

Groupthink? PLA Leading Small Groups and the Prospect for Real Reform and Change in the Chinese Military

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As a result of the 18th Party Congress and its subsequent plenums, especially the Third Plenum in the fall of 2013, the Chinese People's Liberation Army has embarked on a broad set of institutional reforms, tackling training, political work, command and control, and corruption among others. These reform efforts fall under the purview of newly established "leading groups," led by senior officials in the relevant offices. This article examines the personnel and institutional makeup of these new groups, outlines their declared and undeclared missions, and assesses the probability of their success.

Introduction

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Five New Military Leading Groups

These new leading groups are discussed below in the order in which they were established:

Leading Group for Survey of Military Infrastructure Projects and Real Estate Resources
(全军基本建设项目和房地产资源普查工作领导小组)

The Leading Group for Survey of Military Infrastructure Projects and Real Estate Resources (全军基本建设项目和房地产资源普查工作领导小组) was established in mid-2013, and held its first plenary meeting on 20 June 2013.¹ The leader of the leading group is General Logistics Department Director Zhao Keshi (赵克石). The appointment of the GLD director to head his leading group is logical, given that his department is in charge of military infrastructure and real estate. According to an interview given by a "responsible person" associated with the leading group office in July 2013, the organization has five principal tasks: (1) investigate the management situation with respect to capital construction projects, especially the approval procedures and the scale of effort; (2) verify the amount, distribution, utilization, and true circumstances of military-use land; (3) verify the amount, quality, capacity, and management situation with respect to barracks and camps, as well as every type of housing and resident information; (4) verify the quality and amount of national defense engineering projects and facilities;

and (5) investigate the number and quality of excess real estate controlled by units or centralized real estate management departments.²

Given the scope and scale of the corruption issues within GLD, however, it is not surprising that the leading group has encountered difficulties. The July 2013 interview described “contradictions” arising from “irrational” investment in military real estate.³ During a January 2014 teleconference, leading group head Zhao Keshi reported progress on the conduct of two necessary surveys of existing military infrastructure and real estate, but described the progress as “uneven.” He stressed in the call that both surveys needed to be finished by September 2014. The participants also cited a somewhat cryptic comment from Xi Jinping that seemed to criticize recalcitrance and resistance at the lower unit levels to the scrutiny of the leading group, declaring “No unit can speak objectively or discuss the conditions.” (任何单位都不能讲客观、谈条件).

Leading Group for the All-Party-Army’s Mass Line Education and Practice Activity
(全军党的群众路线教育实践活动领导小组)

“The mass line, however, is still not being thoroughly carried out in the work of some comrades; they still rely solely on a handful of people working in solitude. One reason is that, whatever they do, they are always reluctant to explain it to the people they lead and that they do not understand why or how to give play to the initiative and creative energy of those they lead. Subjectively, they too want everyone to take a hand in the work, but they do not let other people know what is to be done or how to do it. That being the case, how can everyone be expected to get moving and how can anything be done well? To solve this problem the basic thing is, of course, to carry out ideological education on the mass line, but at the same time we must teach these comrades many concrete methods of work.”—Chairman Mao, “A Talk to the Editorial Staff of the Shansi-Suiyuan Daily” (April 2, 1948), Selected Works, Vol. IV, pp. 241–42.

The Leading Group for the All-Party-Army’s Mass Line Education and Practice Activity (全军党的群众路线教育实践活动领导小组) was founded soon after its military infrastructure and real estate counterpart, holding its first meeting held on 24 June 2013.⁴ The head of the leading group is General Political Department Director Zhang Yang and his deputy is Deputy Chief of the General Staff Hou Shusen (侯树森). Other members, in protocol order, have included General Political Department Deputy Director and CMC Discipline Inspection Commission Head Jia Yan’an (贾延安), General Political Department Deputy Director and CCP Discipline Inspection Commission Deputy Head Du Jincai (杜金才), General Political Department Deputy Director Wu Changde (吴昌德), General Political Department Deputy Director Yin Fanglong (殷方龙), General Political Department Assistant Director Cen Xu (岑旭), Cui Changjun (崔昌军), General Logistics Department Deputy Political Commissar Liu Shengjie, and General Armaments Department Deputy Political Commissar Wang Jiasheng (王家胜).⁵ The second meeting was held on 17 July 2013, focused on implementing Xi Jinping’s speech on “democratic life” within the party and the PLA.⁶ In particular, the meeting reiterated the need to implement the “eight rectifications”⁷ and oppose the “four weeds.”⁸ On 17 September 2013, the group held its fourth meeting, which focused on the value of criticism and self-criticism, and interestingly focused its attention on “deputy military region” (副大军区) and “corps” (军级)-grade units. On 9 January 2014 the group held its sixth meeting, listening to a presentation by the head of their counterpart “mass line education leading group” in Hebei Province, and studied the key features of the party’s “eight provisions” for mass

