

## MILITARY

July 16, 2024

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has a long political tradition in the development and maintenance of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule. At watershed moments—such as the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976 and the crushing of the 1989 Tiananmen protests—the PLA has played a decisive role as a party army that functions as the ultimate guarantor of CCP rule. When Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, he sensed that the CCP was facing another moment of crisis, but this time the PLA was part of the problem rather than the solution. Xi has since executed a radical reform of the political culture, organizational structure, and force posture of the PLA. In so doing, he has emerged as the most powerful civilian leader of the Chinese military since Deng Xiaoping, a bulwark of his rulership of an authoritarian state. These reforms have also helped Xi improve the PLA’s capabilities—especially in the air, sea, missile, and information domains—and coincided with stronger shows of military force in areas such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the China-India border, raising regional and global concerns about Xi’s military intentions.

- Institutions
- People
- Policy

### Institutions

The **Central Military Commission (CMC)** is China’s top national-level defense leadership and military command center. It is responsible for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the People’s Armed Police (PAP), and the Militia of China. Technically, there are two CMCs: that of the CCP, which is selected by the party’s Central Committee at its First Plenum immediately following each Party Congress, and that of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which is selected by the National People’s Congress (NPC) at its first meeting in March following a Party Congress. However, the two CMCs are identical and exist in parallel simply so that the CMC can formally oversee defense matters in both the party and the state. The CMC is an extremely opaque institution, and its meetings are almost never publicized.

In 2017, Xi reduced the size of the CMC from 11 to seven members as part of his reforms aimed at centralizing power and streamlining decision-making in the military. The CCP General Secretary serves as the CMC Chairman, the top position in the military hierarchy—an essential source of power for the country’s paramount leader. Xi’s leadership of the CMC underscores a critical difference between the

PLA and many Western militaries. While the US Army, for example, exists to serve the United States of America, the PLA exists not to serve the People's Republic of China but the CCP. It is a party army, not a national army, and ultimate authority over military decisions rests with the CCP leadership.

The two CMC Vice Chairmen are PLA generals who serve as the only military representatives on the CCP's elite 24-member Politburo. This arrangement has persisted since 1997, when **Liu Huaqing** ended his five-year term as the last PLA general to hold a seat on the top Politburo Standing Committee. The first-ranked Vice Chairman usually serves as Head of the CMC Leading Group for Inspection Work (CMCLGIW), which oversees political discipline inspections throughout the PLA. The top three CMC officials also lead the CMC Leading Group for National Defense and Military Reform (CLGMR), a policy coordination body that oversees ongoing military reforms. The CMC Chairman serves as Head of this group, the first-ranked Vice Chairman as Executive Deputy Head, and the second-ranked Vice Chairman as a Deputy Head, with other members of the CMC filling out the ranks.

The other CMC members are senior PLA generals who serve as Chief of Staff of the CMC Joint Staff Department (CMCJSD), Director of the CMC Political Work Department (CMCPWD), and Secretary of the CMC Commission for Discipline Inspection (CMCCDI). The inclusion of these roles on the CMC reflects Xi's efforts to transform the PLA into a US-style "joint" force with integrated command of the different services, to ensure the military's absolute loyalty to the CCP (and to Xi's leadership), and to stamp out the rampant corruption that undermined China's military readiness in the past.

Xi's military reforms involved a significant reorganization of the CMC's institutional structure below the seven-member top leadership, going from four general departments—General Staff, General Political, General Logistics, and General Armaments—to 15 smaller departments. The general departments had become bloated organs and hotbeds for corruption; the reforms were designed to create more focused and agile entities and to disperse bureaucratic power. The three new departments represented on the CMC—Joint Staff, Political Work, and Discipline Inspection—rank at the "theater level," which is above seven "deputy theater-level" departments and five "army-level" departments. However, the CMC General Office (CMCGO), a deputy theater-level department that handles administrative operations and information flows, has emerged as an important center of Xi's power in the CMC.

In 2016, Xi elevated and consolidated the existing joint command institutions to create a theater-level CMC Joint Command Center (CMCJCC), the highest combat command institution in the PLA. It is directly under the CMC and led by Xi as China's inaugural Commander in Chief. Formally, however, under the PRC Constitution, it is Xi's role as President that gives him the power to declare war.

