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Admiral Dong Jun Engages Friends and Foes: China's First Naval Defense Minister Brings Joint Operational Experience

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On 29 December 2023, Admiral Dong Jun (董军) was appointed China's 14th Minister of National Defense (国防部部长) at the seventh meeting of the Standing Committee of the 14th National People's Congress.² He replaced the previously deposed Army General Li Shangfu, ending a four-month leadership gap. Admiral Dong is the first PLA Navy (PLAN) officer to head China's Ministry of National Defense (MND). Previously the 9th People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Commander, he was likewise exceptional in achieving this position from a background in theater joint operations.³

As PRC Defense Minister, Dong lacks operational command over the PLA (the responsibility of the Central Military Commission/CMC and which is operationalized through the Theater Commands).⁴ He is instead a diplomat-liaison representing the PLA, and ultimately the CMC, in interactions with foreign militaries. Dong's unprecedented background as the PLAN Commander nevertheless reflects serious joint and naval focus under Xi with growing potential applications to disputed sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas—none more important than Taiwan. This analysis therefore focuses on Dong's formative experiences as a naval officer, and their potential implications within the maritime domain; with particular emphasis on Dong's liaison role.

CMSI's Perspectives and Key Takeaways

- Admiral Dong, one of the PLA's most experienced joint commanders, has deep expertise at the operational level of war.
- His operational assignments in the Eastern and Southern Theater Commands provide him with unique understanding regarding PRC sovereignty claims and will make Dong a potent interlocutor with foreign counterparts regarding Taiwan, the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, and South China Sea disputes.
- Within the limits of his position, Dong is likely to advocate for more robust PLA joint integration—especially as it relates to PLA options for Taiwan—based on his experience overseeing PLA joint operations in the Eastern and Southern Theater Commands.
- Years engaging foreign counterparts, particularly as PLAN Commander, enhance Dong's ability to convey China's strategic goals and objectives to international audiences.
- Dong has engaged extensively with Russian counterparts through naval exercises and high-level communications, highly compatible with China's growing strategic and security cooperation with Russia.

Career Background

Born in the shipbuilding port city of Yantai, Shandong province, in 1961, Dong entered the Dalian Naval Academy in 1978. A career surface warfare officer, Dong subsequently served in the former East Sea Fleet (now Eastern Theater Command Navy) including as commander of the Naval East Sea Joint Command/92269 Force (海军东海联合指挥部/92269 部队) in the Zhoushan Water Garrison District.⁵

From 2007 through end of 2009, Dong served as Director of the Military Training Department of the PLAN Headquarters Department with the grade of Division Leader. In this capacity he almost certainly oversaw the PLAN development and implementation of the 2008 Outline on Military Training and Evaluation (OMTE) (trial in 2008, implemented in January 2009). The OMTE acts as the overarching training guidance document that mandates what training, and how much of it, the PLAN does. This edition remained in effect for a decade until the next series was released in January 2018/2019.⁶

From early 2010 through the end of 2011, Dong served as Director of the Operations Department in the PLAN Headquarters Department with the grade of Division Leader. There, Dong likely played a role in day-to-day oversight of early naval escort task forces to the Gulf of Aden and other day-to-day PLAN operations. From 2012-2013, Dong was one of the North Sea Fleet Deputy Chiefs of Staff with the grade of Corps Deputy Leader. Notably, he acted as the PRC deputy during the first Naval Cooperation exercise with Russia in 2012.⁷ In July 2012, Dong was promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral (one-star).⁸

From July 2013 through November 2014 Dong served as one of the Deputy Commanders of the East Sea Fleet as well as Commander of the newly-established East China Sea Joint Operations Command Center (ECS JOCC) (东海联合作战指挥中心) with the grade of Corps Leader.⁹ In its first serious foray into joint operations command, the PLA established the ECS JOCC in 2013 as a “special joint operations command headquarters” for PLA operations in the direction of the East China Sea; particularly to coordinate PLAN, PLA Air Force (PLAAF), and potentially China Coast Guard operations in that sea area and the airspace above.¹⁰

As the first commander of the first PLA joint operations command entity—especially the one that would face immediate requirements in terms of “defending” China’s recently-declared Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ)—Dong was presumably scrutinized closely in this capacity. On his watch, PLA command and control constructs and operational forces faced real-world tests; he likely had to direct forces to address U.S. and Japanese activities within the area of responsibility of what would become the Eastern Theater Command in 2016.