work compared to the CMC's "10 provisions."⁹ On Valentine's Day the group held its seventh meeting,¹⁰ and on 28 March 2014 the group met for the eighth time, focusing their attention on studying Xi Jinping's "important speech" about "model" Lankao County and its mass line education movement.¹¹ The ninth meeting on 29 April 2014 and the tenth meeting on 16 May 2014 both studied a Xi Jinping speech to an Air Force unit in Lankao as well as 18 headquarters-level supervisory inspection group assessment reports.¹² The most recent group meeting, held on 1 July 2014, studied a recent Xi Jinping speech to the Politburo.¹³

CMC Leading Group for Inspection Work (中央军委巡视工作领导小组)

"I hope that the revolutionary personnel of the whole country will always keep to the style of plain living and hard struggle maintained for more than a decade by the working personnel in Yen-an and the Shensi-Kansu-Ningsia Border Region."—Chairman Mao, "Always Keep to the Style of Plain Living and Hard Struggle," 26 October 1949

The CMC Leading Group for Inspection Work (中央军委巡视工作领导小组) was established as the military counterpart to the broader inspection campaign under way in the Chinese Communist Party. On 31 October 2013, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection website announced that the Central Inspection Team was launching a second round of national inspections to root out graft and corruption. The previous day Xinhua announced that the CMC Leading Group for Inspection Work had held its first meeting, presided over by CMC Vice-Chairman Xu Qiliang. GPD director and deputy leading group head Zhang Yang read out the "Central Military Commission's Decision on Launching Inspection Work" (中央军委关于开展巡视工作的决定), which established the terms of reference for the military's inspection work.¹⁴ From 10 December 2013 to 13 March 2014, two Central Military Commission inspection teams were dispatched to Beijing Military Region and Jinan Military Region with a broad mandate to investigate cadres and units at all levels.¹⁵ After another round of reports and assessments, two additional CMC inspection teams were sent to the Guangzhou Military Region and the Chengdu Military Region between April and June 2014, with Xu Qiliang chairing an assessment report debrief on 14 July 2014.¹⁶

Leading Group for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform

(中央军委深化国防和军队改革领导小组)

"Learn to 'play the piano.' In playing the piano all ten fingers are in motion; it won't do to move some fingers only and not others. But if all ten fingers press down at once, there is no melody. To produce good music, the ten fingers should move rhythmically and in co-ordination. A Party committee should keep a firm grasp on its central task and at the same time, around the central task, it should unfold the work in other fields. At present, we have to take care of many fields; we must look after the work in all the areas, armed units and departments, and not give all our attention to a few problems, to the exclusion of others. Wherever there is a problem, we must put our finger on it, and this is a method we must master. Some play the piano well and some badly, and there is a great difference in the melodies they produce."—Chairman Mao, "Methods of Party Work Committees," 13 March 1949

Though the groups in this article are listed in chronological order of establishment, clearly the most senior and important is the Leading Group for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform (中央军委深化国防和军队改革领导小组), led by CMC

Chairman Xi Jinping and managed by two deputy heads, CMC Vice-Chairmen Fan Changlong and Xu Qiliang. Xi Jinping presided over the first plenary meeting of the leading group, held on 15 March 2014, and delivered an important speech, stressing that “deepening national defense and military reform requires starting with CCP and CMC policies that integrate ideology with action, insisting on reforms that use a strong army as an objective . . .”¹⁷ Very little has been heard of this group since its March 2014 launch, perhaps reflecting the intense political sensitivities surrounding possible reorganizations and likely downsizing of the PLA that would accompany a shift from administrative military regions to a joint operations structure.

Leading Group for Military Training Supervision (全军军事训练监察领导小组)

“As for the method of training, we should unfold the mass training movement in which officers teach soldiers, soldiers teach officers and the soldiers teach each other.”—Chairman Mao, “Policy for Work in the Liberated Areas for 1946” (December 15, 1945), Selected Works, Vol. IV, p. 76.

The Leading Group for Military Training Supervision (全军军事训练监察领导小组) was established much later than its other military leading group counterparts, suggesting that it was unrelated to the “rectification” mission but perhaps reflecting a renewed leadership preference for PLA leading groups as agents of change outside the normal military organization structure. The CMC formally issued a notice on 3 April 2014 announcing the formation of the group, which was reportedly composed of a “general office and two supervisory groups on troop units’ training and school education.”¹⁸ A primary focus of the work for this group was the implementation of the Xi Jinping–approved CMC document “Opinions on Improving the Level of Combat-Realistic Military Training” (关于提高军事训练实战化水平的意见), which was published on 20 March 2014 and emphasized realism in training to support deterrence and real combat operations under informatized conditions.