The CMC oversees the PLA's four service branches: the **PLA Ground Force (PLAGF)**; the **PLA Navy (PLAN)**; the **PLA Air Force (PLAAF)**; and the **PLA Rocket Force (PLARF)**, which controls China's conventional and nuclear missiles. Xi's 2015 reforms created the PLAGF as a separate service branch to reduce the influence of the land forces, which had traditionally dominated PLA decision-making, by putting them on the same administrative footing as the other branches. The same reforms created the PLARF out of the former Second Artillery. The service branches enjoy the same theater-level rank as the

top three CMC departments, but the reforms took them out of the operational chain of command and made them responsible mainly for planning, training, and equipping their respective forces. Each service branch has a split leadership structure comprising a commander, who oversees military operations, and a political commissar, who is a uniformed officer and party cadre in charge of political discipline and ideological instruction. These military commanders and political commissars usually hold a seat on the CCP Central Committee.

Xi's 2015 reforms also led to the founding of a new service branch called the **PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF)**, which oversaw the PLA's operations in the space, cyber, electronic, information, and psychological domains, but this service branch was disbanded in April 2024. Specific responsibilities included hacking, influence operations, information security, intelligence gathering, manned spaceflight, network systems, and satellites. The SSF was replaced by three deputy theater-level forces that sit directly under the CMC: the **PLA Information Support Force (PLAISF)**, the **PLA Space Force (PLASF)**, and the **PLA Cyberspace Force (PLACF)**. The likely motivation for this reorganization is to enhance the CMC's control over these critical capabilities so that top leaders can exert more strategic influence over how they are allocated to and used by other parts of the military. The new forces are functional units intended to provide strategic capabilities to service branches and geographic commands. The PLASF and the PLACF were formed from deputy theater-level units in the SSF (the Space Systems Department and the Network Systems Department, respectively), but the PLAISF was formed from the SSF's corps-level Information Communications Base. This bureaucratic upgrade suggests a rising focus in the PLA on information warfare and network capabilities.

Xi reorganized the PLA from seven military regions into five joint-operation **theater commands**, which report directly to the CMC and have a protocol order that corresponds to the political importance of their geographic missions: the Eastern Theater Command, headquartered in Nanjing and including the Taiwan Strait and East China Sea; the Southern Theater Command, headquartered in Guangzhou and including the South China Sea and Hong Kong; the Western Theater Command, headquartered in Chengdu and including Xinjiang, Tibet, and the China-India border; the Northern Theater Command, headquartered in Shenyang and including the borders with Russia and North Korea; and the Central Theater Command, headquartered in Beijing and focusing on capital defense and military reserve.

This shake-up was designed to transform the PLA from a "big army" military focused on ground force operations to a more "joint" military that de-prioritizes the army and integrates its capabilities with stronger naval, air, missile, and cyber forces. The CMC commands most military units of the service branches through theater commands; each command controls a deputy theater-level branch of the PLAGF, PLAN, and PLAAF (except for the Western and Central Theater Commands, which lack PLAN branches). These commands report to both their theater command and their service branch, but the theater commands lead on operational control. Theater commands are led by both a military commander and a political commissar, almost all of whom hold seats on the CCP Central Committee.

This dual command structure is replicated within theater commands in army-level provincial military districts, which serve as national defense mobilization units under the leadership of the deputy theater-

level CMC Defense Mobilization Department (CMCDMD). Three politically sensitive provincial military districts are combat forces that administratively report directly to PLAGF headquarters (while still taking operational orders from their theater commands): the army-level PLA Beijing Garrison; the deputy theater-level PLA Tibet Military District; and the deputy theater-level PLA Xinjiang Military District, which includes the army-level PLA Southern Xinjiang Military District (SXMD) headquartered in Kashgar. The SXMD is also responsible for defending Ali Prefecture in Tibet, which abuts the Galwan Valley where Chinese and Indian forces fought a deadly melee in June 2020, and so SXMD commanders have been deeply involved with Sino-Indian de-escalation negotiations ever since.

