top of the list was CMC Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary and CMC member Zhang Shengmin, whose eight assignments included political commissar of two Second Artillery Force bases and three different CMC departments. There was little variation by grade, meaning that officers with an unusual number of assignments were no more likely to be promoted than others.

At the junior and mid-career levels, PLA officers usually stay within a single theater. Ground force officers, for example, typically stay within a group army for most of their careers.⁶⁵ At the corps leader level, however, there is more frequent geographic rotation. As figure 8 shows, 77 percent of senior officers in 2021 had served in at least two theaters over the past decade. There are two explanations for this pattern, which are not mutually exclusive. First is a need to provide

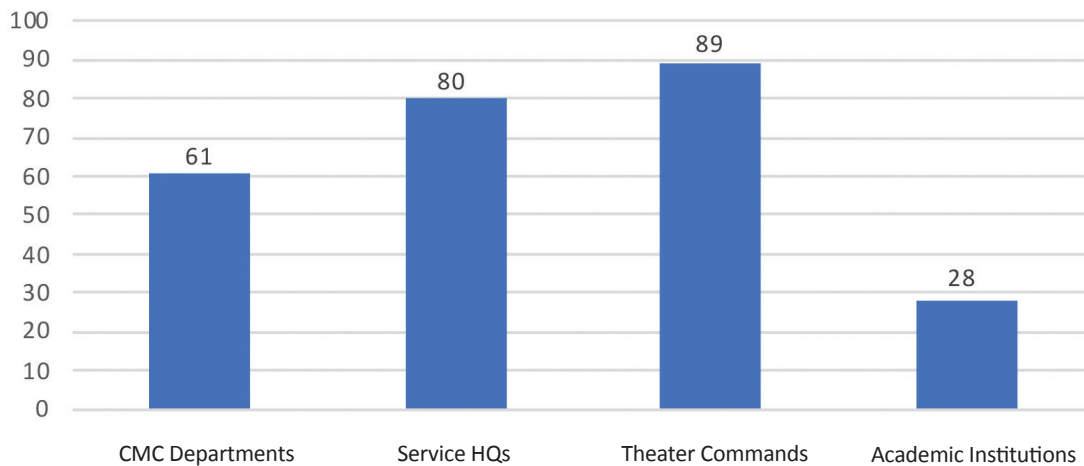
Figure 8. Geographic Rotations in the Previous 10 Years (%)



senior officers with broader experience as they prepare for positions of greater responsibility.⁶⁶ Second is the desire to prevent patronage networks that benefit from long tenures in one location (although Xi's need to undertake the anti-corruption campaign indicates that such rotations were of limited value in preventing graft in previous decades). As a way of achieving this goal, there was evidence after the reforms that commanders and political commissars in each theater were being rotated so that they did not know each other or their subordinates, reducing the possibility of collusion.⁶⁷

Assignment patterns, however, demonstrate some variation across position type. The highest percentages of officers who previously served in multiple regions were in positions in the theaters (89 percent) and service headquarters (80 percent), as figure 9 shows. However, nearly 40 percent of officers serving in CMC departments, which are all headquartered in Beijing, had served in only one location. High-ranking officers in the CMC Logistic Support Department and CMC Equipment Development Department were especially likely to have been in Beijing the entire time; those positions are all located in the capital. Similarly, only 28 percent of military academics rotated geographically; these individuals are also based in Beijing. This finding implies that the quarter of senior PLA leaders who did not rotate were mostly ensconced in Beijing, where they either possessed specific expertise that was less applicable to other assignments or were able to avoid transfers for the purpose of enjoying Beijing's lifestyle, such as better schools and work opportunities for their children and higher environmental standards.

Figure 9. Geographic Rotations in the Previous 10 Years, by Position Type (%)



Although senior PLA officers often change assignments, when they do, they usually perform similar functions to those of their previous positions. Moving between different career tracks, especially late in one's career, is uncommon. As figure 10 demonstrates, 87 percent of officers in 2021 had remained in a single track over the previous decade (even under a broader definition that classifies military academic posts as a separate career specialty).⁶⁸ For instance, there were only a few cases of operational commanders with prior experience in logistics or equipment, or vice versa.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, there was some variation across service. In 2021, the highest share of cross-functional transfers (26 percent) was in the navy and the lowest share (3 percent) was in the air force (see appendix 2). An example of a unique career was Eastern TC Navy Commander Wei Gang, who previously held a series of assignments in naval logistics.⁷⁰

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there might be growing flexibility in career fields, however. Previously, it was uncommon for officers to transfer into political commissar roles late in their careers, but in late 2021 and 2022, there were two exceptions at the TC leader grade: NDU President Zheng He became NDU political commissar, and SSF Commander Li Fengbiao became Western TC political commissar. It remains to be seen whether new rules to the PLA assignment system promulgated by the CMC in 2021 will make such transfers more common by breaking down career field silos.

About half of senior PLA officers rotated between different parts of the PLA (CMC departments, services, and theaters) over the past decade (see appendix 3). In another sign of greater flexibility in the navy, naval officers were the likeliest to shuffle between CMC departments, theaters, and service headquarters positions (83 percent), while army officers were least likely (36 percent). Overall, as figure 11 demonstrates, the most common cross-component rotation was

Figure 10. Cross-Functional Rotations in the Previous 10 Years (%)

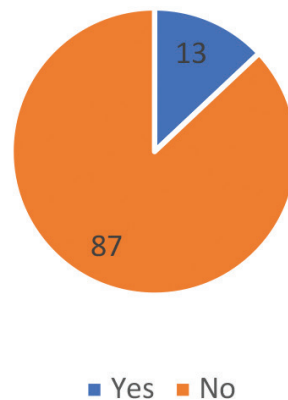
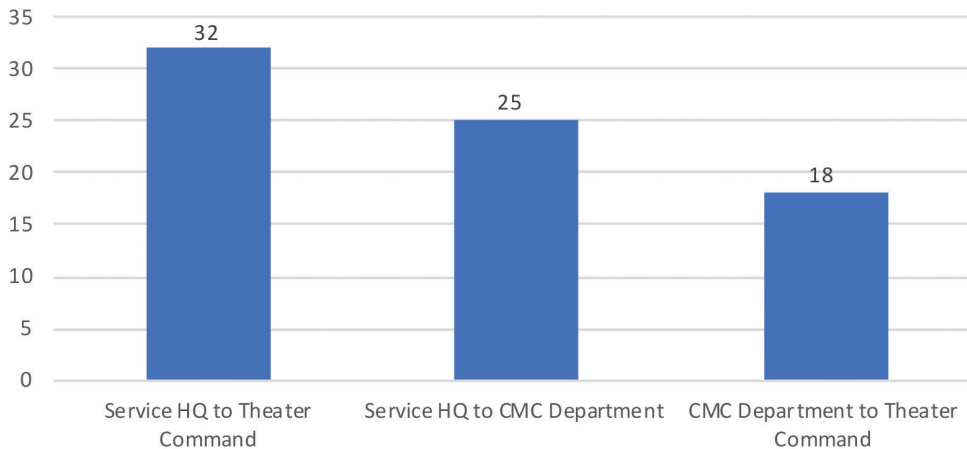


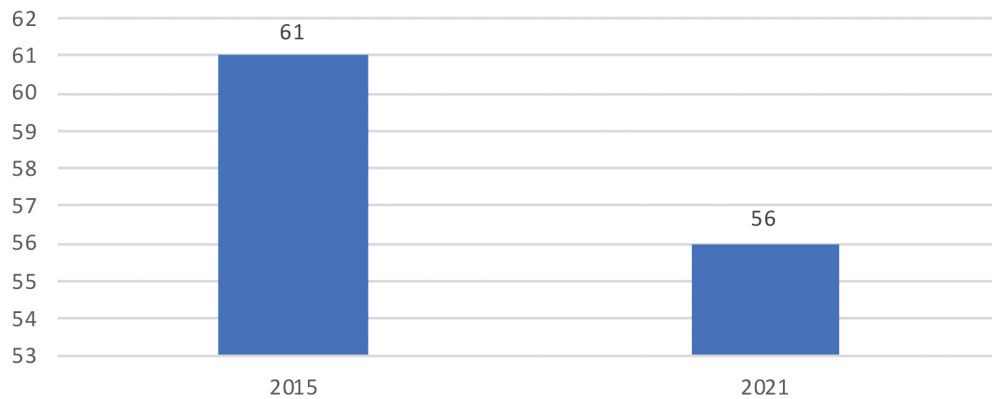
Figure 11. Position Type Rotations in the Previous 10 Years (%)

between a service and a theater position (32 percent). Transitions from a service to a CMC department were less common (25 percent), and the least common were transfers between theaters and CMC departments (18 percent). This finding implies that the CMC and its subordinate departments are relatively insulated from officers arriving from or departing for other positions. This is different from assignment patterns in the U.S. military, in which officers often move from positions in the Joint Staff or defense agencies to the combatant commands or services.

The Post-Reform PLA Does Not Prioritize Joint Assignments for Rising Leaders

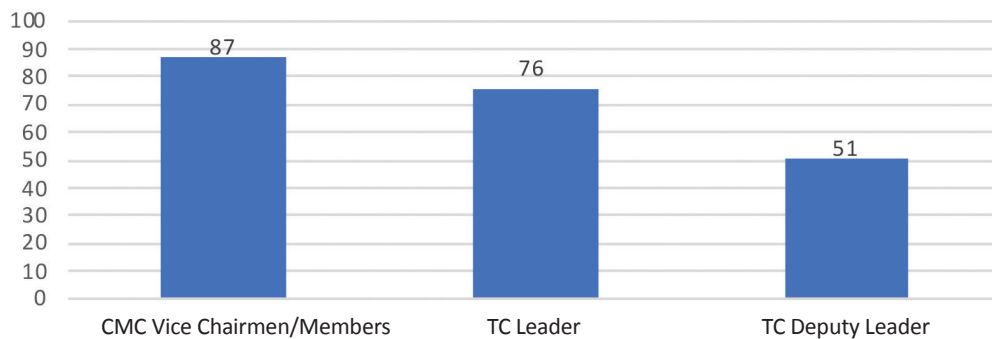
A cornerstone of PLA reforms in the Xi era was the development of a joint command structure in which theater commanders have peacetime authority over ground, naval, and air forces. This model was better aligned with the PLA's focus on preparing for high-intensity joint operations than the pre-reform system, in which military region commanders lacked peacetime operational control over non-army units.⁷¹ The PLA has also expanded joint training in recent years, allowing officers to hone their planning and leadership skills in a "combat-realistic" environment.⁷² Nevertheless, this progress does not extend to the assignment system. Career patterns after the reforms demonstrate that the PLA has not systematically selected a greater percentage of officers with previous experience planning and leading joint operations for more senior positions in the theaters and the JSD. In 2015, only 61 percent of senior officers had held a joint assignment at any point in the past decade ("joint assignments" referring here to service in a military region headquarters or general department).⁷³ In 2021, that figure had declined to 56 percent, as shown in figure 12.⁷⁴

Figure 12. Joint Assignments in the Previous 10 Years (2015 and 2021) (%)



Previous joint experience in the PLA tends to increase with seniority. As shown in figure 13, most CMC members have held at least one joint assignment, as have three-quarters of officers at the TC leader level. As discussed below, this experience often came in the form of service as theater service component commanders dual-hatted as theater deputy commanders (only a part-time joint position). However, only half of TC deputy leaders had held a joint assignment of any sort in the previous decade. This is significantly different from the U.S. military, in which all officers must gain a joint duty qualification for promotion to general officer, with most three- and four-star officers having several previous joint tours.⁷⁵ Notably, Chinese researchers have

Figure 13. Joint Assignments in the Previous 10 Years, by Grade (%)



studied the U.S. joint assignment system and proposed similar options for the PLA, but none has been adopted; PLA careers are still service-oriented.⁷⁶

The paucity of previous joint experience is apparent across the PLA senior officer corps, but especially in positions of significant operational responsibility. Figure 14 documents previous joint assignments among individuals who served in four positions at any point between 2016 and 2021: CMC vice chairmen and members, theater and service commanders,⁷⁷ and JSD deputy chiefs of staff.⁷⁸ Most officers in these positions had received on-the-job training in a joint assignment only in a previous TC deputy leader level position. Very few had held a joint assignment a grade earlier, at the corps leader grade level, suggesting that joint experience, such as it exists in the PLA senior grades, is limited and superficial.

