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China Maritime Report #56: The Silent Service: Assessing PLAN Influence in the Central Military Commission

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Main Findings

- Despite its impressive expansion, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is more of a "decision-taker" than a "decision-maker," with its growth driven by top-down political directives from leaders like Xi Jinping rather than by its own institutional influence.
- The PLAN's bureaucratic influence within the high command remains modest, with minimal representation on the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC) or in its subordinate departments.
- The PLA Army (PLAA) continues to dominate top leadership and management roles, limiting the navy's ability to compete for resources and influence key decisions despite a strategic shift toward the maritime domain.
- Career progression for rising naval officers prioritizes operational experience at sea over joint duty assignments within the CMC bureaucracy, making such influential staff roles unattractive and further weakening the navy's voice at the top.
- Due to its limited lobbying power, the navy has had to accept CMC policies that reduce its autonomy and capabilities, such as transferring land-based aircraft to the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and patrol ships to the China Coast Guard (CCG).

Introduction

In the perennial fight for resources among the PLA's four services, how much influence does the PLAN wield? There are several reasons why a "navy lobby" might succeed in persuading the high command to direct capabilities, budgets, as well as roles and missions towards the navy. A blue water fleet caters to a popular "naval nationalism" that demands such achievements.¹ Politically, naval expansion allows Xi Jinping, as chairman of the CMC, to take credit for a tangible increase in China's national power and prestige. The navy also plays a vital role in shaping China's security environment through diplomacy, territorial claims enforcement, and as the sea component of a joint pressure campaign against Taiwan.² Indeed, naval leaders have been influential in pushing for accelerated naval modernization and a growing focus on maritime rights enforcement.³

Nevertheless, the "navy lobby" must also contend with conflicting factors such as longstanding army dominance in the PLA, inter-service rivalry, finite budgets and manpower, and, most recently, scrutiny of naval officers under suspicion of corruption that have resulted in the downfall of figures such as former PLAN political commissar Admiral Miao Hua (苗华), former Southern Theater

¹ Robert S. Ross, "Nationalism, Geopolitics, and Expansionism from the Nineteenth Century to the Rise of China," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 4 (Autumn 2018), pp. 1-35; Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response," *International Security* 34, no 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 46-81.

² Ian Burn McCaslin and Andrew S. Erickson, "The Impact of Xi Era Reforms on the Chinese Navy," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), pp. 125-170.

³ Christopher D. Yung, "The PLA Navy Lobby and Its Influence Over China's Maritime Sovereignty Policies," in *PLA Influence On China's National Security Policymaking*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 274-299.

Command Navy commander Vice Admiral Li Pengcheng (李鹏程), and high-level maritime industry executives.⁴

This report evaluates naval influence through an analysis of PLA leadership data. Information on the participation and prevalence of naval leaders in the CMC, which makes the key decisions, and its supporting bureaucracy, which sets the agenda, can provide insight into how well positioned the navy is to compete for scarce resources with the other services (i.e. the army, air force, and Rocket Force) and other interest groups. Evidence of naval officers serving in key joint positions responsible for the allocation of resources would indicate naval leadership that has become more influential. Evidence that they remain marginalized, however, would help explain why the navy sometimes needs to accept CMC decisions that cut against its preferences, which we assume would be to maximize manpower, budgets, and capabilities.

We find that the navy's bureaucratic influence has remained modest throughout Xi's tenure. At the national level, the navy lacks strong representation on the CMC and in its subordinate departments. The navy's share of joint positions has only minimally increased over the past decade (and much of this growth has been in operational rather than administrative positions). This pattern can be attributed to the army's continued dominance of top management roles and to naval career incentives that make tours in the CMC bureaucracy unattractive. Despite Xi's frequent calls for the PLA to become more joint, the result has been a leadership that as of early-2026 had no naval (or air force) participation.

Because its lobbying power is limited, the navy has needed to accept CMC decisions that have reduced its autonomy, capabilities, and roles and missions. The 2015-16 reforms meant that army officers serving as theater commanders have gained operational control previously held by PLAN headquarters over naval fleets. Recent structural shifts—such as the reassignment of land-based aviation units to the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and the transfer of dozens of coastal corvettes to the CCG—signal a narrower set of missions focused on amphibious and blue water operations and the divestment of some near-shore maritime and land-based maritime strike responsibilities. Furthermore, the emphasis on recruiting active and reserve officers with civilian technical degrees suggests CMC steps to prioritize STEM skills over the military academy backgrounds traditionally valued by the services. The result is a navy that is well resourced, but must still follow the adage that “you can't always get what you want.”

This report proceeds in three main sections. The first draws from previous research and updated data from the annual U.S. Department of Defense directories on Chinese military leadership to evaluate trends in positions held by naval officers. The second explains why naval officers typically avoid gaining experience in the CMC bureaucracy and identifies the few naval leaders who have served in top staff roles. The third section illustrates the PLAN's status as a decision-taker, rather than decision-maker, through examples drawn from personnel policies, mobilization, reserve forces, capabilities, and command and control. The conclusion recaps the argument and discusses the

⁴ Andrew S. Erickson and Christopher Sharman, “Admiral Miao Hua's Fall: Further Fallout?” CMSI Note #11, China Maritime Studies Institute, 28 November 2024, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/11/>; Christopher H. Sharman and Andrew S. Erickson, *Dirty But Preparing to Fight: VADM Li Pengcheng's Downfall Amid Increasing PLAN Readiness*, China Maritime Report No. 44, China Maritime Studies Institute, January 2025, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/44/>.

implications of the PLAN's limited ability to impact decisions made at the top for operations and management.

PLAN Influence in the PLA Senior Leadership

Historically, the PLAN had little presence in the high command. The shift towards a maritime-focused military strategy since the 1980s occurred despite, not because of, a strong naval lobby within the CMC.⁵ Reflecting a longstanding focus on landpower, the CMC was composed entirely of army officers for most of its history. Admiral Liu Huaqing (刘华清) was instrumental in lobbying for an aircraft carrier program as naval commander in the 1980s and served as an influential CMC vice chairman from 1989 until 1997. However, Liu was not representative of a growing cohort of navy leaders in top positions. He was instead a singular figure who had started in the army and participated in the Long March before being transferred to the navy more than two decades into his career.⁶

In a symbolic gesture towards jointness, Jiang Zemin added the navy, air force, and Second Artillery Force commanders to the CMC in 2004, but its members were still mostly army officers. Moreover, within the larger PLA leadership cohort, naval officers were a small minority. In 2015, the last year before the PLA embarked on a major restructuring to promote jointness, the PLAN occupied only 22 (12 percent) of 182 positions at or above the deputy military region leader grade.⁷ No naval officers served in critical roles such as military region commander or general department director.