The CMC has also been directly responsible for the **People's Armed Police** since 2018, when a reorganization took authority away from provincial party secretaries and gave Xi direct control of all China's armed forces. The PAP is a theater-level paramilitary force that operates nationwide, although its resources are concentrated in areas of greater social unrest in Western China. It is responsible for safeguarding internal security if civilian responses and resources prove inadequate, encompassing activities such as riot control, counterterrorism, hostage rescue, explosives removal, assisting law enforcement in especially dangerous activities, and providing security for major events, core infrastructure, and important facilities (including foreign embassies). During wartime, the CMC can mobilize the PAP, which has up to one million personnel, to support the PLA, which has about two million personnel. The China Coast Guard (CCG)—responsible for maritime security, territorial patrols, law enforcement, anti-smuggling efforts, search and rescue operation, and some gray-zone operations—operates as a service branch of the PAP.

Significant uncertainty surrounds the PLA's intelligence units, which have also been substantially restructured under Xi's leadership since 2015. The principal military intelligence organization, formerly the Second Department of the old PLA General Staff Department, has become the Intelligence Bureau of the CMCJSD. The former signals intelligence (Third Department) and electronic warfare (Fourth Department) units, which were also under the General Staff Department, have meanwhile been reconstituted under the PLASSF as its Network Systems Department. The former General Political Department's Liaison Department (GPDLD), responsible for outreach and intelligence-gathering among foreign and Taiwanese elites, has become the CMCPWD Liaison Bureau.

The CMC directly oversees three academic institutions. The deputy theater-level **PLA Academy of Military Sciences (AMS)** in Beijing is the country's premier research institution focused on domestic and foreign military affairs. It publishes a quasi-authoritative guide to PLA doctrine known as the *Science of Military Strategy*, and its personnel play key roles in supplying information, drafting documents, and shaping messages for PLA leaders. The deputy theater-level **PLA National Defense University (NDU)** in Beijing is the premier military education and training institution in China and publishes its own version of the *Science of Military Strategy*. The army-level **PLA National University of Defense Technology (NUDT)** in Changsha is a public research university that focuses on developing technology for military applications. The US government sanctioned the NUDT by putting it on the Entity List in 2015.

The top military-related state institution is the **National Defense Mobilization Commission (NDMC)**, a policy coordination body between the State Council and the CMC that is responsible for planning, managing, and regulating the use of civilian resources for military operations. The Premier serves as Chairman and the Minister of National Defense and the State Council Secretary-General serve as Vice Chairmen. The NDMC General Office, however, is in the CMCDMD, showing that the bureaucratic muscle of the commission is firmly within the military rather than the government apparatus.

The NDMC, under the leadership of and in coordination with the CMC, oversees the Militia of China, which is a reserve force of approximately eight million troops for the PLA. The militia's responsibilities include providing logistical support to the PLA in preparing for war, defending national borders, maintaining public order, and contributing to economic production. The Maritime Militia of China supports the operations of the PLAN and CCG, especially in gray-zone activities in the South China Sea.

The **Ministry of National Defense (MND)** is one of the 26 constituent department of the State Council. The MND's main purpose is to conduct military-to-military diplomacy and hold press briefings; it has no operational authority and effectively serves as a foreign liaison body for the CMC. The Minister of National Defense is usually a PLA general who holds deputy national rank, a notch above most other ministers, through concurrent positions as a CMC member and a State Councilor, although the current minister does not hold these elevated positions.

The **Ministry of Veterans Affairs (MVA)** is the other constituent department of the State Council with direct relevance to China's military. It is responsible for the management and provision of services to at least 57 million military veterans, as well as retired firefighters and search and rescue personnel. These duties include overseeing the ideological discipline of this politically sensitive group; highlighting the dedication and contributions of veterans to the CCP; managing the commemoration of official martyrs; assisting veterans with the transition to civilian life; aiding injured and disabled veterans; and administering benefits related to social welfare, medical treatment, employment training, and incentives for entrepreneurship. The MVA was created in 2018 through the amalgamation of functions previously performed by various CMC departments and other ministries. The Minister of Veterans Affairs holds standard ministerial rank.

The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) sponsors seven universities to foster science and technology partnerships with the PLA. These "Seven Sons of National Defense" are Beihang University and Beijing Institute of Technology in Beijing; Harbin Engineering University and Harbin Institute of Technology in Harbin; Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics and Nanjing University of Science and Technology in Nanjing; and Northwestern Polytechnical University in Xi'an. For more details on military technology and civil-military fusion, please see the "Technology" section.

