Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson visits Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy Submarine Academy, North Sea Fleet Headquarters, and a PLAN frigate and submarine in Qingdao, China, to improve mutual understanding and encourage professional interaction between U.S. and Chinese navies, July 20, 2016 (U.S. Navy/Nathan Laird)

What Do China's Military Reforms Mean for Taiwan?

By Joel Wuthnow

In late 2015 and early 2016, China announced a sweeping set of reforms to the organizational structure of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).[1] Key changes included the following:

- The 4 semiautonomous general departments (responsible for operations, political work, logistics, and armaments) were replaced by 15 departments directly under the Central Military Commission (CMC).
- At the service level, a new Strategic Support Force was set up to provide support in the electromagnetic, space, and cyber domains; a separate headquarters was established for the ground forces (which were previously collectively led by the general departments); and the Second Artillery Force, an independent branch responsible for China's conventional and nuclear missiles, was upgraded to a full-fledged service and renamed the PLA Rocket Force.
- The seven military regions, responsible for administering forces at the regional level, were replaced with five "theater commands" aligned against specific land and maritime threats on China's periphery.

The reforms not only significantly altered the PLA's organizational structure but also redefined authority relationships among major components. The PLA

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Guided missile destroyer *Jinan*, top, frigate *Yiyang* and guided missile destroyer USS *Mason*, center, guided missile cruiser USS *Monterey* and guided missile destroyer USS *Stout*, bottom, steam in formation during passing exercise in Atlantic Ocean, November 7, 2015 (U.S. Navy/Edward Guttierrez III)

Air Force and Navy headquarters, which previously commanded operations during peacetime, were reassigned to administrative roles focused on training and equipping troops. Operational authority moved to a two-tiered system in which decisions will be made by the CMC and carried out by theater commanders.

In some ways, the new system is reminiscent of the U.S. military structure that developed following the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. That act similarly assigned the Services an "organize, train, and equip" function, while placing operations in the hands of regional combatant commands, such as the U.S. Pacific Command. Nevertheless, a key difference is that the PLA remains a "party army"—with a primary focus on defending the interests of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—not a national army, like the U.S. military, that serves the country's interests regardless of which political party is in power. Thus, the PLA will continue to possess Leninist features that have no cognate in the U.S. system, such as a CMC, political commissars, and party committees down to the regimental level.

Why did Chinese president Xi Jinping and his supporters in the PLA pursue this course of reform? There are both political and operational motivations. Politically, the reforms were designed to enhance the ability of the CCP to supervise the armed forces, which were seen as increasingly corrupt and undisciplined. The reforms thus go hand in hand with parallel efforts to weed out malfeasance through an anti-corruption campaign in the PLA that has already resulted in the dismissal of dozens of senior officers (including two former CMC vice chairmen, Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong) and with efforts to strengthen Xi's authority over the military in his role as CCP general secretary.

The reforms strengthen political control over the PLA in several ways. One reform, for instance, disbands the general departments, which were seen as too autonomous and riddled with corruption, and places their successor organizations directly under the CMC, where they can be more closely scrutinized. Another strengthens auditing and discipline inspection functions, which allow the CMC to send investigators to units across the PLA to root out offenders. In addition, the new Political and Legal Affairs Commission was set up under the CMC to bolster the role of regulations and law enforcement in the PLA.

Operationally, the reforms are intended to increase the PLA's ability to successfully conduct joint operations on a high-tech battlefield. Over the past two decades, Chinese military strategists have identified joint operations as a key to modern warfare. This recognition was due in part to the observations of U.S. battlefield success during the first Gulf War and other operations in the 1990s. Consequently, the PLA developed joint doctrine and carried out an increasing number of cross-service exercises.

The reforms help facilitate "jointness" in the PLA in several ways. The first way is by creating a joint command and control system that places operational authority in the hands of commanders at both the central level (in the new joint

staff department under the CMC) and the regional level (in theater commands). Second, the reforms established a separate ground force headquarters, freeing the CMC and theater commands to become fully joint organizations. Third, the reforms create a training management department at the CMC level that focuses on joint training. The fourth way is by giving theater commanders authority over almost all units in their respective areas of responsibility. This includes air, naval, and conventional missile forces, but probably not nuclear forces.