In the decade since the reforms, the PLAN has struggled to increase its share of leadership positions. In 2024, PLAN officers held 21 (16 percent) of 131 theater deputy leader or above grade positions as referenced in the U.S. Department of Defense directories.⁸ This represented only a small increase from the pre-reform period and from 2016, the first year after the reforms, when they held 24 (13 percent) of 192 positions (see Exhibit 1 below). By comparison, the army retained its dominant status (54 percent of positions in 2024), followed by the air force (19 percent). Among the four services, only the Rocket Force had a smaller share of leadership positions than the navy in 2024 (6 percent). The navy's modest share reflects its smaller percentage of total manpower (12 percent, versus 47 percent for the army and 20 percent for the air force),⁹ as well as a continuing legacy from the PLA's past that those selected for the senior-most roles in the PLA are mostly recruited from the army.

⁵ M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Military Strategy: Winning Informationized Local Wars," *China Brief*, 2 July 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-new-military-strategy-winning-informationized-local-wars/>. Ryan D. Martinson, "Panning for Gold: Assessing Chinese Maritime Strategy from Primary Sources," *Naval War College Review* 69, no. 3 (Summer 2015), pp. 22-44.

⁶ Andrew S. Erickson and Andrew R. Wilson, "China's Aircraft Carrier Dilemma," *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 4 (Autumn 2006), pp. 16-19; Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism," p. 60. On his initial naval experiences, see 刘华清 [Liu Huaqing], 刘华清回忆录 [*Memoirs of Liu Huaqing*] (Beijing: PLA Press, 2004), pp. 252-265.

⁷ Joel Wuthnow, *Gray Dragons: Assessing China's Senior Military Leadership*, INSS China Strategic Perspectives 16 (2022), p. 40.

⁸ Department of Defense, *Directory of PRC Military Personalities* (2024). The directory contains errors and omissions, but there is no reason why these would skew towards or against any service or component.

⁹ *The Military Balance* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2024), p. 254.

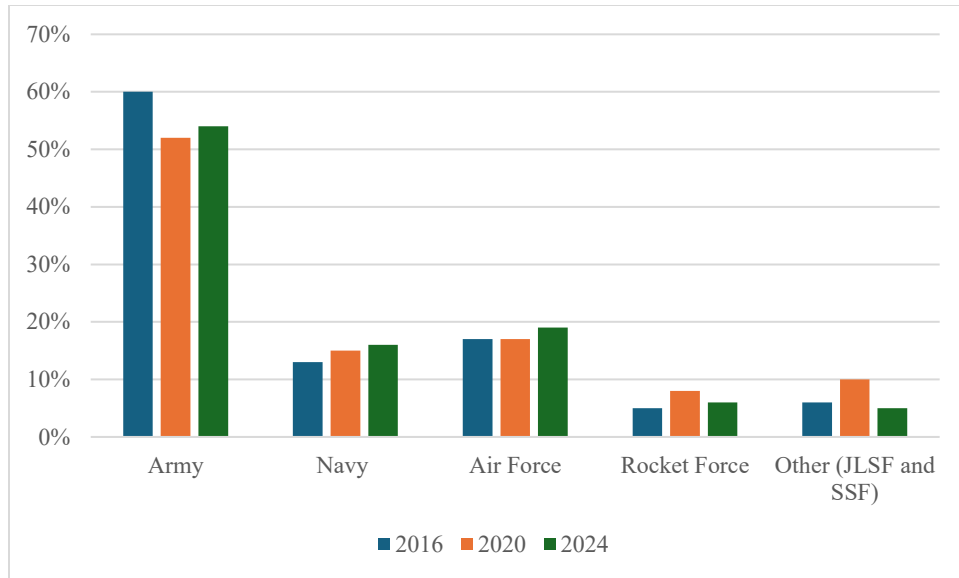


Exhibit 1: PLA Senior Officer Corps by Service (2016-2024)

Broken down by organization, the navy has maintained its low profile in the CMC and its subordinate bureaucracy (see Exhibit 2 below). There was only one PLAN officer on the CMC between 2016 and 2024. In 2016, the service chiefs, including Admiral Wu Shengli (吴胜利), were still ex officio CMC members, but they were not reappointed at the 19th Party Congress in 2017.¹⁰ On that occasion, Admiral Miao Hua was appointed as director of the CMC Political Work Department and became a CMC member, but unlike Wu, his role was not to advocate for his service's interests. Moreover, Miao was not a career naval officer, but a professional political commissar who served most of his career in the army before his selection as the navy's top political commissar in 2014. Most recently, Admiral Dong Jun (董军), who previously commanded the navy before his appointment as defense minister in 2023, has not been elevated to the CMC.¹¹ Miao's purge in November 2024 due to corruption allegations, as well as Dong's absence, meant that as of 2025 the CMC lacked a naval officer for the first time in 20 years.¹²

¹⁰ Joel McFadden, Kim Fassler, and Justin Godby, "The New PLA Leadership: Xi Molds China's Military to His Vision," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, pp. 557-582.

¹¹ Previous defense ministers, including Dong's immediate predecessor Li Shangfu, held CMC seats. It is unclear why Dong has not (yet) been elevated. For an analysis, see Shanshan Mei and Dennis Blasko, "Did China Just Demote Its Defense Ministry?" *Defense One*, 14 August 2024, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2024/08/did-china-just-demote-its-defense-ministry/398805/>.

¹² Jonathan Czin, "Thoughts on the Political Demise of Miao Hua," Brookings Institution, 18 February 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/thoughts-on-the-political-demise-of-miao-hua/>.

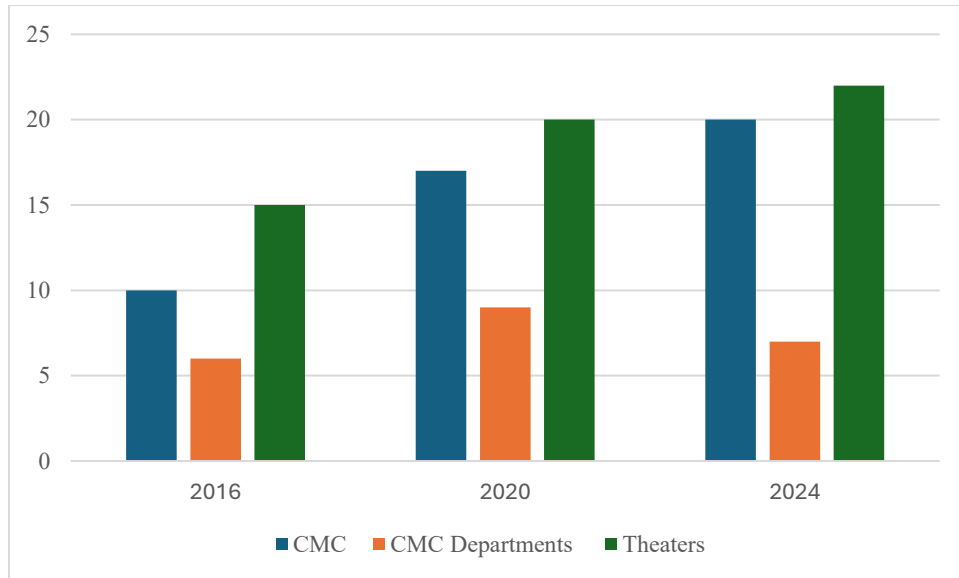


Exhibit 2: Share of PLAN Officers in Joint Positions (%)