Conclusion

While the use of “leading small groups” and other ad hoc leadership organizations to manage specific tasks or oversee internal campaigns is nothing new for the CCP and PLA, the appearance of a significant number of new PLA entities in the midst of the implementation of the Third Plenum reforms is hardly a coincidence. The real question is: Will these leading groups have any appreciable success in confronting and overcoming the important (and longstanding) structural problems that they were created to address? Or will they be yet another example of the Chinese system engaging in “feigned compliance” with the reform directives, while trying to maintain the status quo and protect selected malefactors? It is tempting to see Xi Jinping as different, as bolder and more decisive than his predecessors in breaking crockery and rooting out corruption, but from the outside it is sometimes challenging to distinguish the reality of the situation from the full-volume propaganda depiction of the situation that we are provided by the Chinese media apparatus. Recent events, however, strongly suggest that we are witnessing some real change, particularly with respect to military corruption. If senior military officials like Gu Junshan, and even more significantly Xu Caihou, are officially charged and prosecuted for abuse of power, then we can perhaps conclude that Xi Jinping has the “juice” to push through structural reform. If Xi succeeds in implementing real

organizational reform of the military region system, even replacing it with an architecture better suited to integrated joint operations, one could conclude that he enjoys more influence and power within the PLA than any CCP leader since Deng Xiaoping.

Appendix: Recent Promotions

On 11 June 2014, four PLA lieutenant generals were promoted to the rank of full general.¹⁹ The four officers promoted were Shenyang Military Region commander Wang Jiaocheng, Shenyang Military Region political commissar Chu Yimin, Deputy Chief of the General Staff Qi Jianguo, and Guangzhou Military Region political commissar Wei Liang. According to *China Daily*, “Chinese President and CMC Chairman Xi Jinping presented the officers with their certificates of command, shook hands with them, and expressed his congratulations.” The promotion ceremony was officiated by CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang, and the promotion orders were announced by CMC Vice Chairman Fan Changlong. This was the third round of promotions since Xi became CMC chairman in November 2012.²⁰ He has thus far elevated 11 senior officers to the rank of full general.

The promotions generated the usual spate of Pekingology from the Hong Kong media. Minnie Chan from the *South China Morning Post* noted that “all four have backgrounds in the Nanjing [MR], which oversees security for the southern and southeastern cities, and the Taiwan Strait.” She added that Wang, Qi, and Wei started their military careers in the Nanjing MR, while Chu spent a year working in the political department. She quoted a “retired senior colonel based in Beijing,” who offered the following “insider” perspective about the significance of their collective Nanjing MR experience: “It’s a common practice for top leaders to promote the talent they know well. The new promotions show Xi is following what his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao did...Xi worked in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai for more than two decades, which all fall under the Nanjing [MR].” A stronger argument would point out that Xi, among his ex officio positions, was a senior official in the Fujian Military District from 1988 to 2000 and a director of the Fujian Provincial National Defense Mobilization Committee from 1999 to 2002, and then repeated both of those roles in Zhejiang Province from 2002 to 2007. For 19 years, therefore, Xi had regularly institutional opportunities to interact with military personnel in the Nanjing Military Region, though it is difficult from open sources to directly link him to any of the promoted officers.

Wang Jiaocheng Bio

Wang Jiaocheng was born in 1952 in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, though his “laojia” is listed as Laian in Anhui Province. He enlisted in the PLA in 1969 after graduating from a middle school attached to Zhejiang University. Following a standard ground forces career path, Wang served successively as a regimental chief of staff, regimental commander, and division chief of staff. He then served in a series of command and staff positions in the Nanjing Military Region, including commander of a training base, director of the MR Training Department, and deputy commander of an unnamed group army. He is currently the commander of the Shenyang Military Region.

Chu Yimin Bio

Chu Yimin was born in August 1953 and served for many years in the Lanzhou Military Region. In 2003, he was appointed to be the head of the Xinjiang Military District Political Department, and political commissar of an unnamed group army in 2005. In 2006, Chu was transferred to be the head of the Nanjing Military Region Political Department, and was promoted to Lieutenant General in 2008. In 2007, he was elected as an alternate to the CCP 17th Central Committee, and is a full member of the CCP 18th Central Committee. He is currently served as the Shenyang Military Region political commissar.

