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## The Next Generation of China's Navy: Transformation and Transition for the PLAN

As China's navy undergoes a change in leadership, what lies ahead for the rapidly modernizing service?

By **Andrew S. Erickson**

On January 17, 2017, 71-year old Admiral Wu Shengli retired from a 41-year career culminating in nearly 11 years as commander of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), making him the second-longest-serving Chinese naval head in history. The longest-serving was Xiao Jinguang, who led the PLAN, albeit with some political

interruption, during a particularly difficult three decades from 1950-79.

The events of the previous month offered a fitting capstone to Wu's career. On December 8, Wu attended a high-profile ceremony commemorating the "70th Anniversary of China's Recovery of the Xisha (Paracel) and Nansha (Spratly) Islands" in the South China Sea, having previously inspected some of China's increasingly fortified installations there. On December 29, Wu participated in a video-teleconference commemorating the eighth anniversary of the PLAN's anti-piracy escort mission in the Gulf of Aden. Most dramatically, on December 23, in a widely-reported display of naval and national prestige, Wu guided flight and formation training including "air refueling and air confrontation" from aboard China's first aircraft carrier. Liaoning's circumnavigation of Taiwan and passage through the Taiwan Strait on January 11, 2017 must have been a sweet swan song for him just days before he stepped down.

### **Wu's Legacy**

In reaching these heights for himself and his service, Wu built on significant contributions by his predecessors. Most notably, in six years at the helm from 1982-88, Admiral Liu Huaqing rescued the PLAN from Maoist malaise and set it on a firm course toward modernization. By the time of his death in 2011, he was lionized as the father of China's modern navy, a staunch seapower advocate, and the unstinting champion of its aircraft carrier program. While Liu is credited with groundbreaking strategic thinking concerning the PLAN's long-term development and demarcation of its progress, his status as a ground forces officer later assigned to the navy reflected the more continental era in which he served. Certainly Liu's was a herculean task, but his primary challenge arguably lay in general policy development, positioning, and execution. Much of the heavy-lifting entailed curtailing obviously detrimental activities, such as the obsessive construction of coastal revetments, and establishing a foundation for progress grounded in a manageable set of basic tasks. Convincing Chinese leaders, such as his friend Deng Xiaoping, that naval modernization was important amid countless other priorities for reform, and then

translating their guidance into maritime advances, was no mean feat. Having done so ensures Liu a hallowed place in Chinese history.

Liu's successors most certainly made many important contributions of their own. But history tends to remember major personalities who lead the achievement of dramatic progress. Here Wu too has made a name for himself that will be remembered and ultimately rediscovered by all who follow Chinese naval developments, in his case as a leading career-long naval officer who took his service far out to sea. Wu will also be linked to an even more powerful leader who is leaving an even greater mark on history – Chinese President and Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping. Wu's retention in October 2012, when all other service-grade military leaders of his age were forced to retire, suggested both the Chinese leadership's prioritization of naval modernization and its particular confidence in him. Wu's position was greatly facilitated by support from Xi, who when he assumed all three offices of Chinese executive leadership in 2012 was not only determined to further China's maritime interests and capabilities but also unusually well-placed to do so. Wu's father's status as a former vice governor of Zhejiang province, made the admiral, like Xi, one of China's "princelings." Also like Xi, however, Wu made his own achievements and would ultimately surpass his father in prominence.

Upon joining the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1964, Wu entered the PLA Institute of Surveying and Mapping in Xi'an. After graduating in 1968, Wu rose rapidly, attaining the rank of rear admiral in 1994, vice admiral in 2003, and admiral on June 20, 2007. Wu thus served as a flag officer for 23 years, many times longer than most U.S. flags have served in their rank, and longer than many U.S. officers have been in the military. Cheng Li, director of the Brookings Institution's John L. Thornton China Center, has written that Wu "formed a client relationship with Jiang Zemin in the late 1980s, when Jiang was party secretary in Shanghai and Wu was the deputy chief of staff of the Shanghai Base of the East China Sea Fleet."

Having served as a provincial secretary in Zhejiang, Xi was aware of the Wu family's service to the Communist Party of China (CPC). Moreover, Xi may have felt a particular affinity to Wu, as they were both elites grounded in popular appeal, comfortable with wielding power vigorously, and determined to advance sweeping reforms to further national rejuvenation. In any case, regardless of whatever personal relationship may in fact exist between the two powerful extroverts, their respective leadership has clearly propelled Chinese naval development dramatically, with Xi deeply entrusting Wu to ride herd over the numerous forces necessary for its success.