There have also been few naval officers in top roles in the CMC bureaucracy. During the 2015-6 reforms, the general departments were reorganized into 15 smaller departments, commissions, and offices. In 2024, the share of PLAN officers who served as director or deputy director of any of these organizations was 7 percent, which was about the same as in 2016 (6 percent). Indeed, from 2016-2024, only 13 naval officers were identified to have ever served in any of these roles.¹³ This indicated that the navy was underrepresented in these joint positions compared to its overall (12 percent) manpower share. Nevertheless, the PLAN established a precedent for taking the top role in a CMC organization on three occasions, although these cases were exceptional. Aside from Miao Hua in the Political Work Department, Admiral Wang Renhua (王仁华) was secretary of the CMC Political and Legal Affairs Commission, responsible for the military justice system from 2019 to 2025, and Rear Admiral Guan Youfei (关友飞) directed the CMC Office of International Military Cooperation from 2016-2017.

Overall, the data suggests that naval officers are not in a strong position to influence PLA decisions on budgeting, acquisition, and force structure. The CMC and its chairman must decide how much to expand or restructure the navy based on inputs from the service, but those arguments must be weighed against competing arguments from other interest groups. Decisions that favor naval equities are therefore made despite, not because of, representation by naval officers in elite decision-making circles and the bureaucratic staffs that support them. The army (and to a much lesser degree, the air force) is in a stronger position to influence decisions because of its continuing hold on key positions. This can help to explain why the ground forces have remained the dominant service by manpower despite shifts in China's military strategy over the last two decades that emphasize maritime dominance. Other examples are discussed later.

However, while the navy's role in force-wide management remains limited, its ability to influence PLA joint operations has grown. At the national level, this is due to an expansion of a joint operations structure that features the integration of expertise from all the services and support forces. At least two naval officers, Admiral Sun Jianguo (孙建国) and Vice Admiral Jiang Guoping (姜国

¹³ Department of Defense, *Directory of PRC Military Personalities*, 2016-2024.

平), served in senior roles in the postreform CMC Joint Staff Department. Moreover, a national CMC Joint Operations Command Center (军委联合作战指挥中心) was established to coordinate operations across theaters.¹⁴ The organization allows the CMC to directly task and monitor naval assets and probably has a sub-center responsible for maritime operations. Images from PRC media depict naval officers working there.¹⁵

The navy has also fared better in joint positions in the theater commands. Prior to 2016, naval officers could only serve as military region deputy commanders (dual-hatted as naval fleet commanders). However, after the reforms, PLAN officers continued to serve as dual-hatted deputy commanders, but were also appointed as full-time theater deputy commanders and theater chiefs of staff, both of which are critical joint roles that had previously been held exclusively by the army.¹⁶ For the first time, naval officers also served as theater commanders—Admiral Yuan Yubai (袁誉柏), in the Southern theater from 2017 to 2021—and political commissars—Admiral Liu Qingsong (刘青松), in the Eastern theater since 2023.¹⁷ Hence, in contrast to its hold on top management roles, the army's grip on senior operational positions had begun to wane.

The CMC and PLAN Career Patterns

Limited naval representation in the CMC not only reflects the legacy of an army-centric PLA, but also career incentives that make service in CMC departments and, to a lesser degree, the theater commands, less attractive for rising PLAN officers. Unlike the U.S. system, in which the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act required officers to undertake joint duty assignments as a prerequisite for command, there is no similar requirement governing the careers of PLA officers.¹⁸ Instead, previous research has established that career progression for rising PLAN officers is influenced by several other factors, including experience at sea (such as serving on escort task forces), foreign study, academic credentials, and participation in central-level party organizations.¹⁹ Experience in joint assignments is not considered a key career enhancement.

The biographies of recent PLAN commanders and political commissars demonstrate the limited professional relevance of CMC experience for naval officers. Among PLAN commanders between 2004 and 2024, service in the CMC or the general departments was sporadic. Only two of the five commanders during this period held a senior role in the CMC bureaucracy (see Exhibit 3 below): Admiral Wu Shengli as deputy chief of the General Staff Department and Admiral Zhang Dingfa (张

¹⁴ Rick Gunnell, "Central Military Commission," in *People's Liberation Army as Organization Volume 3.0*, ed. Frank Miller et al. (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation and Exovera, 2025).

¹⁵ 习近平的新头衔公布: 军委联指总指挥 ["Xi Jinping's New Title Announced: Commander in Chief of the CMC Joint Operations Command Center"], 央广网 [China National Radio], 21 April 2016, http://news.cnr.cn/native/gd/20160421/t20160421_521935598.shtml.

¹⁶ For example, in 2024, PLAN admirals Wang Changjiang (王长江) and Jiang Guoping were serving as chief of staff of the Central and Northern theaters, respectively. The roles of the full-time theater deputy commanders are unclear, but they are not working simultaneously as theater navy component commanders, and so are likely focused more on joint operations.

¹⁷ Admiral Liu, however, began his career in the air force and transferred to the navy in 2018.

¹⁸ PLA academics have discussed a possible joint track in the past, but none has been adopted. See Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, "A Modern Major General: Building Joint Commanders in the PLA," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, p. 303.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Becker, David Liebenberg, and Peter Mackenzie, *Behind the Periscope: Leadership in China's Navy* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2013), pp. 107-122; and Jeffrey Becker, "Who's at the Helm? The Past, Present, and Future Leaders of China's Navy," *Naval War College Review* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2016), pp. 66-90.