Qi Jianguo Bio

Qi Jianguo was born in August 1952 in Wendeng, Shandong Province. He enlisted in the PLA in 1970 and is a graduate of the Nanjing Advanced Ground Forces Academy, with a specialization in military command. His early career was in the 1st Group Army, where he rose to division commander of the 1st Division and then chief of staff of the ground army HQ. He was then appointed commander of the 12th Group Army, and in 2005 moved to Beijing to serve as director of the critically important Combat Department of the General Staff Department. In 2009, he was promoted to be assistant chief of the General Staff, and then deputy chief of the General Staff in 2012. Qi was a delegate to the CCP 17th Party Congress, as well as the 10th and 11th National People's Congresses. His official bio credits him with "combat" experience, which apparently includes his leadership role in the PLA's response to the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. Qi is currently the deputy chief of the General Staff with responsibility for foreign affairs and intelligence. In this role, he is responsible for representing the PLA in various international fora, such as the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.²¹

Wei Liang

Wei Liang was born in February 1953 in Gaochun County, Jiangsu Province. He was promoted to major general in August 2002. From 2002 to 2004, Wei was political commissar of the 12th Group Army, and then from 2004 to 2009 served in the same role in the 26th Group Army. In 2009, Wei was transferred to the People's Armed Police at the same rank, working as the director of the PAP Political Department. In 2010, he returned to the PLA as assistant director of the General Political Department, following his promotion to lieutenant general. In 2012, Wei was elevated to his current position as the political commissar of the Guangzhou Military Region and concurrently the secretary of the Guangzhou MR party committee. He is a member of the 18th CCP Central Committee.

Notes

¹ "At Least 5 'New Institutions' Established Since 18th CPC National Congress," *Liberation Army Daily*, 4 April 2014.

² “Army infrastructure projects and real estate resource survey work leading group responsible person answering reporters’ questions,” accessed at <http://www.81281.com/show-28-757-1.html>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Yin Hang, “Leading Group for the Party-Army’s Mass Line Education and Practice Activity Holds Its Seventh Meeting,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 15 February 2014.

⁶ “Leading Group for the Party-Army’s Mass Line Education and Practice Activity Holds Its Second Meeting,” Xinhua, 17 July 2013.

⁷ The “eight rectifications” consist of rectifying (1) the excessive use of official vehicles or use of those vehicles for private use; (2) embezzlement of public funds; (3) laziness and negligence; (4) the negative attitude embodied in the phrase “the doors are hard to enter, difficult to see how it will benefit one’s ‘face,’ and the situation is hard to handle”; (5) violating one’s duties with bribes and spending public funds wastefully on feasts; (6) big payroll and expenses like the “top three officials in the imperial courts”; (7) the cadre affairs mechanism known as the “three extras and the two chaos”; and (8) damaging the masses interests.

⁸ The “four weeds” are formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism, and extravagance.

⁹ Yin Hang, “Leading Group for the Party-Army’s Mass Line Education and Practice Activity Holds Its Eighth Meeting,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 10 January 2014. The CMC’s 10 provisions, which are highly detailed and lengthy, can be found here: <http://baike.baidu.com/view/9816472.htm?fr=aladdin>.

¹⁰ Yin Hang, “Leading Group for the Party-Army’s Mass Line Education and Practice Activity Holds Its Seventh Meeting.”

¹¹ Yin Hang, “Leading Group for the Party-Army’s Mass Line Education and Practice Activity Holds Its Eighth Meeting.”

¹² Yin Hang, “Leading Group for the Party-Army’s Mass Line Education and Practice Activity Holds Its Ninth Meeting” *Liberation Army Daily*, 29 April 2014; and Yin Hang, “Leading Group for the Party-Army’s Mass Line Education and Practice Activity Holds Its 10th Meeting,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 16 May 2014.

¹³ Yin Hang, “Leading Group for the Party-Army’s Mass Line Education and Practice Activity Holds Its 11 Meeting,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 2 July 2014.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Xu Qiliang Presides Over Third Meeting of CMC Leading Group for Inspection Work, Listens to Situation Report Research from Deployment Work,” Xinhua, 15 July 2014.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “China Promotes Four Officers to General,” *China Daily*, 12 July 2014.

²⁰ Minnie Chan, “Latest PLA Promotions Show Xi Jinping Is Bent on Overhaul, Analysts Say,” *South China Morning Post*, 13 July 2014.

²¹ An example of the vapid drivel that Qi offers these fora can be found here:

<http://www.iiss.org/-/media/Documents/Events/Shangri-La Dialogue/sld13/Speeches/Qi Jianguo.pdf>.