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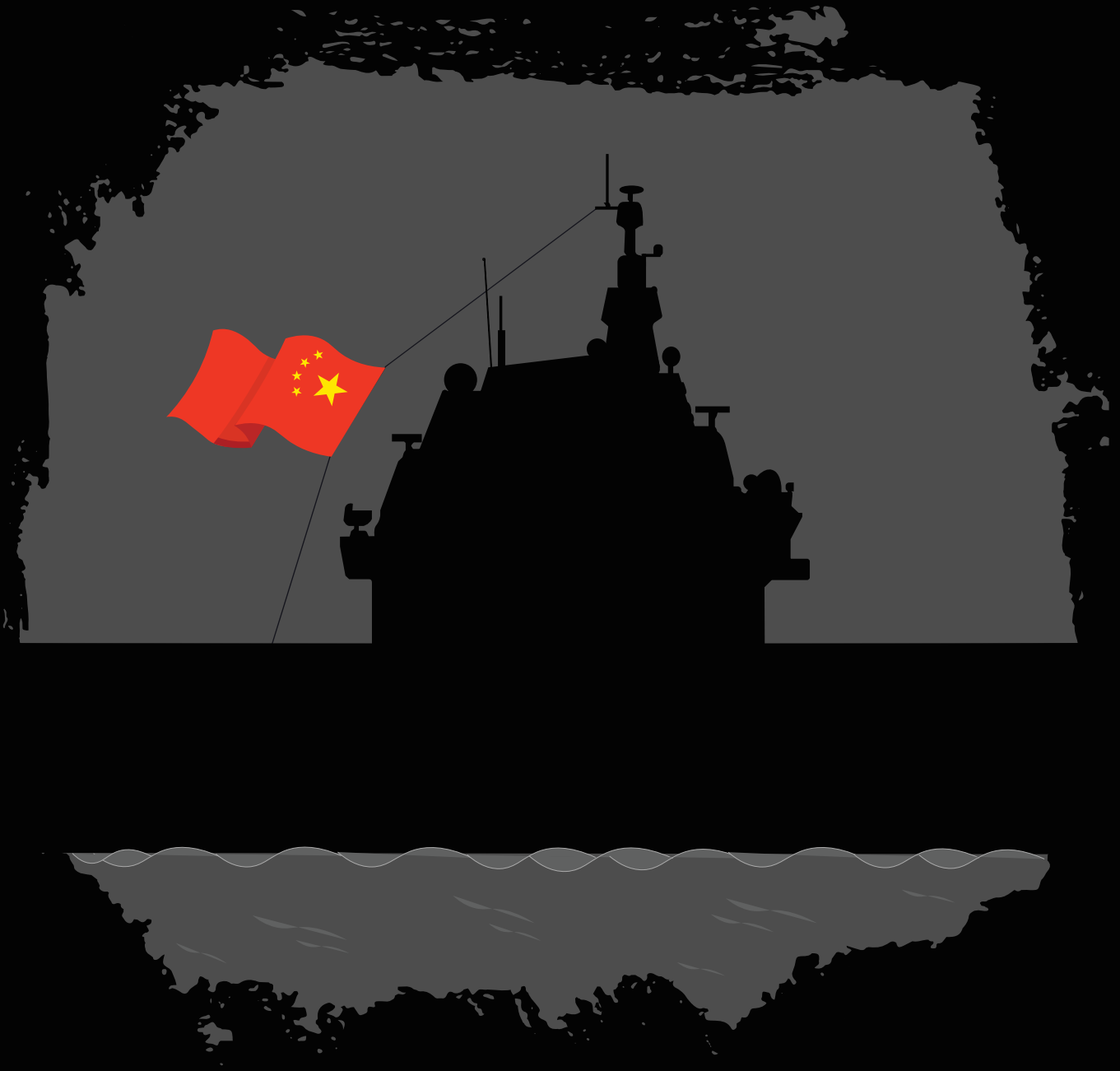
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CMSI NOTE #23 /// 29 JULY 2026

