

Personnel reshuffle in the PLA: The two promotions that did not happen

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The reform of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), launched in November 2015, is mainly aimed at organisational transformation, but also has a significant impact on personnel politics. The sweeping changes underway within the army have provided Xi Jinping with what would seem like an excellent opportunity to promote his followers and demote others. However, the early retirement of General Liu Yuan and the apparent demotion of General Cai Yingting have attracted a lot of attention, because they appear to run counter to this rationale. Both men are seen as being close to Xi Jinping, and both seemed to be set for a bright future in the PLA, but neither were promoted. Liu Yuan, previously political commissar of the General Logistics Department, was expected by analysts to become the head of the new PLA Commission for Discipline Inspection under the Central Military Commission (CMC). Cai Yingting, head of the former Nanjing Military Region, was expected to lead the Joint General Staff Department.²⁶

The sidelining of these two heavy-weights could be interpreted as the first sign that Xi Jinping's hold over the PLA might not be as strong as had been thought. Speculative articles in the Hong Kong and Singapore press give nuance to this idea, putting forward claims that there may be a potential strategic rationale behind it. An analysis of these commentaries will put forward that Xi Jinping is not all-powerful, and must make compromises for the implementation of his PLA reform, even if he does still retain the upper hand.

The sacrifice of Xi's main ally in the PLA

General Liu Yuan is the son of Liu Shaoqi, president of the People's Republic of China from 1959 to 1968. As such, Liu Yuan is one of the main representatives of the "princelings", an influential group made up of the children of Party and military leaders from the Mao era. He is seen as a close associate of Xi Jinping, who is himself the son of former revolutionary leader Xi Zhongxun.²⁷ Liu Yuan led the anti-corruption charges within the PLA. Even before Xi took power, he was a key player in the charge against Gu Junshan, former deputy director of the PLA General Logistics Department, who was removed from office in May 2012. This opened the way for Xi's massive anti-corruption campaign within the PLA, which led to the arrest of General Xu Caihou and General Guo Boxiong, two former vice chairmen of the CMC.

26 Minnie Chan, "PLA reform: China's top brass set New Year deadline for military command restructure", *South China Morning Post*, 8 December 2015, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1888202/pla-reform-chinas-top-brass-set-new-year-deadline>.

27 On the relationship between Xi and Princelings in the PLA, see Jérôme Doyon, "Xi Jinping and the Princelings", *China Analysis*, December 2013, available at www.ecfr.eu/page/-/China_Analysis_Law_and_Power_in_Xis_China_December2013.pdf.

Because of his key role in the fight against corruption, Liu Yuan was an ideal candidate to become head of the new Commission for Discipline Inspection (CDI) in the PLA, which is to be under the direct control of the CMC.²⁸ According to the Hong Kong magazine *Zhengming*, Xi put forward Liu as his only candidate for the CDI leadership during the Party-State leadership's Beidaihe meeting in August 2015.²⁹ At the meeting, the members also discussed making Liu a CMC member at the Fifth Plenum of the 18th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress, which took place in October 2015. His promotion was put to the vote among the CMC's 11 members in October. For major decisions like this, a minimum of 75 percent "yes" votes is required, and this minimum was not reached at the meeting. Five members voted for Liu's nomination to the CMC, three voted against, and three abstained. In November, the CMC voted again, but Liu still did not get the votes. General Fan Changlong, the CMC's number two, voted against Liu's nomination, highlighting the tense relationships between Liu and other high level officers. The *Zhengming* article points out that Liu Yuan made a lot of enemies in the PLA by zealously fighting corruption even before Xi started his campaign in 2013.³⁰

Liu Yuan's retirement was announced on 16 December 2015, apparently as a result of the resistance to his nomination to the CMC. According to *Zhengming*, Liu Yuan met twice with Xi Jinping in December, and the two decided that Liu would have to sacrifice his career to facilitate the implementation of the PLA reforms.³¹ Yu Zeyuan, a Beijing-based journalist for a Singaporean newspaper, says that Liu Yuan's retirement at the height of his career sets an example for other officers. If he could sacrifice himself for reform, other officers have little excuse to block it for their own interests. Indeed, any manoeuvres for personal gain would "look petty in comparison" (相形见绌, *xiangxingjianchu*).³²

Even so, Yu Zeyuan says that more than Liu's retirement will be needed if the PLA reforms are to be successful.³³ In particular, the officers and soldiers who will be displaced in the reorganisation will need to be given guarantees that they will not lose their status in the process. The reforms have an effect on a range of different entrenched interests. The four General Departments, which the reforms are set to impact, were widely seen as "golden rice bowls" (金饭碗, *jinfanwan*) because of the opportunities for corruption available to their leaders. The early retirement of Liu Yuan, who was portrayed as an exemplary officer and princeling, should at least give other officers less leeway to fight the

28 On the CMC's Commission for Discipline Inspection, see Marc Julienne's essay in this issue.

29 Qin Qiming, "Inside Liu Yuan's retirement announcement" (劉源宣佈退役內情, *Liu Yuan xuanbu tuiyi neiqing*), *Zhengming*, January 2016 (hereafter, Qin, "Liu Yuan's retirement").