The State Council's State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) oversees several enormous state-owned enterprises that form the backbone of China's national defense industry, whose top leaders hold deputy minister-level rank in the party-state hierarchy. China North Industries Group Corporation (Norinco) is China's largest manufacturer of weapons and military equipment, with a

focus on tanks, armored vehicles, firearms, and ammunition. China South Industries Group Corporation (Sorinco) is a diversified military manufacturer of vehicles, firearms, and optical electronics, among other equipment. China Poly Group is a conglomerate that brokers the export and import of military equipment on behalf of Chinese defense companies and the PLA. Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC) is an aerospace conglomerate that manufactures fighter jets, bombers, helicopters, drones, and other aircraft for the PLA. Aero Engine Corporation of China (AECC) is dedicated to aerospace engine technology, including that with military applications. China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) is the principal supplier of the Chinese space program and produces military-related technology such as spacecraft, satellites, launch rockets, and missile systems. China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation (CASIC) is China's largest manufacturer of missile systems and makes micro-satellites and solid-state launch vehicles. China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) is China's largest shipbuilder and builds PLA ships.

## People

**Xi Jinping** (born June 1953) is CMC Chairman and Commander in Chief, as well as head of the CMC Leading Small Group for National Defense and Military Reform. He assumes overall responsibility for the CMC's work, and his concurrent role as CCP General Secretary demonstrates the party's absolute leadership over the PLA. Xi has established a firm grip on the seven-member CMC: four of the six other members have direct personal or professional connections with the paramount leader, and the two others appear to be loyal followers who have been rapidly promoted under Xi's leadership. Three of these six PLA leaders are holdovers from the previous CMC, signaling continuity in Xi's political dominance.

**Zhang Youxia** (July 1950) is the first-ranked CMC Vice Chairman and a Politburo member. Like Xi, Zhang is the "princeling" son of a revolutionary leader, and the two have family connections in Shaanxi Province and may have known each other growing up in elite Beijing circles during the 1960s. Zhang was a close ally of Xi on the previous Politburo, during which time he served as the second-ranked CMC Vice Chairman, following an army career that included stints as head of the CMC Equipment Development Department and the former PLA General Armaments Department. Xi chose to keep Zhang on the Politburo even though Zhang turned 72 before the 20th Party Congress in 2022—well past the retirement age norm of 68—likely reflecting the key role that Zhang has played in Xi's sweeping post-2015 military reforms. Zhang is also a rare PLA leader with combat experience, having fought in the 1979–1991 China-Vietnam border wars, reflecting Xi's emphasis on improving the PLA's "ability to fight and win wars."

**He Weidong** (May 1957) is the second-ranked CMC Vice Chairman and a Politburo member. Xi knows He from when the latter worked as a military leader in both Fujian and Zhejiang while Xi was a leader of those provinces from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. Xi promoted He from outside the CCP Central Committee directly to the Politburo, a rare double-skip promotion that suggests both political closeness and policy importance. He is the first former Commander of the PLA Eastern Theater Command (or its

predecessor, the Nanjing Military Region) to serve as a CMC Vice Chairman since the Mao era. This command includes responsibility for PLA operations in the Taiwan Strait, and He Weidong is thought to have planned China's large-scale military exercises after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022. He will bring expertise in Taiwan operations to CMC and Politburo meetings, though likely less to prepare for a near-term invasion than to build longer-term advantage through well-calibrated deterrence and gray-zone tactics. He is an army general and previously commanded the Western Theater Command Ground Force, the Shanghai Garrison, and the old Jiangsu Military District.

**Li Shangfu** (February 1958) was appointed the first-ranked ordinary CMC member and both a State Councilor and the Minister of National Defense following the 20th Party Congress. But he disappeared from public view in late August 2023, reportedly after being placed under investigation for corruption, was stripped of his government positions in October 2023 and lost his place on the CMC in early 2024 and was expelled from the CCP by the Politburo in June 2024. Li had no direct ties to Xi in his early career, but he was considered a member of Xi's "Military-Industrial Gang" of rapidly elevated technocrats, having spent 10 years as a major general after 2006 before winning promotion to lieutenant general in 2016 and then general in 2019. He is an aerospace engineer who worked for more than 30 years as a rocket scientist at the PLA Xichang Satellite Launch Center in Sichuan Province, including about 10 years as its leader. Li then moved to Beijing, where he held senior roles in the PLA General Armaments Department (where he worked under Zhang Youxia) before serving as both Director of the CMC Equipment Development Department and the China Manned Space Program from 2017 to 2022. Li was sanctioned by the US in 2018 for his role in helping China buy fighter jets and missiles from Russia.

