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**China's Post-Deng  
Military Leadership:  
New Faces, New Trends**

**David Shambaugh**

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## **China's Post-Deng Military Leadership: New Faces, New Trends\***

*David Shambaugh*

It is a pleasure to be here at Stanford to discuss China's new military leadership, and to share some preliminary findings from my research on the People's Liberation Army (PLA). One key feature of the new leadership in China today, following the passing of patriarch Deng Xiaoping, are the new faces to be found in the military. The PLA High Command today (see Appendix) is almost entirely new. There has been almost total turnover of the top twenty to thirty military officers in China during the last three years. This includes all the commanders, deputy commanders, and political commissars in all seven military region commands; the General Staff, Logistics, and Political Departments; the two major educational institutions of the PLA, the National Defense University and the Academy of Military Sciences; the Commission on Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense and its successor body the general Armaments Department, and other bodies. The Central Military Commission itself has seen more than half of its membership turn over in the last few years. Only the top echelon of the Second Artillery, China's ballistic missile forces, has gone relatively untouched. I anticipate much more personnel turnover and organizational reform in the next few years as the PLA proceeds with its policy of downsizing, upgrading, and streamlining its force structure.

The ascent of a new High Command is the result of several factors. One, obviously, is generational change and the enforcement of retirement norms. That in itself is very significant across the system. But for this to happen inside the military is particularly significant. In fact, the military is holding much more to retirement norms than is the Party these days, or even to a certain extent the State Council. Second, it also has to do with the post-Tiananmen shake-ups, particularly the dismantling of the Yang Shangkun/Yang Baibing network. These two were overthrown, in essence, just before and just after the 14th Party Congress in 1992. Over the subsequent three years, the networks of clients that Yang Baibing in particular had

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put into place throughout the country and the central military apparatus, particularly in the General Political Department structure, have been weeded out. This has been a second factor in the turnover. Third, there has been a need for the promotion of much more technically competent and combat-experienced officers—as the PLA itself is pursuing a more professional, modernizing mission, and that is one of the major trends we see. I will identify the characteristics that this new cohort of leaders exhibits in a minute, but would simply note that the new missions of the PLA have driven recruitment and promotion patterns to a considerable extent.

Finally, a contributing factor has been Jiang Zemin's own desire to build up support and officers that are loyal, or at least not disloyal, to him in the armed forces. Jiang has gone about cultivating the PLA since he became the chairman of the Central Military Commission in November 1989. He has done to the PLA, just to digress for a second, what I think he's done to other parts of the system. Jiang is a real politician. He has patronized and paid attention to every sub-interest group within the armed forces, from the political commissars to the strategic rocket technicians and many in between.<sup>†</sup>

Within two years of his appointment as CMC chief, he visited every military region. Mao never did that, Deng never did that (one might argue that they did not need to, as they commanded the respect and obedience of the PLA). Jiang has paid extraordinarily close attention to cultivating support within the armed forces. He regularly visits military units—early in his tenure at the rate of two or three per month. Jiang has also personally promoted fifty officers to full general status, including ten just last week. It is uncertain that these efforts have garnered him true allegiance from the new military leadership. I see this very much as a marriage of mutual convenience between the two, rather than one of allegiance. This is a man who has no military background himself (indeed none of the civilian leaders has any military background), and therefore requires military support to stay in power.

## **Profiling the New High Command**

The military leadership is in transition, and these are the broad reasons why. A whole new cohort of commanders is coming to power. What do we know about them? That is what I would like to focus on in the balance of my remarks.

First, we must recognize that outside analysts do not know a great deal about this new military leadership or their backgrounds; we are really data poor on this new cohort and it is very difficult to gain just basic biographical information about a number of them. One has to rely on various Taiwanese and Hong Kong biographies and news reports. Interviews with PLA personnel in China are also useful, but very little is actually published in China aside from scant official biographies of CMC members. So this is not a group about which scholars know a great deal—and I would surmise that the world's intelligence agencies probably don't know a great deal either. Therefore it's imperative, from both a research and a policy perspective, that we learn more about them—by bringing them to the United States. Indeed, one of the most noticeable characteristics of the new High Command is that they are

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<sup>†</sup> For further discussion of Jiang and the PLA, see my "China's Commander-in-Chief: Jiang Zemin and the PLA," in C. Dennison Lane, Mark Weisenbloom, and Dimon Liu (eds.), *Chinese Military Modernization* (London and Washington, D.C.: Kegan Paul International & American Enterprise Institute Press, 1996), pp. 209–245.

very poorly traveled abroad. Further, we do not know how they are going to interact with each other. This is still very much an open variable. They have served in various places; there is not a single cohort that has simply moved through the system that has shared socializing experiences to bond them together. They have had various experiences. Hence, we cannot be sure until crises take place—either domestic or external—what their interpersonal dynamics are and how they will behave in crises, and how they will relate (a) to each other and (b) to the civilian party elite. These, I would submit, are open questions.