There is some variation in previous joint expertise by service affiliation. As shown in figure 15, in 2021, ground force officers had the highest rate of previous joint assignments (67 percent), followed by the SSF (63 percent), which is composed primarily of personnel who transferred from the army. These individuals had typically served in nominally joint positions in the general departments and military regions, but much of this experience was gained in the pre-reform period, when those organizations also had responsibility for ground force affairs. There was less prior joint experience in the other services, including only about half of navy or air force officers and less than a third of Rocket Force officers. There were virtually no changes from the 2015 cohort, suggesting that none of the services was trying to provide their officers with earlier joint assignments as a career-enhancing experience.⁷⁹ It is likelier that, for the most part, joint posts remain a career impediment, as in the U.S. system prior

Figure 14. Joint Assignments in Previous Three Grades, by Job Position (2016–2022)

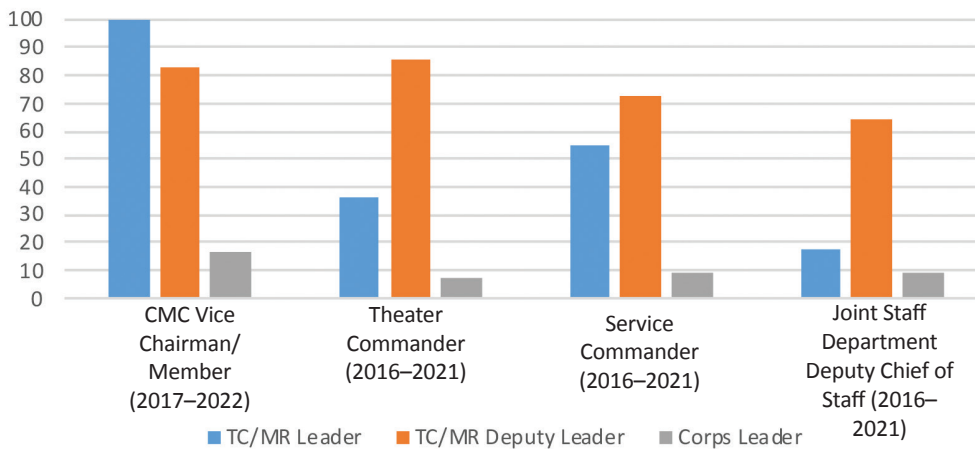
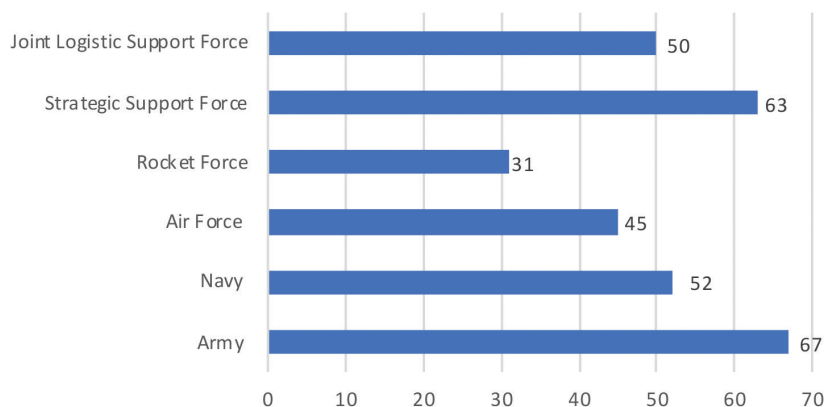


Figure 15. Joint Assignments in the Previous 10 Years, by Service (%)

to Goldwater-Nichols: promotions to higher grades continued to center on performance in service positions.⁸⁰

To improve joint experience, the PLA has offered some officers the chance to serve temporary assignments in other services. This included an experiment in the 2000s during which younger officers were cross-posted for a short duration to learn about another service's organizational culture and capabilities.⁸¹ At a senior level, there are examples of officers cycling between multiple services. Among the 2021 cohort, at least 14 officers (9 percent) had held a position outside their own service in the previous decade, as shown in table 3. These were mostly political commissars, whose skills are relatively fungible, and army officers who served in the People's Armed Police. The most unusual cross-service transfer was Liu Faqing, a former commander of the PLA Air Force Airborne Corps, who later served as a PLA Army deputy commander; this could be an indication of a need to bring those communities more closely together.⁸²

Pathways to Senior Positions Run Through the Services

The reduction of TC leader billets after the reforms has meant that the path from that grade to CMC membership has narrowed. The most likely stepping-stones to the CMC are theater or service commander or political commissar; these accounted for 20 of the 25 TC leader grade positions in 2021.⁸³ Five of the six CMC members appointed after the 19th Party Congress in 2017 had served in one of these roles (see appendix 5).⁸⁴ But how do PLA officers reach these positions? This section identifies common paths from corps leader to TC deputy leader to theater and service commander positions.⁸⁵ (For additional details on specific individuals, see appendix 6.)

Table 3. PLA Leaders with Previous Assignments in Different Services (March 2021)

Name	Original Service	Positions in Different Service
Miao Hua	Army	Navy Political Commissar
Xu Zhongbo	Army	JLSF Political Commissar, PLARF Political Commissar
Liu Zhenli	Army	PAP Chief of Staff
Liu Faqing	Air Force	PLA Army Deputy Commander
Zhu Shengling	Army	PAP Political Commissar
Wang Renhua	Army	East Sea Fleet Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary
Yang Cheng	Army	PAP Deputy Political Commissar
Yuan Huazhi	Navy	Eastern TC Air Force Political Commissar
Wang Zheng	Air Force	Navy Political Work Department Director
Ji Duo	Air Force	SSF Aerospace Engineering University Political Commissar (then returned to the PLAAF)
Chen Pinghua	Army	PLARF Deputy Political Commissar
Liu Qingsong	Air Force	Eastern TC Navy Political Commissar
Liu Jian	Army	Shenyang MR Air Force Political Commissar
Zhou Aimin	Army	PAP Deputy Chief of Staff

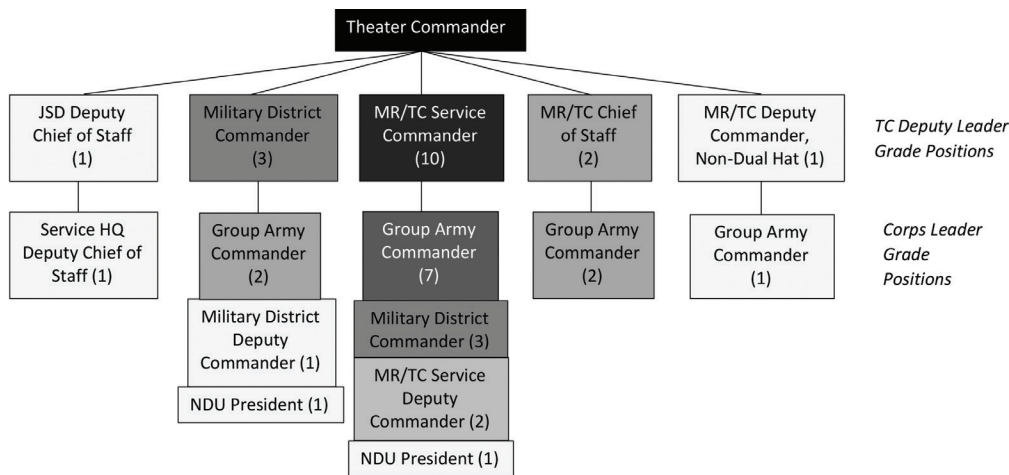
Key: JLSF: Joint Logistic Support Force; MR: Military Region; PAP: People's Armed Police; PLA: People's Liberation Army; PLARF: People's Liberation Army Rocket Force; SSF: Strategic Support Force; TC: Theater Command.

Note: Excludes officers who transferred into the new SSF and JLSF in 2016.

Fourteen PLA officers served as theater commanders between 2016 and 2021. All 14 had previously served in theater positions at both the TC deputy leader and corps leader grades. As documented in figure 16, 10 were theater service component commanders (which is a service position dual-hatted as theater deputy commander), 3 were military district commanders, and 2 were a theater chief of staff (some serving in more than one of these positions). Because 12 of the 14 officers were from the army, it is unsurprising that almost all had served as a group army commander. Less common was prior experience in service headquarters or CMC department positions. An exception was Air Force General Yi Xiaoguang, who was central TC commander from 2017 to 2021 (and was the first air force officer to become a theater commander). At the corps leader level, he had been an air force deputy chief of staff.⁸⁶

Pathways to service commander were more diverse. Of the 11 individuals who served as commander of the army, navy, air force, or Rocket Force between 2016 and 2021, 4 had been a service deputy commander and 5 a theater service component commander, as shown in figure

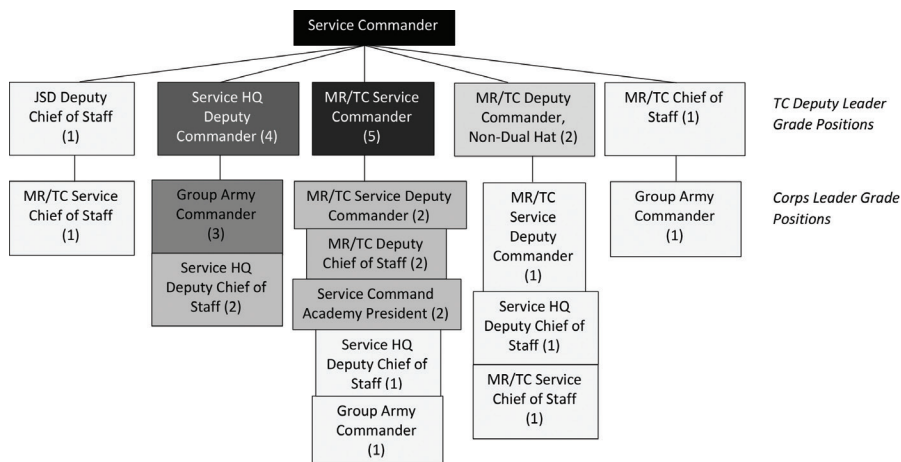
Figure 16. Career Progression for Theater Commanders, 2016–2021



Note: Darker shading denotes more common positions.

17. The latter position is likely coveted among PLA officers, because it is a precursor for promotion to either theater or service commander. At the corps leader grade, future service commanders served in a variety of roles in service and theater service component headquarters, group armies, and service command academies. Notably, military district commanders did not frequently reach higher grades, except in Xinjiang and Tibet and the Beijing Garrison, locations (unlike other military districts) where they directly command troops, gaining operational

Figure 17. Career Progression for Service Commanders, 2016–2021



Note: Darker shading denotes more common positions.

Comparing U.S. and Chinese Four Stars

The composition, demographics, and career patterns of U.S. four-star officers and their Chinese counterparts demonstrate significant disparities. This review compares the 40 Active-duty U.S. four stars and 31 PLA CMC and TC leader grade officers (who wear three stars on their uniform but are at an equivalent level of seniority) in 2021.

- **Service Representation.** The ground forces were the most represented service in both systems, but the army held stronger influence in the PLA, with 48 percent of top billets compared to 35 percent for U.S. officers.

- **Demographics:** On average, Chinese officers were 4 years older than their U.S. counterparts (64 vs. 60) and had 6 more years of experience (46 vs. 40). U.S. leadership was also more diverse, with two women (5 percent) and three African Americans (8 percent), compared to a homogenous PLA leadership (entirely male and 99 percent Han Chinese).

- **Rotations:** U.S. four stars typically held seven assignments in the previous decade, while their Chinese counterparts held five. In the same timeframe, every U.S. officer had geographically rotated, compared to 84 percent of PLA leaders. Moreover, 23 U.S. officers (58 percent) had served in a foreign country, often in a U.S. allied country or Afghanistan/Iraq, while no PLA leader was stationed abroad.

- **Joint Assignments:** All 40 U.S. officers served in at least one, and often several, joint assignments (usually in the Joint Staff or combatant commands), compared to 77 percent of PLA officers.

Overall, U.S. four stars are younger, more diverse, and have more varied professional experiences than their PLA counterparts. The Chinese system, by contrast, values seniority and depth of experience in particular assignments. A final difference concerns career types: most U.S. four stars had achieved success as operational commanders, while almost half of PLA senior leaders were professional political commissars.

experience in sensitive regions.⁸⁷ The diverse pathways to service commander at this level can be explained by the fact that these positions are not dominated by a single service, unlike the position of theater commander.

Most paths to theater and service commander ran through service positions, most notably theater service component commanders. A few officers, however, gained greater joint

experience at the TC deputy leader or corps leader grade. Wang Xiubin, an army officer who became Southern TC commander in 2021, was previously Eastern TC chief of staff; similarly, future SSF commander Li Fengbiao served as Central TC chief of staff.⁸⁸ Air Force generals Yi Xiaoguang and Chang Dingqiu, who rose to theater and service commander, respectively, gained joint expertise as JSD deputy chiefs of staff.⁸⁹ There was also a new phenomenon of officers being promoted through full-time theater deputy commander positions. This route could offer more exposure to theater joint operations for future senior commanders. Nevertheless, this was a narrow path to promotion: the only examples have been Dong Jun (later promoted to navy commander) and Chang Dingqiu (future air force commander). (See appendix 4 for details.⁹⁰)

Regardless of their paths through the senior grades, PLA officers would have needed to demonstrate professional competence. For several years, the PLA has publicly critiqued officers for inadequate operational skills and judgment (in slogans such as the “five inabilities,” “five weaknesses,” and “two insufficients”).⁹¹ Party committees (and ultimately the CMC chairman) would have assessed whether candidates for promotion to a higher grade demonstrated the necessary professional military skills. Recent reforms, such as the creation of a CMC Training and Administration Department, which dispatches personnel to monitor joint training in the theaters, offer decisionmakers new tools to assess performance. Those who advanced are likely to have demonstrated the appropriate qualities, or at least avoided major blunders in training, real-world operations, or day-to-day affairs.