定发) as president of the Academy of Military Sciences.²⁰ The more common routes included tours as fleet commander or deputy commander, or through a deputy commander or chief of staff role in PLAN headquarters. Such patterns are typical not only of the navy, but all the services, and are emblematic of the PLA's service-oriented career progressions.²¹ At the theater level, most future PLAN commanders served in a dual-hatted position (i.e. primarily a fleet commander but also serving concurrently as a theater deputy commander) although Dong Jun was a full-time deputy commander of the Southern theater prior to his selection as navy chief. While still an exception, this career pathway could be a way to instill a stronger degree of joint command experience in future navy senior leaders.

Exhibit 3: Career Paths of PLAN Commanders, 2004-2024

Name	Dates as PLAN Commander	Previous CMC or Joint Roles	Previous PLAN Roles
Hu Zhongming (胡中明)	Dec. 2023-	Northern Theater Deputy Commander*	Asst. to the PLAN Chief of Staff, Deputy PLAN Chief of Staff, North Sea Fleet Commander
Dong Jun (董军)	Sept. 2021-Dec. 2023	Southern Theater Deputy Commander	East Sea Fleet Deputy Commander, PLAN Deputy Chief of Staff
Shen Jinlong (沈金龙)	Jan. 2017-Sept. 2021	Southern Theater Deputy Commander*	Dalian Naval Academy President, PLAN Command Academy President, South Sea Fleet Commander
Wu Shengli (吴胜利)	June 2006-Dec. 2016	Deputy Chief, General Staff Department, Guangzhou Military Region Deputy Commander*	Dalian Naval Academy President, East Sea Fleet Deputy Commander, South Sea Fleet Commander
Zhang Dingfa (张定发)	June 2003-Aug. 2006	Jinan Military Region Deputy Commander*, Academy of Military Sciences President	North Sea Fleet Deputy Commander, North Sea Fleet Commander, PLAN Deputy Commander

Notes: *=dual-hatted position with fleet commander.

The situation is more complicated with the navy's political commissars. Two of the five officers who served in this position between 2004 and 2024—Admiral Yuan Huazhi (袁华智) and Admiral Hu Yanlin (胡彦林)—were professional PLAN officers who had assumed successively senior political commissar roles in their own service. Neither served in a CMC or joint billet and Yuan was removed

²⁰ It was previously common for a future service chief to hold an appointment as a deputy chief of the GSD because this offered expertise and a position at an appropriate grade for advancement (there was no service position with a grade between service deputy commander and service commander).

²¹ Wuthnow, *Gray Dragons*, p. 27.

from his position as part of a sprawling anti-graft purge that began in 2023.²² The other three—Admiral Qin Shengxiang (秦生祥), Admiral Miao Hua, and Admiral Liu Xiaojiang (刘晓江)—were all career army officers who served in senior general department or military region roles before being appointed as PLAN commissar (see Exhibit 4 below). Moreover, Vice Admiral Leng Shaojie (冷少杰), who appears to have acted as the navy’s top commissar following Yuan’s downfall in 2025, was a career army officer who only entered the navy in 2024.²³ This situation reflects the unique characteristics of political commissars, whose political indoctrination and personnel management skills are more transferable across services than those in operational roles. But in no case was there a career PLAN political officer who benefited from service in the CMC on a path towards the service’s top commissar position.

Exhibit 4: Career Paths of PLAN Political Commissars, 2016-2024

Name	Dates as PLAN Commander	Previous CMC or Joint Roles	Previous PLAN Roles
Yuan Huazhi (袁华智)	Jan. 2022-2024/5	None	PLAN Deputy Political Commissar, Eastern TC Air Force Political Commissar, PLAN Marine Corps Political Commissar
Qin Shengxiang (秦生祥)	Aug. 2017-Jan. 2022	CMC General Office Director and CMC Reform and Organization Office Director; General Political Department Organization Director and Deputy Director	None
Miao Hua (苗华)	Dec. 2014-Sept. 2017	Lanzhou Military Region Political Commissar, Deputy Political Commissar, and Political Department Director; 12th Group Army Commissar	None
Liu Xiaojiang (刘晓江)	Dec. 2008-Dec. 2014	General Political Department Culture Department Director, Direct Work Department Deputy Commissar, and Culture Department Deputy Director	PLAN Discipline Inspection Commission Deputy Secretary, PLAN Political Department Deputy Director
Hu Yanlin (胡彦林)	June 2003-Dec. 2008	None	PLAN Deputy Political Commissar, Political Department Director; PLAN Aviation Political Department Director

²² Andrew S. Erickson, “Confirmed: ADM Yuan Huazhi Removed as the PLAN’s Political Commissar,” CMSI Note #16, China Maritime Studies Institute, 4 September 2025, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/16/>.

²³ Ibid.

The biographies of those who did serve in the CMC and its subordinate bureaucracy also illustrate the exceptional nature of these positions. As noted above, only a small handful of naval officers (13) held a director or deputy director position in any CMC department between 2016-2024. Of the eight individuals no longer in those positions, four retired from those roles, meaning that their careers had reached a dead end. The other four represent exceptional cases (see Exhibit 5 below). While leadership positions in a CMC department probably did help the future careers of these individuals and could have offered additional naval input into the decisions being considered by those departments, it is still generally the case that such experience is not the norm for most PLAN flag officers.

Exhibit 5: PLAN Officers with CMC and Post-CMC Experience, 2016-2024

Name	Pre-CMC Position/Dates	CMC Position/Dates	Post-CMC Position/Dates
Jiang Guoping (姜国平)	North Sea Fleet Chief of Staff, 2015-7	Assistant to the Joint Staff Department Chief of Staff, 2017-9	Northern Theater Command Deputy Commander and Joint Staff Department Chief
Wang Dazhong (王大忠)	PLAN Deputy Chief of Staff, 2017-8	CMC Logistics Support Department Deputy Director, 2018-2022	Northern Theater Command Navy Commander and Deputy Commander
Li Hanjun (李汉军)	Commander, Fujian Naval Base (n/a)	Deputy Director, CMC Training and Administration Department (2018-2022)	President, Naval Command Academy; PLAN Chief of Staff (2022-)
Ma Lixin (马立新)	Northern Theater Command Deputy Chief of Staff (2017-2023)	Deputy Director, CMC National Defense Mobilization Department (2023-4)	PLAN Deputy Commander (2024-)

A condition that would support a growing cadre of senior naval officers in the CMC or its subordinate staff elements would be a transformation of career patterns, either by directive or by precedent, which make those experiences more attractive. Dong Jun's role as a full-time theater deputy commander and later promotion to service chief, as well as examples such as Vice Admiral Li Hanjun (李汉军), who served a tour in the CMC Training and Administration Department before his selection as PLAN chief of staff, could establish precedents for alternative career paths that involve service in senior joint roles.²⁴ This could imply a future in which joint experience is no longer a career "kiss of death," as it was for many in the U.S. military before the requirements for joint duty qualifications mandated by the Goldwater-Nichols Act.²⁵ However, such cases are still too limited to upend a long tradition prioritizing experience within the PLAN and its fleets.