**Dong Jun** (1961) replaced Li Shangfu as Minister of National Defense in December 2023. Dong is the first ever PLA Navy officer to serve in the role, a sign of Beijing's rising focus on maritime power, and has led Chinese forces in hotspot areas such as the South China Sea and East China Sea. He also has experience in military diplomacy, having led joint naval exercises with Russia in 2016 and with Pakistan in 2020. He entered the PLA Dalian Naval Academy in 1978 and worked in the PLA Navy's Military Training Department, North Sea Fleet, and Unit 92269. Before his current role, he held leadership positions as Deputy Commander of the PLAN East Sea Fleet from 2013-2014, Deputy Chief of Staff of the PLA Navy from 2014-2017 (when CMC member Miao Hua served as the PLAN Political Commissar, Deputy Commander of the PLA Southern Theater Command from 2017-2021, Deputy Commander of the PLA Navy from 2021-2021, and Commander of the PLA Navy from 2021-2023. Dong remains lower-ranked than Li Shangfu was, however, as the Party has yet to appoint him to fill Li's vacancy on the CMC, or to replace Li on the State Council as a State Councilor.

**Liu Zhenli** (August 1964) is now the first-ranked ordinary CMC member and the Chief of Staff of the CMC Joint Staff Department. Liu also lacks direct personal or professional ties to Xi, but, like Zhang Youxia, he is a combat veteran of the Sino-Vietnamese border conflict. Liu was most recently Commander of the PLA Ground Force, having previously served as Chief of Staff of the PLA Ground Force and of the People's Armed Police after a long career climbing the army ranks. Liu plays a key role in joint

operations, but his strong background in the ground forces suggests that other service branches such as the PLAN and PLAAF may struggle for influence in operational and administrative policymaking.

**Miao Hua** (November 1955) is the second-ranked ordinary CMC member and the Director of the CMC Political Work Department, retaining the same positions he held during the previous CMC from 2017 to 2022. Miao worked in proximity to Xi in Fujian for most of the 1980s and 1990s, and his continued leadership of political work in the armed forces will likely help Xi further consolidate his authority within the military. Miao wears the uniform of a PLAN admiral, having served as PLAN political commissar from 2014 to 2017; previously, he spent his entire career as a political commissar in the PLAGF.

**Zhang Shengmin** (February 1958) is the third-ranked ordinary CMC member and the Secretary of the CMC Commission for Discipline Inspection, as well as a Deputy Secretary of the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, retaining the same positions he held for the past five years. Zhang spent most of his career as a political commissar in what is now the PLARF, including for extended period in Xi's ancestral province of Shaanxi. He was rapidly promoted after Xi became paramount leader, rising from lieutenant general to general in just over a year between the summer of 2016 and November 2017. His continued oversight of political discipline in the military seems designed to strengthen Xi's claim to command the "absolute loyalty" of the PLA behind his political project to rule for life.

**Zhong Shaojun** (October 1968) is reportedly the Political Commissar of the PLA National Defense University (NDU) but served as Director of the CMC General Office from 2017 to 2024 and as Director of the CMC Chairman's Office (CMCCO), which handles Xi's day-to-day military business, from 2013 to 2024. In that period Zhong was Xi's top military aide and he may still hold influence as an adviser and operator that exceeds his nominal rank. Zhong does not have a military background, but he has worked on Xi's staff since the latter was Party Secretary of Zhejiang, following him first to Shanghai and then to Beijing, where he worked in the CCP General Office. In 2013, Zhong became a uniformed PLA officer, gaining the rank of senior colonel in 2013, major general in 2016, and lieutenant general in 2019. Zhong is still relatively young and joined the CCP Central Committee for the first time at the 20th Party Congress. His reassignment to a less influential position at the NDU could show that he has lost Xi's favor or it could represent a stepping stone on his way to rejoining the civilian leadership. Xi may move him out of the military system because he lacks the service experience to credibly serve as a top PLA leader, but he could prove a valuable political ally as a senior Party administrator or provincial leader.