Political Qualifications

All PLA officers need to be members in good standing of the CCP, but candidates for promotion to the highest grades are under added scrutiny because of the sensitivity of their positions. This section suggests that political acumen means showing obedience to Xi at a minimum. Nevertheless, the PLA strives for competent leaders, and the importance of political qualifications should not be overstated. Personal interaction with Xi has not been a strong determinant of success in the PLA, for instance. Rather than drawing from a small pool of officers he has known in the past, Xi has appointed officers from a wide variety of assignments. Within the PLA, frequent senior officer rotations similarly imply limits on the influence of patron-client networks beyond the corps leader level. Finally, some PLA officers burnish their political credentials by serving on top CCP decisionmaking organs or the National People’s Congress, but this service is not required for promotion and is less common at lower grades.

PLA Senior Leaders Are Politically Savvy but Deferential to Xi

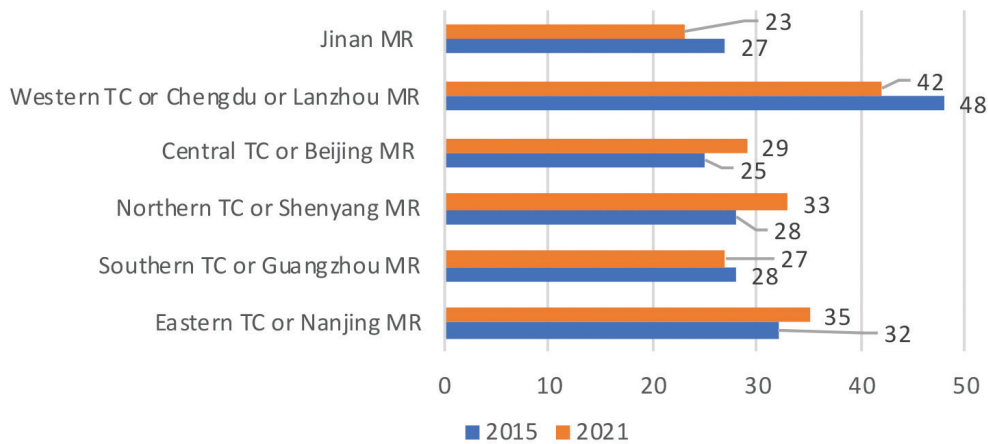
As in any military, officers ascending to the highest rungs of the PLA hierarchy require political acumen. In the Chinese case, the top 100 to 200 officers not only require social capital but also need to have successfully navigated the intra-elite struggles that resulted in Xi's dominance of the political apparatus in 2012. Officers who owed their careers to those aligned with Xi's predecessors, especially Jiang Zemin and his CMC vice chairmen Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, were more likely to have been politically suspect, and many were swept up in the anti-corruption purges that Xi used to clear out political opponents after assuming power.⁹² The officers who survived the purges would have been those who were able to avoid association with Xi's rivals and also would have been careful to demonstrate obedience to Xi by supporting his agenda for military reform and mouthing the correct political slogans at Party meetings.

Xi has also developed powerful coercive tools to enforce compliance with his agenda and authority. Current PLA leaders advanced in a system that was rife with corruption. Most were either likely complicit in or engaged in corrupt schemes, such as illicit business deals and the buying and selling of ranks.⁹³ Xi's high-profile purges of senior officers such as CMC members Fang Fenghui and Zhang Yang, along with institutional changes he promoted to control information about officers—such as strengthening the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission and the Audit Office—mean that PLA officers will be cautious about stepping out of line. Xi is surrounded by those likely to avoid giving advice that they believe is misaligned with his desired goals, which could negatively affect the quality of CMC decisionmaking in a future crisis or on more routine matters of force development.

PLA Assignments Do Not Favor a Specific Geographic Background

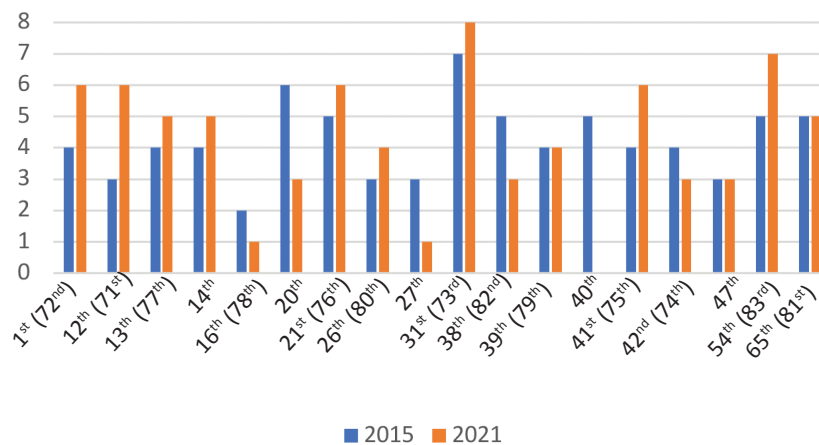
There is a misperception that senior PLA officers are drawn disproportionately from the former Nanjing Military Region. This is an area where Xi Jinping served from 1985 to 2007 and is also regarded as a “cradle of generals,” given the theater's importance in preparing for a Taiwan conflict. Brookings Institution scholar Cheng Li argues that Xi also drew heavily from officers who served in that region.⁹⁴ These contacts included future CMC members Miao Hua and Zhao Keshi and Central TC Commander Yi Xiaoguang. Nevertheless, data from 2015 and 2021 suggest that these were the exceptions, as shown in figure 18. Only about one-third of senior PLA leaders in 2015 served in the Nanjing Military Region over the previous decade, a fraction that stayed the same in 2021. In fact, there was a roughly even distribution of previous assignments across the theaters, with most senior officers never having overlapped with Xi.

Figure 18. PLA Senior Officers in Previous Positions. by MR/TC (2015 vs. 2021)



For army officers, there was a similar distribution of experience across previous group army assignments. Cheng Li argues that officers who previously served in the 31st Group Army (Nanjing Military Region) were disproportionately represented at senior levels, but neither the 2015 nor the 2021 data support this argument.⁹⁵ In 2015, only seven (4 percent) officers had served in this unit over the past decade, a figure that rose only to eight (5 percent) in 2021. Moreover, of the seven army officers who served on the CMC during 2012–2022, only one (Zhao Keshi) had been a 31st Group Army commander or political commissar.⁹⁶ Rather, the PLA selected its senior leaders from a diverse pool of officers who had collectively served in all the group armies, as shown in figure 19. Rather than favoring officers with a specific geographic

Figure 19. Previous Positions by Group Army (2015 vs. 2021)



Note: Parentheses indicate the post-2017 numbering system. Five group armies were disbanded that year.

Was Xi Jinping Dissatisfied With His Western Theater Commander?

The appointment of Wang Haijiang as Western theater commander in August 2021 raised eyebrows since he was the fourth individual to serve in this role since 2016. Indian officials called the frequency of rotations in this billet “highly unusual” and speculated that Xi Jinping might have been dissatisfied with performance in this region. However, comparative data indicate that the pattern was not atypical. Of the five theater commands, both the Western and Central TCs had four commanders between 2016 and 2022, while two others had three, and one had two. Four officers in 6 years are also not out of step with the tendency of TC leader grade officers to rotate, on average, five times in the previous 10 years (see appendix 2). At the individual level, an apparent reason why one of the commanders left his position early was more mundane: Zhang Xudong, who served from December 2020 to June 2021, died from cancer in October 2021. The evidence thus does not confirm a theory that Xi was particularly dissatisfied with the occupants of this position.

Note: For an Indian perspective, see Rajat Pandit, “For the Third Time in 9 Months, China Changes Top Commander Overseeing Disputed Border,” *The Times of India* (Mumbai), September 8, 2021, available at <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/for-third-time-in-9-months-china-changes-top-commander-overseeing-disputed-border/articleshow/86023265.cms>>.

background, it is more likely that Xi Jinping and his senior military advisors looked across the PLA to identify high performers, protect the institutional equities of different units, and guarantee that the leadership included a diverse range of experience.

The Relevance of Personal Networks Should Not Be Overstated

There are a few examples of senior PLA officers whose success could be attributed to personal connections with Xi. CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia, for instance, was a childhood acquaintance of Xi, and their fathers served together in the Chinese Civil War.⁹⁷ Others might have known him in some capacity during his provincial career, though, as suggested above, most did not overlap with him. Since arriving in Beijing in 2008 as China’s vice president, Xi has had the most opportunities to interact with officers located in the capital, in positions in the CMC bureaucracy, service headquarters, and the Beijing Military Region/Central TC. However, individuals selected as service and theater commanders between 2016 and 2021 came from across the theaters (see appendix 6) and in TC deputy leader roles that

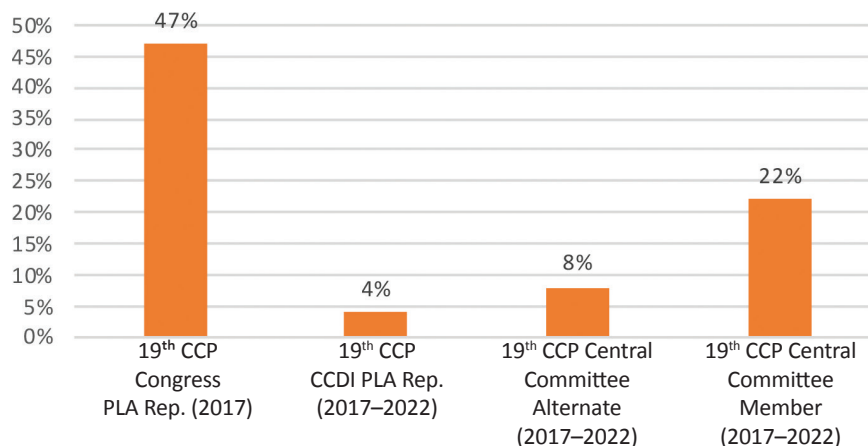
likely would have had limited if any interaction with the CMC chairman. Although Xi has been described as more active in promotion decisions than Hu Jintao, and receives advice on appointments from his military confidants, he has not favored those with whom he has geographically coincided.⁹⁸

More broadly, PLA assignment patterns also raise doubts about the influence of *guanxi* (or personal networks) among PLA officers themselves. As discussed above, PLA officers frequently rotate into different geographic assignments, limiting the ability of such networks to take root.⁹⁹ Moreover, the fact that those selected for TC deputy leader and above positions in recent years came from across all the theaters and group armies suggests that there is no dominant *guanxi* emanating from a specific unit responsible for officers being elevated to the most senior grades. Finally, such prospects are also reduced because candidates for high positions are reviewed at the central level by individuals who may not personally know them. *Guanxi* is likely more influential below the corps leader level, where promotions are decided by a Party committee within one's own direct chain of command.

Some, But Not All, Senior Officers Serve in Key Chinese Communist Party Organs

PLA officers are represented on the major civilian CCP decisionmaking organs, where they provide military advice and look after the PLA's institutional equities.¹⁰⁰ Overall, about half of the PLA's top 155 officers in 2021 attended the 19th Party Congress in 2017, but there was significant variation across grade, as shown in figure 20. Most TC leader grade officers in

Figure 20. Senior PLA Officers Serving in Central CCP Organs (2021)

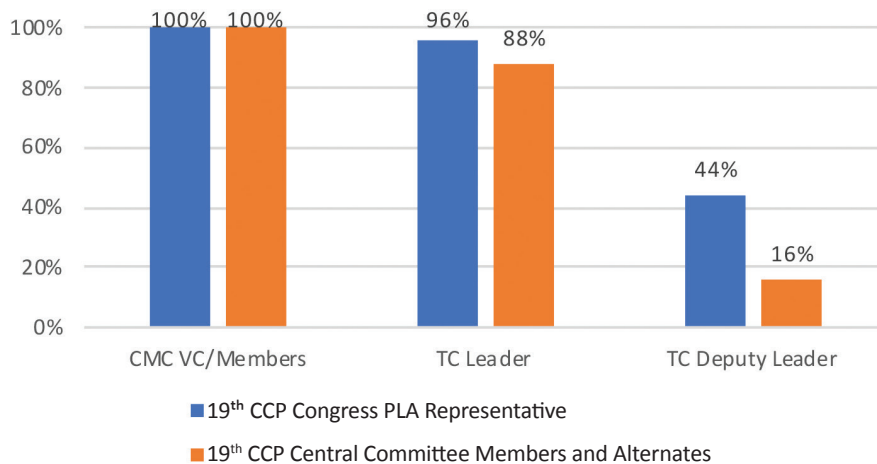


Key: CCDI: Central Commission on Discipline Inspection; CCP: Chinese Communist Party.

