

A key result of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress was the reappointment of Xi Jinping as chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the selection of new CMC members. Some have argued that the new military brass indicates a greater inclination by Xi to use force against Taiwan, but the evidence does not support this view. The new CMC is consistent with the recent past in terms of its internal structure; few of the new members whom Xi has chosen have deep operational expertise on Taiwan, and his new CMC is even less “joint” than the last one in terms of service representation and joint command skills. Rather than designed to lead a war, the new CMC will be charged with pursuing the PLA’s overall modernization, which includes becoming better prepared for future contingencies. The group of CMC advisors could also play a key role in deterring Xi from any temptation to use force if they can speak truth to power.

For the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), a key outcome of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress is the selection of a new Central Military Commission (CMC). The CMC serves as the PLA’s highest decision-making organ, and it has been chaired by Xi Jinping since his election as party general secretary at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012. Unlike the Politburo, where associates of Hu Jintao remained in power until the most recent party congress, Xi had long since cleared the PLA’s top brass of his rivals’ supporters in the military, leveraging his appointment power as CMC chairman and his anti-corruption campaign.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that at the party congress the CMC members focused their commentary primarily on Xi’s leadership, using phrases such as the “two establishments” (两个确立) and the “CMC chairman responsibility system” (军委主席责任制) that highlight Xi’s authority over the party and the army.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, “Large and In Charge: Civil-Military Relations under Xi Jinping,” in Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), 519–556.

<sup>2</sup> “PLA and People’s Armed Police Representatives Continue Discussions on the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress Work Report” [解放军和武警部队代表团继续讨论党的二十大报告], *CPC News* [中国共产党新闻网], October 19, 2022, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2022/1019/c117092-32547953.html>. The “two establishments” refers to establishing Xi as the core of the party and Xi Thought as the core of party doctrine. The “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” underscores that Xi makes all key decisions in his role as CMC chairman.

The question for international observers is not whether Xi has solidified his power within the PLA but whether the new CMC members indicate a shift in Xi's intentions.<sup>3</sup> The concern is that the new military leaders, especially the appointment of the incoming CMC vice chairman He Weidong, who previously served as commander of the Eastern Theater Command, might be a sign that Xi has prioritized planning for a war with Taiwan to take place within the next few years. The personnel shifts have occurred amidst growing speculation about Beijing's plans. Shortly after the party congress, Chen Ming-tong, director-general of Taiwan's National Security Bureau, said that, while improbable, China could launch an invasion in 2023.<sup>4</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken asserted that China's leaders have decided to "speed up the process by which they would pursue unification," which might include "using force to achieve their goals."<sup>5</sup>

Does the new CMC tell us anything about Xi's intentions? This essay argues that while the new military brass will pursue the PLA's "centennial goal" of being prepared for a potential Taiwan contingency by 2027, Xi has not assembled a "war council" designed to manage a conflict within the next few years. There are three reasons for this. First, the CMC is not more operationally focused than it was in the past in terms of its internal structure and composition. Rather, it is postured for high-level oversight over a range of missions. Second, other than He Weidong, the new members do not bring much operational expertise relevant to Taiwan. Third, while any conflict would require cooperation across the services, the new CMC is even less "joint" than its predecessor—all six uniformed members now have an Army background and only two have joint command experience. In short, the new CMC does not provide a strong indication of a shift in Xi's intentions regarding Taiwan.

While the headlines may have exaggerated the significance of the selection of the CMC members for Xi's cross-strait ambitions, the structure and membership of the CMC do tell us about his preferences in terms of military decision-making and leadership. As in the Politburo Standing Committee, Xi values a small inner circle of trusted advisors to guide key decisions, whether related to operations, strategy, acquisitions, budgeting, or political work. The selection of CMC

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Gertz, "Chinese 'Action' General Appointed CMC Vice Chair," *The Washington Times*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/oct/26/inside-ring-chinese-action-general-appointed-cmc-v/>; Jack Lau and Amber Wang, "China's Reshuffled Military Leadership Sends Clear Focus on Taiwan," *South China Morning Post*, October 23, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3196962/chinas-reshuffled-military-leadership-sends-clear-signal-taiwan-focus>; Keith Zhai and Chun Han Wong, "China Appoints Two Vice Chairmen to Central Military Commission," *Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/china-xi-jinping-communist-party-congress/card/china-appoints-two-vice-chairmen-to-central-military-commission-58ktocaE8ZtrUmxmP4FR>.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Pao, "Is Clock Really Ticking Down Toward a Taiwan War?" *Asia Times*, October 26, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/10/is-clock-really-ticking-down-toward-a-taiwan-war>.

