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## **Admiral Hu to the Helm: China's New Navy Commander Brings Operational Expertise**

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China's Navy, the world's largest by number of ships, has a new leader. On 25 December 2023, Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping, in his capacity as Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman, promoted Vice Admiral Hu Zhongming (胡中明) to Admiral and appointed him Commander of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) (海军司令员).<sup>2</sup> Hu's predecessor Admiral Dong Jun (董军) attended the promotion ceremony, suggesting this is an orderly and expected transition—unlike recent removals of the PLA Defense Minister and the former Commander of China's Strategic Rocket Forces.<sup>3</sup>

### **CMSI's Perspectives and Key Take-Aways:**

- Admiral Hu's operational experience commanding both submarines and surface ships will enable him to guide PLAN efforts to improve coordination across warfare domains.
- Hu has experience commanding units operating throughout the South China Sea. He commanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> Submarine Base, which has nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) that will have operated in the South China Sea. Prior to 2010, he was a submarine Commanding Officer at the base, which means he likely operated in disputed waterspace.
- This confers significant real-world experience operating in contested waters and may portend a vision to use the PLAN more aggressively in gray zone activities or even future conflict, although the Commander's core responsibilities are to man, train, and equip the force.
- Hu's background fuses Theater Command experience with technical, exercise-testing, and operational knowledge which will enable him to focus PLAN efforts to address critical shortcomings with a fast-growing force.
- Multi-fleet experience gives Admiral Hu unique insights into each fleet's strengths and weaknesses that will enable him to provide organizational and training improvements to ensure PLAN readiness, as well as to offer uniquely tailored guidance for PLAN operational and tactical improvements.
- As a submariner, Hu is well-positioned to help the PLAN prioritize and address its weaknesses in undersea warfare.

- Hu’s first-hand experience averting a submarine disaster and keen understanding of the complexities of the undersea domain may portend a greater emphasis on damage control training as well as undersea warfare.
- Hu has substantial international experience. He joined the PLAN’s first global circumnavigation in 2002. He was the PLAN lead (Executive Director/执行导演) for the Sino-Russia exercise Joint Sea-2017, giving him personal familiarity in cooperating with a major strategic partner.<sup>4</sup>

## Discussion:

As tenth Commander in the PLAN’s seventy-four-year history, Admiral Hu brings a broad organizational and functional background, as well as valuable technical and operational prowess to a force whose surface fleet and anti-surface mission and missiles have burgeoned dramatically but whose submarine leadership and training apparently still lag overall.<sup>5</sup>

In a pronounced—though hardly unique—pattern, PRC bureaucracy tends to incrementally test, groom, and socialize rising leaders over time. For the past two years (December 2021-December 2023), Hu served as the PLAN Chief of Staff (海军参谋长) with the same grade as the PLAN Deputy Commanders (Theater Command Deputy Leader). In this role, in September 2023 Hu traveled overseas to South Africa, where he paid a courtesy call at South Africa’s Naval Headquarters in Pretoria.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to this topline bureaucratic experience, Hu’s career reflects Xi’s military restructuring. Established on 1 February 2016, the Theater Commands offer both a more operationally-relevant means of organizing PLA(N) forces and the unprecedented prospect of allowing meaningful numbers of naval officers to attain leadership positions in military regional bureaucracies.<sup>7</sup> In December 2019, Hu received rank promotion to Vice Admiral (2 stars).<sup>8</sup> From December 2019 to December 2021, Hu served as the Commander of the Northern Theater Command Navy (北部战区海军司令员), headquartered in his hometown of Qingdao, and as a concurrent Deputy Commander of the Northern Theater Command (兼北部战区副司令员) with the grade of Theater Command Deputy Leader.

From 2016 to December 2019, Hu served as one of the PLAN Headquarters’ Deputy Chiefs of Staff (海军副参谋长) with the grade of Corps Leader. Hu received rank promotion to Rear Admiral (1 star) in July 2014,<sup>9</sup> then became an Assistant to the Chief of Naval Staff in December 2014 with the grade of Corps Deputy Leader.<sup>10</sup> Hu began his systematic climb through navy leadership with appointment as the Commander of the Navy’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Submarine Base (海军潜艇第二基地司令员) at Yalong Bay in Sanya, Hainan Province (MUCD 92730) starting in July 2013 with the grade of Corps Deputy Leader.