**Fang Yongxiang** (August 1966) replaced Zhong Shaojun as Director of the CMC General Office in early 2024. His extensive ties to several political and military associates of Xi are likely what recommended him to the job of being Xi's right-hand man in the military. He spent most of his career in the 31st Group Army, which is headquartered in his hometown of Xiamen in Fujian Province, where he rose through the political commissar ranks between 1989 and 2014. Xi was a provincial leader in Fujian during the 1990s and early 2000s and Fang was a top local military figure in Xiamen while close Xi ally He Lifeng served as the city's Party Secretary from 2005 to 2009. Fang also worked under CMC members He Weidong and Miao Hua in the 31st Group Army. Fang later served as Director of the Political Department of the 1st Group Army in Huzhou City in Zhejiang Province (2014-2015), Deputy Director of the 2nd Department of



the former PLA General Political Department (2015-2016), Deputy Director of the Political Work Department of the PLA Eastern Theater Command (2016-2017), Political Commissar of the 81st Group Army in Zhangjiakou in Hebei Province (2017-2018), concurrently as a Deputy Minister of Veterans Affairs and an Assistant Director of the CMC Political Work Department (2018-2022), and Deputy Political Commissar of the PLA Southern Theater Command (2022-2024).

## **Policy**

While serving as a civilian CMC Vice Chairman from 2010 to 2012, Xi saw a PLA that exploited its monopolies on military expertise and processes to exert substantial autonomy and outsize policy influence. Illustrative examples include the PLA's 2007 anti-satellite test and its 2011 test flight of a prototype J-20 stealth fighter during a visit by US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, when it seemed that Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, had little control. Even more worrying for Xi was the perception that the PLA leadership had become so corrupt that the military struggled to perform its most basic functions. Then CMC Vice Chairmen Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou had sold so many official posts that they had effectively created a private army loyal to them within the PLA.

According to the "history resolution" that Xi passed at the Sixth Plenum of the 19th Central Committee in November 2021, "For a period, the party's leadership over the military was obviously lacking. If this problem had not been completely solved, it would not only have diminished the military's combat capacity, but also undermined the key political principle that the party commands the gun." Guo and Xu also served as political instruments for former General Secretary Jiang Zemin to retain a strong hand in military affairs, limiting Hu's ability to consolidate power and leaving Xi concerned that their remaining protégés in the high command might similarly handicap him.

Xi's response to these looming challenges was swift. He pursued a political "shock and awe" campaign using the twin weapons of a disruptive reorganization of the PLA command structure and a withering anti-corruption purge of the PLA high command, which saw Guo and Xu arrested on charges of corruption and a massive 85 percent turnover in PLA personnel from the 18th to the 19th Central Committee selected in 2017. Xi's predecessors had tried to initiate such reforms before, but they were thwarted by the political power of the PLA. In November 2013, the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee in November 2013 published a decision stating that the PLA would undergo a structural reorganization, the prelude to the sweeping changes that have since been achieved.

Xi then orchestrated an artful piece of political stagecraft in November 2014 by using the 85th anniversary of the 1929 Gutian Conference, which established the PLA's subordination to the party, to convene a conference on the PLA as the party's army. In his speech at the conference, Xi detailed Xu's misdeeds, implying that most generals in attendance were at least indirectly complicit in his corruption

and suggesting that he would establish a personal hold over the PLA akin to Mao's. What followed was an unprecedented purge of corrupt generals, with a special focus on Jiang Zemin's cronies.

Then, in 2015, Xi launched a reform program that brought perhaps the most significant shake-up of the PLA since the founding of the PRC. Shocked by the corruption and factionalism he had witnessed as a CMC Vice Chairman, Xi wanted to transform the PLA into a loyal, modern, and, ultimately, credible force that could protect the CCP regime, secure China's borders, advance China's position in territorial disputes, and project force regionally and, to some extent, globally. Well after the PLA formally recognized the importance of "joint operations" in 1993 and of "informatization" in 2004—after witnessing US military might during the Gulf War and the Iraq War—it was still dominated by the ground forces and organized around a Soviet model focused on legacy missions, such as conducting land-based operations and fighting border wars.