From the biographical data I have been able to ascertain, the following characteristics emerge. First, analytically, the Whitsonian field army thesis cannot be fully put to rest for cohort analysis. It does not explain, or has substantially declined in efficacy for explaining, factual alignments and personal ties in the current PLA leadership. Having said that, though, the peak of the pyramid of these individuals—Zhang Wannian, Fu Quanyou, Wang Ke, and Chi Haotian (the top four military commanders in the PLA today)—did serve in field armies during the latter stages of the Sino-Japanese and civil wars, but their post-1949 career paths and personal allegiances do not reflect field-army loyalties. Rather, their career paths have much more to do with their subsequent field service, their training in academies, and their battlefield experience. This brings me to the second principal characteristic: patronage and personal ties are now largely forged through shared command assignments or shared classmate experiences in academies, primarily the Military Academy in Nanjing during the late fifties–early sixties and then more recently the National Defense University of Beijing. The top three, Zhang Wannian, Fu Quanyou, and Wang Ke, all studied at the Military Academy in Nanjing during a four-year period, during the Great Leap Forward, in fact, 1959 to 1962. And they matriculated more or less together at a time when General Zhang Zhen was the commandant. Zhang Zhen subsequently became, of course, the first commandant of the NDU in Beijing. To the extent that there is a faction in the PLA High Command today that is identifiable, at least to me, it's a “Zhang Zhen faction.” There are a number of people whose careers have intersected with his. There are a couple of individuals, Zhang Wannian in particular, whose careers have prospered through direct patronage from Zhang Zhen. I think that we are also beginning to see the early signs of a Zhang Wannian grouping across several parts of the High Command (Zhang Wannian now being the number-one active duty service officer in the PLA). There are several individuals whose careers have also intersected with Zhang Wannian, who find themselves also rising through the ranks. But in trying to assess loyalties and ties, one must be very careful not to solely rely on the old sort of patron/client analysis. There are other factors at work today which explain career advancement in the PLA.

The third characteristic of this group is that it is largely comprised of commanders and real warfighters, men with battlefield and lengthy service experience. These are people who commanded troops in the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war, the 1988 Nansha conflict, the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clashes, 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, and the Korean War. They are not, importantly, political commissars. There are only two political commissars in the top thirty members of the High Command: Chi Haotian and Yu Yongbo (with Wang Ruilin possibly considered a third). The “professionals” are rising and the commissars declining substantially, particularly following the removal of Yang Baibing in 1992.

Fourth, and relatedly, this new military leadership is not comprised of soldier-politicians, as it has been in the past. We see, therefore, a very significant development in the Chinese political system—the breaking of the “interlocking directorate” and long-standing symbiotic relationship between party and army that has existed since 1927, when the army was

formed. We are now seeing, for the first time, a growing bifurcation of the two institutions. There is increasing corporatism in the armed forces. It is a military that is much more prepared to resist Communist Party encroachment into military affairs or to resist party attempts to pull the PLA into domestic politics at the top or domestic security at the bottom of the system. This does not obviate the need for the People's Armed Police.

It also raises the issue of constitutionalism in the armed forces and the broader relationship of party to army. If the army is indeed becoming much more professionalist, corporate, autonomous, and comprised of war fighters instead of commissars, and the previous symbiotic link with the party is being severed, does it mean that the PLA is drifting toward becoming a more national army, loyal to the state—as has happened in other developing countries and even former socialist countries? I think it is too early to conclude that, but it is clear that there is a heated debate about the issue inside the armed forces as well as among politically reformist intellectuals. The issue of putting the PLA under the command of the President and state, instead of the Communist Party, was floated and debated during the Zhao Ziyang era of the late 1980s, but cropped up again in 1997. It reached a peak around late summer last year, around Army Day. In fact, if you read the speeches on Army Day last August 1, the issue is front and center in all the major speeches by both civilian and party leaders, as they denounce “Western hostile forces that trumpet the twin theories of depoliticization and departification of the armed forces.” That kind of propaganda declined somewhat when Yang Baibing fell from power, but we saw it rise very much in the wake of the 1997 National People's Congress a year ago, when the National Defense Law was passed. That law is very significant for a number of reasons, but one of those reasons is that it suggests that the army is subordinate to the state, to the President, and to the State Council. According to the new law, it is the President who can mobilize the armed forces and can commit armed forces into war. We will see when push comes to shove if such constitutional stipulations are followed. Historical experience, including 1989, is not encouraging in this regard. Nonetheless, it is a very significant document. But after it passed the NPC, numerous articles appeared stressing the army's loyalty to the party, not to the state. So there is clearly internal debate going on.