<sup>5</sup> Iain Marlow, "China Wants to 'Speed Up' Its Seizure of Taiwan, Blinken Says," *Bloomberg*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-26/blinken-says-china-wants-to-speed-up-its-seizure-of-taiwan>.

personnel appears to be based on two criteria: longstanding ties with Xi and a track record of success in key positions. The key question for the future is whether, given Xi's dominance over the party-state, will the uniformed members of the CMC will feel empowered to provide Xi with candid advice? The members may not have been chosen to prosecute a war, but they could play an essential role in talking Xi out of one.

### **Consistency in Size, Composition, and Personnel**

One sign that Xi intends to focus on cross-Strait operations would be changes in the internal composition of the CMC. Indeed, the CMC's structure has varied since its establishment in 1926 to serve different purposes, but there was no change in the size or offices represented in the new line-up.<sup>6</sup> In comparison, there was a more significant change at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2017, when Xi reduced the size of the CMC from eleven to seven, and different offices were represented *ex officio*.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, the service chiefs and directors of the General Logistics and Armaments departments were removed, and the secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission was added—a sign of Xi's focus on anti-corruption. The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress retained two vice chairmen and four members, who serve concurrently as Defense minister, Joint Staff Department chief, Political Work Department director, and Discipline Inspection Commission secretary (see Table below).

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<sup>6</sup> The first post-Mao CMC in 1977, for instance, consisted of five vice chairmen and eleven members, while Xi's first CMC, after the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2012, consisted of two vice chairmen and eight members. There have also occasionally been civilian vice chairmen (typically, the successor-in-training to the party general secretary), a post held by Xi himself in 2010–12. For a discussion, see Nan Li, "The Central Military Commission and Military Policy in China," in James C. Mulvenon and Andrew N.D. Yang, *The People's Liberation Army as Organization* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002), 45–120, and Tai Ming Cheung, "The Riddle in the Middle: China's Central Military Commission in the Twenty-first century," in Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, eds., *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 84–119.

<sup>7</sup> Joel McFadden, Kim Fassler, and Justin Godby, "The New PLA Leadership: Xi Molds China's Military to His Vision," in Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, 557–582.

**Table: The Post-20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress Central Military Commission**

Name	Concurrent PLA Role(s)	Service	Age	Service Years	Previous Roles (Last 10 Years)
<b>Chairman</b>					
Xi Jinping 习近平	N/A	N/A	69	N/A [1]	N/A (CMC Vice Chairman from 2010–12)
<b>Vice Chairmen</b>					
Zhang Youxia 张又侠	N/A	Army	72	54	-CMC Member (2012–17) and Vice Chairman (2017–22) -Director, CMC Equipment Development Department (2015–17) -Director, General Armaments Department (2012–15)
He Weidong 何卫东	N/A	Army	65	50	-Eastern Theater Commander (2019–22) -Western Theater Deputy Commander and Ground Force Commander (2016–19) -Shanghai Garrison Commander (2014–16) -Jiangsu Military District Commander (2013–14) -Nanjing Military Region Deputy Chief of Staff (2013) -31 <sup>st</sup> Group Army Deputy Commander (2008–13)
<b>Members</b>					
Li Shangfu 李尚福	Prospective Defense Minister [2]	Army	64	44	-CMC Equipment Development Department Director (2017–22) -PLA Strategic Support Force Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff (2016–17) -General Armaments Department Deputy Director (2014–16) -General Armaments Department Chief of Staff (2013–14)
Liu Zhenli 刘振立	CMC Joint Staff Dept. Chief of Staff	Army	58	39	-PLA Ground Force Commander (2021–22) -PLA Ground Force Chief of Staff (2015–21) -People’s Armed Police Chief of Staff (2015) -38 <sup>th</sup> Group Army Commander (2014–15) -65 <sup>th</sup> Group Army Commander (2012–14)
Miao Hua 苗华	CMC Political Work Dept. Director	Navy (fmr. Army)	66	52	-PLA Navy Political Commissar (2014–17) -Lanzhou Military Region Political Commissar (2014) -Lanzhou Military Region Deputy Political Commissar (2012–14)
Zhang Shengmin 张升民	CMC Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary	Rocket Force (fmr. Army)	64	44	-CMC Logistics Support Department Political Commissar (2016–17) -CMC Training and Administration Department Political Commissar (2015–16) -Second Artillery Force Political Department Director (2014–15) -Political Commissar of the Second Artillery Force Base (2013–14) -Second Artillery Force Command College Political Commissar (2012–13)