2021 did attend the 19th Party Congress in 2017, sometimes at a lower grade. Thus, a TC deputy leader officer who fails to attend the congress is unlikely to be promoted. However, only 36 percent of 2021 TC deputy leader grade officers attended the congress, meaning that such service is not a strong indicator of promotion to that level. This finding conflicts somewhat with assessments that Party congress attendance is a strong predictor of promotion potential.¹⁰¹ Previous service on the CCP Central Committee is an even less useful indicator. Only 3 2021 TC leader grade officers served as full or alternate members of the 18th Central Committee (2012–2017), and 22 did not.¹⁰²

Service on leading CCP organs varies by seniority, as shown in figure 21. CMC vice chairmen are consistently members of the Politburo (and the only 2 military members on the 25-person body), and CMC members are always members of the 200-person Central Committee. Representation below that grade is less consistent. In 2021, 20 TC leaders (80 percent) were full Central Committee members, 1 was an alternate, and 3 were absent.¹⁰³ Eight TC deputy leaders (6 percent) were also full Central Committee members, 12 (10 percent) were alternates, and more than 100 had no role. This pattern has two implications for the relationship between Party membership and the PLA leadership structure. First, concurrent service on the Central Committee is not required below the CMC level and becomes less prevalent at lower grades. Second, the Party and military hierarchies are not perfectly aligned: there are PLA officers who serve in more senior CCP organs than their superiors, and vice versa.

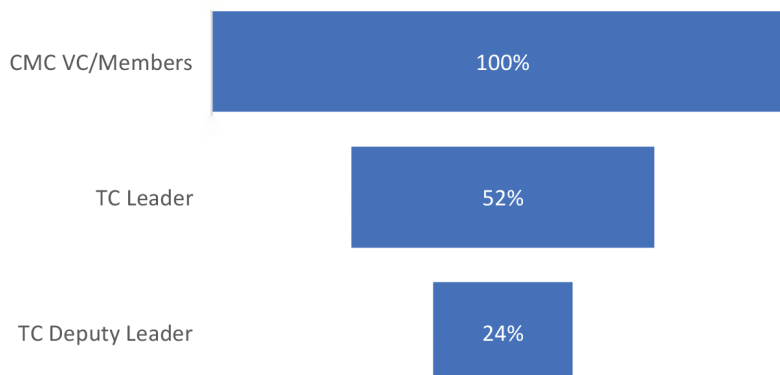
Figure 21. Membership in CCP Decisionmaking Organs, by Grade (2021)



Some PLA officers have also served in other civilian CCP positions. For instance, a handful of PLA political commissars serve on the CCP Central Commission on Discipline Inspection (CCDI), which functions as the central Party's anti-corruption watchdog.¹⁰⁴ PLA officers thus play a role in a commission that investigates civilian cadres, but there are no civilians in the CCDI's counterpart in the PLA, the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission—a fact that underscores the PLA's insulation from external supervision.¹⁰⁵ In addition, at least 12 of the 155 PLA senior officers in 2021 had served on a provincial-level Party committee in the previous decade. These were all in major cities (Beijing or Shanghai) or in western China, locations particularly relevant for a military role in preventing or responding to major incidents. There were no examples of service on other provincial Party committees.¹⁰⁶

There are also opportunities for PLA officers to be elected as representatives to the National People's Congress (NPC), which meets every March to pass laws. Of the PLA senior leadership in 2021, 49 officers (32 percent) were deputies to the 13th NPC (2018–2023).¹⁰⁷ As with the Central Committee, representation is associated with seniority. All six CMC members were in the 13th NPC, but the figure declined to 52 percent for TC leaders and 24 percent for TC deputy leaders, as shown in figure 22.¹⁰⁸ There were also several officers who served in the 12th NPC (2013–2018) but not on the 13th. These figures suggest that service as an NPC member is not necessary to be eligible for promotion to higher grades and is less frequently so at lower grades. In sum, PLA officers must be politically conscious but do not need personal connections with Xi or strong credentials in civilian Party organs or the NPC to move from one grade to the next.

Figure 22. PLA Representatives to the 13th National People's Congress, by Grade (2021)



Implications and Conclusion

Under Xi Jinping, the PLA has made significant changes to its organizational chart and lines of authority but has chosen to make do with the existing cohort of senior leaders to manage the new system. The PLA did not skip a generation of officers whose formative experiences were rooted in the Cold War to place young Turks more familiar with modern technologies and operational concepts into positions of responsibility. This finding is evidenced in consistent average ages, lengths of service, and education for those in the highest grades. Career patterns indicate that these individuals mostly rose through their own services, with little previous joint experience. Unlike the U.S. system after Goldwater-Nichols, the PLA did not mandate joint assignments or otherwise advantage those who had served in a joint position. Career incentives, in other words, continued to be shaped by service traditions.¹⁰⁹

The PLA leadership has also remained like its predecessors in other ways. There has been no attempt to increase gender or ethnic diversity; the PLA continues to rely on male Han Chinese to fill its senior positions. Officers continue to rotate every two or three years, gaining some exposure to different responsibilities but less than in the U.S. system, where four-star officers change positions roughly every 18 months. Senior PLA officers often move around the country but have little international experience other than what they might have acquired through military diplomacy or in short-duration tours earlier in their careers.¹¹⁰ Continued specialization in particular career tracks means that they have relatively deep expertise in particular areas but likely limited awareness of other functional skills: for instance, operational commanders tend not to have a background in logistics or acquisition.

As in the past, PLA officers cannot hope to succeed without maintaining their *bona fides* in the CCP. They must undergo extensive political vetting and face continuous monitoring from political commissars, the anti-corruption investigators within the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, financial auditors, and the legal system. Such control mechanisms probably induce caution in personal affairs—today's senior officers are less overtly corrupt than their predecessors—but may also blunt risk-taking in operations as officers look up the chain of command or build consensus in Party committees.¹¹¹ Loyalty to the Party and Xi is essential, but the PLA has avoided patronage networks that privilege service in specific units: officers are relatively evenly drawn from all the theaters and group armies. This system implies that the PLA is protecting institutional equities while also ensuring that a breadth of expertise reaches the senior levels. Many officers also serve in key roles in CCP decisionmaking organs, but the performance of those duties is less frequent and important below the CMC level.

Together, these patterns could have negative effects on China's military effectiveness. PLA sources frequently advocate for officers who can think in new ways, but the assignment system does not prioritize or produce broad experience or risk-taking. Officers with almost no experience leading troops from other services are less likely to be confident in commanding those forces and more likely to delegate authority to specialists within those services. This could produce situations such as that of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, where the overall cohesion of forces was low.¹¹² Operational commanders who never needed to gain a high level of understanding of logistics or maintenance might fail to use those forces optimally, paralleling another Russian failure in 2022.¹¹³ CMC-theater coordination will be limited by a system where officers do not frequently rotate between CMC departments (where policy and training requirements are set) and the theaters (which implement CMC guidance). Such weaknesses are probably exacerbated by political work rules and organizational traditions that prize centralized authority and consensus decisionmaking.

While much has remained consistent about the PLA leadership during Xi's reforms, there have also been gradual changes occurring within the officer corps that could reshape the focus of the senior PLA leadership in the years ahead. The current cohort will be the last to be steeped in China's Cold War strategy, which emphasized ground force combined arms operations against the superpowers. Their successors will have been rooted in the pivotal 1993 strategy that prioritized high-end regional contingencies. Younger officers will also have attained their formative experiences within the reformed PLA, where they are conducting more joint training, receiving more joint education (including through a new NDU Joint Operations College, which focuses on less senior officers), becoming more technically literate, and looking forward to more opportunities for joint assignments.¹¹⁴ The officers who entered the PLA in the late 1980s and 1990s do not have personal memories of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and are more familiar with an ascendant post-Mao China, and they are perhaps more likely to overestimate PLA capabilities and China's prospects in a military conflict.

The influence of the ground forces in senior leadership positions is also declining. Compared with the 2015 cohort, the most recent batch of senior PLA officers includes a significantly greater share of air force and naval officers. Some of these personnel have brought insights from their services into key joint operations posts, such as theater chief of staff and even theater commander, which is especially useful in theaters with an air and maritime focus. Appointing officers as full-time theater deputy commanders may be a useful way of providing rising leaders with greater experience outside their services and involving them in the joint planning and training processes that take place at the theater level. A question is whether this pattern will

continue or whether the army will regain lost ground—the return to five theaters led by army officers in late 2021 was a sign that greater service diversity cannot be assumed.¹¹⁵

Pushing in the opposite direction, the senior leadership is also becoming more invested in their respective services' parochial interests. More officers—double the 2015 share—are now serving in service headquarters, where part of their responsibility is to advocate for the missions and capabilities of their services. A national headquarters for the army has meant that that service now must compete on a more even playing field for resources with the other services. New JLSF and SSF headquarters amounted to new bureaucracies that will argue the importance of their unique contributions. The removal of the service chiefs from the CMC in 2017 also meant that the services will have to appeal to a higher decisionmaking organ for funding and resources. The extent to which these changes will intensify interservice rivalry will depend on the ability of the CMC to adjudicate competing demands based on strategic priorities and of the CCP to referee civilian and military demands in an era of increasing financial stress. However, this process will conflict with a tendency in China to avoid making difficult choices.¹¹⁶

The CMC will have opportunities to encourage further change in the experience of the senior leadership, especially if Xi or his successor uses personnel selections or new promotion and assignment regulations to break up established patterns and parochialism. One sign of change would be a decrease in the average age or length of experience of senior officers. This would imply an increase in the share of fast burners better acquainted with modern operations and technology and with a larger proportion of officers with civilian degrees. Another sign would be greater international experience, which officers will attain earlier in their careers, especially as the PLA opens additional overseas bases and draws more heavily from naval personnel, who are more likely to have served abroad in some capacity.¹¹⁷ Still another indicator would be a further decrease in the share of army officers in senior positions, especially roles critical in the planning and conduct of joint operations or in senior CMC administrative positions.

Other markers of change could involve the assignment system. Thus far, the PLA has not mandated changes in the paths that officers must take before they can assume higher command, which reflects the legacy of established patterns and service equities. In the future, the PLA could increase the frequency of rotations and encourage a higher proportion of officers to move between CMC and theater (or service) positions or between different career tracks. Of particular importance, an increase in the share of officers with joint experience below the TC deputy leader level would suggest greater prioritization of officers qualified in this area. A specific sign of change would be greater promotion rates for individuals who served in joint billets such as theater deputy chief of staff. This could mean more officers with career progressions that resemble

that of Zheng He (see textbox), who rose outside the traditional service pathway.¹¹⁸ All of these changes could broaden the perspective and skills of officers destined to assume joint command.

Although the PLA leadership could become more technically proficient and joint, modeling its expectations more on the U.S. system than the PLA of the past, the role of politics will continue to constitute a major difference between the systems. Nearly half of senior PLA officers will continue to be political commissars, whose primary mission is to ensure that the Party's directives are being followed and personnel are properly indoctrinated. All others will need to remain Party members in good standing and familiarize themselves with the political orthodoxy, whether Xi's or his successor's. This means that PLA leaders, even if they are younger and have different experiences and perspectives, cannot lose sight of their political responsibilities; they will need to be both "red" and expert.¹¹⁹ Whether this requirement becomes a hindrance to professionalization by taking time away from military matters or helps the Party by increasing unity of thought and resolve will be known only when the PLA leadership is put to the ultimate test, in battle.

Zheng He: A Model Joint Officer

Zheng He (born 1958) served in a succession of "joint" positions in the decade before 2022, at both the theater and national level, and across different functional specialties, including:



- Deputy Chief of Staff, Nanjing Military Region
- Director, Military Training Department, General Staff Department
- Deputy Commander, Chengdu Military Region
- Inaugural Director, CMC Training Management Department
- President, Academy of Military Sciences
- President, National Defense University
- Political Commissar, National Defense University.