In critical respects, Wu's contribution is unprecedented in its thoroughgoing nature: taking the PLAN to an entirely different level of sophistication through complex intensive development. This requires a transformation of the missions and institutional culture of China's navy to a degree that would challenge any service. Despite Wu's determined efforts, this transformation remains ongoing, leaving much to his successor. Nevertheless, it can truly be said that Wu leaves the PLAN a fundamentally different service from the one he inherited in 2006.

At its essence, the PLAN under Wu became a true blue water navy operating routinely in many of the major sea lanes of the world. As a 2015 Xinhua article put it, "People should get used to seeing Chinese warships out in the sea." Indeed they have. The international naval community is increasingly accustomed to, and welcoming of, PLAN participation in multinational exercises and forums – but not by happenstance, and not overnight. This change in Chinese and foreign thinking has occurred because under Wu the PLAN transformed from a still-somewhat-subordinate service venturing only selectively beyond the near seas (the Yellow, East China, and South China Seas), to what may already be properly regarded as the world's second "far seas" navy, trailing only its American counterpart in numbers of warships and in aggregate capabilities.

This was a sea change indeed. When Wu ascended from PLA deputy chief of general staff to replace his ailing predecessor Zhang Dingfa in August 2006, it had been less than two years since

President Hu Jintao assigned the PLA “new historic” missions that charged it with growing international responsibilities wherein the PLAN was ideally suited to take the lead. It had been only four years since the PLAN completed its first global circumnavigation. That saga was disrupted embarrassingly when one of the warships suffered a breakdown of its imported MTU diesel engine, and German technicians had to be flown in to fix it.

It is now PLAN warships that help foreign vessels suffering engine trouble and other kinds of distress. Since December 2008, under Wu’s watch, a succession of more than 25 PLAN task groups have escorted more than 6,000 Chinese and foreign vessels and, according to Xinhua, “successfully rescued or aided more than 60 Chinese and foreign ships.” In addition to an irreplaceable source of training and experience, the patrols have ensured a presence sufficient to serve as a springboard for other PLAN contributions, including escorting a small but symbolic component of the evacuation of 35,000 Chinese citizens from Libya in 2011; the escorting of Syrian chemical weapons to their destruction in 2014; and the evacuation of nearly 600 Chinese and 225 foreign citizens from Yemen on warships in 2015.

Viewed from an American perspective, building on decades of top-tier naval investment, development, and global infrastructure access, China’s Gulf of Aden patrols may seem like an obvious and even basic thing to do. But the speed with which the PLAN progressed from a near-total lack of experience and demonstrated capability to routine performance is remarkable. It required path-breaking efforts in policy and legal instruments, diplomacy, logistics, and key operational areas. Admiral Wu himself was said to be instrumental in ensuring whole-of-government support for key resources that the U.S. Navy has long taken for granted, such as ensuring sufficient satellite coverage to support robust communications with vessels operating thousands of kilometers from China. There was no substitute for learning by doing, a paradigm shift for a risk-averse force that now had to master new tasks before the prying eyes of foreign navies and the proud but curious and sometimes worried gaze of citizens back home.

The anti-piracy mission was a major catalyst for a plethora of PLAN “firsts” under Wu. Sometimes technocratic or trivial sounding to Western audiences accustomed to having their own national navies do such things repeatedly, or at least in days of yore, these milestones have nevertheless been meaningful to many in China, and positively electrifying to the legions of Chinese military enthusiasts. A particularly redolent example is the Internet meme inspired by Liaoning’s first publicized flight tests in 2011 and cemented firmly with its commissioning in 2012. Chinese of all ages, from all walks of life, posted photos of themselves in the most incongruous of settings emulating the deck crewmember’s distinctive waving crouch in clearing J-15 fighters for takeoff.

