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*The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) aircraft carrier Liaoning in the South China Sea, April 12, 2018. Photo by Zhang Lei/Flickr.com*

# China's New Military Commanders Reflect Xi Jinping's Naval Ambitions

*By [Andrew S. Erickson](#), Visiting Professor, Government Department, Harvard University; Professor of Strategy, U.S. Naval War College (NWC) China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI); and Fairbank Center Associate in Research. The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and do not represent any institution with which he is, or has been, affiliated. He thanks Ken Allen for helpful*

*input. This analysis draws in part on Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute Notes #1 and #2, which he recently coauthored with CMSI Director Christopher Sharman.*

National leaders generally want capable militaries, but no other nation's leader is overseeing increasing military capabilities at anything remotely approaching the scope, scale, and speed we are witnessing under Xi Jinping. China's paramount leader is a man in a hurry, determined to resolve disputed sovereignty claims—none more important than achieving control over Taiwan and ensuring unification on his terms. Xi would prefer to recover Taiwan and achieve other top-priority objectives without initiating outright conflict. But he believes that the capability to do so is essential to coercing adversaries into submission, if possible, and compelling them militarily if not. Two new military leadership appointments reflect Xi's deadly serious aims.

First, the world's largest navy by number of ships has a new helmsman. On December 25, 2023, as Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman, Commander-in-Chief Xi promoted Vice Admiral Hu Zhongming (胡中明) to three-star Admiral in rank and Theater Command Leader in grade and appointed him Commander of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy. Second, Hu's predecessor, Admiral Dong Jun (董军),<sup>[1]</sup> was named the People's Republic of China (PRC) Defense Minister four days later.

Embodying Xi's requirement that his armed forces prepare credible warfighting capabilities, Hu and Dong are the latest in a trend of PLA Navy (PLAN) leaders bringing increasing operational expertise and focus. Hu is well-positioned to capitalize on his predecessors' foundation and marshal future efforts toward closing key warfighting gaps. The goal is for the navy to offer increasingly specialized contributions within an ever-more-integrated military capable of waging and winning modern wars, within which naval forces have a vital role.

## Hu: Vanguard Submariner-Bureaucrat



*Admiral Hu Zhongming (back row, center, in white uniform) with Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping and leading officers at a ceremony in Beijing on December 25, 2023. Xi promoted Hu to three-star Admiral in rank and Theater Command Leader in grade and appointed him Commander of the People's Liberation Army Navy. Source: China Daily.*

The PLAN's tenth Commander in its seventy-four-year history, Hu brings extensive organizational and operational experience to the job. Of particular note: his technical and operational prowess regarding submarines. Born in Qingdao in 1964, Hu began his career in China's submarine force and served with distinction in a wide variety of roles, including commanding both a submarine and one of China's two bases for nuclear-powered submarines. In 2009, as a submarine Commanding Officer, Hu won accolades for averting disaster during sea trials, improving testing procedures, and innovating training and real-time emergency communications measures.<sup>[2]</sup>

An overriding consideration behind putting a submariner in charge may have been to ensure that the PLA Navy's long-troubled nuclear submarine expansion program advances safely and effectively. The navy's surface fleet and anti-surface mission and missiles—backstopped by still greater forces ashore—have grown tremendously, but its submarine leadership and training apparently still lag overall.<sup>[3]</sup> Here, Hu has his work cut out for him.<sup>[4]</sup>

In addition to submarine prowess and topline bureaucratic experience, Hu's career reflects Xi's sweeping military restructuring since 2016. China's joint Theater Commands offer a more operationally-relevant means of organizing PLA/Navy forces than the previous, Army-dominated Military Regions. From December 2019 to December 2021, Hu served as the Commander of the Northern Theater Command Navy and as a concurrent Deputy Commander of the Northern Theater Command.

## **Dong: Warship-Command Center Leader Turned Spokesman**



*Admiral Dong Jun (front row, fourth from left, wearing glasses) with representatives from the PRC and Pakistani navies at the Pakistan Navy's Dockyard in Karachi, January 14, 2020. They sit during the closing ceremony for the Sea Guardians 2020 joint naval exercise, which Dong planned and led in his capacity as Commander of the Southern Theater Command Navy. Source: PRC Ministry of National Defense.*

Born in Yantai, in 1961, former ninth PLA Navy Commander Admiral Dong Jun is now the country's fourteenth Defense Minister—the first from his service to assume the role.<sup>[5]</sup> In a break from the traditional path through theater service components and their command, Dong was a career surface warfare officer with a focus on theater joint operations. Dong had operational assignments in the Eastern Theater Command, responsible for PLA activities regarding the East China Sea, including vis-à-vis Taiwan; and the Southern Theater Command, responsible for PLA activities regarding the South China Sea. With the limited exception of the Yellow Sea, these two contested seas contain all of Beijing's unresolved island/feature and maritime sovereignty claims, which China under Xi is now pursuing with increasing power and determination. The fact that Dong is a naval flag officer, with the aforementioned set of experiences, makes him likely to be

particularly well-versed in addressing territorial disputes with his interlocutors. He will also likely provide useful inputs to the PLA's Joint Staff Department regarding joint operations, thereby helping better integrate China's Navy into them.

