

**People's Liberation Army: Command Structure of the Armed Services**

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*The views expressed in this entry are those of the author alone and do not represent the official policies or estimates of the U.S. Navy or any other element of the U.S. government.*

**COMMAND STRUCTURE OF THE ARMED SERVICES**

Like all other major parts of government, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has parallel Communist Party- and state-bureaucratic structures. Every headquarters of the PLA has a

party committee (*dangwei*) and a party standing committee (*dangwei changwei*). Political commissars (usually the committee secretary) and military commanders (usually the deputy secretary) make decisions using a party-committee system that brings them and their deputies into a collective decision-making process. Staff departments (e.g., command, political, logistics, armaments) support their decisions by providing information and analysis to relevant party committees and then monitor and guide implementation at lower levels.

On the party side, the Central Military Commission (Zhongyang Junshi Weiyuanhui), established in February 1930 as part of a gradual, negotiated process, makes decisions on operational policy (*zuozhan fang'an*) for the PLA as its party committee and determines national military strategy, as China's national command authority. It currently has eleven members: Chairman Hu Jintao, China's president; two vice chairs; a defense minister; four general department heads, and the commanders of the PLA Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery. The general office (*bangongting*) of the Central Military Commission (CMC) coordinates the general departments, services, and premier professional-military-education institutions (the National Defense University and the Academy of Military Science) to realize national military strategy. Four general departments, led by commission members, are responsible for operational command (*zuozhan zhihui*), and assist in the promulgation and implementation of CMC policy (e.g., by

A comparison of administrative levels			
Organization	First level	Second level*	Third level**
General departments ( <i>zongbu</i> )	4 departments ( <i>bu</i> )	Department ( <i>bu</i> ), general office ( <i>bangongting</i> ), bureau ( <i>ju</i> )	Bureau ( <i>ju</i> )
Service headquarters ( <i>junzhong</i> )	4 departments ( <i>bu</i> )	Department ( <i>bu</i> ), office ( <i>bangongshi</i> ), bureau ( <i>ju</i> )	Division ( <i>chu</i> )
Military-region headquarters ( <i>junqu</i> )	4 departments ( <i>bu</i> )	Department ( <i>bu</i> ), office ( <i>bangongshi</i> )	Division ( <i>chu</i> )
Military region of the Air Force/fleet headquarters ( <i>junqu Kongjun/Jiandui</i> )	4 departments ( <i>bu</i> )	Office ( <i>bangongshi</i> ), division ( <i>chu</i> )	Office ( <i>ke</i> )
Army/corps ( <i>jun</i> )	4 departments ( <i>bu</i> )	Division ( <i>chu</i> )	Office ( <i>ke</i> )
Base ( <i>jidi</i> )	4 departments ( <i>bu</i> )	Division ( <i>chu</i> )	Office ( <i>ke</i> )
Division ( <i>shi</i> )	4 departments ( <i>bu</i> )	Office ( <i>ke</i> )	Office ( <i>ke</i> )
Brigade ( <i>liu</i> )	4 departments ( <i>bu</i> )	Office ( <i>ke</i> )	Office ( <i>ke</i> )
Regiment ( <i>tuan</i> )	Headquarters department ( <i>bu</i> ); political, logistics, and armament/maintenance divisions ( <i>chu</i> )	Branch ( <i>gu</i> )	
Battalion ( <i>ying</i> ), group ( <i>dadui</i> )	N/A		
Company ( <i>lian</i> ), squadron ( <i>zhongdui</i> )	N/A		

\*Some second level departments are in the process of being consolidated.  
 \*\*Third level organizations are in the process of being consolidated and reduced, particularly below the division level.