From December 2014 through December 2017, Dong served at the PLAN Headquarters Department as one of the Deputy Chiefs of Staff with the grade of Corps Deputy Leader.¹¹ There his responsibilities likely centered on force modernization, strategy, and training; as well as multifarious meetings and official functions. For example, on 18 August 2015 Dong participated in a PLAN seminar focused on building innovative think tanks in the service.¹² Per standard practice, on 2 March 2016, Dong attended the PLAN’s annual military work meeting at which leadership reviewed previous-year PLAN achievements and current-year requirements.¹³ Dong was deeply involved in the Sino-Russian *Joint Sea* (海上联合) exercise in 2015¹⁴ and 2016,¹⁵ serving both times as executive training director (执行导演).

In January 2017 Dong became one of the concurrent Deputy Commanders of the Southern Theater Command and Commander of the Southern Theater Command Navy with the grade of Theater Command Deputy Leader.¹⁶ He was promoted to the rank of Vice Admiral (two-star) in July 2018.

Whereas his predecessor oversaw the maritime operations group specifically, Dong likely acted as the principal maritime deputy commander at the physical JOCC, thereby examining how the maritime component fuses with the other components. In this capacity, he was probably involved in key events, including the 2018 *Decatur* Incident, the 2019 Hong Kong PLA response, and the command's expanding area of responsibility.¹⁷ He was undoubtedly involved in managing the PLA response to increasing U.S. FONOPS starting in 2017,¹⁸ and presumably was involved in the joint Summer 2020 South China Sea exercise.¹⁹

Further afield, in March 2017, Dong was part of an official PLA delegation to Malaysia and Saudi Arabia.²⁰ In October 2017, in a foreshadowing of his own future leadership responsibilities, Dong visited the Philippines as part of a delegation under State Councillor and Defense Minister Chang Wanquan.²¹ From December 2019 to January 2020 Dong planned and led as “chief director” the Sino-Pakistani joint naval exercise *Sea Guardians 2020*.²²

In March 2021, Dong returned to Headquarters as one of the PLAN Deputy Commanders with the grade of Theater Command Deputy Leader. In August 2021, Dong was named PLAN Commander with the grade promotion of Theater Command Leader. The following month, he was promoted to the rank of Admiral (three-star, the PLAN's highest rank).²³ Dong subsequently presided over such milestones as the launch of China's third aircraft carrier, *Fujian*, in June 2022.²⁴ From 14-19 December 2022, Dong headed a conclave of the PLAN's most senior officers. In Ryan Martinson's analysis, “the six-day training event can be reduced to a single theme: make all necessary preparations to defeat the U.S. Navy in great power war at sea.”²⁵ On a related note, Dong has been credited with intellectually guiding the requisite “naval talent construction.”²⁶ He has informed “practical training closely in line with actual combat” in the Eastern Theater Command.²⁷ Dong headed China's Navy until 25 December 2023, when he attended a ceremony with Xi Jinping in which command passed to Admiral Hu Zhongming.²⁸

Throughout the latter stages of his career, Dong has engaged with many navies, including those of Sweden,²⁹ Djibouti,³⁰ the UK,³¹ North Korea,³² Chile,³³ Singapore,³⁴ and Gulf of Guinea nations.³⁵ Dong's longtime interaction with Pakistani and Russian counterparts is particularly significant.³⁶ He has extensive experience engaging with Russian counterparts through exercises and high-level communications. The tracks with Moscow's increasing importance as a strategic partner of Beijing, and the great and growing entente that Xi envisions moving forward. Of note, in November 2021, Dong participated in a video call discussing joint Sino-Russian maritime and air joint patrols that year. The other principals were then State Councillor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, PLAAF Commander General Chang Dingqiu, Commander-in-chief of the Russian Navy Admiral Nikolay Yevmenov, and Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces General Sergei Surovikin.³⁷

Implications

All told, Admiral Dong's pathbreaking career has made him one of the PLA's most experienced joint commanders, with deep expertise at the operational level of war. He has international, joint, and extensive naval experience in the Eastern and Southern Theater Commands, the two most important areas of unresolved PRC sovereignty claims, now aggressively pursued under Xi. This familiarity and credibility, together with Dong's track record and seasoned status as an international interlocutor will be particularly helpful with messaging on PRC strategic goals—the focus of his new position.