What does all this mean for Taiwan's security? There are several possible implications. First, in the near term the PLA is likely to face a degree of organizational disruption as new lines of authority are clarified, new leaders take their positions, and rank-and-file personnel seek to understand where they stand in the new organizational chart and what their roles will be. An added source of organizational stress will be a concurrent downsizing of the PLA, in which the Chinese military is slated to decrease from 2.3 million to 2 million servicemembers by late 2017. As a result, the PLA will be focused inward for the next few years, reducing its ability to fight a major war.

Second, over the longer term the PLA could build a more robust ability to conduct joint operations in multiple domains. The theater commands, in particular, will likely focus on joint training related to threats in their particular areas of responsibility. Regarding Taiwan, the Eastern Theater Command, based in Nanjing, will be responsible for planning and operations related to a Taiwan contingency. Theater commanders will be able to integrate units from the army, navy, air force, and conventional missile force into joint training and operations. The Eastern Theater commander could also probably draw on more support from the Strategic Support Force, which will be critical for pursuing operations in nontraditional domains of warfare, such as space and cyber. The result could be a better trained joint force that will pose an even greater threat to Taiwan's security.

Third, the PLA is working to create new and better trained leaders responsible for developing doctrine and conducting training and operations relevant to a Taiwan contingency. The PLA is already instituting professional military education reforms to complement its organizational restructuring, including a new curriculum focused on joint command at the PLA National Defense University.[2] New commanders will also rotate into key positions at both the CMC and theater levels. Some of these could be senior officers from the navy and air force, which would bring valuable new perspectives as the PLA seeks to build a more joint force. Moreover, the PLA will probably continue a tradition of sending its best and brightest officers to the theater responsible for Taiwan.

Fourth, the Chinese military will continue to allocate its most advanced equipment to the Eastern Theater Command, just as it sent its most capable hardware to the preceding Nanjing Military Region. The reforms could facilitate development of more advanced equipment, such as long-range precision-strike systems, by encouraging stronger civil-military cooperation in defense research and development and by instituting procurement and acquisition reforms. According to press reports, the Strategic Support Force will play a role in developing advanced capabilities. This could result in a PLA that is not only better trained but also better equipped to pursue operations in a Taiwan contingency.

Nevertheless, several obstacles could inhibit the PLA's ability to develop into a more credible joint force. First, at least for the next few years, the PLA will continue to be an organization dominated by the ground forces, with most key positions filled by army officers. This could inhibit the emergence of a true joint mentality within the PLA. Second, inter-service rivalry could pose issues as each service attempts to demonstrate and maintain its unique advantages. This might be particularly problematic in an increasingly budget-constrained environment. Third, the PLA's lack of combat experience (having not fought a major war since 1979) means that it will not enjoy the advantage of testing its organization, doctrine, and equipment under real combat conditions.

In sum, the PLA's organizational reforms are clearly intended to allow China to field a stronger joint force capable of effectively conducting operations across the range of possible contingencies, including those related to Taiwan. If all goes according to plan, Taipei could face an adversary that is not only better organized, trained, and equipped but also more confident in its ability to fight and win wars under informationized conditions. Nevertheless, as the U.S. military has found in the 30 years following Goldwater-Nichols, developing a capable joint force takes years of trial and error. Whether and how successfully the PLA will overcome its own obstacles remain to be seen. **JFQ**

Notes

[1] Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, *China's Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms*, Strategic Forum 294 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, April 2016), available at <ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-294.pdf>.

[2] Zhang Shibo and Liu Yazhou, "Strive to Build a Supreme Military Academy That Attains the World's Advanced Standards and Boasts Unique Chinese Characteristics—On Deeply Studying and Implementing the Important Speech by Chairman Xi During His Inspection of the National Defense University," *Jiefangjun Bao*, April 18, 2016, 6.