30 Qin, "Liu Yuan's retirement".

31 Qin, "Liu Yuan's retirement".

32 Yu Zeyuan, "Does the PLA reform bring with it a major personnel reshuffle?" (中國軍改迎來人事大變動?, *zhongguo jungai yinglai renshi da biandong?*), *Lianhe Zaobao*, 30 December 2016 (hereafter, Yu, "PLA reform personnel reshuffle").

33 On the broader challenges to the PLA reforms, see Cristina Garafola's article in this issue.

China's military commanders



Army commander
General Li Zuocheng



Navy commander
Admiral Wu Shengli



Air Force commander
General Ma Xiaotian



Rocket Force commander
General Wei Fenghe



Strategic Support Force commander
Lieutenant General Gao Jin



The entire PLA comprises a total of 2.3 million personnel, making it the biggest armed forces in the world. The army command alone includes 1.6 million personnel. The Chinese army boasts 6,450 battle tanks. China is, comparatively to other services, investing less in technology for the ground forces and is estimated to cut 300,000 troops over the next few years.



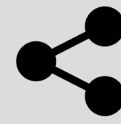
The Chinese navy has a total staff of 235,000, including 10,000 marines. The navy has four submarines equipped with ballistic missiles, and 56 tactical submarines. It has one aircraft carrier, with a second, locally designed, currently under construction. It also has 73 other cruiser, destroyer and frigate ships. After stages of innovation, it now produces them in series.



The air force has 2,306 combat capable aircraft, including 150 bombers. China is indigenously developing two types of fifth-generation fighters (J-20, J-31), and it has engaged conversation with Russia about purchasing 24 of its Su-35 multi-role combat aircraft. It would be the first foreign force to have purchased the aircraft. The air force has 398,000 total troops.



100,000 troops operate China's missile force, which is comprised of 62 ICBMs, with a minimum range of 5,500 kilometres. China also commands 351 shorter-range missiles. China is domestically developing new models of ICBM, as well as anti-ship ballistic missiles, such as the nuclear capable DF-26 missile which was shown off at China's Victory Day parade.



The strategic support force was introduced in December 2015 to provide all military commands with information and strategic support. Its missions include target tracking and reconnaissance, operation of satellite navigation, the management of space-based reconnaissance assets, as well as cyber and electronic warfare.

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2016*

reforms to maintain their own privileges.³⁴

On 25 February 2016, Liu Yuan was officially appointed vice-chairman of the National People's Congress's Economic and Finance Committee. This kind of appointment is common for retiring senior officials and underlines the fact that Xi Jinping values his "sacrifice".³⁵

In the end, it was General Du Jincai who was named as head of the new CDI under the CMC. Since 2012, Du has been the secretary of the old CDI, under the auspices of the PLA's General Political Department, and so, like Liu, he too has been active in the anti-corruption campaign. As a result of his new appointment, he should soon become a CMC member, and as he will not have reached the seniority limit he could remain a member after the 19th CCP Congress scheduled for 2017.

A mysterious demotion

Another change of personnel that seems to go against Xi's interests is the transfer of Cai Yingting from the role of commander of the Nanjing Military Region to that of president of the PLA Academy of Military Science. While

his new position is prestigious, it does not compare to his previous role in terms of operational power. This transfer is particularly surprising since Cai Yingting was particularly close to Xi. He was a key member of the so-called Nanjing faction, made up of figures from the Nanjing military region, which includes

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provinces in which Xi Jinping worked for a long time and in which he has a strong network.³⁶

Like Liu Yuan, Cai Yingting was seen as a serious candidate for CMC membership, and his demotion is even more mysterious. Overseas Chinese media sources have spread numerous rumours about the reasons behind Cai's downfall. One frequent rumour is that Cai Yingting was the personal secretary of Zhang Wannian, former vice-chair of the CMC and a close ally of Jiang Zemin, and Xi saw Cai as being too close to the former leader and doubted his loyalty.³⁷

³⁶ On the Nanjing military region faction, see Willy Lam, "Xi Jinping Consolidates Power by Promoting Alumni of the Nanjing Military Region", *China Brief*, 9 January 2015, available at [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=43376](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=43376).