Vice Admiral Zhang Zheng Likely at the Helm: The PLA Navy's Apparent New Most Senior Officer

Jordan Shaw, Andrew S. Erickson, and Christopher Sharman¹

Key Takeaways:

- Vice Admiral (VADM) Zhang Zheng (张峥) *appears* to have been promoted to the most senior billet in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy (PLAN). He seems to have taken up this responsibility as early as December 2025.
- An experienced surface warfare officer, with prior service as the captain of the PLAN's first aircraft carrier, *Liaoning* (辽宁舰), as well as commander of the *Shandong* aircraft carrier battle group (山东航母编队), VADM Zhang is well prepared to lead the PLAN in the "era of three aircraft carriers" (三航母时代).
- Zhang's wide-ranging experience across the East Sea Fleet (东海舰队); his professional military education in the United Kingdom (UK); and his service with distinction in the North Sea Fleet (北海舰队), in PLAN Headquarters, and in a joint billet in the Southern Theater Command (南部战区) makes him a well-rounded leader—vital in today's comprehensive PLAN.
- Zhang's lack of previous major political experience (i.e., neither as a member of a Delegation of the PLA and People's Armed Police to the National People's Congress (全国人大解放军和武警部队代表团) nor of the CCP's Central Committee (中央委员) or Alternate Member to the Central Committee (中央候补委员)) does not appear to have hindered his upward trajectory.

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- The apparent elevation of Zhang, coupled with PLAN Commander Admiral Hu Zhongming (胡中明)’s absence from publicly reported official PLAN activities since May 2025,² suggests that Hu may have been unceremoniously removed from his leadership post and succeeded by Zhang.³

Reading the Signals

Who leads the PLAN matters. As the world’s largest navy charts its course toward reaching the world-class status that Xi Jinping expects, changes at its highest levels can provide valuable insights into Beijing’s navy priorities. Yet the PLA is often opaque about senior leadership transitions—particularly amid personnel upheavals of recent years. As a result, protocol, official media, and other indirect evidence yields insights into important leadership changes. At times, the strongest evidence comes not from an official announcement, but from what appears to be an otherwise routine event. In February 2026, the PLAN’s annual Spring Festival greeting provided just such a distinctive clue.

New Revelations During Spring Festival

Every year around the Spring Festival, the Central Military Commission (CMC) (中央军委) Chairman delivers greetings to PLA servicemembers, expressing appreciation for their hard work and encouraging them to train hard to build combat capabilities. The PLAN, like the other services and forces, does the same for its sailors, marines, and aviators posted throughout the People’s Republic of China (PRC), underway, and abroad. The PLAN Commander and Political Commissar deliver the Spring Festival remarks to the fleet (CMSI is unaware of any exemptions). In the PLAN’s 2026 Spring Festival greetings, a different officer occupied the seat where Admiral Hu Zhongming, a figure covered in *CMSI Note 1*,⁴ once sat: VADM Zhang Zheng.⁵ Since the PLA—like China’s entire Party-State-Military system—places great significance on protocol order and seating placement, this was the clearest sign that VADM Zhang had assumed the duties of leading the PLAN.

² ผู้บัญชาการทหารเรือเดินทางเยือนกองทัพเรือสาธารณรัฐประชาชนจีนอย่างเป็นทางการ ในฐานะแขกคนสำคัญ [“The Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Navy Paid an Official Visit to the People’s Republic of China Navy as a Distinguished Guest”], กองทัพเรือไทย [Royal Thai Navy], 13 May 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260218015157/https://www.navy.mi.th/index.php/9zy6pgluimp6>.

