

Chinese Military Leadership After the 17th Congress: Hu's Guys or Whose Guys?

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The civilian political leadership changes at the 17th Party Congress in October 2007 have received close scrutiny from outside observers, but important and interesting personnel adjustments in the military have garnered less attention. This article examines recent Chinese military leadership changes in detail, focusing principally on the Central Military Commission but also tracking significant moves at the Military Region and Service level.

Military Leadership Changes Leading Up to the 17th Congress

Prior to the 17th Party Congress and the selection of the new Central Committee, Politburo, and Politburo Standing Committee, systematic and sweeping changes were made in the leadership structures of all seven military regions and the services. These reshuffles were not a purge, but an unusually intense round of the PLA's regular command rotations and age-based removals of personnel. According to a reliable, Beijing-owned newspaper, commanders of the Beijing, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Lanzhou, Chengdu, and Shenyang Military Regions were replaced, as well as the heads of important units such as the General Staff Headquarters, General Armament Department, Air Force, and National Defense University.¹

Table 1

Major Military Region Leadership Changes, 2007

<i>Name</i>	<i>Previous Position</i>	<i>New Position</i>
Fang Fenghui	COS, GZMR ²	CDR, BJMR ³
Zhao Keshi	COS, NJMR	CDR, NJMR ⁴
Zhang Qinsheng	DCOGS (Intel), GSD	CDR, GZMR ⁵
Li Shiming	DCDR, CDMR	CDR, CDMR ⁶
Zhang Youxia	DCDR, BJMR ⁷	CDR, SYMR ⁸
Wang Guosheng	COS, LZMR	Commander, LZMR ⁹
Liu Chengjun	DCDR, PLAAF	CDT, AMS
Wang Xibin	COS, BJMR	CDT, NDU
Zhang Yang	Dir., Political Dept., GZMR	PC, GZMR
Li Changcai	DPC, NJMR	PC, LZMR
Chen Guoling	DPC, GZMR	PC, NJMR
Zhang Haiyang	DPC, BJMR	PC, CDMR
Tong Shiping	Asst. Director, GPD	PC, NDU

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Table 1 (*continued*)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Previous Position</i>	<i>New Position</i>
Yu Linxiang	PC, LZMR	PC, PAP
Liu Yuan	DPC, GLD	PC, AMS
Zhang Rucheng	PC, Hong Kong Garrison	DPC, GZMR ¹⁰
Liu Xiaojiang	DPC, PLAN	Dep Director, GPD
Ai Husheng	CDR, 39 th GA	COS, CDMR ¹¹
MG Cai Yingting	Commander, 31GA	COS, NJMR
Chen Xiaogong	Director, GSD 2 nd Dept	DCOGS (Intel), GSD ¹²
Du Jincai	Dir., Political Dept., CDMR	Asst to Director, GPD
Ma Xiaotian	CDT, NDU	DCOGS

Of the seven military regions, only the commander and political commissar of the Jinan Military Region remained unchanged.¹³ Of the six replaced MR commanders, five retired because of age-based retirement regulations, while the sixth, Chang Wanquan, was promoted to be the new director of the General Armaments Department (more on this in the next section). Among the new commanders and political commissars, all but two were transferred from different military regions, reflecting the institutional norm of regular rotation of personnel to prevent the development of what Mao Zedong called “independent kingdoms” (*duli wangguo*) or the spread of “mountaintop-ism” (*shantou zhuyi*).¹⁴ Three of the MR commander promotions (Wang Guosheng, Fang Fenghui, and Zhao Keshi) deserve particular attention, however, as the officers in question jumped two “grades” in rank from chief of staff positions to MR commanders, marking them as a high-flyers in the system. All of the promoted generals belonged to the so-called “post-4968” group, defined as high-ranking leaders who were born after 1949 and joined the army after 1968.¹⁵

A PRC-owned newspaper offered two additional comments on the trends in military reshuffling. One article linked some of the changes in leadership positions to past service in the Nanjing Military Region, a potential future Taiwan war zone:

... nine high-ranking generals in the new Central Committee have held important posts in Nanjing Military Region and have a good command of and are familiar with Taiwan-related military combat; these include Liang Guanglie, internally designated as the next minister of national defense; Chief of Staff Chen Bingde and Deputy Chief Ma Xiaotian; General Political Department Deputy Director Liu Yongzhi; Navy Commander Wu Shengli; Air Force Commander Xu Qiliang; Nanjing Military Region Commander Zhao Keshi and Political Commissar Chen Guoling; and Lanzhou Military Region Political Commissar Li Changcai.¹⁶

A second article asserted that the leadership is attempting to place more naval and air force officers in “important posts at the General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department, National Defense University, and Academy of Military Science.”¹⁷

Military Leadership Changes During and After the 17th Congress

A total of 249 PLA delegates attended the 17th Party Congress in October, making up more than 10 percent of the total 2,235 attendees. In keeping with institutional norms since the 14th Party Congress in 1992, the two vice-chairmen of the Central Military Commission were elected as Politburo members, but no active-duty military personnel were elected to the Politburo Standing Committee. Of the 204 party members elected to the new Central Committee, 42 are active-duty PLA officers, and 25 of those officers are serving on the Central Committee for the first time. As an example of the depth of the age-based promotion system, Navy Political Commissar Hu Yanlin was too old to be elected to the Central Committee, yet his younger deputy Liu Xiaojiang was elected. An additional 167 party members were designated as alternate Central Committee members. Notably, Jiang Zemin's former military *mishu*, Jia Ting'an, received the lowest number of alternate member votes, much as Jiang's chief bodyguard, You Xigui, did in 2002, suggesting passive criticism of Jiang and his allies.¹⁸



As expected, a new Central Military Commission (pictured above) was introduced at the 17th Party Congress.¹⁹ Among the important changes, Chang Wenquan was promoted from commander of the Shenyang Military Region to become the new director of the General Armaments Department, replacing Chen Bingde, who replaced Liang Guanglie as the Chief of the General Staff.²⁰ CMC Vice-Chairman and Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan retired, handing over his vice-chairmanship to former General Political Department director Xu Caihou and very likely turning over the defense minister position to outgoing Chief of the General Staff Liang Guanglie (see more on this below). Finally, PLAAF Commander Qiao Qingchen stepped down, replaced by former Deputy Chief of the General Staff Xu Qiliang.

Table 2
Post-17th Congress Central Military Commission (in protocol order)

<i>Member</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Previous Position (if applicable)</i>
Hu Jintao	Chairman	N/A
Guo Boxiong	Vice-Chairman	N/A
Xu Caihou	Vice-Chairman	Director, General Political Department
Liang Guanglie	(see below)	Director, General Staff Department

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Table 2 (continued)

<i>Member</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Previous Position (if applicable)</i>
Chen Bingde	Director, General Staff Dept.	Director, General Armaments Dept.
Li Jinai	Director, General Political Dept.	N/A
Liao Xilong	Director, General Logistics Dept.	N/A
Chang Wanchuan	Director, General Armaments Department	Commander, Shenyang Military Region
Jing Zhiyuan	Commander, Second Artillery	N/A
Wu Shengli	Commander, Navy	N/A
Xu Qiliang	Commander, Air Force	Deputy Chief of the General Staff