[1] Xi served in the PLA in 1979–1982 as secretary to then–Defense Minister Geng Biao.

[2] Not formally confirmed. Will become Defense Minister at the National People's Congress in spring 2023. Until then, Wei Fenghe will continue in this role.

Structural continuity suggests that Xi is satisfied with how the CMC has functioned over the last five years. Keeping the commission at its current size implies that Xi finds it expedient to confine military decision-making to a small inner circle; this parallels the size of the Politburo Standing Committee, which has been reduced to seven members under Xi.<sup>8</sup> The line-up of offices represented on the CMC also suggests that Xi values a balance between operations, through the Joint Staff Department, and political work (including anti-corruption investigations) through the Discipline Inspection Commission, which has been Xi's key tool to gain control over the PLA.<sup>9</sup> Presumably, there will be a continued division of labor between the CMC vice chairmen, with one handling military affairs and the other holding a political portfolio (though, as in the last CMC, both vice chairmen, Zhang Youxia and He Weidong, have operational backgrounds, and they will likely weigh in on professional military matters).<sup>10</sup>

Decisions that Xi did *not* make regarding the CMC structure also provide clues about his preferences and priorities. He did not appoint a civilian vice chairman, reflecting the lack of a named successor. He did not restore *ex officio* representation by the service chiefs, implying that he prefers a nominally impartial “general staff”-like organization to make key acquisition and budgetary decisions. He also did not add the theater commanders, which might have been expected if he wanted the CMC to become more actively engaged in day-to-day operations.<sup>11</sup> Also absent are some of the most important actors relevant to a high-intensity conflict with Taiwan, such as the Eastern Theater Command, Strategic Support Force, Rocket Force, and Joint Logistics Support Force commanders.<sup>12</sup> In short, the “dogs that didn't bark” indicate that Xi prefers to run the CMC as an executive body under his control, focusing on the big picture rather than being excessively concerned about the details of specific problems.

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<sup>8</sup> The size of the Politburo Standing Committee was also reduced under Xi, from nine to seven members, but this change occurred in 2012 rather than in 2017 (as that for the CMC).

<sup>9</sup> Morgan Clemens and Benjamin Rosen, “The Impact on the PLA's Political Work System,” in Roy Kamphausen, ed., *The People in the PLA 2.0* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2021), 1–39; James Mulvenon, “‘Comrade, Where's My Military Car'? Xi Jinping's Throwback Mass-Line Campaign to Curb PLA Corruption,” *China Leadership Monitor* 42 (2013), 1–5.

<sup>10</sup> There has always been a division of labor among the CMC vice chairmen, though the nature of this division has varied. In 2002–7, for instance, there was a third vice chairman (Cao Gangchuan), who was responsible for technology.

<sup>11</sup> For different potential CMC models, see Phillip C. Saunders, “Alternative Models for the Central Military Commission,” *China Brief*, October 20, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/alternative-models-central-military-commission/>.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of relevant actors, see Joel Wuthnow, “Who Does What? Chinese Command and Control in a Taiwan Scenario,” in Joel Wuthnow et al., eds., *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2022), 277–303.

