



CHINA'S NEW CENTRAL MILITARY COMMISSION AFTER THE 18TH PARTY CONGRESS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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This is a crucial year for China, when large-scale changes at the top leadership echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will be approved at the 18th Party Congress scheduled to be held in Beijing in October 2012. The changes coincide with rising domestic discontent, inner-Party rivalries and increased turbulence in China's neighbourhood.

Both, the CCP and PLA, are in the midst of transformational change. The CCP's composition is changing as it dilutes purist principles, encourages the growth of private business, and admits wealthy individuals, businessmen and younger members. The PLA's requirements are similarly changing. In its advance towards becoming a professional technology-based military force, it is emphasising recruitment of better educated, technically qualified personnel and has established linkages with over 100 universities to qualitatively upgrade the calibre of officers and technical capabilities of its personnel.

The changes coincide with the spread of pro-Mao nostalgia in the country and resentment against corruption. At least two PLA Generals of impeccable, prestigious 'Revolutionary' lineage have spoken out strongly against corruption namely, Mao Xinyu, Mao Zedong's grandson who is a Major General in a PLA think-tank and General Liu Yuan, former Chinese President Liu Shaoqi's son. The CCP and PLA have also both been buffeted by the recent factional infighting centering on the Bo Xilai affair. By July 2012, at least five central task force teams were conducting investigations in the jurisdiction of the 13th and 14th Group Armies associated with Bo Xilai. This could adversely blight the promotion prospects of

some senior officers and has given prominence to the issue of the PLA's loyalty to the Party.

An article in the Liberation Army Daily (LAD) on June 17, 2012, for the first time seemed to imply there were 'sub-loyalties' in the PLA. It said 'the problem of loyalty is of special importance in the year of the 18th Congress, when "enemy forces" are spreading rumours etc.' It then warns about "fake loyalty" and to be 'aware of people just pretending to be loyal, who feign loyalty, but do not really mean it'. Earlier, at the NPC session in March 2012, Premier Wen Jiabao had pointedly, and for the

first time, declared "we will run the armed forces with strict discipline".

An official campaign was simultaneously launched against "depoliticising of the military, separating the Chinese Communist Party from the military, and nationalising the military." These fears are related directly to suggestions that the PLA should be an army of the State and not the CCP. Though initially voiced by the foreign media, the thought has been picked up by some Chinese intellectuals like the prominent and outspoken Chinese

economist, Han Zhiguo, who has a following of over three and a half million on Sina Weibo. At a gathering in Beijing on January 18, 2012, he said that 'reform had come to a dead end' and advocated, among other things, 'nationalisation of the PLA'. Senior Party and PLA leaders apprehend that such sentiments could strike a chord with the better educated younger officers now joining the PLA. The sensitivity of the topic is evident in the summary dismissal on June 3, of Yu Chen, Editor of the Chinese newspaper 'Southern Metropolitan', for allowing a comment on the paper's official micro-blog mocking the CCP's insistence on retaining control over the PLA.

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While China's Vice President Xi Jinping, ranked first among the present three CMC Vice Chairmen would, in the normal course, be expected to take over as CMC Chairman from Hu Jintao, this now seems unlikely. The unsettled domestic political situation emphasised by repeated exhortations by senior military officers and the official media urging the PLA to be "absolutely loyal" to the Party and rally "more closely" around "Chairman Hu Jintao", makes it probable that Hu Jintao will retain the position of Chairman of the Military Commission for at least another year.

Normally two of the three CMC members who do not retire will replace the two CMC Vice Chairmen who retire while the third should be appointed Defence Minister. 1945-born PLA Navy (PLAN) Commander Wu Shengli, assessed as favoured by Hu Jintao, is tipped to become a Vice Chairman. However, he is at the retirement age of 65 years and unless promoted retires in 2015. General Chang Wanquan, presently Director of the General Armaments Department (GAD) is another candidate for the position of CMC Vice Chairman and, given the importance attached to defence R&D and weapons indigenisation, he seems sure to be appointed. Third in seniority is PLA Air Force Commander Xu Qiliang, born in 1950, who is also assessed as a candidate for CMC Vice Chairman. In case Hu Jintao continues as CMC Chairman, however, Xu Qiliang's promotion could be deferred. Vice Chairmen of the CMC, incidentally, retire at 70 years while Military Region Commanders, with whom PLAAF and PLAN Commanders and

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There is reliable indication that General Chen Bingde, who retires as PLA CGS, has recommended that the CMC undergo a symbolic generational change-over. He has proposed that only those born in

1949 or after, in other words those born in the People's Republic of China, be inducted into the CMC. In case this is accepted, then PLAN Commander Wu Shengli retires in 2015.

While Air Force General Ma Xiaotian (born in 1949) is widely considered a front-runner for the job of PLAAF Commander, a recent reliable input suggests otherwise. It asserts that Ma Xiaotian, presently a PLA Deputy Chief of General Staff (DCGS), a 'princeling' closely connected to Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping and with a high-profile record of service, will be appointed Defence Minister and concurrently Vice Chairman of the CMC. If this materializes it will mean that the number of Vice Chairmen in the CMC will have been enhanced and Ma Xiaotian would have benefited from a double promotion. It would be the first time also that a PLAAF officer will officially interact on behalf of the PLA with foreign militaries and, more importantly, influence formulation of the defence budget. A consequence would be that Xu Qiliang, who is senior, gets elevated as CMC Vice Chairman giving the PLAAF an unprecedented three representatives in the CMC, unless Xu Qiliang is concurrently PLAAF Commander.