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. Of pioneering significance, this hub became the PLA's first full joint-operations command organization upon its establishment in 2013, thereby helping better coordinate forces in theater. This is a key requirement of sophisticated sub-war operations and modern warfare alike—precisely the full range of options Xi wants in his military toolbox. From January 2017 through March 2021, Dong served as one of the concurrent Deputy Commanders of the Southern Theater Command and Commander of the Southern Theater Command Navy.<sup>[6]</sup>

As Defense Minister, Dong is a diplomat-liaison representing the PLA, and ultimately the CMC under Xi, in interactions with foreign militaries. As the PLA engages in drills and other pressure operations vis-à-vis Taiwan during the incoming Lai-Hsiao Administration,<sup>[7]</sup> Dong will explain Beijing's activities, intentions, conditions, and expectations to the outside world. In doing so, Dong draws on years of interactions with foreign naval and military leaders through exercises, meetings, and elite communications. As Defense Minister, Dong lacks operational command over PLA forces; however, as his predecessors did, he is likely to soon become a concurrent member of the CMC, China's highest military decision-making body. CMC Members, including the two Vice Chairmen directly under Xi himself, would have operational command of the entire PLA during wartime.

## The Shoulders of Giants: Building on a Long-term Modernization Strategy

China's Navy leaders are taking their service to a new level for a new era. They will help guide China's military as it fulfills the New Historic Missions assigned by Hu Jintao in 2004 and operates globally on a routine basis.<sup>[8]</sup> With the most fundamental structural aspects of Xi's defense reforms largely complete, Navy leaders are no longer preoccupied with organizational change, and can focus instead on preparation for warfighting. With their operational background, they can work to ensure that China's armed forces are postured for, and more capable regarding, key contingencies, e.g., with respect to Taiwan. That starts with service expertise. Coming from the Navy, Admirals Dong and Hu likely know each other well and will have a good working relationship. This will afford China's Navy unique insights into CMC decision-making. Dong and Hu will also serve, respectively, as the face of China's military and navy—the most outwardly focused of all military services.

The first PLA Navy Commander, Xiao Jinguang, who retired in 1979,<sup>[9]</sup> pioneered a makeshift “hodgepodge fleet,” taking guerilla strategy and force to sea just sufficient to wrest the vast majority of offshore islands along China's coastline from Kuomintang control—leaving an enduring imprint on the Navy's ways of war.<sup>[10]</sup> The third PLA Navy Commander, Admiral Liu Huaqing, who served until 1988, brought the navy from Maoist marginalization to wholesale modernization. Under his leadership, in 1985, the service received its first strategy, Near Seas Active Defense, focused on the Yellow, East, and South China Seas.<sup>[11]</sup> From 1993-1998, Liu helped guide the PLA Navy's future as the first and only CMC Vice Chairman of naval background.

The seventh PLA Navy Commander, Admiral Wu Shengli, in office from 2006-2017, served as a full member of the CMC's Central Committee. He systematically transformed China's Navy into a fighting force with comprehensive capabilities.<sup>[12]</sup> As part of this decisive decade of PLA Navy improvement, in 2015 Xi assigned the service a second layer of strategy—Far Seas Protection.<sup>[13]</sup>

Starting around 2019, two years after Admiral Wu's comprehensive drive concluded, China's Navy has been pursuing a combination of “near seas defense, far seas protection, [global] oceanic presence, and expansion into the two poles [Arctic and Antarctic].”<sup>[14]</sup> Now the experiences of China's ninth and tenth Navy Commanders, Admirals Dong and Hu, provides them with unique maritime operational expertise which will enhance their ability to help shape future PLA joint operations with the other services.

## **Full Steam Ahead: Will Party Control Get in the Way?**

Clearly the PLA Navy is improving rapidly and comprehensively, however unevenly. Nuclear submarine propulsion and several other apex technologies aside, military hardware development appears to be outpacing that of human and organizational capital. Narrowing that gap will be a key task for Admiral Hu throughout his time as PLA Navy Commander: his core responsibility is to crew, train, and equip the force.

Many aspects of PLA Navy leadership, personnel, organization, training, and education remain unclear to outside observers, however. Some areas may even remain uncertain to the PLA Navy itself in terms of caliber and effectiveness where and when it matters most. Under the PLA's dual command system, for example, every PLA Navy organization, including its ships, embarks a military commander and a political commissar, who collaborate in the service of military and political objectives alike.<sup>[15]</sup> That system typically requires near-daily meetings of their

embarked Party Standing Committees, a floating microcosm of how Party organs conduct business across China and around the world; or pre-authorized orders, neither of which may work as desired or predicted in complex crisis conditions—let alone the fog of war.<sup>[16]</sup> China's political commissar system is far more intrusive, and potentially cumbersome, than the oversight role employed in the United States and other Western countries where civilians oversee the military and its operations. Beijing's approach, by contrast, requires committee decision-making at each level of operations, from strategic to tactical.

Understanding these crucial areas will require much additional research. But scholars and analysts must hurry: China's Navy is making great waves, which are now reaching all shores. And the risk of a tidal wave across the Taiwan Strait grows with each passing year.

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[6] Of note, however, following the eleventh PLA force reduction and major reorganization of the PLA starting in January 2016, Xi appointed Admiral Yuan Yubai in January 2017 as the commander of the Southern Theater Command. Yu became the first PLAN commander of a Theater Command; however, in July 2021, Yu was replaced by an Army general. Currently, no PLAN admiral commands a Theater Command.

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