The current scarcity of open-source data on Chinese military elites precludes highly detailed predictive analysis of promotion patterns, but some variables can be preliminarily assessed. Command experience in units and administrative organizations located on a possible Taiwan war front is a common theme among top military leaders. In terms of geographic background, however, the evidence is more diffuse. Three of the current CMC members (Li Jinai, Xu Qiliang, Jing Zhiyuan) are natives of the eastern coastal province of Shandong, which has dominated senior leadership promotion patterns since the 1980s because of historical legacies from the end of the pre-Liberation period. The remainder of the CMC hails from home provinces across all of China, suggesting no identifiable pattern. According to an article in *Asia Times*, Hu Jintao is from the eastern province of Anhui; Guo Boxiong is native of the mountainous northeastern province of Shanxi; Liang Guanglie is from south-central Sichuan Province; Xu Caihou from the northeastern province of Liaoning; Chen Bingde hails from the eastern coastal province of Jiangsu; Liao Xilong is a native of Guizhou Province in southwest China; Chang Wanchuan is from central China's Henan Province; and Wu Shengli's hometown is in the northern province of Hebei.²¹ The weakest and perhaps no longer relevant explanatory variable is factional allegiances to the former Field Army system from the pre-1949 period, which is often cited by "analysts" in Hong Kong and Taiwan but appears to have little analytical value in the post-Deng PLA. As a final note, the average age of a CMC member continues to drop, consistent with age-based retirement regulations and norms across the Chinese governmental and party system. After the 17th Congress, the average age of a CMC member is 63.5, which is more or less the same as the 63.3 average among CMC members in the 16th Congress.²² By contrast, the average age of CMC members was 67.85 in 1997 and 67.25 in 1999.

No New Civilian Vice-Chairman?

Contrary to some predictions, no civilian vice-chair was appointed to the Central Military Commission, generating intense speculation about Hu Jintao's strategy for choosing and training a successor. If and when it does happen, Xi Jinping is the obvious choice, since he is already being groomed in a variety of deputy positions across the Party and government, with the goal of preparing him for the "trifecta" to replace Hu as general-secretary, president, and chairman of the Central Military Commission. Xi even has some notable military experience, serving from 1979–82 as the *mishu* for Geng Biao when the

latter was a member of the CPC Central Committee Political Bureau, vice premier of the State Council, secretary general of the CMC, and minister of national defense.²³ Xi is also married to Peng Liyuan, a famous singer who is also a PLA officer.²⁴ At the same time, there does appear to be a built-in competitive dynamic between Xi and Li Keqiang, the two new Politburo Standing Committee members who will likely form the core of the leadership at the 18th Party Congress. Hu may wait some decent interval before elevating Xi to a CMC vice-chairmanship. Hu Jintao took the post of the first vice chairman of CMC at the Third Plenary Session of the 15th CPC Central Committee in 1999, two years after he was elected a member of the Political Bureau Standing Committee.²⁵ It would also not be surprising for Hu to relinquish his state and party positions in 2012 and retain the CMC chairmanship for a transition period, just as Jiang Zemin did in 2002.

Chen Bingde and the ASAT test

In *CLM* 20, I speculated on the role of then-director of the General Armaments Department Chen Bingde in the January 2007 ASAT test, surmising that his position as the head of the PLA's RDT&E system meant that he likely played an important part in keeping Hu Jintao apprised of the status and progress of the ASAT testing program. Any conspiracy theories about rogue PLA testing programs operating without civilian oversight were dealt a serious blow, however, when Chen achieved the culmination of his military career with a promotion to become chief of the general staff. In China's blame culture, where the leader takes the fall even for the actions of subordinates, Chen would have been punished for the fallout of a rogue ASAT test or at the very least shunted laterally to some symbolic but irrelevant job, not elevated to the pinnacle of the PLA system. This move strongly supports the hypothesis that Hu and perhaps other senior leaders (though clearly not the Foreign Ministry) were apprised of the test ahead of time, and are not angry or frustrated with the PLA for the resulting diplomatic and political turbulence, as some have suggested.

What's the Deal With Liang Guanglie?

The most interesting mystery coming out of the 17th Congress, the status of General Liang Guanglie, will likely not be fully revealed until the National People's Congress meets in March 2008. Liang was retained on the Central Military Commission in the fourth protocol position, but apparently as minister-without-portfolio for the time being, since Chen Bingde replaced Liang as chief of the general staff, and the media after the 17th Congress continue to describe official meetings between Cao Gangchuan and his foreign defense minister counterparts. Liang will likely be elected to the defense minister position at the 2008 NPC meeting, but was not promoted at the 17th Congress to one of the two vice-chairman positions held by previous leaders also serving as the state defense minister. If Liang does get the step next March, the move would therefore change the traditional convention of having the defense minister be a CMC vice-chairman and Politburo member. Unnamed analysts in a Singapore newspaper argue that this outcome would communicate the civilian leadership's respect for the military, elevating the

previously dual-hatted defense minister job to a level that merits a CMC membership on its own terms. An alternate view is that this move would effectively demote the defense minister position in protocol rank, which has interesting implications for the already complicated task of finding parallel interlocutors for the U.S. Secretary of Defense.