Now, when one looks at Taiwan and other countries, this is one of the major elements of democratization—to get the army out of politics to make it subservient to the state, and to de-Leninize the armed forces. That has now been accomplished on Taiwan—where the armed forces had a long history of subservience to the ruling Kuomintang. It has also happened in South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan and other countries in Africa and Latin America. Placing the armed forces under the control of the state, and making them autonomous of the ruling party, is a necessary element of democratization. We just might be seeing the very early signs of this in China, which taken together with other developments, such as village-level elections and various proposals for structural political reform at the top of the system, may portend the further dismantling of the Leninist system in China and preliminary movement toward proto-democracy. This should clearly not be overstated, but I do think it is significant.

The fifth characteristic we note in this new High Command is that they have largely spent their careers in the regional field commands, and they display a distinctly insular and non-cosmopolitan worldview. These are what the Chinese call *tu baozi* (country bumpkins). These are people who have really been in the interior of China all their careers—not on the coast, with one or two exceptions. More importantly, they're all “green suiters,” that is, they come from the ground forces. Not air force, not navy, not marine, but ground force

backgrounds. As I say, they are battle tested, many of them. What does this mean? Among other things, this means that they have not traveled abroad, do not speak foreign languages, and are very “insular” people. This would suggest that they do not understand what modernity is, much less what modern warfare is. American military officers who have met these individuals confirm this view. Some are highly xenophobic as well: real fire-breathing anti-foreigners. One would also surmise that this lack of global awareness and cosmopolitanism also leads them to be distrustful of cooperative security mechanisms, regimes, etc. Their backgrounds as field commanders make them comfortable with battlefield tactics, not global security.

I would further hypothesize that given the direction the PLA is moving in—trying to become a high-tech peripheral defense military that emphasizes air, naval power projection, nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, submarines, communication satellites, anti-satellite weapons (ASATs), laser and precision-guided munitions (PGMs), and so on—that this is a military that is commanded by people who have not been exposed to these sorts of things. I will leave the correlation to you. Just beneath them, however, there is a whole layer of lieutenant generals and senior colonels who are 180 degrees opposite. And it is this cohort that will manage the PLA in the twenty-first century. The High Command described above are going to be, if retirement norms hold, out of the picture within five years. We must deal with them now, and we will for the next five years. But after that, a very different group will come to power. This again emphasizes the importance of bringing these individuals to the United States systematically. Defense Minister Chi Haotian and Chief of Staff Fu Quanyou have been here, Chief of Logistics Wang Ke is here now, and CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Wannian will visit later in the year (having postponed twice for health reasons). There have also been a series of service chiefs who have visited over the last year, and a steady stream of U.S. military officials have been to China.

Sixth, there is the role of elders. What is it? I would suggest that it’s been really minimalized and it’s going to continue to decline. The Long March generation of party elders have died, but the military elders have not. But they do not seem to be intervening in either military affairs or party affairs. The two that could are the more recently retired generals Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen, both of whom retired last year at the 15th Party Congress. My guess is that Liu Huaqing is really going to fade away. Zhang Zhen is another story, for reasons of his patronage network, but also because he does understand modern warfare. He is the father of the new operative defense doctrine—“limited war under high-technology conditions” doctrine. He is the one who was in charge of the revision of doctrine and tactics during the last decade.

Seventh, does one see divisions in this new leadership? Not really. I think this is a pretty stable and secure group. I see only two that have potential vulnerabilities, namely Wang Ruilin and Yu Yongbo—but they both made it through the Party Congress last year with their positions intact (in fact strengthened). So, I see this as a pretty stable leadership. Not necessarily cohesive, but stable.