A related sign of a changing focus would be a wholesale leadership turnover. However, three of the six uniformed members were re-appointed. The surprise is Zhang Youxia, who has served on the CMC since 2012 and became a vice chairman in 2017, had been expected to retire, given his age (72).<sup>13</sup> Like Xi and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, he was also the only Central Committee member to break the party's retirement norm of 68. His re-appointment ensures continuity in one vice chairman position (the other vice chairman, Xu Qiliang, retired) and reflects Zhang Youxia's lifelong association with Xi—their fathers were close comrades during and after the Chinese Civil War.<sup>14</sup> Political Work Department Director Miao Hua and Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary Zhang Shengmin also stayed on in their respective posts. Since either could have left before retirement age, their selection indicates that Xi has been satisfied with their performance.

Demographics is a final source of continuity. As in the past, all those selected for the new CMC are male Han Chinese. Moreover, the average age and tenure of CMC members appointed at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress are almost identical to those selected at the last party congress (65 years old in 2022 versus 64 in 2017; 47 years of service in both years). At age 58, incoming Joint Staff Department Chief Liu Zhenli is the first CMC member to have been born in the 1960s and, as something like a “fast burner” during his career, he was promoted a few years ahead of his contemporaries (of note, he is also the only CMC member who will be eligible to remain on the CMC at the 21<sup>st</sup> Party Congress in 2027 if the age rule is followed).<sup>15</sup> In general, however, Xi did not reach into the ranks to promote “Young Turks” or a new generation of leadership.

## Taiwan and Broader Expertise

Another sign of a shifting intention would be a rebalancing of the expertise at the decision-making table. The choice that elicited the greatest amount of international attention was the appointment of He Weidong as vice chairman. Xi could have selected a current CMC member (Miao Hua or Zhang Shengmin) for this position, but he instead chose to allow He Weidong to skip a grade.<sup>16</sup> Such a move is not common, although it is not unprecedented—Fan Changlong

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<sup>13</sup> The retirement age for CMC officers has only existed for about twenty-five years. Admiral Liu Huaqing was 76 when he was re-appointed to the CMC at the 14<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in October 1992, and he was 80 when he retired in 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Cheng Li, “Xi Jinping’s Inner Circle (Part 1: The Shaanxi Gang),” *China Leadership Monitor*, June 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Xi-Jinping-Inner-Circle.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> “PLA Adds Four More Names as General! Liu Zhenli Breaks the Record for Youngest General” [解放军再添4名上将！刘振立刷新公开履历最年轻上将记录], *Southern Metropolitan Daily* [南方都市报], July 6, 2021, [https://www.sohu.com/a/475853143\\_161795](https://www.sohu.com/a/475853143_161795).

<sup>16</sup> The PLA has fifteen officer grades. He Weidong skipped from Theater Command leader (正战区级) to the top grade of CMC vice chairman (军委副主席级).

was also elevated two grades to vice chairman in 2012. There are two explanations for He Weidong's rapid rise. First, he had served in the Xiamen-based 31<sup>st</sup> Group Army when Xi was governor of Fujian from 1999–2002, and so the two likely have known each other for more than two decades (just as Xi also likely knew Miao Hua, who was a senior officer in the same group army at the same time).<sup>17</sup> This could have given He Weidong an edge over other candidates who were less well-known to Xi.

The second reason concerns the need for operational expertise. Xu Qiliang's retirement left the CMC with no one who served in an operational role opposite Taiwan.<sup>18</sup> It would have been surprising if Xi had not filled that gap given the importance of Taiwan to China's military strategy.<sup>19</sup> Elevating He Weidong ensured that the CMC would have a competent voice not only on cross-Straits operations but also on the Sino-Indian border dispute, as He Weidong served as Western Theater Command deputy commander for three years. To be sure, there was no clear indication in the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress work report that the party judges a conflict with Taiwan or another regional opponent to be imminent.<sup>20</sup> However, it is likely that given He Weidong's credentials that he will be responsible for ensuring timely completion of the PLA's 2027 "centennial goal" (建军一百年奋斗目标), a key element of which, according to senior U.S. officials, is to be prepared to execute a military operation against Taiwan by that time.<sup>21</sup> He will likely also provide key advice on PLA activities, and provocations, against other neighbors.