Appendix 1: PLA Senior Officer Career Data (2015)

	Service Ratios (%)	Age	Years of Service	Total Rotations	Geographic Rotations (%)	Cross-Functional Rotations (%)	Joint Assignments (%)
Aggregate							
Total Officers: 182	Army (69), Navy (12), Air Force (14), SAF (4)	60	44	4	79	19	61
Service Breakdown							
Army (125)	N/A	61	43	4	79	22	69
Navy (22)	N/A	61	44	4	86	14	50
Air Force (26)	N/A	60	44	4	92	19	38
SAF (8)	N/A	60	42	4	50	25	37
Job Type Breakdown							
CMC/General Departments (36)	Army (83), Navy (8), Air Force (6), SAF (3)	62	45	3	48	28	94
Service HQs (29)	N/A	60	42	4	76	21	48
MRs (98)	Army (82), Navy (6), Air Force (12)	60	43	4	89	12	50
Academic (17)	Army (83), Navy (6), Air Force (12)	60	43	3	53	41	71
Grade Breakdown							
CMC VC, Member (9)	Army (56), Navy (11), Air Force (22), SSF (11)	66	48	3	100	33	100
MR/TC Leader (31)	Army (81), Navy (6), Air Force (10), SSF (3)	62	45	4	61	16	94
MR/TC Deputy Leader (141)	Army (67), Navy (13), Air Force (15), SSF (3)	60	43	4	82	19	51

Key: CMC: Central Military Commission; HQs: Headquarters; MR: Military Region; SAF: Second Artillery Force; TC: Theater Command; VC: Vice Chairman.

Appendix 2: PLA Senior Officer Career Data (2021)

	Service Ratios (%)	Age	Years of Service	Total Rotations	Geographic Rotations (%)	Cross-Functional Rotations (%)	Joint Assignments (%)
Aggregate							
Total Officers: 155	Army (48), Navy (15), Air Force (20), RF (8), SSF (7), JLSF (1)	61	44	4	77	13	56
Service Breakdown							
Army (75)	N/A	62	44	4	75	12	67
Navy (23)	N/A	61	44	5	83	26	52
Air Force (31)	N/A	60	44	4	87	3	45
Rocket Force (13)	N/A	62	45	5	77	8	31
Strategic Support Force (11)	N/A	61	43	4	55	23	63
Joint Logistic Support Force (2)	N/A	60	N/A	4	100	0	50
Job Type Breakdown							
CMC/General Departments (33)	Army (61), Navy (12), Air Force (12), RF (9), SSF (6)	63	44	4	61	24	79
Services (51)	N/A	61	43	4	80	14	37
TCs (64)	Army (52), Navy (16), Air Force (30), RF (3)	61	44	4	89	5	56
Academic (7)	Army (100)	61	42	3	28	28	86
Grade Breakdown							
CMC VC, Member (6)	Army (33), Navy (17), Air Force (17), RF (33)	68	51	4	87	33	87
MR/TC Leader (25)	Army (44), Navy (12), Air Force (20), RF (8), SSF (8)	63	45	5	84	20	76
MR/TC Deputy Leader (124)	Army (50), Navy (15), Air Force (20), RF (7), SSF (6), JLSF (2)	61	42	4	76	10	51

Key: CMC: Central Military Commission; HQs: Headquarters; MR: Military Region; SSF: Strategic Support Force; TC: Theater Command; VC: Vice Chairman.

Appendix 3: PLA Senior Officer Rotations by Position Type (2021)

	Rotation (%)	Service to Theater (%)	Service to CMC (%)	CMC to Theater (%)
Total Officers: 155	52	32	25	18
Service Breakdown				
Army (75)	36	17	4	24
Navy (23)	83	61	26	13
Air Force (31)	48	39	10	13
Rocket Force (13)	62	31	38	8
SSF (11)	91	55	55	18
JLSF(2)	50	50	0	0
Job Type Breakdown				
CMC/General Departments (33)	73	24	39	52
Services (51)	75	59	18	6
TCs (64)	27	19	2	11
Grade Breakdown				
CMC VC, Member (6)	100	33	83	50
MR/TC Leader (25)	72	40	20	28
MR/TC Deputy Leader (124)	45	31	10	15

Key: CMC: Central Military Commission; JLSF: Joint Logistic Support Force; MR: Military Region; SSF: Strategic Support Force; TC: Theater Command; VC: Vice Chairman.

Appendix 4: Full-Time PLAN and PLAAF Theater Deputy Commanders (2016–2020)

Name	Date Identified	Theater Command	Service	Prior Positions	Later Positions
Sun Herong [孙和荣]	February 2016	ETC	Air Force	Deputy Commander, Jinan MR, and Commander, Jinan MR Air Force (2013–2015)	N/A
Li Fengbiao [李凤彪]	February 2016	CTC	Air Force	*Served concurrently as CTC Joint Staff Department COS; COS, airborne corps (2009–2013); served concurrently as CTC COS; Commander, airborne corps (2013–2015), and Deputy Commander, Chengdu MR (2015)	Commander, SSF (May 2019)
VADM Gu Xiangbing [顾祥兵]	February 2016	ETC	Navy	Deputy COS, NSF (2008–?); Commandant, PLAN Submarine Academy (2011–?); Deputy Commander, ESF (2011–2016)	N/A
LTG Zhang Yihu [张义瑚]	February 2016	CTC	Air Force	COS, Beijing MR Air Force (2011–2013), and Deputy COS, Beijing MR (2011–2013); Commander, Lanzhou MR Air Force (2013–?), and Deputy Commander, Lanzhou MR (2013–?)	N/A
Wei Gang [魏钢]	March 2016	STC	Navy	*Served concurrently as STC COS; Deputy Secretary, PLAN Discipline Inspection Commission (2010–2013), and Deputy Director, PLAN Logistics Department (2010–2013); COS, NSF (2014–2015); Deputy Commander, NSF (2014–2015); Director, PLAN Logistics Department (2015–2016)	ETC Deputy Commander and ESF Commander (January 2017)
Chang Dingqiu [常丁求]	March 2016	STC	Air Force	Commander, 3 rd Fighter Division (2008–2013); Assistant to the COS, PLAAF HQ (2013–2015); COS, Shenyang MR (2015)	Deputy Chief, JSD (July 2018); Air Force Commander (August 2021)
Han Shengyan [韩胜延]	March 2016	WTC	Air Force	Deputy COS, Chengdu MR Air Force (2008–2013); Deputy Commander, Chengdu MR Air Force (2013–2014); Commander, Dingxin Test and Training Base (2014)	CTC Deputy Commander and CTC Air Force Commander (December 2018)
VADM Wang Changjiang [王长江]	March 2016	NTC (2016–2018); CTC (2018–)	Navy	*Served concurrently as Central TC COS; Deputy COS, PLAN HQ (2010–2013); Deputy Commander, SSF (2013–?), and Commander, SSF Naval Aviation (2013–?)	N/A
RADM Dong Jun [董军]	January 2017	STC	Navy	COS, NSF (2012–2014); Deputy Commander, ESF (2014–2015); Deputy COS, PLAN HQ (2015–2017)	Navy Commander (August 2021)
MG Wang Qiang [王强]	January 2019	CTC	Air Force	Deputy COS, Jinan MR (2014); COS, WTC Air Force (2016–2019), and Deputy COS, WTC (2016–2019)	Added duty as CTC Air Force Commander, (May 2020)

Key: COS: Chief of Staff; CTC: Central Theater Command; ESF: East Sea Fleet; ETC: Eastern Theater Command; HQ: Headquarters; JSD: Joint Staff Department; MR: Military Region; NSF: North Sea Fleet; NTC: Northern Theater Command; PLAAF: People's Liberation Army Air Force; PLAN: People's Liberation Army Navy; SSF: Strategic Support Force; SSF: South Sea Fleet; STC: Southern Theater Command; TC: Theater Command; WTC: Western Theater Command.

*Includes individuals who served concurrently as TC Joint Staff Department COS, which is a joint position located in the TC headquarters.

Appendix 5: Career Progression for CMC Members (2017–2022)

Name	Service	MR Leader				MR Deputy Leader		MR Deputy Leader, cont.		Corps Leader					
		Service CDR/PC	CMC Dept. Dir./PC	JSD/GSD Deputy	TC/MR CDR/PC	Service COS	Service Political Dept. Dir.	MR Political Dept. Dir.	MR/TC Service CDR/MR Deputy CDR/PC	Service DCOS	MR/TC DCOS	Group Army Commander/PC	Other Service Position	Service PME Role	
Xu Qiliang [许其亮] (VC)	Air Force	PLAAF		GSD Dep.		AF			Shenyang MRAF CDR	AF				8 th Air Corps CDR	
Zhang Youxia [张又侠] (VC)	Army		CMC EDD Dir.		Shenyang MR CDR				Beijing MR Deputy				13 th CDR		
Li Zuocheng [李作成]	Army	PLAA			Chengdu MR CDR				Chengdu MR Deputy		Guangzhou MR		41 st CDR		
Miao Hua [苗华]	Navy (formerly Army)	PLAN PC	CMC PWD Dir.		Lanzhou MR PC		Lanzhou MR		Lanzhou MR PC				12 th PC		
Wei Fenghe [魏凤和]	Rocket Force	PLARF		GSD Dep.		SAF				SAF				52 nd Base CDR	
Zhang Shengmin [张升民]	Rocket Force (formerly Army)		CMC DIC Dir., CMC LSD PC, CMC TAD PC					SAF						SAF Base PC	SAF CC PC

Key: AF: Air Force; CC: Command College; CDR: Commander; CMC: Central Military Commission; COS: Chief of Staff; DCOS: Deputy Chief of Staff; Dep.: Deputy; Dept.: Department; Dir.: Director; EDD: Equipment Development Department; GSD: General Staff Department; JSD: Joint Staff Department; LSD: Logistic Support Department; MR: Military Region; MRAF: Military Region Air Force; PC: Political Commissar; PLAA: PLA Army; PLAAF: PLA Air Force; PLAN: PLA Navy; PLARF: PLA Rocket Force; PME: Professional Military Education; PWD: Political Work Department; SAF: Second Artillery Force; TAD: Training and Administration Department; VC: Vice Chairman.

Appendix 6: Career Progression for Select TC Leader Positions (2016–2021)

Name	Role	Service	Dates	MR/TC LDR		MR Dep. LDR			MR Dep. LDR, cont.			Corps LDR							
				TC/ MR CDR	JSD/GSD Dep. Director	JSD Dep./ GSD Assistant to COS	MR/TC Service CDR/ Dep. (Dual Hat)	MR/TC COS	MR/TC Dep. (Non- Dual Hat)	MD CDR (or Dep.)	Service HQ Dep. or COS (incl. PAP)	MR/TC Service Dep./ COS	MD CDR (or Dep./ COS)	Group Army CDR	RF Base CDR	NDU Position	Service PME Position	Service HQ DCOS	MR/ TC DCOS
TC CDRs (2016–2021)									TC CDRs (2016–2021), cont.										
He Weidong [何卫东]	ETC	Army	12/19–				WTC Army, TC Dep.						Shanghai Garrison, Jiangsu MD						
Liu Yuejun [刘粤军]	ETC	Army	2/16– 12/19					Lanzhou						42 nd					
Wang Xiubun [王秀斌]	STC	Army	6/21–					ETC Dep.						80 th , 1 st					
Yuan Yubai [袁誉柏]	STC	Navy	1/17– 6/21				NSF					NSF							
Wang Jiaocheng [王教成]	STC	Army	2/16– 1/17				Nanjing Dep.							12 th					
Wang Haijiang [汪海江]	WTC	Army	8/21–							Xinjiang, Tibet			Xinjiang Dep.						
Xu Qiling [徐起零]	WTC	Army	6/21– 8/21				ETC, WTC Army					Central TC Army	Liaoning	79 th					
Zhang Xudong [张旭东]	WTC	Army	12/20– 6/21				CTC Army		CTC					39 th					
Zhao Zongqi [赵宗岐]	WTC	Army	2/16– 12/20				Jinan MR Dep.						Tibet	13 th , 14 th					
Li Qiaoming [李桥铭]	NTC	Army	9/17–				NTC Army							41 st					

Appendix 6: Career Progression for Select TC Leader Positions (2016–2021), cont.

Name	Role	Service	Dates	MR/TC LDR		MR Dep. LDR			MR Dep. LDR, cont.			Corps LDR							
				TC/MR CDR	JSD/GSD Dep. Director	JSD Dep./GSD Assistant to the COS	MR/TC Service CDR/Dep. (Dual Hat)	MR/TC COS	MR/TC Dep. (Non-Dual Hat)	MD CDR (or Dep.)	Service HQ Dep. or COS (incl. PAP)	MR/TC Service Dep./COS	MD CDR (or Dep./COS)	Group Army CDR	RF Base CDR	NDU Position	Service PME Position	Service HQ DCOS	MR/TC DCOS
Song Puxuan [宋普选]	NTC	Army	2/16–9/17				Nanjing MR Dep.			Beijing MR				54 th		NDU			
Lin Xiangyang [林向阳]	CTC	Army	8/21–				ETC Army							47 th , 72 nd , 82 nd					
Yi Xiaoguang [乙晓光]	CTC	Air Force	8/17–8/21			and GSD Assistant	Nanjing MRAF											AF HQ DCOS	
Han Weiguo [韩卫国]	CTC	Army	2/16–8/17							Beijing MR				12 th					
Service CDRs (2016–2021)										Service CDRs (2016–2021), cont.									
Liu Zhenli [刘振立]	Army CDR	Army	6/21–								Army HQ COS, PAP Dep.			36 th , 65 th					
Han Weiguo [韩卫国]	Army CDR	Army	8/17–6/21						Beijing MR					12 th					
Li Zuocheng [李作成]	Army CDR	Army	1/16–8/17				Chengdu MR Dep.							41 st					Guangzhou MR
Dong Jun [董军]	Navy CDR	Navy	8/21–						STC Dep.		Navy HQ	ESF						Navy HQ DCOS	
Shen Jinlong [沈金龙]	Navy CDR	Navy	1/17–8/21				STC Navy, SSF					SSF					PLANCC		
Wu Shengli [吴胜利]	Navy CDR	Navy	8/06–1/17				SSF					ESF							

Appendix 6: Career Progression for Select TC Leader Positions (2016–2021), cont.