Does one see any evidence of the problem that has plagued the Chinese armed forces since 1927—namely so-called “independent kingdoms,” i.e. local warlord-type fiefdoms? Not really. Deng Xiaoping paid attention to this, as did Mao. They both shuffled military region commanders on a pretty regular basis. And this continues to be done today. To the extent there is a kind of independent kingdom, it’s what some people refer to as the “Shandong faction.” Many of today’s High Command have either been born or served in Shandong during their careers. But it’s kind of like the Shanghai faction in the party; I think



it's a bit exaggerated. Just because you worked there for a few years or you were born there, does that mean that you have the kind of socialized factional mentality? I don't know, but I think perhaps the Hong Kong press overstates the existence of a Shandong faction.

## **Policy Proclivities**

What can we expect out of this new military leadership? Five main thrusts of policy seem apparent.

First, we are already witnessing the further reduction and streamlining of the armed forces, and increased concentration of resources on advanced units to create what they're now calling an "elite army with Chinese characteristics." Jiang Zemin announced last autumn the reduction of a half a million more personnel, which would bring the armed forces down to 2.4 million when it is finished. They have already demobilized about half that amount. Ten years ago, in 1987, they had 3.9 million under arms. They are now down to 2.6 or 2.7, roughly, and going down to 2.4 or 2.5 million. Some in the Chinese military tell me that, optimally, they would like a force of 1.5 million. This is still a very large army, by the standards of many countries, but they have clearly learned a lesson that their size is one of their great detriments. So the PLA is downsizing and streamlining—cutting out so-called Category B and C units (many of these coming out of the ground forces). In fact, the current demobilization is coming disproportionately out of the ground forces, and disproportionately out of the northeast (out of the Liaoning Military District in particular). Two whole group armies are being dismantled at the moment.

Where are they going? Are these soldiers just being released into the labor force? The answer is yes, many of them are—which is exacerbating already extant unemployment problems. But many of them are being moved into the People's Armed Police as well, which is a force that is now up to 900,000–1,000,000 strong, and growing. For the PAP, the optimal number some mention is 1.2–1.4 million. And one has to face facts: the PAP is part of the PLA. Administratively, it answers directly to the Central Military Commission. It is simply the internal side of the PLA. The new commander, General Yang Guoping (who was just promoted to full general last week) is a career-long PLA ground-force officer. So the relationship of PAP to PLA is one of a division of labor: internal vs. external security.

The second principal policy challenge is to prepare for limited-war contingencies against adversaries with superior weapons and technology—so-called asymmetrical warfare. One notices, to make a long story short, that the PLA are not putting a lot of money into their conventional weapons systems. They lag woefully behind, twenty to thirty years behind, the state of the art, and probably about that behind its neighbors as well. The air force, navy, wherever you look, this is a really backward and antiquated conventional force. Sure, they are buying a few platforms and technologies from the Russians and Israelis to plug their most pressing gaps, but where they are putting their money is into a variety of high-tech systems, particularly cruise missiles, medium-range ballistic missiles, nuclear force modernization, MIRVing of their nuclear forces, solid fueling their rockets, basing more of them in fixed launchers, working on a whole range of intermediate and long intercontinental ballistic missiles (the DF31 in particular), ASAT weaponry, laser-guided munitions, information warfare, computer viruses, electronic countermeasures, etc. What limited resources they have for R&D are not going into upgrading conventional systems—they are going into the

more high-tech end. Whether this is going to pay off or not is a big subject. My own guess is it will not, or it will only in part, for a whole variety of reasons. Ten years from now, the Chinese will probably have a very bifurcated military, with this really backward conventional force, a pretty strong missile force, and some advancements in some of these other areas, particularly in PGMs.

Thirdly, they will try to deepen party control over the military. As I previously indicated, this is a contested issue. I still cannot imagine the party not trying to emphasize its control over the military; rather, it is a question of the military carving out its own more corporate and autonomous role.

Fourth, they will continue to battle corruption and various other “unhealthy tendencies” in the armed forces, particularly corruption and lax discipline and training regimens. The involvement of the armed forces in commerce has had a very deleterious effect on readiness and professionalism in the armed forces.

Lastly, defense spending will continue to increase, but not disproportionately to other sectors of the budget or, more importantly, to civilian economic development. China is not going to go the way of the Soviets, by trying to build a strong military without the comprehensive economic and technological base to support it.