²⁴ Notably, however, Li was removed from his position in 2025 under a disciplinary investigation. See Andrew S. Erickson and Christopher H. Sharman, "PLAN Chief of Staff Li Hanjun: Fast-Rising Star of Training and Education Extinguished," CMSI Note #15, China Maritime Studies Institute, 30 June 2025, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/15/>.

²⁵ Howard D. Graves and Don M. Snider, "Emergence of the Joint Officer," *Joint Force Quarterly* 13 (Autumn 1996), p. 55.

Impact of CMC Policies

Weak institutional representation in the CMC means that the navy has often had to accept policies and directives that require it to concede manpower, missions, or resources, or that limit its ability to achieve its agenda. This section illustrates several such concessions even as naval expansion has taken place. Examples include losing operational control over deployed naval forces in the near seas, recruitment policies that create possibilities for those without a military/maritime background to serve in the navy, the re-subordination of land-based naval aviation capabilities to the air force, and the transfer of certain patrol ships to the CCG.²⁶

Command and Control

Prior to the 2015-16 reforms, peacetime operational control over naval (and air force) capabilities in the military regions was held by the service chiefs, rather than the commanders of the military regions in which those forces were based. This system contradicted the requirements of jointness because the military regions could not effectively organize joint training or planning, and because the transition from peacetime to wartime control would have involved a major realignment of authorities. The main contribution of the creation of the five theater commands was subordinating naval (and air) units to theater commanders.²⁷ The creation of the theater has contributed to increasing complexity and scale of joint training, and has facilitated more effective joint operations, including multi-domain exercises aimed at Taiwan.

Nevertheless, the transition to theater commands came at the expense of the service chiefs. The PLAN commander is now outside the operational chain of command for most deployed naval forces. Exceptions include national assets such as the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC) and “far seas” deployments beyond the scope of the theaters, including counter-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden (although even these appear to be approved and controlled by the CMC).²⁸ Moreover, while the army lost manpower as part of the reforms, it continues to hold onto many senior operational roles such as

²⁶ The PLAN headquarters still retains certain command functions directly assigned to it by the CMC, such as far seas operations beyond the areas of responsibility for the five geographic theater commands such as the Gulf of Aden escort task forces and possibly nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (i.e., SSBNs) on deterrence patrols. Ryan D. Martinson, “War without Surprises—Education for Command in the People’s Liberation Army Navy,” *Naval War College Review* 77, no. 3 (Summer/Autumn 2024), p. 4.

²⁷ Edmund J. Burke and Arthur Chan, “Coming to a (New) Theater Near You: Command, Control, and Forces,” in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, pp. 227-255.

²⁸ Dennis J. Blasko, “Recent Changes in the PLA Navy’s Gulf of Aden Deployment Pattern,” CMSI Note #8, China Maritime Studies Institute, 13 August 2024, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/8/>; 中央军委委员, 海军司令员吴胜利出席欢送仪式并致词。吴胜利说, 这次护航任务是党中央、国务院、中央军委和胡主席根据联合国安理会有关决议作出的重大决策 [“Central Military Commission Member and Navy Commander Wu Shengli Attended the Send-Off Ceremony and Stated that this Escort Mission was a Major Decision Made by the Party Central Committee, the State Council, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Hu, Based on Relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions”], Government of China, 26 December, 2008, https://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-12/26/content_1188602.htm; 这一次我们派出舰艇赴亚丁湾、索马里海域执行任务是经过我国国务院和中央军委批准的 [“This Time, Our Dispatch of Naval Vessels to the Gulf of Aden and Somali Waters to Carry Out Missions Was Approved by Our State Council and the Central Military Commission”], PRC Ministry of National Defense, 23 December, 2008, https://www.gov.cn/xwfb/2008-12/23/content_1185458.htm. Although the two official announcements are from 2008, there does not appear to be any changes to the authorities directing international deployments of PLAN assets (rotated between theater commands).

theater commander and Joint Staff Department chief of staff.²⁹ Similarly, the recent transfer of PLAN ground-based air assets signified a loss to the PLAN and a gain to the PLAAF for command and control of the network of ground-based air domain awareness radars supporting the PRC's national integrated air defense system.³⁰

Recruitment and Training

The CMC has consistently shaped naval officers' accession and education policies, at times requiring the navy to shift course. During the Mao era, recruitment policies focused heavily on ideological commitment, class background, and party loyalty. Naval personnel were often selected from rural backgrounds; educational qualifications were secondary to political credentials.³¹ Officer education in this era was based entirely on military academies rather than civilian universities.³² However, since the 1980s and accelerating in the 1990s, the CMC shifted to recruiting better educated and more technically proficient candidates. The 1997 *Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Period* underscored the importance of high-tech warfare, prompting reforms in recruitment standards.³³ By the 2000s, under CMC guidance, the PLAN started recruiting candidates from top-tier civilian universities and technical colleges in addition to military academies.³⁴ Programs were established to attract STEM graduates, reflecting the strategic shift toward enhancing cyberwarfare, ballistic missile, and undersea warfare capabilities. The introduction of the National Defense Student Program allowed some university students to receive military training alongside academic coursework, with a direct path to officer commissioning, although this program has since been canceled due to low interest.³⁵

PLAN officers can receive their commissions through several pathways. High school students and enlisted personnel can obtain their undergraduate degrees and commission through the PLA's military academies, including the CMC's direct affiliate National University of Defense Technology.³⁶ The PLAN academies, including specific warfare track schools such as the Dalian Naval Academy for surface warfare, the Naval Submarine Academy in Qingdao, and the prestigious Naval University of Engineering, also select officer cadets from the fleet (enlisted sailors

²⁹ Phillip C. Saunders and John Chen, "Is the Chinese Army the Real Winner in PLA Reforms?" *Joint Force Quarterly* 83 (October 2016), pp. 44-8.

³⁰ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2024), p. 59; Rod Lee, *PLA Naval Aviation Reorganization 2023* (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2023).

³¹ Timothy R. Heath, Howard Wang, and Cindy Zheng, *Political Legitimacy and the People's Liberation Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2025), p. 2.

³² Thomas J. Bickford, "Trends in Education and Training, 1924-2007: From Whampoa to Nanjing Polytechnic," in *The "People" in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China's Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2007), p. 27.

³³ 江泽民 [Jiang Zemin], 实现国防和军队现代化建设跨世纪发展的战略目标 ["Strategic Objectives for Realizing National Defense and Military Modernization and Development Over the New Period"], 7 December 1997, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220630161614/http://www.reformdata.org/1997/1207/5729.shtml>.