³⁷ Leng Qingshan, "Cai Yingting did not get Xi Jinping's approval, who doubts him because his daughter married a foreigner" (蔡英挺没得过习近平这关, 疑因女儿跨国婚姻, *Cai Yingting mei guo Xi Jinping zheguan, yi yin nu'er kuaguo hunyin*), *Duowei*, 17 February 2016, available at <http://blog.dwnews.com/post-877398.html> (hereafter, *Duowei*, "Cai Yingting"). *Duowei* is a Chinese-language news website based in New York; its content is blocked in mainland China.

³⁴ Yu, "PLA reform personnel reshuffle".

³⁵ Minnie Chan, "Non-combat role: Xi Jinping's military spearhead against corruption takes on new job with NPC", *South China Morning Post*, 26 February 2016, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1917585/non-combat-role-xi-jinpings-military-spearhead-against-corruption-takes>.

Still, no explanation is given as to why this proximity would suddenly matter now and not before – Cai was one of the first officers to be promoted by Xi Jinping, in 2013. Another rumour is that Cai's patriotism and reliability have been called into question because of his daughter's recent marriage to a Frenchman.³⁸ The reliability of this rumour is highly dubious, but it is symptomatic of the increasing suspicion in Xi's China towards officers and cadres with transnational connections.

Yu Zeyuan says that there is a possibility that Cai Yingting's transfer could in fact not be wholly negative – it might be only a temporary move. Given his career so far, and his status as one of the PLA's main Taiwan specialists, Cai is still a serious candidate for CMC membership in 2017. His transfer could be a way to round out his military experience and especially his knowledge of China-United States strategic relations. It could also be a way to upgrade the political status of the Military Academy itself.³⁹

Loyalty is everything

Cai Yingting's position remains uncertain, but his situation is unique. The six other former commanders of the military regions have been transferred to at least equivalent positions, as reported in *Caixin wang*.⁴⁰ General Li Zuocheng, the former commander of the Chengdu Military Region, was even appointed commander of the newly established PLA Army headquarters. Li is a decorated hero of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and was promoted to the rank of general in 2015 by Xi Jinping.⁴¹

Looking at the profile of the new commanders of the four military services, as well as the Strategic Support force, it is clear that Li Zuocheng is not an exception.⁴² The commanders are in general old allies of Xi or else have seen their career advance rapidly with Xi's support. Wei Fenghe, who commands the Rocket Force, was the first officer promoted by Xi after he took the leadership of the CMC in 2012. Gao Jin, who heads the PLA Strategic Support Force, was raised to the rank of lieutenant general by Xi in 2013.⁴³ The commanders of the Navy and Air Force, Wu Shengli and Ma Xiaotian, both have longstanding ties with Xi.⁴⁴ They are

38 Duowei, "Cai Yingting".

39 Yu Zeyuan, "The former commander of the Nanjing Military Region Cai Yingting to head a military think tank" (原南京军区司令蔡英挺或主管军方智库, *yuán Nanjing junqu sīlǐng cài yǐngtīng huò zhǔguǎn jūnfāng zhīkù*), *Lianhe Zaobao*, 3 February 2016.

40 "Six military regions commanders assume their new positions" (六名正大军区级将领履新, *liù míng zhèng dàjūnqūjí jiǎnglǐng lǚxīn*), *Caixin wang*, 3 February 2015, available at <http://china.caixin.com/2016-01-02/100895211.html> (hereafter, *Caixin wang*, "Six military regions commanders").

41 *Caixin wang*, "Six military regions commanders".

42 The four services are the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Rocket Force.

43 *Caixin wang*, "Six military regions commanders".

44 Ma Xiaotian and Wu Shengli both have a princeling background. See Cheng Li, "China's Midterm Jockeying: Gearing Up for 2012 (Part 3: Military Leaders)", *China Leadership Monitor*, 33, Summer 2010, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2010/06/-/media/Research/Files/Opinions/2010/6/29%20military%20lead>

both scheduled to retire in 2017 due to seniority limits, but Yu Zeyuan argues that it is very possible that Xi will change the rules in order to keep them as CMC members for two more years. This would be a way to ensure stability at a time of huge reforms and to keep close allies in top positions.⁴⁵

Xi has been able to compromise in order to push forward PLA reform and to set aside allies, but he does not compromise on the reliability of his subordinates. As one anonymous military officer told Bowen Press: "Xi Jinping does not believe that ability is a key criterion for appointment – the only one is loyalty".⁴⁶

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45 Yu, "PLA reform personnel reshuffle".

46 Officer interviewed by the US-based Chinese-language website *Bowen Press*. "Exclusive: The resignation of Liu Yuan will help the implementation of Xi's military reforms" (刘源辞要职助习近平推军改, *liú yuán cí yào zhī zhù Xī Jìnpíng tuī jūngāi*) *Bowen Press*, 24 December 2015, available at http://bowenpress.com/news/bowen_50895.html.