Name	Role	Service	Dates	MR/TC LDR		MR Dep. LDR			MR Dep. LDR, cont.			Corps LDR							
				TC/ MR CDR	JSD/ GSD Dep. Dir.	JSD Dep./ GSD Assistant to the COS	MR/TC Service CDR/Dep. (Dual Hat)	MR/TC COS	MR/ TC Dep. (Non- Dual Hat)	MD CDR (or Dep.)	Service HQ Dep. or COS (incl. PAP)	MR/TC Service Dep./ COS	MD CDR (or Dep./ COS)	Group Army CDR	RF Base CDR	NDU Position	Service PME Position	Service HQ DCOS	MR/ TC DCOS
Chang Dingqiu [常丁求]	Air Force CDR	Air Force	8/21–			JSD Dep.				STC Dep.		Shenyang MRAF COS							
Ding Laihang [丁来杭]	Air Force CDR	Air Force	8/17– 8/21				NTC AF, Shenyang MRAF					Chengdu MRAF COS					PLAAFCC		
Ma Xiaotian [马晓天]	Air Force CDR	Air Force	10/12– 9/17				Nanjing MRAF, Lanzhou MRAF, Guangzhou MRAF COS				AF HQ							AF HQ	
Zhou Yaning [周亚宁]	RF CDR	RF	8/17–								RF HQ				52, 53				
Wei Fenghe [魏凤和]	RF CDR	RF	10/12– 8/17								RF HQ COS				53			SAF HQ	
Joint Staff Dept. Dep. (2016–2021)									Joint Staff Dept. Dep. (2016–2021), cont.										
Li Jun (TCDL) [李军]	JSD Dep.	RF	12/20–									RF COS, Dep.				53, 56			
Shao Yuanming (TCDL) [邵元明]	JSD Dep.	RF	1/17–												53			RF HQ	
Wu Ya'nan (TCDL) [吴亚男]	JSD Dep.	Army	12/20–				NTC Army							78 th					
Chang Dingqiu [常丁求]	JSD Dep.	Air Force	12/17– 8/21						STC Dep.			Shenyang MRAF COS							
Ma Yiming [马宜明]	JSD Dep.	Army	1/17– 12/20			GSD Assistant		Jinan MR COS						26 th					

Appendix 6: Career Progression for Select TC Leader Positions (2016–2021), cont.

Name	Role	Service	Dates	MR/TC LDR		MR Dep. LDR			MR Dep. LDR, cont.			Corps LDR								
				TC/ MR CDR	JSD/ GSD Dep. Dir.	JSD Dep./ GSD Assistant to the COS	MR/TC Service CDR/ Dep. (Dual Hat)	MR/TC COS	MR/ TC Dep. (Non- Dual Hat)	MD CDR (or Dep.)	Service HQ Dep. or COS (incl. PAP)	MR/ TC Service Dep./ COS	MD CDR (or Dep./ COS)	Group Army CDR	RF Base CDR	NDU Position	Service PME Position	Service HQ DCOS	MR/TC DCOS	
Sun Jianguo [孙建国]	JSD Dep.	Navy	1/09– 1/17			GSD Assistant						PLAN HQ COS							PLAN HQ	
Xu Fenlin [徐粉林]	JSD Dep.	Army	1/16– x/17					Guangzhou MR COS						17 th						
Wang Jianping [王建平]	JSD Dep.	Army/ PAP	12/15– 8/16									PAP COS, Dep.								
Wang Guanzhong [王冠中]	JSD Dep.	Army	10/12– 1/17																	
Qi Jianguo [戚建国]	JSD Dep.	Army	10/12– 1/17			GSD Assistant								12 th						
Yi Xiaoguang [乙晓光]	JSD Dep.	Air Force	7/14– 8/17			GSD Assistant	Nanjing MRAF											PLAAFCC	AF HQ	

Key: AF: Air Force; CDR: Commander; COS: Chief of Staff; CTC: Central Theater Command; DCOS: Deputy Chief of Staff; Dep.: Deputy; Dept.: Department; Dir.: Director; ESF: East Sea Fleet; ETC: Eastern Theater Command; GSD: General Staff Department; HQ: Headquarters; JSD: Joint Staff Department; LDR: Leader; MD: Military District; MR: Military Region; MRAF: Military Region Air Force; NSF: North Sea Fleet; NDU: National Defense University (China); NTC: Northern Theater Command; PAP: People's Armed Police; PLAAF: People's Liberation Army Air Force; PLAAFCC: PLA Air Force Command College; PLAN: PLA Navy; PLANCC: PLA Navy Command College; PME: Professional Military Education; RF: Rocket Force; SAF: Second Artillery Force; SSF: South Sea Fleet; STC: Southern Theater Command; TC: Theater Command; TCDL: Theater Company Deputy Leader; WTC: Western Theater Command.

Appendix 7: Concurrent Civilian Party and National People's Congress Positions

	Previous Provincial Positions (%)	18 th Central Committee Alternate and Member (%)	19 th CPC Congress Representative (%)	19 th CPC Central Committee Alternate (%)	19 th CPC Central Committee Member (%)	13 th NPC Representative or Deputy (%)
Aggregate						
Total Officers: 155	8	5	47	8	22	32
Service Breakdown						
Army (75)	15	5	53	5	21	27
Navy (23)	0	0	35	9	17	30
Air Force (31)	0	6	39	10	19	39
Rocket Force (13)	0	8	54	23	31	54
SSF (11)	9	9	55	9	36	27
JLSF (2)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Job Type Breakdown						
CMC/GSDs (33)	3	12	67	3	33	55
Services (51)	14	0	49	12	24	24
TCs (64)	6	5	33	8	14	28
Academic (7)	0	14	71	14	29	14
Grade Breakdown						
CMC VC, Member (6)	0	50	100	0	100	100
MR/TC LDR (25)	20	12	88	4	80	52
MR/TCDL LDR (124)	6	2	36	10	6	24

Key: CMC: Central Military Commission; GSD: General Services Department; JLSF: Joint Logistic Support Force; LDR: Leader; MR: Military Region; SSF: Strategic Support Force; TC: Theater Command; TCDL: Theater Command Deputy Leader; VC: Vice Chairman.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reform* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/Chairman-Xi-Remakes-the-PLA/>>; *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2021* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2021), available at <<https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>>; *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019), available at <https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf>; Sujiura Yasuyuki, *China Security Report 2022: The PLA's Pursuit of Enhanced Joint Operations* (Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan, 2022), available at <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/chinareport/pdf/china_report_EN_web_2022_A01.pdf>.

² Dan Reiter and William A. Wagstaff, "Leadership and Military Effectiveness," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 14, no. 4 (October 2018), 490–511; Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam III, "Democracy and Battlefield Military Effectiveness," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (June 1998), 259–277.

³ Statement of Dennis J. Blasko, "PLA Weaknesses and Xi's Concerns about PLA Capabilities," Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 7, 2019, available at <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Blasko_USCC%20Testimony_FINAL.pdf>.

⁴ "Xi Jinping Emphasized the Implementation of the Military Education Policy for the New Era at the Opening Ceremony of the All-Army Academy President's Training Course" [习近平在全军院校长集训开班式上强调 贯彻新时代军事教育方针], *Xinhua*, November 27, 2019, available at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-11/27/c_1125281872.htm>; "Xi Jinping Emphasized During an Inspection of the National Defense University: Promote the Reform and Innovation of Military Academies Around the Goal of Achieving a Strong Military, and Provide Talent and Intellectual Support for the Realization of the China Dream and the Strong Army Dream" [习近平在视察国防大学时强调：围绕实现强军目标推进军队院校改革创新 为实现中国梦强军梦提供人才和智力支持], *People's Daily Online* [人民网], March 24, 2016, available at <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0324/c64094-28222252.html>>.

⁵ "Xi Stresses CPC's Absolute Leadership Over Army," *Xinhua*, November 2, 2014, available at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-11/02/content_18843109.htm>.

⁶ Although the reforms have been compared to the U.S. Goldwater-Nichols Act in terms of reorienting the PLA's focus toward joint operations, they did not change career patterns through joint duty requirements. See James Mulvenon, "China's 'Goldwater-Nichols'? The Long-Awaited PLA Reorganization Has Finally Arrived," *China Leadership Monitor* 49 (2016), 1–6, available at <<https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-goldwater-nichols-long-awaited-pla-reorganization-has-finally-arrived>>; Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, "China's Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms," *Joint Force Quarterly* 82 (3rd Quarter, July 2016), 68–75, available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Article/793267/chinas-goldwater-nichols-assessing-pla-organizational-reforms/>>; and David M. Finkelstein, *Initial Thoughts on the Reorganization and Reform of the PLA* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2016), 18, available at <https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/dop-2016-u-012560-final.pdf>.

⁷ Dennis J. Blasko, “The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms: The PLA Army,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 345–392.

⁸ Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, “A New Step Forward in PLA Professionalization,” *China Brief* 21, no. 5 (March 15, 2021), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/a-new-step-forward-in-pla-professionalization/>>.

⁹ See, for example, Caitlin Lee et al., *Rare Birds: Understanding and Addressing Air Force Underrepresentation in Senior Joint Positions in the Post-Goldwater-Nichols Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), available at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2089.html>; Michael C. Veneri, “The U.S. Military’s Implementation of the Joint Duty Promotion Requirement,” *Armed Forces & Society* 34, no. 3 (April 2008), 413–432, available at <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609037>>.

¹⁰ See, for example, James Mulvenon, “The New Central Military Commission,” *China Leadership Monitor* 40 (2013), available at <<https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM40JM.pdf>>; Dennis J. Blasko, “A ‘First’ for the People’s Liberation Army: A Navy Admiral Becomes a Joint, Regional Commander,” *China Brief* 17, no. 5 (March 31, 2017), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/first-peoples-liberation-army-navy-admiral-becomes-joint-regional-commander/>>; Kenneth W. Allen and Jana Allen, “Waiting in the Wings: PLAAF General Yi Xiaoguang,” *China Brief* 17, no. 8 (June 9, 2017), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/waiting-wings-plaaf-general-yi-xiaoguang/>>; Marcus Clay and Rod Lee, “Star General Chang Dingqiu Takes Command of China’s Air Force,” *The Diplomat*, September 24, 2021, available at <<https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/star-general-chang-dingqiu-takes-command-of-chinas-air-force/>>; Kenneth W. Allen, Dennis J. Blasko, and John F. Corbett, “Assessment of the PLA’s 3-Star Promotions in September 2021,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2021, available at <<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/CASI%20Articles/2021-09-20%20Assessment%20of%20the%20PLA%203-Star%20Promotions%20in%20September%202021.pdf?ver=Psqza841-Epg6Jjge-comw%3D%3D>>.

¹¹ Elizabeth Hague, “PLA Leadership in China’s Military Regions,” in *Civil-Military Change in China: Elites, Institutes, and Ideas After the 16th Party Congress*, ed. Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), 219–256, available at <<https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/1686.pdf>>; Jeffrey Becker, David Liebenberg, and Peter Mackenzie, *Behind the Periscope: Leadership in China’s Navy* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2013), available at <https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/crm-2013-u-006467-final.pdf>; Kenneth W. Allen, *Commanders of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force: An Overview* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2021), available at <<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/PLAAF/2021-02-11%20Commanders%20of%20the%20PLAAF.pdf?ver=tCyanf8P28Um6b6oTQnfg%3D%3D>>; Kenneth W. Allen, *Political Commissars of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2021), available at <<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/CASI%20Articles/2021-03-22%20PCs%20of%20the%20PLAAF.pdf?ver=-IqxmyMopymzYtli6FTmZw%3D%3D>>.

¹² It is worth noting that there is some margin of error in compiling up-to-date leadership profiles. Appointments are sometimes not announced and are discovered only, for instance, when an officer appears at a Party event wearing a new ribbon or patch. Retirements are usually not announced, meaning that some retirees are sometimes still catalogued as on active duty. Nevertheless, extensive

coverage in Chinese media reduces these errors, and there is no reason to believe that those errors would systematically skew the data.