³ For background on the rise of Admiral Hu Zhongming to Commander of the PLAN, see Christopher H. Sharman and Andrew S. Erickson, “Admiral Hu to the Helm: China’s New Navy Commander Brings Operational Expertise,” *CMSI Note 1* (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 27 December 2023), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/1/>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ [军事报道]海军春节前视频慰问一线任务部队官兵 [“[Military Report] Navy Sends Video Greetings to Frontline Troops Before Spring Festival”], CCTV-7, 13 February 2026, <https://tv.cctv.cn/2026/02/14/VIDEz8cu6ZpznaYmisHg9qOD260214.shtml>.



Figure 1: VADM Zhang Zheng (circled in red) wishes PLAN sailors, marines, and aviators a Happy Spring Festival in February 2026. Sitting to Zhang's left is VADM Hu Yuhai (胡瑜海), PLAN Political Work Department Director (circled in blue), who is likely Acting in the Capacity of PLAN Political Commissar.



Figure 2: For comparison and contrast: PLAN Commander Admiral Hu Zhongming (circled in red) and PLAN Political Commissar Admiral Yuan Huazhi (circled in blue)—a figure covered in CMSI Note 16—deliver Spring Festival greetings to PLAN sailors, marines, and aviators in February 2024.⁶

Early Life and Education

Zhang Zheng was born in September 1969 in Changxing County, Zhejiang Province (浙江省长兴县). As his father was a PLAN officer, Zhang followed him to Zhoushan, Zhejiang Province (浙江省舟山市), home to what was then known as the East Sea Fleet (ESF) (东海舰队) (now known the Eastern Theater Command Navy (东部战区海军)). Zhang completed his secondary school education at Dinghai No. 1 Middle School (定海第一中学). His former head teacher remembered Zhang for his outstanding character and impressive academics.⁷ Zhang's dedication and hard work helped him test into the undergraduate program in the Department of Automatic Control at the prestigious Shanghai Jiaotong University (上海交通大学自动控制系) in 1986. A former college classmate remembered Zhang as being younger and smaller than other classmates, almost like “a little brother.” Although Zhang was not talkative, he had a cheerful personality and was friendly towards others.⁸



Figure 3: Zhang Zheng during his time as a student at Shanghai Jiaotong University.⁹

⁶ [军事报道]海军春节前视频慰问一线任务部队官兵 [“[Military Report] Navy Sends Video Greetings to Frontline Troops Before Spring Festival”], CCTV-7, 6 February 2024, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/02/06/VIDEpeJ6k50cYEypVPeFFltm240206.shtml?spm=C52346.PiumOrlYLNUM.E0VXtwLj8YU7.7>.

⁷ 覃戈 [Qin Ge], 航母舰长来自浙江本网记者视频专访张峥儿时班主任 [“Aircraft Carrier Captain Hails from Zhejiang: Our Reporter Conducts a Video Interview with Zhang Zheng's Childhood Homeroom Teacher”], 浙江在线 [Zhejiang Online], 26 September 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260506210902/https://zjnews.zjol.com.cn/system/2012/09/26/018837601.shtml>.

⁸ 同学贴航母舰长张峥青涩旧照“当年像个小弟弟” [“Classmate Posts an Old, Youthful Photo of Aircraft Carrier Captain Zhang Zheng: ‘Back Then, He Was Like a Little Brother’”], 武汉晚报 [Wuhan Evening News], 27 September 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250714200451/https://www.chinanews.com.cn/mil/2012/09-27/4215794.shtml>.

⁹ Ibid.

Choosing the PLAN

In summer 1988, Zhang's class was assigned to an internship with the ESF. While aboard a ship during this internship, a naval officer shared with the class: "Our navy's equipment and capabilities are lagging; you are cultured and understand technology—we truly hope you will come here after graduating." It was upon hearing this call that Zhang decided to join the PLAN. This was an exceptional choice—most of his classmates opted to either study abroad or seek employment in large cities after their studies.¹⁰ Zhang graduated from Shanghai Jiaotong University in 1990. His thesis was the only one in his class to be given the grade of "outstanding" ("优秀").¹¹