The series of other milestones the PLAN achieved under Wu are staggering. Many involve history’s first Chinese naval presence in a given international strait or port call in a given nation. Exercises in distant seas with foreign navies, however modest in their specifics, have become routine. All this offers a prominent platform for naval diplomacy. China hosted the Western Pacific Naval Symposium in Qingdao in 2014, at which the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) was adopted almost unanimously, and subsequently signed two Memoranda of Understanding with the United States. Wu himself made multiple foreign visits, and met with a plethora of counterparts, most numerous when he led China’s first delegation to the U.S. Naval War College’s 21st International Seapower Symposium in 2014. This included extensive interaction with successive heads of the U.S. Navy. Characteristic of both the government he answered to and his own forceful personality, Wu did not hesitate to use such occasions to hammer home Chinese positions. Chinese sources credit him with emphasizing during a meeting with U.S. Navy head Admiral John Richardson in Beijing that China would not make concessions concerning its “core interests” in the South China Sea despite American concern about feature augmentation and “militarization.”

Undergirding these expanding operations has been a spate of warship construction and deliveries. The speed and scope is unmatched anywhere else in the world, ensuring wide circulation

of the following phrase in Chinese media: “In recent years, China’s navy has been launching new ships like dumping dumplings [into soup broth].” Wu’s watch has witnessed the completion of Liaoning’s outfitting, testing, and deployment. Construction of an indigenous carrier likely to be similar in many respects is now well underway in Dalian, and initial work on a third carrier has been rumored in Shanghai. China has also developed and deployed the capable new Type 052D Luyang III destroyer.

A forthright disciplinarian, Wu was an officer’s officer who inspired respect and admiration in his subordinates, who reportedly viewed him as both driving the service forward and seeing to it that they had the tools and resources they needed to do so. He has used these attributes to the maximum in working to address a PLA-wide problem. China’s defense industry, particularly its shipbuilding sector, is rapidly producing increasingly advanced hardware; software and coordination lags well behind. Clearly determined to narrow this gap as much as possible, Xi and Wu placed unprecedented emphasis on the sophistication and realism of “combat-realistic training” to enhance the PLA and PLAN’s efficiency and ability to execute “local wars under modern informatized conditions,” with “local wars” a reference to the near seas-focused contingencies for which they have ordered the PLA to prepare.

To undergird these reforms and ensure their further advancement long after his retirement, Wu has worked to consolidate the PLAN’s eight schools into a system centered on a comprehensive academic institution, centered in Qingdao. To this end, after participating in the International Seapower Symposium in 2014, Wu led his large delegation to MIT and Harvard, where he questioned administrators extensively in ways that revealed intensive focus on integrating and advancing professional military education (PME) for the PLAN.

For all his strengths and determination, Wu was compelled to leave some objectives and aspirations to his successor. To Wu’s obvious frustration, the United States’ FY2000 Defense Authorization Act will continue to effectively prohibit PLA officers from studying at U.S. institutions under officially sanctioned exchanges. This

includes the Naval War College, which Wu viewed as a gold standard and to which he would very much have liked to send some of his top students to learn firsthand how the world's oldest naval PME institution equips officers to lead the world's most powerful Navy. There seems to be no prospect of this prohibition being lifted during the presidency of Donald Trump.

### **Leadership Succession**

By almost any measure, Admiral Wu is a hard act to follow, and for some time foreign observers were unclear as to who his successor would be. Admiral Sun Jianguo, long viewed as an heir apparent by many, represented China at the 2015 and 2016 Shangri La Dialogues. Other perceived candidates included Vice Admirals Tian Zhong, Liu Yi, Ding Yi, Jiang Weile, Yuan Yubai, Su Zhiqian, and, most importantly, Vice Admiral Shen Jinlong. Astute observers would have noticed that Shen led a three-warship PLAN delegation to Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), the world's largest international maritime exercise, in 2014, and that he subsequently headed the PLAN delegation to the 22nd International Seapower Symposium at the Naval War College in September 2016. One pattern common to Chinese bureaucracy is a tendency toward incremental testing, grooming, and socializing rising leaders over time; Shen was clearly a beneficiary of this process.