Born in January 1964 in the naval city of Qingdao, Shandong Province, Hu joined the PLA in 1979. He began his career in the submarine force and served with distinction in a wide variety of roles, including commanding a submarine. As of 1996, Hu served as Commanding Officer of the submarine “Great Wall 11” (“长城 11 号”潜艇).<sup>11</sup> In 2008, as Commander of the 90<sup>th</sup> Detachment (92730 部队 90 分队分队长) of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Submarine Base—one of the two units responsible for China’s nuclear-powered submarines—Hu was credited with numerous achievements in a special *PLA Daily* feature. His unit was recognized by the PLAN “as an advanced ship company standard-bearer, and by the fleet as a standard-bearer unit for grass-roots construction.” In 2006, the PLAN recognized Hu as “an excellent grass-roots master

standard bearer,” credited with strong education and management contributions. For this, he was honored with one second-class merit and three third-class merits. Hu completed conventional submarine commanding officer comprehensive training, destroyer captain solo qualified training, and full subject training for “a new type of submarine.” The last almost certainly means qualification to command a nuclear-powered submarine, because the 2<sup>nd</sup> Submarine Base only has nuclear-powered submarines. Hu also participated in the PLAN’s first round-the-world cruise in 2002, as well as in many major exercises and drills.<sup>12</sup>

In 2009, as the Commanding Officer of a submarine, Hu was lauded for having previously avoided disaster during an “automatic steering depth test” during sea trials for a new type of submarine, improving testing procedures, and innovating training and real time communications measures to enhance safety during emergency conditions.<sup>13</sup> Apparently the mishap took place in less than 100m of water (百米不到的海域) and the submarine’s underbelly actually grazed the seafloor (潜艇腹部与海底擦肩而过又迅速上浮).<sup>14</sup> The submarine in question was definitely a nuclear-powered boat, because it was from the 2<sup>nd</sup> submarine base, which only has nuclear-powered submarines.<sup>15</sup>

In July 2013, Hu was appointed Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Submarine Base. As Commander of that base in 2014, Hu was credited with cultivating human capital necessary to unleash nuclear submarine combat power by taking measures to “train the troops with difficulty and rigor in accordance with actual combat needs” (实战需要出发从难从严训练部队) while emphasizing safety and accident avoidance.<sup>16</sup>

### **Bottom Line:**

Xi’s selection of Admiral Hu Zhongming to lead the PLAN reflects his priority for PLA military commanders to have real-world operational experience and follows a trend of PLAN leaders who bring credible warfighting capabilities to their leadership roles. Hu’s operational experience will guide efforts to rapidly address identified shortcomings within the PLAN and to enhance its warfighting capabilities across all PLAN warfare domains and with other services.

Specifically, Hu has extensive experience in undersea warfare, heretofore a lagging area for the PLAN. He has first-hand familiarity with two key warfare communities (submarine and surface). Finally, he has considerable experience training forces—which will be his job: to man, train, and equip the service. The PLAN commander no longer makes operational decisions in peacetime, so how his units are used will ultimately be decided by the CMC and the Theater Commands.

Admiral Hu’s practical experience suggests he is likely to be a seasoned and pragmatic, if inevitably Party-controlled, interlocutor during diplomatic engagements with foreign Navy delegations. He is likely to be an operator’s operator, adeptly capable of addressing complex maritime issues—from the capability requirements to the Navy’s role in support of maritime disputes. The breadth of his operational assignments along with his unique maritime achievements suggest he is likely to command the respect of the PLAN and the trust of Xi at a time when the PLAN is charged with great responsibilities on a demanding timeline.

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<sup>2</sup> Hu was promoted to 3-star Admiral, the highest PLAN rank.

<sup>3</sup> 责任编辑: 温腾 [Editor in Charge: Wen Teng], “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 Held a Ceremony for Promotion to the Rank of General. Xi Jinping Issued a Certificate of Order and Congratulated the Officers], 人民日报 [People’s Daily], 25 December 2023, <https://wap.peopleapp.com/article/7297251/7135115>.

<sup>4</sup> “中俄‘海上联合-2017’创该系列演习多个‘首次’” [The Sino-Russian “Maritime Joint-2017” Exercise Series Achieved Many “Firsts”], 中国新闻网 [China News Net], 25 September 2017, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/m/mil/2017/09-25/8339843.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> China Maritime Studies Institute, “Chinese Undersea Warfare: Development, Capabilities, Trends,” Quick Look Conference Summary (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 5 May 2023), <https://bit.ly/CMSI2023>.