Early Career and Professional Military Education

Zhang assumed his first PLAN billet in August 1990, as an assistant engineer (助理工程师) at an automation workstation (自动化工作站) in the ESF Headquarters Department (东海舰队司令部).¹² After two years' service, Zhang was admitted into the postgraduate program at Dalian Naval Academy (海军大连舰艇学院). From August 1992-August 1995, Zhang studied and earned a master's degree in surface combatant operational command (舰艇作战指挥专业).¹³

After finishing his studies as a surface warfare officer, Zhang was assigned to the 6th Destroyer Zhidui in Zhoushan, Zhejiang province from August 1995-July 2001.¹⁴ It was during an unidentified major naval exercise in October 1995 that Zhang proved his mettle dramatically; a radar suddenly lost its target 10 seconds before launch. Zhang instantly proposed emergency measures, which were apparently successful. Due to his outstanding performance, Zhang was transferred to the training department (作训科) for focused training and demonstrated exceptional talent there. Before every major mission, commanders would always choose Zhang as an accompanying staff officer (参谋)—he lived up to expectations and successfully completed numerous missions.¹⁵ Zhang rose up the ranks and later became department head (部门长) and staff officer.¹⁶

¹⁰ 吴志菲 [Wu Zhifei], 张峥: 中国航母“辽宁舰”舰长(图) ["Zhang Zheng: Captain of China's Aircraft Carrier 'Liaoning' (Photo)"], 天津日报 [*Tianjin Daily*], 23 November 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260127000147/http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n/2012/1123/c117092-19673964.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 中国航母“辽宁舰”入列 舰长张峥, 来自浙江 [China's Aircraft Carrier "Liaoning" Has Been Commissioned; Its Captain, Zhang Zheng, is From Zhejiang], 浙江在线 [*Zhejiang Online*], 25 September 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120929012414/https://zjnews.zjol.com.cn/05zjnews/system/2012/09/25/018835398.shtml>.

¹⁴ 吴志菲 [Wu Zhifei], 张峥: 中国航母“辽宁舰”舰长(图) ["Zhang Zheng: Captain of China's Aircraft Carrier 'Liaoning' (Photo)"], 天津日报 [*Tianjin Daily*], 23 November 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260127000147/http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n/2012/1123/c117092-19673964.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

In April 1997, Zhang was promoted to deputy commander of an unidentified ship.¹⁷ In spring 1998, Zhang married a PLAN lieutenant (company leader grade officer) (连职).¹⁸ Afterwards, he served as captain of an unidentified frigate and later captain of a destroyer, likely the *Nanjing* (南京舰).¹⁹

From July 2001-August 2003, Zhang pursued advanced studies successively at the UK Defence School of Languages and the Joint Services Command and Staff College.²⁰ His professional military education in the West is an exception among PLA officers—most mid-career and senior officers who complete their professional military education abroad tended to study at Russian military institutions.²¹ Moreover, he was widely credited with developing excellent English—common among intelligence specialists but exceptional among fast-track senior line officers. After returning to China, Commander Zhang became Deputy Chief of Staff (DCOS) (副参谋长) of an unidentified PLAN unit, a regiment leader grade billet.²² His work throughout was outstanding and seen by higher ups in the PLAN; in June 2012, he was named in an “Honor Roll” (光荣榜) as an “PLA Outstanding Command Officer” (2011 年度全军优秀指挥军官).²³

A Major Step for the People’s Navy

On 25 September 2012, the PRC’s first aircraft carrier, *Liaoning* (辽宁舰), was commissioned into service. Senior Captain (SCPT) Zhang was billeted as *Liaoning*’s Captain, a division leader grade (正师职) position.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ 中国航母“辽宁舰”入列 舰长张峥, 来自浙江 [China’s Aircraft Carrier “Liaoning” Has Been Commissioned; Its Captain, Zhang Zheng, is From Zhejiang], 浙江在线 [Zhejiang Online], 25 September 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120929012414/https://zjnews.zjol.com.cn/05zjnews/system/2012/09/25/018835398.shtml>.