Yang Baibing? I Thought You Were Dead!

One of the strangest things about the 17th Party Congress was the reappearance of retired general Yang Baibing, who, along with his late elder half-brother, General Yang Shangkun, had been purged by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin in 1993 from senior positions in the army for alleged usurpation of power.²⁶ In the immediate wake of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, Yang Baibing, as the army's top political commissar and secretary-general of the Central Military Commission, had led an intense political rectification campaign within the PLA. Yang was also a vocal supporter of Deng's controversial "Southern tour" in 1992, publicly declaring that the military would support Deng in his efforts to jumpstart economic reform in the face of conservative resistance by Chen Yun and, to a lesser extent, Jiang Zemin.²⁷ He was accused of building a political power base in which loyalty to the Yang family was the primary criterion for promotion to high position, and reportedly held secret meetings in which post-Deng political contingencies were planned. These were enough to compel Deng to purge the Yang brothers in favor of Admiral Liu Huaqing and General Zhang Zhen in February 1993.

In recent years, the younger Yang had only been seen at funerals (Hong Xuezhong,²⁸ Bo Yibo,²⁹ Huang Ju³⁰) and commemorative events (2007 Spring Festival meeting in the Great Hall of the People,³¹ Yang Shangkun's Centennial at the Great Hall of the People,³² the 80th anniversary of the founding of the PLA,³³ the 58th anniversary of the founding of the PRC³⁴), befitting his senior but retired status. It was therefore surprising when Yang appeared prominently in a 22 October 2007 Xinhua article describing Hu Jintao's meeting with PLA and PAP delegates to the 17th Congress. Per custom, the attendees of the meeting were listed in protocol order. The three most senior current CMC members (Guo Boxiong, Cao Gangchuan, and Xu Caihou) were listed first, followed immediately by Yang and a mixture of active-duty CMC members and retired senior cadres (e.g., Zhang Wannian, Chi Haotian, Zhao Nanqi). Media mention of Yang's appearance could have multiple meanings. It could simply be a symbolic swipe at Jiang Zemin, who had opposed the Yang brothers and directly benefited from their purge. It could be part of a larger effort by Hu to ingratiate himself with military elders, including Yang, Zhang, Chi, and Zhao, in order to prepare the battlefield for the transfer of CMC authority to a chosen civilian successor like Xi Jinping. Or it could mean nothing!

Conclusions

The military personnel changes leading up to and during the 17th Party Congress raise no questions about Hu Jintao's primacy in civil-military relations and authority in the Central Military Commission. He appears to be firmly in charge, even taking the liberty

of meeting with former Jiang Zemin nemesis Yang Baibing. The main question for the future involves the timing of Xi Jinping's elevation to a bridesmaid position on the CMC, and Hu's calculus for turning over the chairmanship at the 18th Congress in 2012. For the PLA, the personnel reshuffles continue to reflect an increasingly professional force, institutionalizing the quest for jointness through integration of the services into the CMC. No political or ideological crosscurrents within the leadership could be discerned from the outside, suggesting a minimal number of distractions from an already formidable military modernization process.

Notes

¹ Liu Yueh-shan, "Six Military Regions' No. 1 Men Changed; Military Commission To Be Reshuffled," *Wen wei po*, 10 October 2007.

² Chin Chien-li, "Critical Biography of Lieutenant General Fang Fenghui, Chief of Staff of the Guangzhou Military Region," *Chien Shao*, 1 July 07–31 July 07, No.197, pp.34–37.

³ Zhu Zhe, "PLA Promotes Younger Officers," *China Daily*, 10 October 2007.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Chang Wanquan Promoted to Directorship of General Armament Department," *Ming pao*, 2 October 2007.