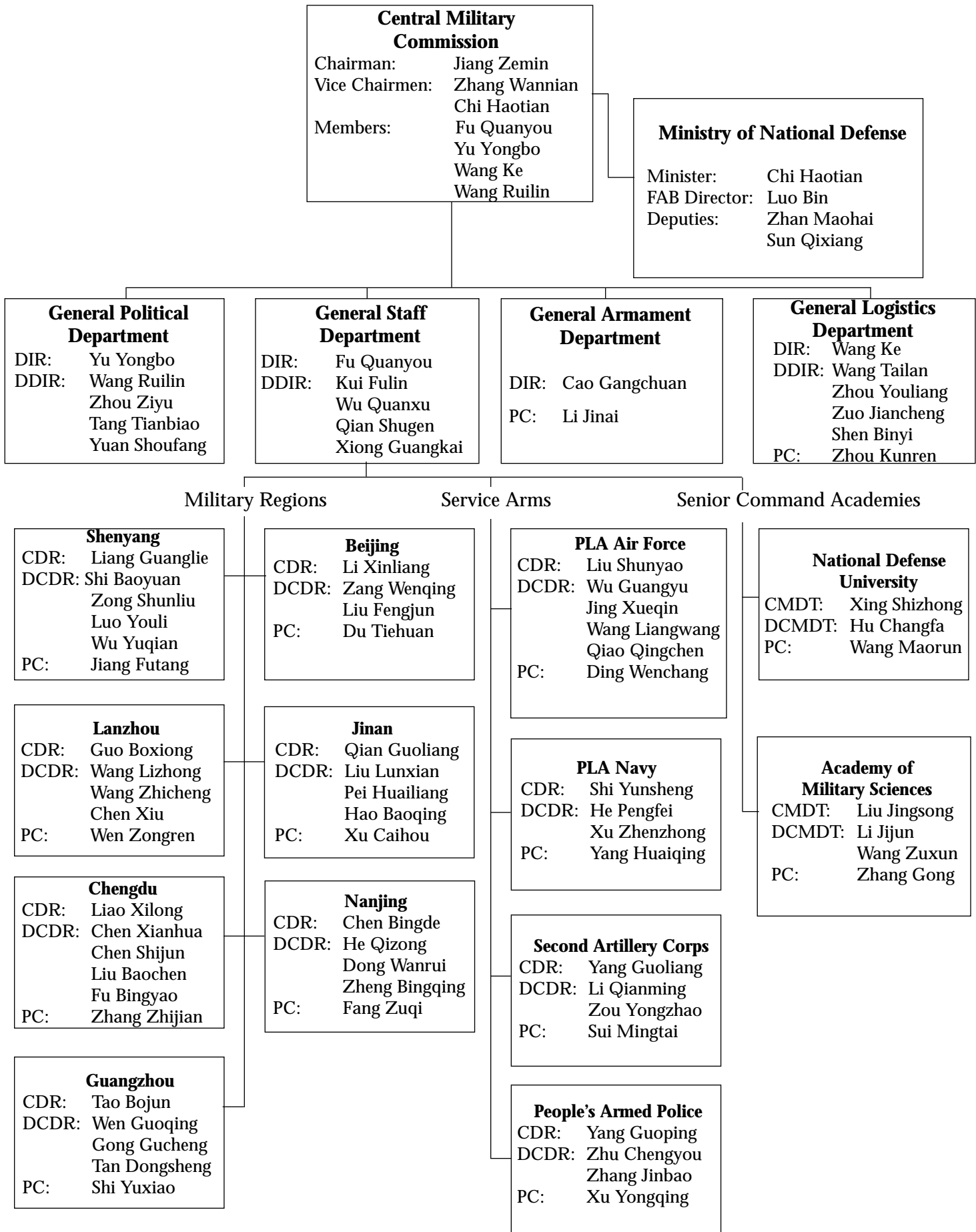
## **Conclusion**

This provides some sense, hopefully, of the implications of the changing of the guard in China today. There is much more to be said and one could delve into interesting biographical details of the new High Command, but I have tried to identify the principal characteristics of the new military elite and the implications of their rise to power.



# Appendix

## China: The People's Liberation Army Leadership





## **About the Author**

David Shambaugh is professor of political science and international affairs, and director of the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, at The George Washington University. Prior to joining the faculty at the Elliott School of International Affairs, he taught at the University of London School of Oriental & African Studies, served as editor of *The China Quarterly*, and directed the Asia Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He has published widely on Chinese politics, foreign relations, military affairs, Sino-American relations, and international politics and security in the Asia-Pacific region. He is presently writing a book on the Chinese military.

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