²¹ Gao Yang [高阳], 每年外派 300 人以上军事留学生 中国军事留学经历了怎样的发展 [“With Over 300 Military Students Sent Abroad Annually: The Developments of China’s Military Study Abroad”], 《留学》杂志 [“Study Abroad” Magazine], 11 October 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20221015182705/http://www.wrsa.net/content_40038961.htm.

²² 吴志菲 [Wu Zhifei], 正师编制 人员上千 [“A Division Leader Grade Unit: Over A Thousand Personnel”], 文摘报 [Wen Zhai Bao], 29 September 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20260506205835/https://epaper.gmw.cn/wzb/html/2012-09/29/nw.D110000wzb_20120929_1-01.htm.

²³ 光荣榜 [“Honor Roll”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 21 June 2012, p. 2.



Figure 4: Senior Captain Zhang Zheng looks toward the horizon on the bridge wing of Liaoning, the PLAN's first aircraft carrier.

During his time as captain, Zhang accepted media interviews and attended public events to promote *Liaoning*'s profile among the populace, almost as if he were an unofficial spokesman. Less than one month after *Liaoning*'s commissioning, Zhang and then-Political Commissar of the Liaoning, SCPT Mei Wen (梅文), sat in a wide-ranging interview with “Face to Face” (《面对面》), a popular long-form interview program run by China Central Television (CCTV/中央电视台). Besides sharing his personal experience in being selected as Captain of *Liaoning* and what daily life is like aboard, Zhang also explained that China currently cannot have (naval) aviators serve as captains of aircraft carriers, as its deck aviation program is still in its infancy; Zhang also noted that many other navies also began by having a surface fleet commanders serve as aircraft carrier captains.²⁴

Zhang employed his English fluency when he engaged foreign visitors. In September 2013, Zhang was a part of then-Admiral Wu Shengli's (吴胜利) visit to the U.S.—first to California

²⁴ 张峥舰长: 中国暂时不具备飞行员当航母舰长条件 [“Captain Zhang Zheng: China Currently Does Not Have the Prerequisites to Have Pilots Serve as Aircraft Carrier Captains”], 中国网络电视台 [China Network Television], 12 October 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20241219213939/https://www.taiwan.cn/xwzx/PoliticsNews/201210/t20121012_3172629.htm.

and later Washington, D.C.²⁵ When discussing *Liaoning*'s operations, Zhang explained in English: "And the size is not as large as the U.S. one. We have run 36 airplanes, ... operating on board our ship, and we are still practicing and doing tests and experiments for this equipment and also systems. And in the future, we will make our progress."²⁶ In April 2014, when then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel visited the PRC, *Liaoning* was one of his stops. During the two-hour visit, Secretary Hagel was able to receive a briefing and a tour, as well as meet with SCPT Zhang.²⁷

In these public appearances, Zhang spoke proudly of the PLAN's recent achievements and candidly about the PLAN's future as well as its shortcomings. On 23 April 2015, two years after being billeted as *Liaoning*'s Captain, SCPT Zhang gave a speech at Tsinghua University on his own experiences in the development of *Liaoning*'s capabilities and crewmembers' skills. Zhang emphasized that although much had been achieved thus far, there was still a long way to go in the building of a developed and mature aircraft carrier—"an aircraft carrier that can fight wars" (一艘能打仗的航母).²⁸



Figure 5: Senior Captain Zhang Zheng speaks on the history and future of aircraft carriers at Tsinghua University.

²⁵ David Alexander, "China Navy Chief Says Operational Aircraft Carrier a Few Years Away," *Reuters*, 12 September 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-navy-chief-says-operational-aircraft-carrier-a-few-years-away-idUSBRE98B189/>.