In case Ma Xiaotian is not appointed PLAAF Commander and Xu Qiliang is elevated as CMC Vice Chairman, then the Commandant of the Academy of Military Sciences and former PLAAF Deputy Commander, Air Force Lt General Liu Chengjun (born:1949) is viewed as Xu Qiliang's successor.

General Liu Yuan (born:1951), son of China's former President Liu Shaoqi and friend of Xi Jinping is currently Political Commissar of the PLA's General Logistics Department (GLD). He is a likely choice for CMC Vice Chairman to replace General Xu Caihou, who oversees political work in the PLA. Liu Shaoqi was, incidentally, Mao Zedong's key planner during the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962. General Liu Yuan commands prestige in the Party and PLA and has in recent months spoken out

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strongly against corruption in the PLA. But for him to be appointed CMC Vice Chairman would mean that he would also receive a double promotion. He has apparently been told, though, that he would be moving into the CMC and could end up being appointed Director of the PLA's General Political Department (GPD) and consequently a CMC member.

The other contender for the posts of CMC Vice Chairman as well as GPD Director is General Zhang Haiyang, presently Political Commissar of Second Artillery and also a 'princeling'. His chances might have been adversely affected because of his association with Bo Xilai, but his father, General Zhang Zhen, is alive and could try to intercede. He is also the son-in-law of Major General Sun Keji. Reports claim, however, that Zhang Haiyang has been implicated in a corruption scandal and might even face trial.

Another contender for the post of Director GPD is Vice Admiral Liu Xiaojiang (born:1949), PLAN Political Commissar and former 'mishu' to Admiral Liu Huaqing. His wife is the daughter of former popular Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who is respected by Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. Liu Huaqing and Hu Yaobang were both opposed to Jiang Zemin. These connections give him a distinct edge in case he doesn't compete with General Liu Yuan.

New Commanders will be appointed to the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Second Artillery. The four principle departments of the PLA headquarters namely, the General Staff Department (GSD)— whose head is the PLA Chief of General Staff (CGS) and equated with the head of the armed forces of other countries— General Political Department (GPD), General Armaments Department (GAD) and the General Logistics Department (GLD), will have new Directors. All are members of the CMC.

Distinguishing the new CMC will be the increased representation of the PLAAF, and possibly even PLAN, in the CMC. Once the new PLAAF and PLAN Commanders are appointed, they will automatically assume their positions in the CMC. It was CMC Chairman Hu Jintao who, for the first time in 2004, appointed the PLAAF and PLAN Commanders as members of the CMC. Their predecessors, if still in service as in the case of the PLAAF

Commander, would have been elevated as Vice Chairmen of the CMC. Hu Jintao also introduced changes in the structure of the GSD to include officers from the PLAAF and PLAN at senior levels.

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In the running for the post of PLA CGS to replace General Chen Bingde is Commander of the Shenyang Military Region, General Zhang Youxia (born:1950), a 'princeling' who was promoted full General in July 2011. He is one of the few Generals with battle experience having participated in the Sino-Vietnam war. He initially adopted a

tough line against the Philippines in the recent dispute over Scarborough Reef. He is reputedly close to Xi Jinping.

Another contender is General Fang Fenghui (born:1951) who, as Commander of the sensitive Beijing Military Region, is trusted by Hu Jintao. He is a technocrat with command experience including in the digitalized battlefield.

General Li Shiming (born:1948), Commander of the Chengdu Military Region and exercising operational jurisdiction over Tibet and the areas across the border with India, is also in the reckoning. He was appointed full General by Hu Jintao in 2010. All contenders are members of the 17th CCP CC.

Vice Admiral Sun Jianguo (born:1952), Deputy CGS and former 'mishu' to General Chen Bingde and Chief of Staff of PLAN (2004-2006), is a leading candidate for the post of PLAN Commander. He is a nuclear submariner.

These changes, however, will not mean a reduction in the primacy of the PLA ground forces, or PLAA, as they are

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designated since China's Defence White Paper, 2010. Of the 57 senior General Officers in the PLA, for example, 37 are from the PLAA. In the Military Regions (MR) also, it is the Military Region Commander who heads the command and the head of the PLAAF Military Region Air Force, for example, is designated a Deputy MR Commander. The PLAA which has considerably larger manpower also receives a larger proportion of the budget in real terms.

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Those tipped as the new PLAAF and PLAN Commanders have operational credentials. The South China Sea Fleet is being equipped for a large operational role spanning the South China Sea, the Malacca Strait and the Indian Ocean. The first China-built aircraft carrier will be incorporated in

this fleet. The presence of two senior PLAAF officers in the CMC guarantees that the PLAAF will receive adequate funds to pursue its modernization programme. It is assessed that ten per cent of the defence budget will be spent on aircraft procurement and R&D. PLAN representation in the CMC will ensure continued allocation of a larger percentage of the defence budget for PLAN and the Navy's modernization programme will proceed apace. PLAN and PLAAF are both expected to assume a more operationally

assertive posture. Meanwhile, the new PLA Chief of General Staff (CGS) will certainly have an operational background which would mean increased attention at high levels to the Sino-Indian border and China's other unsettled frontiers.

Finally, of the sixteen identified 'princelings' in the PLA's senior echelons, for the first time there will be three, or even four, in the CMC. Like in the CCP, they will influence national strategic policy giving it a harder inflexible edge and, additionally, be Xi Jinping's core

supporters. As in the CCP's highest bodies, officers appointed to the CMC will belong to the 'Cultural Revolution Generation' and likely to have a tougher, more nationalistic mindset.

Overall, the PLA's political clout and representation in the Party is likely to remain unchanged with two seats in the PB while in the CC they will probably continue to retain 24 seats.

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