**Table 1**

*People's Liberation Army: Command Structure of the Armed Services*

Officer grades and ranks of the People's Liberation Army						
Grade ( <i>zhiwu dengji</i> )	Military rank ( <i>junxian</i> )	Service limit age	Army	Navy	Air Force	2nd Artillery
1. Central Military Commission chairman (Junwei <i>zhuxi</i> ), vice chairman ( <i>fuzhuxi</i> )	Chairman: none; vice chairman: general					
2. Central Military Commission member (Junwei <i>welyuan</i> )	General		General departments			
3. Military-region leader ( <i>daqu zhengzhi</i> )	General, lieutenant general	65	Military region/general department deputy leader	Headquarters	Headquarters	Headquarters
4. Military region deputy leader ( <i>daqu fuzhi</i> )	Lieutenant general, major general	63		Fleet/naval aviation	Military region of the Air Force	
5. Army leader ( <i>zhengjun</i> )	Major general, lieutenant general	55	Army ( <i>jitian jun</i> ), military district	Base, fleet aviation	Airborne army	Base
6. Army deputy leader ( <i>fujun</i> )	Major general, senior colonel	55				
7. Division leader ( <i>zhengshi</i> )	Senior colonel, major general	50	Division	Garrison ( <i>zhidui</i> ), flotilla ( <i>jiandui</i> )	Division command post	
8. Division deputy leader ( <i>fushi</i> ), brigade leader ( <i>zhenglü</i> )	Colonel, senior colonel	50	Brigade		Brigade	Brigade
9. Regiment leader ( <i>zhengtuan</i> ), brigade deputy leader ( <i>fulü</i> )	Colonel, lieutenant colonel	45	Regiment	Group ( <i>jianting dadui</i> )	Regiment, brigade deputy leader	Brigade deputy leader
10. Regiment deputy leader ( <i>futuan</i> )	Lieutenant colonel, colonel	45				
11. Battalion leader ( <i>zhengying</i> )	Major, lieutenant colonel	40	Battalion	Squadron ( <i>jianting zhongdai</i> )	Battalion, group ( <i>dadui</i> )	Battalion
12. Battalion deputy leader ( <i>fuying</i> )	Captain, major	40				
13. Company leader ( <i>zhenglian</i> )	Captain, 1st lieutenant	35	Company		Company, squadron ( <i>zhongdai</i> )	Company
14. Company deputy leader ( <i>fulian</i> )	1st lieutenant, captain	35				
15. Platoon leader ( <i>zhengpai</i> )	2nd or 1st lieutenant	30	Platoon		Platoon, flight ( <i>fendui</i> )	Platoon

**Table 2**

helping line officers make decisions): the General Staff Department (strategy and operations); the General Political Department (in charge of personnel, party indoctrination, internal security, and psychological operations since 1931, save for 1937–1946); the General Logistics Department (finance, supply, military-matériel industries, construction, and medical); and the General Armaments Department (in charge of weapons development, production, and acquisition since 1998). The General Staff Department's Second and Third Departments, as well as the General Political Department's Liaison Department, are responsible for intelligence. This bureaucratic pattern is replicated in the military regions, where communications-intercept stations are based (see Table 1).

The fact that the PLA remains a party army is revealed by its small, relatively noninfluential state-side organizations that are counterparts to party organizations. The State Council oversees the Ministry of National Defense (whose minister is a senior member of the CMC, as provided for by China's 1982 constitution) and the state CMC (which merely approves decisions by the party CMC). The Min-

istry of National Defense was created specifically to interface with foreign counterparts and lacks independent authority. Party pronouncements stipulate that the PLA will remain a party army for the foreseeable future.

This system has the benefit of maintaining political consensus and avoiding rash decisions, but in comparison with Western military systems with complete civilian leadership and a single chain of command, it suffers from two major challenges aggravated by the requirements of modern warfare. First, it is sometimes difficult to divide responsibilities clearly under the unified party-committee leadership. Second, it may be difficult to decide which decisions are sufficiently important to forward to the party committee. This might slow the deployment of troops into combat situations or limit their ability to react quickly to changing conditions once there.