It would be a mistake, however, to characterize the new CMC as designed to concentrate expertise relevant for a future conflict. Indeed, only He Weidong and Miao Hua have served in the Eastern Theater Command. The other appointees bring different skills to address Xi's needs for advice on other matters. Two members (Zhang Youxia and Li Shangfu) previously directed the CMC Equipment Development Department. Li, a graduate of the National University of Defense Technology, served for most of his career in space launches before serving as a deputy commander of the Strategic Support Force, which is responsible for space, cyber, and electronic

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<sup>17</sup> Miao was director of the 31<sup>st</sup> Group Army Political Department in 1999 <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Xi-Jinping-Inner-Circle.pdf>2005. Xi would have known both men in his capacity as director of the Fujian Provincial National Defense Mobilization Commission.

<sup>18</sup> Xu served in the Nanjing Military Region in successive senior Air Force positions between 1984 and 1993.

<sup>19</sup> Since 1993, the Southeast, including the Taiwan Strait, has been regarded as the "main strategic direction" (主要战略方向).

<sup>20</sup> The work report contains similar language on Taiwan, including the statement that the party still seeks "peaceful reunification."

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Sam LaGrone, "Milley: China Wants Capability to Take Taiwan by 2027, Sees No Near-Term Intent to Invade," *USNI News*, June 23, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/23/milley-china-wants-capability-to-take-taiwan-by-2027-sees-no-near-term-intent-to-invade>.

warfare, and finally he served as equipment czar. Having such experience corresponds with the work report's statements for the PLA to "accelerate the building of the army into a world-class force" and to "expand the ratio of combat capabilities in new fields and new domains."<sup>22</sup>

Another two CMC members are specialists in political control. Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin bring their skills as career political commissars to a variety of positions, including the Lanzhou Military Region and the Navy (Miao) and the CMC Training and Logistics departments and the former Second Artillery Force (Zhang). While not professional expertise in a Western sense, having a cadre of officers who are able to carry out political work within the PLA and to ensure, in the words of the work report, "that the barrel of the gun always acts at the command of the party," supports one of Xi's core goals.<sup>23</sup> These officers will be instrumental in advising him on political work and in supervising the system of party committees, political commissars, and discipline inspectors that stretches deep into the force structure. Xi thus values input from officers who are not only "red" and "expert" but also "expert at being red."

Other qualifications might also have played a role in the selection of the new CMC members. Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli both have combat experience: the former served in the 1979 Sino-Vietnam border war and the latter was decorated for his actions during the 1986–87 border clashes with Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> Liu also gained renown as one of the first commanders of a modern mechanized infantry division and later as Army service chief.<sup>25</sup> These appointees have served in multiple theaters and group armies across their careers.<sup>26</sup> In short, the expertise that Xi will have available to him within the CMC will allow him to draw on those who have distinguished themselves in various career tracks. This corresponds with a view of the CMC as providing high-level advice to Xi on myriad topics and not focusing exclusively on a single task.

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<sup>22</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress Work Report, Section 12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> "Former 38<sup>th</sup> Group Army Commander Liu Zhenli Becomes Chief of Staff of the People's Armed Police" [第38集团军原军长刘振立少将升任武警部队参谋长], *The Paper* [澎湃新闻], August 2, 2015, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1359583](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1359583). For a discussion of this lesser-known border clash with Vietnam, see Edward C. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War: The Last Maoist War* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 105.

<sup>25</sup> Ling Xiang and Zou Weirong, "Record of an Interview with the PLA's First Mechanized Infantry Division Commander Liu Zhenli" [我军第一支机械化步兵师刘振立师长访谈录], *Ordnance Knowledge* [兵器知识], February 2009, 37–39.

<sup>26</sup> He Weidong served concurrently as overall commander of ground forces assigned to the Western Theater Command during this period, which coincided with the 2017 Doklam Incident involving Chinese and Indian troops. However, his role in that incident is uncertain.