<sup>6</sup> “PLAN CoS meets CSAN,” DefenceWeb, 7 September 2023, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/sea/sea-sea/plan-cos-meets-csan/>.

<sup>7</sup> At a ceremony attended by the entire CMC, five new “Theater Commands” were established in protocol order—Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, and Central—and their commanders and PCs were appointed. They replaced the former seven Military Area Commands (e.g., Military Regions)—Shenyang, Beijing, Lanzhou, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, and Chengdu. Whereas the former Military Regions were primarily the regional Army Headquarters and dominated by Army officers, the five Theater Commands have become joint organizations.

<sup>8</sup> 责任编辑: 韩佳鹏 [Editor: Han Jiapeng], “海军举行晋升将官军衔仪式 4人晋升为中将” [The Navy Held a General Promotion Ceremony—4 People Were Promoted to Rear Admirals], 当代海军 [Navy Today], 14 December 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20191214091634/https://news.163.com/19/1214/12/F0C0Q4P40001899O.html>. As a general rule, PLA rank and grade promotions have not occurred at the same time; however, this situation began changing in December 2019 when grade and rank promotions for 3-star flag officers occurred simultaneously. Although starting in 2017 the PLA has wanted simultaneous rank and grade promotions to occur at every level, it has been a very long and difficult process and has not yet been fully implemented.

<sup>9</sup> 本报记者蒲海洋 [Pu Haiyang], “海军隆重举行将官军衔晋升仪式--吴胜利宣读命令 刘晓江主持仪式” [The Navy Held a Grand Ceremony to Promote Flag and General Officers in Rank—Wu Shengli Read Orders, Liu Xiaojiang Presided Over the Ceremony], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 11 July 2014, 1.

<sup>10</sup> 吴耀谦 [Wu Yaoqian], “胡中明少将履新海军参谋长助理, 曾参加海军首次环球航行” [Major General Hu Zhongming Serves as the New Assistant to the Chief of Naval Staff and Participated in the Navy’s First Round-The-World Voyage], 澎湃新闻 [The Paper], 8 April 2015, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1318375](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1318375).

<sup>11</sup> 翟佩能、郭建跃 [Zhai Peineng and Guo Jianyue], “立足本职岗位建设精神文明” [Building a Spiritual Civilization Based On One’s Own Position], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 15 December 1996.

<sup>12</sup> “建功军营精武沙场——第九届全军学习成才标兵风采录” [Constructing Military Camps and Martial Arts Sands—The Ninth Army Learning And Successful Pacesetters’ Style Record], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 22 September 2008, <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2008-09-22/0624522402.html>.

<sup>13</sup> 本报特约通讯员 黄育平 叶文勇 [Special correspondents Huang Yuping and Ye Wenyong], “潜艇艇长胡中明--试验试航不惧险” [Submarine Captain Hu Zhongming—Experimentation and Sea Trial without Fear of Danger], in “人民海军走过六十年风雨征程一代新型舰长走向大洋” [The People’s Navy Has Gone through Sixty Years of Ups and Downs, And a New Generation of Captains Has Gone to the Ocean], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 24 April 2009, 3.

<sup>14</sup> See 本报记者孙国强特约通讯员马俊 [Reporter Sun Guoqiang and Special Correspondent Ma Jun], 生命线之光--南海舰队某潜艇基地扎实开展政治工作纪实 [The Light of the Lifeline—A Record of Solid Political Work Carried Out at a Certain Submarine Base of the South China Sea Fleet], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 23 March 2015, 1.

<sup>15</sup> For confirmation that it happened to a boat from that unit, see Ibid. Pre-2009, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Submarine Base was receiving both Shang- and Jin-class submarines; suggesting that the boat in question was perhaps most likely a Shang I, although it could have been a Jin.

<sup>16</sup> 者虞章才肖勇利特约记者沈抒 [Yu Zhangcai, Xiao Yongli, and Special Correspondent Shen Shu], “以只争朝夕的精神强军兴军--第一期海军学习贯彻习主席系列重要讲话精神集训班学员畅谈学习体会(下)” [Strengthen the Military with the Spirit of Seizing the Day and Night—Students of the First Naval Training Class for Studying and Implementing the Spirit of President Xi’s Series of Important Speeches Talk About Their Learning Experience (Part 2)], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 17 March 2014, 2.