Xi's reforms had several dimensions. He reasserted CCP leadership by reemphasizing political work, installing his close ally Zhong Shaojun to supervise the CMC General Office, and creating a "CMC Chairman Responsibility System," which emphasized the top civilian leader's grip on the military, unlike the "CMC Vice Chairman Responsibility System" under Jiang and Hu, which gave de facto control to the top generals. He dismembered and downgraded the four powerful PLA General Departments and distributed their responsibilities among 15 new CMC departments, which were intentionally smaller and easier to manage, including supervisory departments focused on audit, discipline inspection, and political and legal affairs. This move reduced the potential for the emergence of powerful independent fiefdoms in the PLA that could constrain Xi's military policy agenda, or even pose a direct threat to his power. To further reduce the possibility of cronyism, PLA personnel were rotated more regularly, and commanders and political commissars at senior levels were appointed to work with counterparts they did not know well. Xi consolidated his political victory by shrinking the CMC's membership from 11 to 7 at the 19th Party Congress.

Xi significantly enhanced the PLA's capacity for joint operations by transforming its seven military regions—which were ground force headquarters with no peacetime authority over navy, air force, or artillery units—into five theater commands with joint operational control of ground, navy, air, and conventional forces in their jurisdiction. Lower-level commands were streamlined from a four-tier structure to a three-tier army brigade battalion structure. He demoted the PLAGF by placing it on an equal footing with the other service branches, which were all removed from the operational chain of command. He increased personnel in the PLAN and PLAAF while reducing the PLA's headcount by 300,000 personnel, mostly cut from the PLAGF and PLA support units. He established the PLASSF to provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities to operational commanders, as well as a Joint Logistics Support Force to service their logistical needs. And he boosted civil-military integration across the economy, but especially in science and technology.

The pace of political purges and structural overhauls of the military have slowed considerably with Xi's triumphant execution of the 2015 reform agenda. Xi's restructuring has created a more professionalized force that is focused on continuing a decades-long effort at military modernization, meaning that any

internal disagreements in the PLA are likely to mirror the budgetary fights and interservice rivalries common in advanced foreign militaries. Xi's greater emphasis on jointness and air-sea forces, while still a long-term project that is far from complete, already appears to be increasing the PLA's abilities and confidence in conducting gray-zone operations in the Taiwan Strait and large-scale multi-force exercises around Taiwan, increasing the risk of a military accident or confrontation in the region.

Xi used his reports to the 19th and 20th Party Congresses to outline ambitious targets for the PLA's modernization and the advancement of its operational capabilities. These political milestones specified that China should "accelerate the integrated development of mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization" by the PLA's centenary in 2027, then "basically complete the modernization of national defense and the military" by 2035, and finally "fully transform the people's armed forces into a world-class military" by 2049. These benchmarks do not represent an expedited timeline for a prospective invasion of Taiwan, but they do suggest that Xi is increasing his focus on military modernization, especially before the PLA centenary, which was a focus of the 20th Party Congress report.

Xi has not altered the most fundamental concepts of PLA doctrine, such as "active defense," which holds that "we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked." In 2014, Xi oversaw an update to the PLA's Military Strategic Guideline, a high-level document that provides a blueprint for the development and modernization of China's military forces. That document is believed to have focused on winning "informationized local wars" through "integrated joint operations" in a "southeast and maritime" direction, with Taiwan and the United States seen as the primary opponents. None of these concepts was new to PLA doctrine, but the difference is that Xi has the political clout to force the PLA to undertake the reforms necessary to make real progress toward these objectives. Xi issued a Military Strategic Guideline for a New Era in 2019, which is thought to have simply updated the 2014 document to increase the focus on Xi's political control of the military.

The military will remain a critical pillar of Xi's power, and it will be important to monitor how his relationship with the PLA evolves. Xi's position is stronger than ever but continuing to advance his reforms in an institution in which he is the only civilian will demand sustained political attention. Progress in the PLA's joint capabilities is another crucial yardstick for evaluating Beijing's confidence in intimidating Taiwan, advancing its claims in other territorial disputes, and contesting regional security leadership with the United States. While the PLA has become less corrupt and more capable under Xi, it still lacks joint structures below the theater command level, its leadership is still weighted toward ground forces, and its command capabilities remain wholly untested in actual combat scenarios.