## Weaker “Joint” Qualifications and Service Representation

A final sign that the CMC is being redefined as a “war council” would be greater jointness. Modern warfare is inherently “joint,” meaning that it requires close coordination between the different services. Recognizing that “jointness” was key to U.S. success during the Gulf War, by the early 1990s the PLA shifted from a focus on single-service operations to joint operations, and reforms carried out under Xi produced a modern joint command structure by granting theater commanders authority over air and naval forces.<sup>27</sup> The PLA has also strengthened its joint training, most recently in the form of exercises simulating a blockade of Taiwan that were held after Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taipei in August 2022.<sup>28</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress work report confirms that a continuing goal for the armed forces will be to “optimize the joint command and control system” (优化联合作战指挥体系).<sup>29</sup>

It is thus somewhat surprising that the new CMC are *less* joint in two ways. First, representation by non-Army officers on the CMC has declined. For most of its history, the CMC was dominated by senior ground force officers, but, in a show of “jointness,” the service chiefs were added in 2004.<sup>30</sup> Although the service chiefs were removed thirteen years later, there were still officers from each of the services appointed to the CMC in 2017. By contrast, the new CMC lacks an Air Force officer, and its two non-Army representatives—Admiral Miao Hua and Rocket Force General Zhang Shengmin—are both political commissars who spent most of their careers in the Army.<sup>31</sup> Air Force General Xu Qiliang and Rocket Force General Wei Fenghe, who commanded forces in their respective services, retired, meaning that the new CMC includes officers who only possess land-warfare operational expertise.

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<sup>27</sup> Joel Wuthnow, “A Brave New World for Chinese Joint Operations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 12 (2017), 169–195.

<sup>28</sup> Cyril Ip, “Chinese PLA Drills Simulating Taiwan Blockade Seen to Become New ‘Normal,’” *South China Morning Post*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3188257/mainland-china-declares-military-drills-will-continue-around>.

<sup>29</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress Work Report, Section 12.

<sup>30</sup> An exception is Admiral Liu Huaqing, who became a CMC member in 1989 and served until 1997.

<sup>31</sup> Miao’s only service in the Navy is as political commissar in 2014–17. Zhang joined the PLA in 1978 and served as an Army officer until 2004, when he became a Rocket Force Political Commissar. Transfers by political track officers across services are more common than transfers by other career tracks because of the fungibility of their skills (e.g., political indoctrination). It is also worth noting that Li Shangfu spent a year in the Strategic Support Force as a deputy commander and Liu Zhenli was briefly chief of staff of the People’s Armed Police.

Second, there has been a drop in the CMC members' expertise in joint operations. Senior PLA officers tend to have spent little time in "joint" positions responsible for coordinating activities across the services; instead, they have spent most of their careers within their own service.<sup>32</sup> Collectively, the six uniformed members of the last CMC spent 10 percent of their careers in joint command positions (29 out of 279 years of combined service), and in the new CMC this rate has dropped to 5 percent (13 out of 279 years).<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the joint experience comes from only two CMC members: Zhang Youxia and He Weidong, who served as theater deputy commander and commander respectively prior to joining the CMC.<sup>34</sup> Of note, incoming Joint Staff Department Chief Liu Zhenli, who in his new capacity will be responsible for coordinating joint forces across the PLA, has not spent a single year in a joint command position; his entire career has been in the Army.

It is tempting to explain these patterns as being the result of a resurgent Big Army mentality within the PLA, but the reality is likely that Xi does not intend for the CMC to micro-manage operations, even if its members offer him advice and direction.<sup>35</sup> Most instrumental in advising Xi on operational matters will be commanders such as He Weidong, Zhang Youxia, and Liu Zhenli. But given their Army backgrounds and limited joint command experience, they will have to seek input from and pass on some decision-making authority to lower-level commanders, especially in the Joint Staff Department and the theater commands. The fact that CMC members work directly with Xi implies that, having known some of them for many decades, he trusts their advice and their ability to provide options and to ensure that his decisions are implemented. But thinking of the CMC as an operational command probably misstates its function.

## Implications

The new CMC should not be seen as a clue that Xi is preparing to initiate hostilities with Taiwan in the immediate future. To recap, there are three main reasons why the new line-up of two CMC vice chairmen and four members advising Xi is not better postured for managing a conflict than its predecessors. First, there is notable consistency in the CMC's structure, which does not

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<sup>32</sup> Joel Wuthnow, *Gray Dragons: Assessing China's Senior Military Leadership* (INSS China Strategic Perspectives 16, September 2022), 22–25.