²⁶ 辽宁舰舰长随吴胜利访美 用英语披露航母情况 ["The Captain of the Liaoning Aircraft Carrier Accompanied Wu Shengli on his Visit to the United States and Disclosed Information about the Aircraft Carrier in English."], 新华网 [Xinhua Net], 13 September 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20251212183339/https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2013-09-13/0951740391.html>.

²⁷ Cheryl Pellerin, "Hagel Visits Chinese Aircraft Carrier *Liaoning*," *Digital Visual Information Distribution System*, 6 April 2014, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/506380/hagel-visits-chinese-aircraft-carrier-liaoning>.

²⁸ 邱越 [Qiu Yue] and 黄子娟 [Huang Zijuan], 辽宁舰舰长张峥首次公开演讲 称中国需要能打仗的航母 ["Liaoning Aircraft Carrier Captain Zhang Zheng Gives his First Public Speech, Stating that China Needs Aircraft Carriers Capable of Fighting Wars"], 人民网 [People's Net], 23 April 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220526113404/http://military.people.com.cn/n/2015/0423/c1011-26893550.html>.

In May 2016, Zhang was transferred to PLAN headquarters and billeted as Assistant to the Chief of Staff (参谋长助理).²⁹ This was the first time that Zhang served in PLAN headquarters. At headquarters, he would have engaged the vast range of service-wide topics and issues. Such issues included: (1) conferences on safety measures, where senior leaders across the PLAN met to conduct safety review work;³⁰ (2) receiving foreign counterparts, such as U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral John Richardson;³¹ and (3) important group discussions on implementing the CMC Chairman Xi's strategic thinking on strengthening the military through reforms.³²

Moving Up into Senior Grades and Ranks

In April 2017, PRC Ministry of National Defense spokesman Senior Colonel Yang Yujun (杨宇军) confirmed that Zhang's completion of numerous major missions as *Liaoning's* Captain had earned him a grade promotion to a corps deputy leader (副军职) officer.³³ An August 2017 *People's Navy* (人民海军) article confirmed Zhang's new billet: Commander of Unit 91910, the Military Unit Cover Designator (MUCD) for the *Shandong* aircraft carrier battle group (山东舰航母编队). Zhang also received a rank promotion from Senior Captain to Rear Admiral (RADM).³⁴

²⁹ 岳怀让 [Yue Huairang] and 蒋子文 [Jiang Ziwen], 辽宁舰舰长张峥大校已出任海军参谋长助理 [“Senior Captain Zhang Zheng, Former Captain of the Aircraft Carrier *Liaoning*, Has Assumed the Post of Assistant to the Chief of Staff of the PLA Navy”], 澎湃新闻 [The Paper], 20 May 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20260506215837/https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1472165?commTag=tr [ue](#).

³⁰ 郝昭 [Hao Zhao] and 梁庆松 [Liang Qingsong], 海军召开安全工作检查电视电话会议 田中丁毅邱延鹏杨世光李玉杰参加 [“The Navy Held a Video Conference on Safety Inspections—Tian Dingyi, Qiu Yanpeng, Yang Shiguang, and Li Yujie Participated”], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 17 May 2016, p. 1.

³¹ 汪国征 [Wang Guozheng] and 蒲海洋 [Pu Haiyang], 吴胜利会见美国海军作战部长 [Wu Shengli Meets U.S. Chief of Naval Operations], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 19 July 2016, p. 1.

³² 周亦民 [Zhou Yimin], 柏杨 [Bo Yang], and 王智涛 [Wang Zhitao], 在改革强军大考中交出满意答卷 第二期海军学习贯彻习主席改革强军战略思想理论集训班分组讨论侧记 [“Delivering a Satisfactory Performance in the Major Test of Military Reform and Strengthening: A Report on the Group Discussions at the Second Navy Theoretical Training Course on Studying and Implementing Chairman Xi's Strategic Thinking on Military Reform and Strengthening”], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 30 May 2016, p. 1.