³⁴ 2022 直招军官开始了！3600 余个军官、警官岗位公开招录 ["2022 Direct Recruitment of Military Officers has Begun! Public Recruiting for Over 3,600 PLA, PAP Billets"], Sohu, 12 March 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20231213193604/https://www.sohu.com/a/529338345_121124324.

³⁵ Kenneth Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People's Liberation Army's 37 Academic Institutions* (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020), p. 2.

³⁶ Xiaoke Qi, *2024 Military Academic Institution Recruitment Plan* (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2024), pp. 1-3.

demonstrating superior performance, or those with undergraduate degrees) or from the civilian cadre (mid-career change), and from those with specialized experience outside the military.³⁷ In 1997, the CMC ordered 70 percent of officers to commission from military academic institutions, but more recent CMC direction to downsize military academic institutions from 67 to 37 and the cancellation of the National Defense Student Program indicates a renewed emphasis on direct recruitment from civilian university graduates. These directly recruited civilians would commission as naval officers without completing four years of maritime or naval training in an undergraduate, ROTC-like curriculum.³⁸ As PLAN officers promote and take increasing responsibility, they are enrolled in continuing military education, although no course is longer than ten months and there does not appear to be joint operations content before major command, unlike the U.S. system which requires joint education for field grade officers from all services.³⁹ Because warfare-specific naval training appears to happen primarily at the undergraduate level, this likely means directly commissioned candidates do not receive comprehensive naval training and are rather valued for their civilian technical expertise.

The promotion pathway of a college-educated enlisted sailor to flag command would start with ten months of “Commissioning Education School,” followed by ten months at the Dalian Academy of Surface Warfare Command. As he promotes to captain, he would attend the Naval Command College for ten months of naval combined arms command training prior to taking up a deputy commander role of a major operational naval formation such as a surface task force or a destroyer squadron. Then comes five months of naval campaign command training at the Naval Command College prior to promotion to Senior Captain and commanding a major surface formation. Finally, as he attains flag rank, he would attend ten months of joint operational command school at the National Defense University to take command of a fleet and promote beyond the fleet command level.⁴⁰

PLAN officers appear to be trained in combined naval arms during junior to intermediate courses and formally introduced to joint operational theory at the naval campaign command course. This suggests a focus on service-specific capabilities for junior and intermediate officers, for whom understanding of joint operations is less important. This also suggests operational-level decisions in joint exercises and joint operations are not made by intermediate PLAN officers.

Notably, the training pathway for PLAN political commissars, who hold dual-command authority aboard PLAN vessels alongside the captain, emphasizes political instruction over naval and maritime education, which is introduced only at initial accession training and not seen again until professional military education at above the regimental level.⁴¹ Political commissars do receive an additional two months of combined arms command training at the deputy squadron command level in the promotion between the ranks of senior instructor and deputy squadron political commissar.⁴² This somewhat stronger emphasis on joint and combined training, or at least understanding strategic intent from CMC leadership, suggests political commissars may be an important factor in closing the gap between tactical level education and experience for operational PLAN officers and integrating into

³⁷ 海军司令部 [PLA Navy Headquarters Department], 中国海军军人手册 [*Handbook of Chinese Naval Personnel*] (Beijing: Hai Chao Press, 2012), p. 143.

³⁸ Allen and Chen, *The People's Liberation Army's 37 Academic Institutions*, p. 10.

³⁹ *Handbook of Chinese Naval Personnel*, pp. 144-153.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 144; Martinson, “War Without Surprises,” p. 6.

⁴¹ *Handbook of Chinese Naval Personnel*, p. 150.

⁴² Ibid.

higher-level joint operations and fulfilling strategic objectives, due to the co-equal and dual-command nature of commanding officers and political commissars in the command of PLAN units and vessels.⁴³

Recent CMC policies have further institutionalized the direct recruitment of elite subject matter experts. Recent CMC circulars announced the eligibility of graduates from over one hundred universities to directly apply to PLA officer billet vacancies listed online under the “Double First Class” (双一流) initiative, with additional graduates eligible for vacancies in specialized fields, indicating evolving requirements for personnel coming in with specialized technical skills (compared to those who have undergone traditional maritime or naval training) to operate in increasingly complex and high-tech operations.⁴⁴ For example, in a recruitment notice from 2025, the PLAN sought undergraduates under 24 years old, Master’s graduates under 29 years old, and PhDs under 34 years old with strong STEM academic records with special emphasis on degrees in hydro-acoustics engineering, weapons science and technology, and low-density languages.⁴⁵ These university graduates are not required to have received any naval training or have military background prior to their direct commissioning into active duty with the PLAN. This could indicate a continuing tension between the needs of the CMC to recruit highly specialized technical personnel, and the navy’s traditional emphasis on maritime skills and graduates of military institution.⁴⁶

Manning and Mobilization

The 2015-2016 reforms impacted PLAN service-level decision-making authorities on manning and mobilizing forces, including reserve forces. While the PLAN retains the man, train, and equip functions for naval forces, the reforms established a Training and Administration Department (中央军委训练管理部; TAD) and National Defense Mobilization Department (中央军委国防动员部; NDMD), both reporting directly to the CMC.⁴⁷ There are no identified PLAN personnel in senior positions within the TAD, which appears to formulate CMC directives on training for the PLA, including the directive to improve joint operational combat capabilities.⁴⁸

However, as of late 2024 there were two PLAN rear admirals serving as deputy directors within the NDMD, which oversees divisions for personnel, national defense education, and bureaus for

⁴³ Jeff W. Benson and Zi Yang, *Party on the Bridge – Political Commissars in the Chinese Navy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), p. 25.

⁴⁴ “2022 Direct Recruitment” and “China Recruits More Officers from College Students,” Xinhua, 19 March 2025, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202503/19/WS67da79aba310c240449dbb76.html>.

⁴⁵ 2025 年下半年海军直接选拔招录普通高等学校应届毕业生公告 [“Public Notice for PLAN Direct Recruitment of University Graduates in the second half of 2025], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 14 September 2025, <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20250914A03IYS00>.

⁴⁶ 海军工程大学 2026 年直接选拔招录“双一流”入伍研究生公告 [“Public Notice of the Naval University of Engineering’s Direct Selection of ‘Double First Class’ Candidates for its 2026 Graduate School Cohort”], 海军工程大学招生信息网 [Naval University of Engineering Recruitment Website], 23 July 2025, <https://www.nue.edu.cn/htmls/xuexiaodongtai/20250723/1948013334250917888.html>.