⁸ Choi Chi-Yuk, "Hu Tightens Grip on Power by Choosing Young PLA Officers," *South China Morning Post*, 22 October 2007.

⁹ Zhu Zhe, "PLA Promotes Younger Officers," *China Daily*, 10 October 2007.

¹⁰ Gary Cheung, "New Commissar for PLA Force," *South China Morning Post*, 5 July 2007.

¹¹ "Chang Wanquan Promoted to Directorship of General Armament Department," *Ming pao*, 2 October 2007.

¹² "PLA Headquarters Promotes Two Generals," *Ming pao*, 30 June 2007.

¹³ Liu Yueh-shan, "Six Military Regions' No. 1 Men Changed; Military Commission To Be Reshuffled," *Wen wei po*, 10 October 2007.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "'Post-4968' People Will Shine; Those With Taiwan-Related Experience Are Promoted Fastest," *Wen wei po*, 23 October 2007.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Tian Wen, "A New Feature in the Military Personnel Reshuffles," *Ta kung pao*, 7 October 2007.

¹⁸ Jane Cai, "Hu's Allies Rise as Jiang's Supporters Fall Out of Favour," *South China Morning Post*, 22 October 2007.

¹⁹ "List of Chairman, Vice Chairmen, Members of CPC Central Military Commission," Xinhua, 22 October 2007.

²⁰ Cao Zhi, "China's CMC Holds a Ceremony To Promote a Senior Military Officer to the Rank of General; Hu Jintao Awards a Certificate of Command to and Congratulates Chang Wanquan Who Is Promoted to the Rank of General; Guo Boxiong Reads an Order for the Promotion; Xu Caihou Chairs the Ceremony; Liang Guanglie, Chen Bingde, Li Jinai, Liao Xilong, Jing Zhiyuan, Wu Shengli, and Xu Qiliang Attend the Ceremony," Xinhua, 2 November 2007.

²¹ "China Reshuffle Sends Message To Taiwan," *Asia Times Online*, 1 October 2007.

²² Ibid.

²³ Chung Shih, "Secret From Beijing" column, *Ming pao*, 6 October 2007.

²⁴ "Profile of Xi Jinping, Chinese 'Princeling' With Big Future," *AFP*, 22 October 2007.

²⁵ Chung Shih, "Secret From Beijing" column, *Ming pao*, 6 October 2007.

²⁶ Lena Sun, "Deng Completes Major Army Purge," *Washington Post*, 12 February 1993.

²⁷ Richard Baum, *Burying Mao* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), chapter 14.

²⁸ “Hu Jintao, Wu Bangguo, Wen Jiabao, Other Leaders Attend Hong Xuezhai’s Funeral,” Xinhua, 27 November 2006.

²⁹ “Hu Jintao, Jiang Zemin, Other PRC Leaders Attend Bo Yibo’s Funeral,” Xinhua, 21 January 2007.

³⁰ “Hu Jintao, Others Bid Farewell to Huang Ju’s Remains; Long Leadership Lineups,” Xinhua, 5 June 2007.

³¹ “PRC’s Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao Make Comments at Spring Festival Meeting of Leaders,” Xinhua, 16 February 2007.

³² “CPC Central Committee Commemorates Yang Shangkun’s Centennial, Hu Jintao Speaks,” Xinhua, 20 July 2007.

³³ Jia Yong and Cao Zhi, “PRC Ministry of National Defense Holds Grand Reception in Beijing to Celebrate 80th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Liberation Army of China; Hu Jintao, Wu Bangguo, Wen Jiabao, Jia Qinglin, Zeng Qinghong, Wu Guanzheng, Li Changchun, and Luo Gan Attend the Reception,” Xinhua, 31 July 2007.

³⁴ Li Bin and Zou Shengwen, “State Council Holds Reception to Celebrate the 58th Founding Anniversary of People’s Republic of China; Hu Jintao, Wu Bangguo, Jia Qinglin, Zeng Qinghong, Wu Guanzheng, Li Changchun, Luo Gan, Others Attend; Wen Jiabao Delivers Speech,” Xinhua, 30 September 2007.