³³ 2017年4月国防部例行记者会文字实录 [Transcript of the Ministry of National Defense's Regular Press Conference in April 2017], 中华人民共和国国防部网 [PRC Ministry of National Defense Website], 27 April 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20260513220626/https://wcm1.cnr.cn/pub/en_US/js2014/zgj/q/20170427/t20170427_523729393.html.

³⁴ 张海鹏 [Zhang Haipeng] and 王元元 [Wang Yuanyuan], 海军隆重举行将官军衔晋升仪式 沈金龙宣读晋衔命令 苗华主持晋衔仪式 [“The Navy Solemnly Holds a Ceremony to Promote Officers to the Flag Officers. Shen Jinlong Read Out the Promotion Orders Miao Hua Presided Over the Ceremony”], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 1 August 2017, p. 1.

Sometime around April 2022, Zhang was transferred to a joint billet for the first time and was identified as DCOS in the Southern Theater Command (南部战区).³⁵ This billet put Zhang in a significant position of regional leadership and involvement regarding a wide range of issues, including disaster relief operations and engagements with foreign militaries. In December 2023, DCOS Zhang led a PLA delegation to Hai Phong, Vietnam to attend the 16th annual meeting with the Vietnam People’s Navy. His counterpart leading the Vietnamese People’s Army delegation was RADM Nguyen Viet Khanh, DCOS of the Vietnam People’s Navy. The two sides (1) affirmed their positive, comprehensive cooperative relationship; (2) reviewed and assessed the 2023 Sino-Vietnamese joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin; and (3) agreed to two more joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin in 2024. Zhang’s delegation also paid a courtesy call on the Vietnam People’s Navy Command and visited Brigade 147 of Naval Region 1 as well as Ha Long Bay.³⁶



Figure 6: RADM Zhang Zheng, (left) Deputy Chief of Staff of the Southern Theater Command, shakes hands with Rear Admiral Nguyen Viet Khanh (right), Deputy Chief of Staff of the Vietnam People’s Navy.

³⁵ 广东省抗震救灾指挥部关于调整指挥部成员的通知 [“Notice from the Guangdong Provincial Headquarters for Earthquake Relief on Changes to Headquarters’ Membership”], 广东省应急管理厅 [Department of Emergency Management of Guangdong Province], 7 April 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20240601221455/http://yjgl.gd.gov.cn/gk/tzgg/tz/content/post_3906335.html.

³⁶ 青香 [Qing Xiang], 越南人民海军与中国人民解放军南部战区举行第 16 次年度会晤 [“The Vietnam People’s Navy and the Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s Southern Theater Command Held Their 16th Annual Meeting”] 人民军队 [People’s Army], 28 December 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240816004659/https://cn.qdnd.vn/cid-6126/7185/-609157>.

Current Billet and Responsibilities

Zhang likely assumed the PLAN's most senior billet around December 2025. During the ceremony when CMC Chairman Xi Jinping promoted Yang Zhibin (杨志斌), Commander of the Eastern Theater Command and Han Shengyan (韩胜延), Commander of the Central Theater Command, to the rank of General, Zhang was present and wearing VADM shoulder boards.³⁷



Figure 7: Zhang Zheng (circled in red) attends the December 2025 promotion ceremony wearing VADM shoulder boards.

A persistent question remains concerning Zhang's current role. As of this writing, official CCP/PRC/PLA media outlets have not explicitly confirmed Zhang's selection to lead the PLAN. However, one source offers inferential evidence that Zhang is, or has served recently as, Chief of Staff (COS), PLAN. This suggests that he may be simultaneously performing the responsibilities of both billets.

The 12 January 2026 broadcast of *Xinwen Lianbo* (新闻联播) reported on the Fifth Plenary Session of the 20th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (中国共产党第二十届中央纪律检查委员会第五次全体会议). Among the many attendees, Zhang was sitting between two Lieutenant Generals: one is PLA Army COS Cai Zhijun (蔡志军); the other is PLA Air Force

³⁷中央军委举行晋升上将军衔仪式 习近平颁发命令状并向晋衔的军官表示祝贺 [“The Central Military Commission Holds a Ceremony to Promote Officers to the Rank of General; Xi Jinping Presents the Certificates of Order and Congratulates the Promoted Officers”], 「新闻联播」[News Broadcast], CCTV, 22 December 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYSFoPnlSgk>.