⁴⁷ 解放军四总部改组 15 部门 联合参谋部是指挥关键 [“PLA’s Four Headquarters Reformed into 15 departments, Joint Staff Department is the Key Command Node”], 大公网 [Ta Kung Pao], 12 January 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201104110832/http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/focus/2016-01/3266754.html>.

⁴⁸ “Chinese Military Releases Outline to Improve Joint Combat Capabilities,” *China Military Online*, 13 November 2020, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CMC/Departments/TrainingandAdministrationDepartment/10055542.html>.

mobilization and recruitment as well as militia and reserves administration.⁴⁹ One significant detail is that the NDMD is responsible for “leading and managing the provincial military commands,” a task previously assigned to the military region headquarters.⁵⁰ The NDMD plays an important role in this system by organizing and overseeing the PLA’s reserve forces, militia, and provincial military districts and below.⁵¹ Although founded to support the ground forces, recent reforms seek to reduce PLAA reserves and increase those for the PLAN, PLAAF, and the Rocket Force (PLARF).

The 2022 Reservist Law (中华人民共和国预备役人员法) directs fundamental reforms to the PLA organizational structure to adapt to future combat operations and to better integrate reserve forces with active-duty components.⁵² Notably, the law broadens the pool of eligible reservist candidates to include non-prior service individuals with special technical skills or professional experience direct from the civilian sector, similar to the emphasis on directly commissioning such candidates into active duty. This is likely designed to improve technical capabilities within the forces, especially those related to cyber and information warfare, in the event of a major contingency. As these reforms are directed by the CMC and implemented by the PLAN, this indicates a shift away from emphasis on traditional maritime (i.e. surface warfare) experience and toward a pool of off-the-shelf technical capabilities which can be easily leveraged by a centralized and strategic command function over service-specific command functions.

Forces and Capabilities

Recent shifts in military asset allocations may signify a divestment of certain near-shore missions previously conducted by the navy, possibly at the direction of the CMC and not at the direction of PLAN headquarters. In 2023, for example, shifting missions for naval aviation triggered the transfer of significant portions of PLAN shore-based, fixed-wing combat aviation units, facilities, air defense, and radar units to the PLAAF. Signaling its emphasis on developing carrier-based aviation capabilities, the PLAN transferred several shore-based aircraft brigades and regiments to the PLAAF. This includes its entire complement of H-6J bombers and JH-7 maritime strike aircraft.⁵³ These aircraft, which were also the PLAN’s minelayer aircraft, were absorbed by the air force and continue to remain available for shore-based maritime strike missions. This transfer of maritime strike capabilities to the PLAAF appears to continue along the trend for the PLAAF to take on more air capabilities in the maritime domain; PLAAF H-6Ks have been training for out-of-area maritime missions since 2016 and maritime strike missions since 2020.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Directory of PRC Military Personalities* (2024), pp. 13-14.

⁵⁰ Kenneth W. Allen, Dennis J. Blasko, and John F. Corbett Jr., “Updated – The PLA’s New Organizational Structure: What Is Known, Unknown, and Speculation, Parts 1 & 2,” *China Brief*, 4 February 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-new-organizational-structure-what-is-known-unknown-and-speculation-part-1/>.

⁵¹ 军委国防动员部下设民兵预备役局边防局等单位[“National Defense and Mobilization Department designates Militia Readiness Office, Border Security Office, and Other Subordinate Offices”], 中国军网-中国国防报[*China Military Net – China National Defense News*], 13 April 2016, http://www.81.cn/jwgz/2016-04/13/content_7004077.htm; *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (2024), p. 29.

⁵² 全国人大常委会表决通过预备役人员法 [“National People’s Congress Standing Committee Passes the Reservist Law”], Xinhua, 31 December 2022, http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-12/31/c_1129247172.htm. Tiffany Tat, “PLA Navy Reserve: Out of the Shadows and into the Forefront?” CMSI Note #7, China Maritime Studies Institute, 1 August 2024, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-notes/7/>.

⁵³ Lee, *PLA Naval Aviation Reorganization 2023*, p. 1.

⁵⁴ 军事专家：中国空军远海训练正经历重大变化，空战体系已形成 [“Military Experts say PLAAF Far Seas Training Experience Undergo Significant Changes, Developing System for Air Combat”], 16 December 2016,

The PLAN also recently transferred surface assets, including 20 1500-ton Type-056 corvettes, to the CCG, which were subsequently modified for maritime law enforcement operations, enhancing CCG capabilities and range. These corvettes are equipped with a landing pad for a Z-9C helicopter high-capacity water cannons, multiple interceptor boats and guns ranging from 30 mm to 76 mm.⁵⁵ Unlike previous transfers of outdated PLAN ships to the CCG, these were newer ships that had not reached the end of their service life (some had only been in the navy for six to seven years).⁵⁶ However, this transfer did not include the anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capable Type-056As, which remain in service with the PLAN. This may indicate that while advanced warfare capabilities such as ASW still remain a PLAN core mission, the CCG may be taking on some of the PLAN's former maritime security responsibilities even as maritime assertions become increasingly important as part of China's national security strategy.⁵⁷ In any event, this transfer of assets, and possibly manpower billets, may signify a streamlining of missions for the PLAN to be a more blue water force focused on peer adversaries, while the CCG is elevated and its missions expanded to conduct more near-shore and maritime rights enforcement missions against lesser adversaries.

In amphibious warfare, the navy achieved a better result when, in 2017, the army transferred three amphibious brigades to the PLANMC.⁵⁸ In 2023, the army transferred an additional three brigades, bringing the PLANMC up to 11 naval infantry brigades, which improved the branch's emerging expeditionary capabilities.⁵⁹ These new PLANMC brigades might play a more influential role in overseas operations, under the direction of the CMC.⁶⁰ However, in a testament to the army's ability to preserve important components of its structure in a time of rapid organizational restructuring, the main amphibious role for a Taiwan contingency still lies with the army.⁶¹ Its six amphibious brigades opposite the Taiwan Strait have been significantly modernized and standardized since 2017.⁶²

https://web.archive.org/web/20171222173737/http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1581496; *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (2024), p. 53.

⁵⁵ Andrew Tate, "China Commissions Fourth ASW-Capable Type 056 Corvette," *Jane's Navy International*, May 11, 2015; *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (2024), p. 77.

⁵⁶ 武德充沛! 海军 20 艘 056 全部转隶海警部队, 中国周边想“挑事儿”的要当心了! ["Full of Martial Virtue! All 20 Type-056 PLAN Corvettes Have Been Transferred to the Coast Guard. Those Who Want to 'Make Trouble' Around China Should Be Careful!"], Zhihu, 28 November 2021, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/438944213>.