¹³ By rank, these officers include full generals (who wear three stars on their uniforms), lieutenant generals (two stars), and a few major generals (one star). The PLA does not currently have a four-star rank.

¹⁴ Clay and Blasko estimate that there were 450,000 officers and civilian cadres (23 percent), 850,000 noncommissioned officers (42 percent), and 700,000 conscripts (35 percent). However, the exact figure for officers is unknown. See Marcus Clay and Dennis J. Blasko, “People Win Wars: The PLA Enlisted Force, and Other Related Matters,” *War on the Rocks*, July 31, 2020, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/people-win-wars-the-pla-enlisted-force-and-other-related-matters/>>.

¹⁵ In 2022, there were 159 three-star generals in the U.S. Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Space Force, and another 40 four-star generals.

¹⁶ China has 10 officer ranks; thus, there are multiple ranks associated with a single grade, and multiple grades associated with a single rank. To make matters more confusing, the PLA has announced an intention to place more weight on rank, but in practice it is not clear what this means or how a rank-centered system would work, because the organizational structure is still based on the 15-step grade structure. For analysis, see Wuthnow and Saunders, “A New Step Forward in PLA Professionalization”; Kenneth W. Allen, “China Announces Reform of Military Ranks,” *China Brief* 17, no. 2, January 30, 2017, available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/china-announces-reform-military-ranks/>>.

¹⁷ Thanks to Ken Allen for this observation.

¹⁸ James Mulvenon and Andrew N.D. Yang, eds., *The People’s Liberation Army as Organization v1.0* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002), 238, available at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF182.html>. Article 12 of the 2016 Active Duty Officer Law stipulates that the CMC chairman must approve candidates for division leader and higher. Precisely how the process works for very senior leaders is unclear, as is Xi’s personal role.

¹⁹ Active Duty Officer Law [in Chinese] (2016), Article 1, available at <<https://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/gjxfj/xxgk/fgwj/flfg/webinfo/2016/03/1460585589878285.htm>>.

²⁰ Wuthnow and Saunders, “A New Step Forward in PLA Professionalization.”

²¹ For a summary, see Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, *Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications*, China Strategic Perspectives 10 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, March 2017), available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-10.pdf>>.

²² For a discussion of the downsizing, see Ma Chengkun and John Chen, “System Overload? The 2015 PLA Force Reduction, Military-Locality Relations, and the Potential for Social Instability,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 661–709.

²³ The standard retirement ages for TC deputy leader and TC leader are 63 and 65, respectively. See Article 14 of the Active Duty Officer Law (revised 2016), available at <<https://www.gjxfj.gov.cn/gjxfj/xxgk/fgwj/flfg/webinfo/2016/03/1460585589878285.htm>>. CMC members have typically retired at 67.

²⁴ Ma and Chen, “System Overload?”

²⁵ Joel McFadden, Kim Fassler, and Justin Godby, “The New PLA Leadership: Xi Molds China’s Military to His Vision,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 557–582.

²⁶ Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, “Large and In Charge: Civil-Military Relations under Xi Jinping,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 519–555.

²⁷ The creation of army, Strategic Support Force, and Joint Logistic Support Force headquarters created new TC leader and TC deputy leader billets, offsetting some of the losses from the theaters and general departments.

²⁸ These included TC deputy commanders and deputy political commissars. There is no fixed number of these positions, but an approximation, based on the 2015 *Directory of PRC Military Personalities*, is four each per theater.

²⁹ JSD deputy chiefs were similarly reduced from TC leader to TC deputy leader, but they remained in the “senior leadership” as defined by the senior-most four grades.

³⁰ Thanks to Rod Lee for this insight.

³¹ For an overview, see Kenneth W. Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People’s Liberation Army’s 37 Academic Institutions* (Washington, DC: CASI, 2018), available at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/Other-Topics/2020-06-11%20PLA%20Academic_Institutions.pdf>. The authors note that the PLA National Defense University was downgraded from a TC leader to a TC deputy leader organization, although the commandant remains a TC leader.

³² There is some evidence that some of these offices were already disappearing by 2022. Thanks to Rick Gunnell for this observation.

³³ According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the manpower shares in 2015 were as follows: army, 1.6 million (69 percent), navy, 235,000 (10 percent), air force, 398,000 (17 percent), and Second Artillery Force, 100,000 (4 percent). *The Military Balance 2015* (London: IISS, 2015), 237. By 2021, the shares were as follows: army, 965,000 (47 percent), navy, 260,000 (13 percent), air force, 395,000 (19 percent), Rocket Force, 120,000 (6 percent), Strategic Support Force, 145,000 (7 percent), and other, 150,000 (7 percent). “Other” likely consists primarily of the Joint Logistic Support Force, which is the only other component of the PLA not otherwise represented. *The Military Balance 2022* (London: IISS, 2022), 255.

³⁴ These positions include JSD chief of staff and deputy chief of staff, and theater command commander, political commissar, deputy commander (both non-dual-hatted as theater service component commander dual-hatted as deputy commander), deputy political commissar, and chief of staff.

³⁵ Air Force General Chang Dingqiu became Central TC commander and Navy Admiral Yuan Yubai became Southern TC commander in 2017. Teddy Ng, “China’s Air Force Gets a Lift with Pilot’s Promotion to Top Military Job,” *South China Morning Post*, February 14, 2018, available at <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2133405/chinas-air-force-gets-lift-pilots-promotion-top>>; Blasko, “A ‘First’ for the People’s Liberation Army.” Nevertheless, two of five theater political commissars in late 2021 were non-army officers (Air Force General Li Fengbiao, in the Western TC, and Navy Admiral Liu Qingsong, in the Northern TC). Thanks to Rod Lee for this observation.

³⁶ It is also worth noting that, post-reform, three of five theaters (60 percent) have a naval fleet, compared with three of seven military regions (43 percent). This increased the relative proportion of naval representation at the TC deputy leader level.

³⁷ For one example, see “Air Force Major General Zhou Li Transferred to Commander of the Henan Military District, Replacing Major General Lu Changjian” [空军少将周利调任河南省军区司令员, 接替卢长健少将], *The Paper*, April 12, 2017, available at <https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1660971>.

³⁸ Nevertheless, each of the service headquarters retained a residual operational role. For instance, the navy takes charge of counter-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden. For details, see Phillip C. Saunders, “PLA Command and Control of Overseas Operations,” in *The PLA Beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2021), 117–118, available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/PLA-Beyond-Borders/>>.

³⁹ Edmund J. Burke and Arthur Chan, “Coming to a (New) Theater Near You: Command, Control, and Forces,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 227–255.

⁴⁰ For instance, current CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia and CMC member Li Zuocheng were both junior infantry officers in the 1979 border conflict. Current PAP Chief of Staff Zhou Youya served in that conflict as a 16-year-old conscript. Current PLA Army Commander Liu Zhenli participated in a skirmish along the Sino-Indian border in 1986.

⁴¹ For a good survey of this era, see Ellis Joffe, *The Chinese Army After Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁴² David M. Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy: An Overview of the ‘Military Strategic Guidelines,’” in *Right Sizing the People’s Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military*, ed. Andrew Scobell and Roy Kamphausen (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2007), 95–127, available at <<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1071&context=monographs>>; M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴³ For instance, experience at sea was increasingly common for PLA Navy leaders during this time frame. See Becker, Liebenberg, and Mackenzie, *Behind the Periscope*, 112–114.

⁴⁴ The slight discrepancy is likely due to the timing of the data relative to the Party congresses: 2015 was 2 years away from a Party congress, whereas 2021 was only 1 year away; thus, individuals in the latter year tended to be about a year older.

⁴⁵ This contrasts with Cheng Li’s assessment that Xi was systematically promoting “young guards” to senior positions. See Cheng Li, “Promoting ‘Young Guards’: The Recent High Turnover in the PLA Leadership (Part III: Personal and Political),” *China Leadership Monitor* 50 (2016), 1–10, available at <<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/promoting-young-guards-the-recent-high-turnover-in-the-pla-leadership-part-iii-personal-and-political/>>.

⁴⁶ The Active Duty Officer Law specifies a minimum term in grade of 3 years for most positions. An age of 4 years younger than the average would suggest that an officer skipped a grade or was elevated quickly. Article 20 specifies that officers can be promoted early on the basis of “political integrity, outstanding performance, and work needs” [德才优秀, 实绩显著, 工作需要].

⁴⁷ Zhong was previously a civilian aide to Xi and became a military officer only in 2012, when Xi became CMC chairman. Edward Wong, “The ‘Gatekeeper’ in Xi Jinping’s Inner Circle,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2015, available at <<https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/the-gatekeeper-in-xi-jinpings-inner-circle/>>.

⁴⁸ Zhong, Chang, and Zhang were TC deputy leader grade officers, whereas Guo was the youngest TC leader.

⁴⁹ Kenneth W. Allen and Morgan Clemens, *PLA Navy Personnel Recruitment, Education, and Training* (Newport, RI: Naval War College, China Maritime Studies Institute, 2014), available at <<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-red-books/10/>>.

⁵⁰ This course is held at the PLA National Defense University. The students will then return to the PLA NDU as corps leader grade officers and take part in the command and strategy course, colloquially known as the “Dragons.” Paul H.B. Godwin, “The Cradle of Generals: Strategists, Commanders, and the PLA-National Defense University,” in *The “People” in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China’s Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008), 317–352, available at <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12107>>.

⁵¹ This group of officers was in the same generation that benefited from the reopening of China’s civilian universities in 1977, with the first graduates completing their degrees in 1982.

⁵² Thomas J. Bickford, “Trends in Education and Training, 1924–2007: From Whampoa to Nanjing Polytechnic,” in Kamphausen, Scobell, and Tanner, *The “People” in the PLA*, 19–48.

⁵³ These officers are too old to have participated in the PLA’s “national defense student” program, which recruited officers from civilian universities. That program lasted from 1999 to 2017. It is also notable that many PLA officers who joined the military prior to the mid-1980s did not possess bachelor’s degrees or higher through military academies. Kenneth W. Allen and Cristina L. Garafola, *70 Years of the PLA Air Force* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2021), 161, available at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/PLAAF/2021-04-12%20CASI_70%20Years%20of%20the%20PLAAF_FINAL%20ALL.pdf?ver=hTom1CXAjt0VTGTJzJBGAQ%3D%3D>.

⁵⁴ Liu later returned to Tsinghua and received master’s and doctoral degrees. Liu’s successor as director of the CMC Science and Technology Commission, Zhao Xiaozhe, is also a civilian university graduate, having received bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees from the Dalian University of Technology in the 1980s and 1990s.

⁵⁵ This would include civilian graduates who joined the PLA later as well as active-duty PLA officers who rotated into student assignments in civilian universities.

⁵⁶ Erin Hale, “China’s Communist Party at 100: Where Are the Women?” *Al Jazeera*, June 20, 2021, available at <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/30/chinas-communist-party-at-100-where-are-the-women>>.

⁵⁷ At the TC deputy leader grade, Lieutenant General Nie Li, daughter of Chinese Marshal Nie Rongzhen, served as a deputy director of COSTIND in the early 1990s. Xu Lili, a Navy rear admiral, served as deputy political commissar of the PLA Navy Logistics Department and later deputy commandant of the Academy of Military Sciences in the 2010s. Thanks to Rod Lee for identifying these cases.

⁵⁸ In the PLA Air Force, only five women have ever been promoted to the rank of major general. Research indicates that in this service, there is a glass ceiling for women at the battalion level. Kenneth W. Allen, *Overview of Females in the PLA Air Force* (Montgomery, AL: Chinese Aerospace Studies Institute, 2021), 4, available at <<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/>>

Research/PLAAF/2021-11-15%20Females%20in%20the%20PLA%20Air%20Force.pdf?ver=s549Z-wl0IhJeIMa4sEQ2g%3D%3D>.

⁵⁹ Overall, women accounted for 18.9 percent of Active-duty U.S. officers in 2020. For further information on demographics in the U.S. military, see *2020 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), available at <<https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2020-demographics-report.pdf>>.

⁶⁰ Based on 2010 census data. See “China,” *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, available at <<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/china/>>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Elizabeth Hague, “PLA Career Progressions and Policies,” in Kamphausen, Scobell, and Tanner, *The “People” in the PLA*, 268–272.

⁶³ Unlike other Chinese ethnic minorities, Tibetans and Uyghurs are easier to identify because of the transliteration into Chinese characters of their names. According to the 2021 *Directory of People’s Republic of China Military Personalities* (Hong Kong: U.S. Consulate General, 2021), an ethnic Tibetan was serving as one of four deputy commanders of the Tibet Military District, and an ethnic Uyghur was a deputy chief of the Xinjiang Military District Staff Department.