The breadth of Dong’s assignments makes him uniquely qualified to serve as Defense Minister where he will represent the PLA at bilateral meetings and high-profile forums on the international stage. His navy and joint operational assignments enhance his ability to articulate and defend PRC’s positions on disputed features in the East and South China Sea and to address PLA operations around the PLA’s most pressing objective: Taiwan.

Taiwan’s 13 January 2024 presidential election and the PLA response—while an Eastern Theater Command responsibility and role—will be one of Dong’s first tests on the international stage. While the nature of any PLA military response to the elections is unknown, Dong will be charged with representing the PLA response to foreign audiences. Through his actions, he will be charged with demonstrating to foreign and domestic audiences alike, the PRC’s unwavering resolve to unify with Taiwan. Given the stakes for all concerned, Dong’s time on center stage will be closely scrutinized. But his navy and joint operational background coupled with foreign engagement prowess suggest he will be well prepared to address this challenge.

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² Jiang Chenglong, “China Names Former Navy Commander Dong Jun As New Defense Minister,” *China Daily*, 29 December 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202312/29/WS658ea3c6a3105f21a5079c7e.html>

³ As Joel Wuthnow observes, “Most paths to theater and service commander ran through service positions, most notably theater service component commanders. ... There was also a new phenomenon of officers being promoted through full-time theater deputy commander positions. This route could offer more exposure to theater joint operations for future senior commanders. Nevertheless, this was a narrow path to promotion: the only examples have been Dong Jun (later promoted to navy commander) and Chang Dingqiu (future air force commander).” Joel Wuthnow, *Gray Dragons: Assessing China’s Senior Military Leadership, China Strategic Perspective* 16 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 13 September 2022), 29, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/china-perspectives-16.pdf>.

⁴ The PRC MND does not have any operational command responsibilities over the PLA during peacetime or wartime. As such, China’s Defense Minister does not provide operational command over PLA forces while wearing that hat; however, as a concurrent CMC Member, the Defense Minister and the other CMC Members, including the CMC’s two Vice Chairmen, do have operational command of the entire PLA during wartime. Having served as a former Theater Command Navy Commander and concurrent Theater Command Deputy Commander, Dong does bring joint operational command experience to his new billet.

⁵ Ying-Yu Lin, “The PLA’s New Generals: Security Implications,” *The Diplomat*, 28 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/the-plas-new-generals-security-implications/>.

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⁷ “军事纪实 《军事纪实》 20120504 黄海观澜(下)‘海上联合 2012’中俄海军联合演习纪实” [Military Documentary “Military Documentary” 20120504 Yellow Sea Observatory (Part 2) “Maritime Joint 2012” China-Russia Joint Naval Exercise Documentary], 23 June 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBPSNZA7s7w>.

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⁹ As Roderick Lee and Morgan Clemens explain, “The CMC’s establishment of joint theater commands and theater command joint operations command centers has enabled the PLA to reliably plan and command joint operations for the first time. This ability to conduct joint operations is especially useful within the first island chain, given the wide range of forces that the PLA has available to use in the near seas [Yellow, East China, and South China Seas].” Roderick Lee and Morgan Clemens, *Organizing to Fight in the Far Seas: The Chinese Navy in an Era of Military Reform, China Maritime Report* 9 (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, October 2020), 5, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

¹⁰ Michael Dahm and Alison Zhao, *Bitterness Ends, Sweetness Begins: Organizational Changes to the PLAN Submarine Force Since 2015, China Maritime Report* 28 (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, June 2023), 3, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

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