**GRADES AND RANKS**

The Officer Grade and Rank System (*Ganbu Dengji Zhidu*) of the PLA has evolved fitfully. In the early years of the PLA,

*People's Liberation Army: Military Doctrine*

Enlisted grades and ranks of the People's Liberation Army			
Time in service	Service period	Grade ( <i>sandeng liuji</i> )	Rank ( <i>junxian</i> )
1st year	Conscript (2 years)	Conscript ( <i>shibing</i> )	Private 2nd class ( <i>liebing</i> )
2nd year			Private 1st class ( <i>shangdengbing</i> )
2–4 years	1st period (3 years)	1st grade, basic noncommissioned officer ( <i>chuji shiguan</i> )	Sergeant 1st grade ( <i>yiji shiguan</i> )
5–7 years	2nd period (3 years)	2nd grade, basic noncommissioned officer ( <i>erji shiguan</i> )	Sergeant 2nd grade ( <i>erji shiguan</i> )
8–11 years	3rd period (4 years)	3rd grade, intermediate noncommissioned officer ( <i>zhongji shiguan</i> )	Sergeant 3rd grade ( <i>sanji shiguan</i> )
12–15 years	4th period (4 years)	4th grade, intermediate noncommissioned officer ( <i>zhongji shiguan</i> )	Sergeant 4th grade ( <i>siji shiguan</i> )
16–20 years	5th period (5 years)	5th grade, advanced noncommissioned officer ( <i>gaoji shiguan</i> )	Sergeant 5th grade ( <i>wuji shiguan</i> )
21–30 years	6th period (9 years)	6th grade, advanced noncommissioned officer ( <i>gaoji shiguan</i> )	Sergeant 6th grade ( <i>liuji shiguan</i> )

Table 3

there was tension between Mao Zedong, who championed an egalitarian “red” peasant army, and Marshals Zhu De and Peng Dehuai, who advocated a more professional “expert” Western-style military hierarchy. Soviet-style ranks were established in 1955, when ten officers were promoted to marshal and ten to senior general. The call to be red was taken to extremes during the decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when many professional-military-education schools were closed, instructors were harassed and in many cases killed, and political study supplanted operationally useful training. Ranks were abolished in 1965 and not reinstated until October 1, 1988, following poor performance during the 1979 “self-defensive counterattack” against Vietnam. The rank of marshal was eliminated. Seventeen officers were promoted to full general, and many officers persecuted during the Cultural Revolution were rehabilitated. By 1993 most of these generals had retired, and Jiang Zemin promoted twenty-five officers to full general both to further standardize and professionalize the officer corps and to consolidate his civilian authority. Tables 2 and 3 outline the PLA’s grades (which are more important) and ranks for officers and the enlisted.

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**MILITARY DOCTRINE**

Since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) developed its own military forces in the late 1920s, top Communist leaders have, at least until the 1990s, seen the definition of basic military doctrine as a core role, primarily in their capacity as chair of the Military Affairs Commission of the CCP. Certainly Mao Zedong and, to a lesser extent, Deng Xiaoping, played the leading role in the codification of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) military doctrine. Since the 1990s, military professionals have increasingly defined doctrine, with the concurrence of the chairman of the Military Affairs Commission (often also the general secretary of the CCP). The core national interests of China (as defined by the CCP) are to maintain the CCP’s leadership position in Chinese society, to defend China’s territorial integrity (including creating the ability to bring Taiwan under Chinese control), and increasingly to defend and protect Chinese interests internationally. China’s defense doctrine takes these core interests as the starting point to develop systematic ideas governing the role of the use of force and the conditions under which force is used, and to guide the acquisition of capabilities (weapon systems) that make it possible for the successful implementation of doctrine.

The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) defines *doctrine* as “fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in application” (DOD 2001, p. 169). Whatever the U.S. definition, China’s definition of doctrine is sufficiently unclear that leading Western experts disagree on what it is. Moreover, while China appears to have a formal written military doctrine, it is not publicly revealed. While there has been some movement toward improved transparency, available public statements are at a high level of generality. These vague statements are often combined with sanitized intelligence reports released by national governments, particularly the U.S. government, to make reasonable assessments about what Chinese military doctrine is. Over time, instead of a formal definition, it is more useful to distinguish among the