⁶⁴ “Hui Ethnicity Major General Rao Kaixun Is Elevated to Deputy Commander of the Strategic Support Force” [回族少将饶开勋升任战略支援部队副司令员], *Caixin* [财新], March 11, 2016, available at <<https://china.caixin.com/m/2016-03-11/100918854.html>>. Note that Rao was removed from his position as an NPC representative in 2019, but his status in the PLA remains unclear.

⁶⁵ Hague, “PLA Career Progressions and Policies,” 267–268. Rod Lee notes that in the PLAAF, officers tend to stay in the same unit until roughly the “O-6 equivalent level.” Roderick Lee, “Building the Next Generation of Chinese Military Leaders,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2020), 137–138, available at <<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/31/2002488091/-1/-1/1/LEE.PDF>>.

⁶⁶ This was one purpose of the Active Duty Officer Law. See Kenneth W. Allen and John F. Corbett, Jr., “Predicting PLA Leader Promotions,” in Scobell and Wortzel, *Civil-Military Change in China*, 263, available at <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep11969.11.pdf>>.

⁶⁷ Saunders and Wuthnow, “Large and In Charge,” 536–537.

⁶⁸ For analysis, an officer moving from an operational command to an academic post has a functional rotation, because the positions are qualitatively different.

⁶⁹ This contrasts with the mid-2000s, when the PLA appeared to be experimenting with giving operational commanders more exposure to equipment and logistics. Hague, “PLA Career Progressions and Policies,” 264.

⁷⁰ “North Sea Fleet Deputy Commander Wei Gang Was Promoted to the Naval Headquarters and Became Director of the Logistics Department” [北海舰队副司令员魏钢上调海军总部，出任后勤部部长], *The Paper*, July 12, 2015, available at <https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1351658>.

⁷¹ Joel Wuthnow, “A Brave New World for Chinese Joint Operations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 1–2 (2017), 169–195, available at <<https://cwp.sipa.columbia.edu/news/'-brave-new-world-chinese-joint-operations'-cwp-fellow-joel-wuthnow>>.

⁷² Statement of Mark Cozad, *PLA Joint Training and Implications for Future Expeditionary Capabilities*, Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 21, 2016, available at <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT451/RAND_CT451.pdf>.

⁷³ Joint assignments included service on the CMC, in a CMC or general department, in a theater or military district headquarters (including concurrent service as a theater service component commander and theater deputy commander), and in the PLA National Defense University, National University of Defense Technology, or Academy of Military Sciences.

⁷⁴ For a more thorough discussion of jointness in the PLA officer corps, see Joel Wuthnow, “PLA Senior Officer Assignments and the Limits of Jointness,” paper presented at the CAPS-RAND-NDU-USIP Conference on the People’s Liberation Army, November 2021.

⁷⁵ The U.S. Congress required joint duty assignments as a criterion for promotion under the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, leading to a greater percentage of senior officers who have served on the Joint Staff and in staff positions in the combatant commands. Even after this reform, however, some U.S. analysts contend that incentives for joint experience vary across the services and that further reforms are needed to encourage jointness. See Harry J. Thie et al., “A Framework for Joint Officer Management: A Strategic Approach,” RAND Research Brief, 2005, available at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9114.html>; Ryan Shaw and Miriam Krieger, “Don’t Leave Jointness to the Services: Preserving Joint Officer Development and Goldwater-Nichols Reforms,” *War on the Rocks*, December 30, 2015, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/dont-leave-jointness-to-the-services-preserving-joint-officer-development-amid-goldwater-nichols-reform/>>.

⁷⁶ Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, “A Modern Major General: Building Joint Commanders in the PLA,” in Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, 303; Li Xianping, “Comment on the U.S. Military Joint Officer Qualification System” [美军军官联合资格认证制度评析], *Comparative Education Review* [比较教育研究] 7 (2012), 56–60 (Li is a professor at the PLA NDU); Zhou Jianxin and Liu Daifeng, “Exploration of the U.S. Military’s Joint Duty Officer Cultivation System” [美军联合职业军官培养机制透析], *Theoretical Studies in PLA Political Work* [军队政工理论研究] 9, no. 5 (2008), 109–113 (the authors are professors at the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy); and Kang Guoqiang, “Construction of U.S. Military Joint Commanders” [美军联合作战指挥军官队伍建设], *Foreign Military Observer* [外军观察] 1 (2011), 74–75 (the author is a professor at the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy).

⁷⁷ Service commanders have less operational responsibility than in the pre-reform system, but each has a residual operational portfolio. They also control key national assets, such as the marine corps (navy) and airborne corps (air force).

⁷⁸ The chief of the JSD is an ex officio member of the CMC. JSD deputy chiefs were previously TC leader grade officers but in 2017–2018 were downgraded to TC deputy leader. Some of these officers had transferred laterally from other TC deputy leader positions.

⁷⁹ A minor exception, as discussed later, was the new phenomenon of full-time theater deputy commanders.

⁸⁰ James R. Locher III, “Has It Worked? The Goldwater-Nichols Reorganization Act,” *Naval War College Review* 54, no. 4 (Autumn 2001), 104, available at <<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol54/iss4/7/>>.

⁸¹ However, PLA interviewees suggested that this program has not yielded the intended results. See Wuthnow and Saunders, “A Modern Major General,” 297–298. See also Kevin McCauley, “Cultivating Joint Operations Talent,” in *The People of the PLA 2.0*, ed. Roy Kamphausen (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2021), 260, available at <<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/944/>>.

⁸² “Cross-Service Promotion: Major General Liu Faqing, Former Commander of the PLAAF Airborne Corps, Was Appointed as Army Deputy Commander” [跨军种晋升：空军空降兵某军原军长刘发庆少将任陆军副司令员], *The Paper*, December 3, 2018, available at <https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2699734>. Nevertheless, the airborne corps still struggles with joint integration, including a lack of joint training. For a discussion, see Roderick Lee, “The PLA Airborne Corps in a Taiwan Scenario,” in *Crossing the Strait: China’s Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2022), 195–222.

⁸³ Others included NDU and AMS presidents, directors of the CMC Logistic Support Department and Equipment Development Department, and political commissar of the Logistic Support Department.

⁸⁴ The exception was Zhang Shengmin, who had served in the CMC bureaucracy.

⁸⁵ The analysis does not consider paths to theater or service political commissar.

⁸⁶ At the TC deputy leader level, Yi had been Nanjing Military Region air force commander. In 2014, he transferred to a TC leader position as deputy chief of the General Staff Department (GSD). Prior to the reforms, it was necessary for non-army officers preparing for service commander to take a GSD position, because service headquarters lacked a TC leader grade billet.

⁸⁷ Thanks to Dennis Blasko for this observation.

⁸⁸ Like other TC chiefs of staff—it is a TC deputy leader position—Wang was dual-hatted as theater deputy commander.

⁸⁹ In the past, serving as a GSD deputy chief of staff was a common pathway to navy and air force commander (which were previously CMC members) because the services did not have a military region leader grade billet. Since the service chiefs were reduced to TC leader in 2017, this pathway is no longer necessary. If an officer serves as a JSD assistant or deputy chief of staff, it is more likely a career-broadening move.

⁹⁰ Army officer Zhang Xudong also served as non-dual-hatted deputy commander of the Central TC prior to his appointment as Western TC commander in December 2020. Others have transferred laterally from these positions to dual-hatted theater deputy commander. For instance, Air Force General Han Shengyan transferred from full-time deputy commander of the Western TC to commander of the Central TC Air Force (dual-hatted as Central TC deputy commander). Service as a non-dual-hatted theater deputy might thus be a holding position for those in line for dual-hatted positions.

⁹¹ Lee, “Building the Next Generation of Chinese Military Leaders,” 138–140; Blasko, *PLA Weaknesses and Xi’s Concerns about PLA Capabilities*.

⁹² Cheng Li, “Promoting ‘Young Guards’: The Recent High Turnover in the PLA Leadership (Part I: Purges and Reshuffles),” *China Leadership Monitor* 48 (2015), 1–14.

⁹³ James Mulvenon, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise and Fall of the Chinese Military-Business Complex, 1978–1998* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁹⁴ Li, “Promoting ‘Young Guards’” (Part 1), 10.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ It is also possible to trace the career trajectory of group army commanders each year to determine if the commander of a specific group army was more likely than his peers to be promoted. Of the 18 commanders in 2016, at least 8 (including the 31st Group Army commander, Li Huohui) subsequently rose to theater deputy leader positions. Several others were still in corps leader billets but may be promoted in grade in the future.

⁹⁷ Minnie Chan, “General Zhang Youxia: Xi Jinping’s ‘Sworn Brother’ Now His Deputy on China’s Top Military Body,” *South China Morning Post*, October 25, 2017, available at <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2116936/general-zhang-youxia-xi-jinpings-sworn-brother-now-his>>.

⁹⁸ Saunders and Wuthnow, “Large and In Charge,” 543–544.

⁹⁹ Allen and Corbett argue that the modern rotation system, combined with the demise of the old field armies, undercuts the influence of patronage ties established decades ago. See Allen and Corbett, “Predicting PLA Leader Promotions,” 266–267.

¹⁰⁰ Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, eds., *PLA Influence on China’s National Security Policymaking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

¹⁰¹ Cheng Li, “Forecasting China’s Largest-Ever Turnover of Military Elite at the 19th Party Congress,” *China-U.S. Focus*, September 18, 2017, available at <<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/forecasting-chinas-largest-ever-turnover-of-military-elite-at-the-19th-party-congress/>>.

¹⁰² The three were Yi Xiaoguang, Gao Jin, and Yang Xuejun. There were also two 2021 TC deputy leaders (Gao Jianguo and Xu Linping) on the 18th Central Committee.

¹⁰³ However, those three had been promoted after the 19th Party Congress and are likely to be elevated to the Central Committee at the 20th Party Congress.

¹⁰⁴ In 2021, 6 PLA officers served on the 130-person Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. All were political commissars except Li Qingjie, whose PLA position is deputy director of the Logistic Support Department.

¹⁰⁵ See Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, “More Red but Still Expert: China’s Party-Army Relations under Xi Jinping,” unpublished manuscript, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Of the 12 cases, 4 were or had been on the Party standing committee in Tibet, 3 in Xinjiang, 2 in Shanghai, and 1 each in Beijing, Sichuan, and Gansu. Nevertheless, it is unclear that these data are as consistently reported as national-level Party committees and Party congresses.

¹⁰⁷ These PLA officers are among the 2019 CCP representatives to the NPC. There are also eight other political parties that elect representatives, but none include PLA members (whose CCP membership is required for duty).

¹⁰⁸ There are also more than 200 PLA officers at the corps leader and below levels elected to the NPC, but they constitute very small percentages of their respective grades.

¹⁰⁹ Services steering officers away from joint assignments remains an issue in the U.S. system even after Goldwater-Nichols. See, for example, Lee et al., *Rare Birds*, 36.

¹¹⁰ Kenneth W. Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications*, China Strategic Perspectives 11 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2016).

¹¹¹ Joel Wuthnow, “Who Does What? Chinese Command and Control in a Taiwan Scenario,” in Wuthnow et al., *Crossing the Strait*, 277–303.

¹¹² Gustav Fressel, “Combined Farces: Russia’s Early Military Failures in Ukraine,” European Council on Foreign Relations, March 15, 2022, available at <<https://ecfr.eu/article/combined-farces-russias-early-military-failures-in-ukraine/>>.

¹¹³ Ann Marie Dailey, “What’s Behind Russia’s Logistical Mess in Ukraine? A U.S. Army Engineer Looks at the Tactical Level,” *New Atlanticist*, March 21, 2022, available at <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/whats-behind-russias-logistical-mess-in-ukraine-a-us-army-engineer-looks-at-the-tactical-level/>>.

¹¹⁴ McCauley, “Cultivating Joint Operations Talent”; Wuthnow and Saunders, “A Modern Major General”; Kevin McCauley, *PLA System of Systems Operations: Enabling Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2017), available at <https://www.academia.edu/37360167/System_of_Systems_Enabling_Joint_Operations_final>; Kevin McCauley, *Cultivating Joint Talent: PLA Education and Training Reforms* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Foreign Military Studies Office, 2022), available at <https://www.academia.edu/79958506/Cultivating_Joint_Talent_PLA_Education_and_Training_Reforms>.

¹¹⁵ Allen, Blasko, and Corbett, *Assessment of the PLA’s 3-Star Promotions in September 2021*.

¹¹⁶ Susan L. Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reforms in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 125.

¹¹⁷ In the navy, for instance, “blue water operational experience” is increasingly a prerequisite for promotion. Becker, Liebenberg, and Mackenzie, *Behind the Periscope*, 112–115.

¹¹⁸ “The New President of National Defense University Takes Office, Zheng He Is Now President” [国防大学新“掌门人”就职 郑和出任校长], *Global Times*, June 20, 2017, available at <https://news.ifeng.com/a/20170620/51284757_0.shtml>.

¹¹⁹ For a discussion, see Wuthnow and Saunders, “More Red but Still Expert.”

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