So who is Shen Jinlong, the man now in charge of the world's second largest navy, whose name means "Golden Dragon"? While not yet well known outside PLAN circles, the 60-year-old Shanghai native in fact brings wide-ranging PME, command, operational, and international experience to his new position; he appears to be well prepared. Since joining the PLAN at 18 in 1974, he has served as captain of a frigate, chief of staff and commander of a frigate squadron and a destroyer flotilla, commander of the Lüshun Support Base, and commandant of the PLAN Naval Vessel Academy in Dalian. Shen has engaged in three rounds of advanced studies: at Russia's Kuznetsov Naval Academy in 2001, as well as at the PLA National Defense University in 2008 and 2012. In 2011, he became commandant of the Naval Command College in Nanjing. In this capacity, Shen participated in what was arguably a watershed intellectual event for the PLAN: On February 23, 2012, Shen's



college convened the first International Escort Forum. The two-day event saw numerous PLAN officers and 84 foreign participants discuss anti-piracy experience and prospects for further cooperation in that area. In August 2014, Shen became deputy commander of the South Sea Fleet. In December 2014, he was promoted to both commander of the South Sea Fleet and deputy commander of what was then known as the Guangzhou Military Region. In both this leadership capacity and as the head of two PLAN PME institutions, he gained considerable experience in receiving foreign delegations.

Shen's command of three warships in 2014 is particularly noteworthy for the multidimensional responsibility and experience it suggests. On June 9, under his command, the guided-missile destroyer Haikou, the guided-missile frigate Yueyang, and the replenishment ship Qiandaohu departed for RIMPAC in Hawaii, where they participated in weeks of exercises. Shen's group then conducted CUES-related exercises with two U.S. warships in eastern Pacific waters before beginning a five-day port call in San Diego California on August 10, 2014. There Shen met with the Chinese ambassador to the United States and consul general of Los Angeles, the PLAN deputy commander, and the commander of the U.S. Third Fleet.

The latest Chinese state media reports suggest that Wu still serves on the PLA Central Military Commission (CMC), China's highest military decision-making body. In his capacity as a high-ranking Communist Party member, Wu has been a full member of the CPC Central Committee since 2007, serving on the 17th and 18th Committees. It remains uncertain when and how Shen will assume similar roles.

### **Shen's Inheritance: A Navy in Transition**

With Xi Jinping's strong support, Admiral Wu Shengli has led a golden decade of PLAN development. Wu's legacy is a PLAN that has grown far more rapidly in quality than quantity, but is now growing quantitatively as well. Working closely with the consolidating China Coast Guard and sometimes even with elite units from the little-known Maritime Militia to maximize

peacetime progress through “salami slicing,” the PLAN is helping Beijing advance its disputed sovereignty claims in the near seas. It learns constantly from and cooperates more and more with foreign navies in the far seas, where it is increasingly deploying vessels on ever more diverse peacetime missions and more gradually strengthening nascent power-projection capabilities.

Wu’s successor, Admiral Shen Jinlong, can expect continued support from Xi, but also growing expectations. Most fundamentally, Shen will face tremendous responsibilities in shepherding his service through its subset of Xi’s sweeping PLA reforms. Such a transition would be extremely ambitious for any service in any nation, and there are sure to be many friction points and hiccups along the way. On the bright side, Xi’s reforms are already increasing the PLAN’s status and influence within the PLA. The newly-created Theater Commands, for instance, promise the unprecedented prospect of allowing meaningful numbers of naval officers to attain leadership positions in military regional bureaucracies.

On a related note, for Xi, the PLAN is a versatile foreign policy tool. This brings heightened opportunities and challenges. For a variety of reasons, many of them having been mounting for years, in the Trump era the United States and China appear headed for greater tension vis-à-vis the near seas, particularly the South China Sea. Here Shen’s South Sea Fleet experience is likely to be particularly germane. Nevertheless, the PLAN’s responsibilities in these seas will impose constant challenges and the risk of sensitive mistakes.

Looking further out, for all its progress, the PLAN still lacks substantial combat capacity against a great power navy in the far seas, and costs ever more to develop, maintain, and crew. Neither of these issues is likely to come to a head during Shen’s tenure, regardless of its length. Nevertheless, Shen is likely to have to grapple with competing priorities and a more complex set of factors than even Wu did. Such is the challenge for the head of what has already become one of the world’s great power navies. For all the differences among various leading navies and the nations they serve, there are some universal dynamics at work involving missions, budgets, bureaucracy, and personnel

management. Had Shen then a chance to converse at length with fellow navy heads in Newport, home of the Naval War College, late last year, he might have heard echoes of some of his own challenges. One price of progress, which the PLAN will finally be facing after years of rapid modernization and transformation: burdens increasingly similar to those confronting other leading navies.

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