<sup>33</sup> These positions include deputy chief of the Joint Staff Department and Theater chief of staff, deputy commander, and commander. Other CMC members have "joint" experience but not in a command track, including Li Shangfu's experience in the General Armaments Department and Zhang Shengmin's service as political commissar of the CMC Logistics Support Department.

<sup>34</sup> Zhang was deputy commander of the Beijing Military Region in 2005–7 and commander of the Shenyang Military Region in 2007–2012. He was deputy commander of the Western Theater Command from 2016–2019 and commander of the Eastern Theater Command in 2019–2022.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of cross-strait campaigns, see Michael Casey, "Firepower Strike, Blockade, Landing: PLA Campaigns for a Cross-Strait Conflict," in Wuthnow et al., eds., *Crossing the Strait*, 113–138.

include *ex officio* representation of the theater commands or other key warfighting actors. Second, the new members bring a range of operational and administrative expertise but, other than He Weidong, they do not bring deep insights in cross-Strait operations (a gap that needed to be filled given Xu Qiliang's departure). Third, the lack of jointness in the new CMC would pose challenges if Xi intended it to supervise a conflict, which would require input from Air Force, Navy, and Rocket Force officers and from those familiar with joint operations.

It is more likely that the main purpose of the CMC over the next five years will be to manage the continued modernization of the PLA. The line-up Xi selected at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress is well suited to this mission. With service as a theater commander, He Weidong understands the steps that must be taken to improve the PLA's readiness for cross-Strait operations—which is central to the army's "centennial goal" and other regional missions. Zhang Youxia and Li Shangfu, who previously led the CMC's Equipment Department, are ideal choices to complete the work report's goal of "increasing the proportion of combat capabilities in new fields and domains" (增加新域新质作战力量比重).<sup>36</sup> Liu Zhenli will provide valuable input for army modernization. The two career political commissars, Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin, will ensure that even as the PLA becomes more professional, it will remain loyal to the party as well as to Xi – one of Xi's key goals over the last decade.

There are scenarios in which Xi might contemplate the use of force against Taiwan, such as strong moves toward independence by Taiwan's incoming president after the 2024 election. The CMC, in these circumstances, would advise Xi on military options. Thus, it is important to understand the relationship between Xi and his military leadership. The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress offers clues about Xi's preferences regarding military decision-making and leadership. He has retained a smaller CMC, suggesting that he prefers a small group of trusted advisors over a larger but more representative arrangement. He also values both personal ties and professional skills.<sup>37</sup> Three of the six CMC members have longstanding ties to Xi. All six have strong reputations, whether through combat performance, theater command, or in key posts elsewhere in the PLA. Xi appears to value diverse professional expertise, but above all, he prizes competence.<sup>38</sup> Hence, he has chosen individuals who will likely have his ear.

Xi's consolidation of power within the party-state raises the question of whether the CMC will offer him candid advice on the use of force. A worrisome parallel is their advice on relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was apparently misled by his senior generals about

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<sup>36</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress Work Report, Section 12.

<sup>37</sup> This is a typical pattern. See Daniel C. Mattingly, "How the Party Commands the Gun: The Foreign-Domestic Threat Dilemma in China," *American Journal of Political Science*, October 21, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12739>.

<sup>38</sup> This helps explain why Xi would want officers in positions that, at face value, do not match their career trajectories – in particular, Liu Zhenli in the Joint Staff Department and Li Shangfu (and, before him, Wei Fenghe) as Defense Minister.

the chances of securing a quick victory in Ukraine.<sup>39</sup> Xi's new CMC members likely have the professional knowledge to comprehend China's limitations in any conflict with Taiwan and the United States. Candor on these challenges might be on the table in general discussions when Xi's mind is not yet made up. The critical issue is whether they will be able to nudge him off a path to war if he already seems committed, either by informing him of the costs and risks or by presenting him with narrower options. While Xi might not have selected the current CMC members to prosecute a war, they could play a key role in keeping China out of one.

### **About the Contributor**

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This essay represents the author's own views and not those of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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<sup>39</sup> Steve Holland and Andrea Shalal, "Putin Misled by 'Yes Men' in Military Afraid to Tell Him the Truth, White House and EU Officials Say," Reuters, March 31, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-advisers-too-afraid-tell-him-truth-ukraine-us-official-2022-03-30/>.