⁵⁷ U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Type 056A Class (Jiangdao II Class) Chinese Corvette, *Worldwide Equipment Guide*, 2025, <https://odin.tradoc.army.mil/WEG/Asset/dcb55796f5ea5f6b90490f1ac85df76b>; 新时代的中国国家安全["National Security in the New Era"], 12 May 2025, 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室 ["People's Republic of China State Council Press Office"], http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/zfbps_2279/202505/t20250512_894771.html.

⁵⁸ Dennis J. Blasko and Roderick Lee, "The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 1: Expansion and Reorganization," *China Brief*, 1 February 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-chinese-navys-marine-corps-part-1-expansion-and-reorganization/>.

⁵⁹ 解放军海军陆战队完成扩编, 达到集团军规模, 首波能投入 5 万兵力["PLAMC Completes Expansion, Reaching 'Group Army' Size, Can Contribute Strength of 50,000 in the First Wave"], 25 January 2024, <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20240125A00WIP00>; *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (2024), p. 44.

⁶⁰ PLANMC special operations forces are deployed to Djibouti, for example. Tim Ditter et al. *The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2024); John Chen and Joel Wuthnow, *Sea Dragons: Special Operations and Chinese Military Strategy* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2025), p. 25.

⁶¹ Joshua Arostegui, "PLA Army and Marine Corps Amphibious Brigades in a Post-Reform Military," in *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2022), pp. 161-194.

⁶² Dennis J. Blasko, *The PLA Army Amphibious Force*, China Maritime Report No. 20, China Maritime Studies Institute, April 2022, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/20/>.

Conclusion

Despite its unprecedented buildup in recent years, China's navy is still more of a decision-taker than an influential CMC decision-maker. Flag officers account for only a marginally larger share of the PLA leadership than in the period before Xi's arrival and have been mostly absent from senior positions in the CMC departments. They have fared better in theater-level operational roles, with navy officers serving once as a commander and political commissar, and consistently as deputy commanders. On the CMC itself, Liu Huaqing was the last navy officer to serve as vice chairman and the removal of the service chiefs in 2017 meant that the navy lost its institutional representation on the CMC. The navy has certainly witnessed impressive growth in recent decades, as demonstrated in the historic modernization and expansion of large surface combatants (from 216 in 2004 to 332 in 2023).⁶³ However, the decisive factor was at the top—including Hu Jintao, whose strategic vision foresaw China becoming a “maritime great power,” and Xi Jinping, who has been a tireless advocate for a larger and more powerful navy to protect the nation's maritime rights and interests and as a symbol of China's rejuvenation.⁶⁴

Two reasons can help explain why the navy has not improved its representation. First is the endurance of the army's privileged status in senior level positions responsible for managing the PLA. Xi had an opportunity to appoint more officers from the other services to these roles but chose instead to respect tradition. This might have been a way to cater to the interests of the PLA's largest service and increase support for reforms that required the army to reduce manpower and force structure.⁶⁵ Second is that there are career disincentives for naval officers to seek out joint positions. Although Xi has encouraged the PLA to improve its joint commanders, attainment of top positions such as service chief and theater commander still run through operational experiences in one's own service, and the navy is no exception.

A navy that has not increased its share of influential positions has implications for PLA operations and management decisions. The CMC, which approves major operational decisions, does not have ex officio naval expertise and would have to seek it from officers at lower echelons. This does not necessarily suggest poor decision-making, but it means that the high command would have less ability to weigh the quality of advice from the other services than in a true joint staff model. A modestly growing share of naval officers in theater joint headquarters and in the CMC Joint Operations Command Center permits stronger consideration of naval equities in the formulation of joint training and contingency plans, yet persistent army dominance means that final decisions could be made by individuals with little naval expertise. Recruiting personnel without formal maritime or naval academy training, but with strong STEM backgrounds, may boost technical naval performance even as it accentuates a longstanding tension between traditionally trained maritime officers and those from non-traditional career tracks.

From a management perspective, the navy does not have unique advantages to lobby for resources, manpower, or structure. Thus, while Admiral Liu's vision of a blue water navy has been realized precisely because it was adopted by senior civilian leaders including Hu and Xi, there are constraints

⁶³ Ron O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2025), p. 8.

⁶⁴ Ryan D. Martinson, *Chairman Xi's Navy*, China Maritime Report No. 54, China Maritime Studies Institute, June 2026, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/54/>.

⁶⁵ Joel Wuthnow, “Stabilizing the Boat: Revisiting Party-Army Relations under Xi Jinping,” in *The PLA in a Complex Security Environment: Preparing for High Winds and Choppy Waters*, ed. Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2025), pp. 41-64.

on how much the CMC will choose to expand or modernize the fleet relative to other requirements. The navy chief, without a direct CMC role, must compete for resources against other PLA interest groups, including the other services, support forces, and theaters. The limits on the navy's ability to gain bureaucratic advantages during the Xi era are apparent in its lagging manpower share compared to the other services, loss of its land-based aviation facilities and capabilities to the air force, and transfers of newer surface combatants to the CCG. They also have limited ability to influence personnel decisions, including policies related to the recruitment and development of naval officers.

The broader lesson for the PLA is that while service interests are considered, the top-down control model exercised by the CMC and its chairman mean that no particular interest group can attain a dominant position.⁶⁶ The navy, as discussed in this report, has faced constraints in manpower, command and control, capabilities, and roles and missions. The air force once aspired to control the space mission by promulgating an “integrated air and space capability” mission in the early 2000s but could not achieve it when space became a core role for the Strategic Support Force.⁶⁷ The Strategic Support Force could not survive intact when Xi decided to carve it up into three constituent units.⁶⁸ Even the ground forces, which have maintained a predominant position in the senior PLA leadership, needed to shed force structure and manpower to fulfill Xi's vision of a more balanced force.⁶⁹ Such realities are likely to continue as the CMC must balance priorities to achieve the PLA's long-range development goals.

⁶⁶ Tai Ming Cheung, “The Riddle in the Middle: China's Central Military Commission in the Twenty-First Century,” in *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking*, pp. 84-119.

⁶⁷ Kenneth Allen, “Overview of the PLA Air Force's Kongtian Yiti Strategy” (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2019).

⁶⁸ J. Michael Dahm, “A Disturbance in the Force: The Reorganization of People's Liberation Army Command and Elimination of China's Strategic Support Force,” *China Brief*, 26 April 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/a-disturbance-in-the-force-the-reorganization-of-peoples-liberation-army-command-and-elimination-of-chinas-strategic-support-force/>.

⁶⁹ Dennis J. Blasko, “The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms: The PLA Army,” in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, pp. 345-392.

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