COS Wang Gang (王刚), who was promoted in July 2026 to the rank of General and billet of Commander, PLAAF.³⁸ As there is strict protocol for seating order in the PLA, by organization, grade, and rank, one can reasonably infer that Zhang is Chief of Staff.³⁹ As COS (and combined with Zhang's seating position during the Spring Festival greetings), it is also reasonable to assume that VADM Zhang has been leading the PLAN's daily work and operations (i.e., filling the role of Commander of the PLAN). There is a prior example of such a combined billeting arrangement: VADM Leng Shaojie (冷少杰), a figure covered in *CMSI* Note 16,⁴⁰ was referenced in official PLA Navy news as: "PLAN Deputy Political Commissar Leng Shaojie (Acting in the Capacity of PLAN Political Commissar)" (海军副政治委员冷少杰 (代理海军政治委员职务)).⁴¹

³⁸ 梅常伟 [Mei Changwei], 中央军委举行晋升上将军衔仪式 习近平颁发命令状并向晋衔的军官表示祝贺 ["The Central Military Commission Holds a Ceremony to Promote Officers to the Rank of General; Xi Jinping Presents the Certificates of Order and Congratulates the Promoted Officers"], 新华网 [Xinhua Net], 3 July 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20260703153024/https://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/20260703/e7a831d5766e4c9e89ca8b4c599e0625/c.html>.

³⁹ "中国共产党第二十届中央纪律检查委员会第五次全体会议公报 | CCTV「新闻联播」20260114," [Communiqué of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 20th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Chinese Communist Party] 「新闻联播」 [News Broadcast], CCTV, 14 January 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbwbULNIsaY>.

⁴⁰ Andrew S. Erickson, "Confirmed: ADM Yuan Huazhi Removed as the PLAN's Political Commissar," *CMSI Note* 16 (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 4 September 2025), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/16/>.

⁴¹ 杨金照 [Yang Jinzhao], 肖勇利 [Xiao Yongli], and 王汉唐 [Wang Hantang], 海军机关抓基层工作领导小组会议暨基层建设调研动员部署会议在京召开: 打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战 以基层全面过硬支撑海军建设高效 ["Meeting of the Navy Headquarters Leading Group for Grassroots Work and Mobilization Meeting on Research into Grassroots Development Held in Beijing: Winning the Critical Battle to Achieve the Centenary Goal of the People's Army; Underpinning High-Quality, High-Efficiency Navy Development with Solid, All-Around Grassroots Strength"], 人民海军 [People's Navy], 3 March 2025, p. 1.



Figure 8: VADM Zhang Zheng (circled in red) sits between PLA Army COS Cai Zhijun and PLA Air Force COS Wang Gang on 12 January 2026.

Conclusion

It has become reasonably clear through news broadcasts that VADM Zhang Zheng has assumed the responsibility of leading the PLAN. He achieved this position by doing outstanding work in important billets amid the removal of numerous other PLAN leaders by disciplinary authorities. Zhang's presence at key events also suggests that despite the positive and prominent coverage, VADM Cui Yuzhong (崔玉忠), a figure covered in *CMSI Note 20*,⁴² did not assume a more senior, longstanding leadership role in the PLAN. It looks like the 57-year-old VADM Zhang, with abundant cutting-edge experience throughout the fleet and abroad, has a bright future ahead of him in the PLAN's "era of three aircraft carriers."

⁴² Jordan Shaw, Andrew S. Erickson, and Christopher H. Sharman, "Flying Higher and Higher: VADM Cui Yuzhong: Moving Up in Complex Times," *CMSI Note 20* (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, 25 February 2026), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/20/>.