

Rearranging the Deck Chairs on the *Liaoning*? The PLA Once Again Considers Reorganization

James Mulvenon

Since the first sweeping structural reform of the Chinese People's Liberation Army in 1985, the military media have periodically floated trial balloons about deeper restructuring but the political realities of the situation have consistently stymied the proposed changes. In early 2014, the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported that the PLA was planning to make the most significant modifications to its command and control structure in almost 30 years, replacing its administrative, geographically oriented military region system with a mission-oriented configuration designed to match the increasing "joint" orientation of its deployed forces. To the surprise of many, official Chinese media organs did not reject the report out of hand, but instead expressed dismay that the information had been disseminated prematurely, and grudgingly acknowledged plans to carry out the changes. This article describes the historical rationale for the current command and control structure of the PLA, analyzes the factors motivating its alteration, and assesses the implications of these latest indications of reform.

Introduction

Since the first sweeping structural reform of the Chinese People's Liberation Army in 1985, the military media have periodically floated trial balloons about deeper restructuring but the political realities of the situation have consistently stymied the proposed changes. In early 2014, the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported that the PLA was planning to make the most significant modifications to its command and control structure in almost 30 years, replacing its administrative, geographically oriented military region system with a mission-oriented configuration designed to match the increasing "joint" orientation of its deployed forces. To the surprise of many, official Chinese media organs did not reject the report out of hand, but instead expressed dismay that the information had been disseminated prematurely, and grudgingly acknowledged plans to carry out the changes. This article describes the historical rationale for the current command and control structure of the PLA, analyzes the factors motivating its alteration, and assesses the implications of these latest indications of reform.

The Current PLA C2 Structure: Legacy and Rationale for Change

The current regional administrative structure predates even the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and is therefore beset with the burdens of historical legacy and bureaucratic inertia. The most comprehensive academic work on the evolution of this system comes from Ken Allen, the acknowledged guru on PLA organizational issues, especially his chapter entitled "Introduction to the PLA's Administrative and Operational Structure" in the 2000 RAND conference volume, *The PLA as Organization*

v1.0, edited by the author. Exploiting authoritative Chinese military sources, Allen argues that since the early days of the Red Army, “the PLA has tried to systematically organize its forces into regional areas and functional groupings that would allow centralized control and decentralized operations.”¹ For our purposes, this analysis is principally concerned with the post-1949 structure, wherein General Departments (*zongbu*) at the national level oversee Military Regions (*junqu*), which in turn command the deployed units of the armed forces (group armies, fleets, etc.). In particular, we want to focus on the Military Region level of analysis, since the General Departments and main line units have undergone significant change over the years while the MRs have stayed static and therefore are seen by some as increasingly out of step with the larger transformation of the PLA. Indeed, the current rumored organizational reforms would reduce the number of military regions from seven to five, each with its own joint operational command.

While there were once as many as 13 military regions, the PLA since 1985 has been divided into seven regional areas. According to Allen, “the seven military regions are always listed in the following protocol order based upon the dates they were established (most prior to 1949) and where they fit in the level of importance at the time they were formed: Shenyang, Beijing, Lanzhou, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, and Chengdu.”² These military regions “are the military command and control authority for the combined military units within China’s strategic areas and are responsible for establishing the unified military command organization to carry out the nation’s strategic and operational missions at the campaign level.”³ In peacetime, these MRs and their associated subordinate military districts, which are coterminous with the provinces, are also responsible for internal security, disaster relief, and other political missions. In wartime, these regions would convert to war zones or theaters of war (*zhanqu*), and would command their peacetime units “plus any other units deployed to the military region or chopped to the headquarters for operational purposes.”⁴

As PLA units have evolved and adapted to the requirements of new deployed systems and technologies, inevitable tensions and stresses arose with the military’s command and control architecture. In particular, Xi Jinping’s recent call for “joint operations to gain victory” runs counter-grain to the fixed geography of the military region system.⁵ As one PLA scholar assigned to a Jinan Military Region training base asserted in *International Herald Leader*:

In fact, the current organization and composition of our armed forces is very unsuited to the objective requirements of informatized wars, and to the missions and tasks our armed forces are to carry out. That is mainly to be seen in: compartmentalization, each fighting its own battle, and arms and services not integrated within large combat organizations; a huge, top-heavy structure, with combat units being a rather small proportion of the total manpower of the armed forces; many and varied administrative levels, overlapping functions, and quite significant constraints on bringing military effectiveness into play. So resolving our armed forces’ structural contradictions through reform is an urgent matter if we are to win informatized war and achieve the dream of being strong armed forces.⁶

Professor Yang's analysis closely resembles that of previous reform manifestos, particularly its criticism of the geography-based military region system:

First is to innovate structure. Reform and abandon old and outmoded organization and composition, create a command system and unit composition suited to the requirements of informatized warfare, and the core of that is to establish a joint operations command system. The current organization and structure of our armed forces is demarcated by arms and services and by natural areas. That form of organization is a product of the era of mechanization. It is clearly not suited to the systemic integration of combat forces in the information age, nor is it suited to coping with diverse security threats.⁷

While Yang is not by any means the first to offer this military rationale for change, generations of reformers encountered at least three main pockets of stiff resistance: The first was a concern, validated by the Tiananmen crisis and the more recent separatist conflicts in Xinjiang and Tibet, that the PLA, not the corrupt People's Armed Police, was the last line of defense for internal security. Second, the Center was sensitive to the potential economic and social dislocation that reorganization and likely downsizing would have at the local political level, similar in many ways to the diehard resistance in the United States to the various rounds of Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC). Third, elements within the PLA no doubt feared losing their "rice bowls" during the inevitable reductions in force.⁸ For all of these reasons, the PLA leadership eventually decided each time to defer the organizational restructuring.

Establishment of Joint Command

On 2 January 2014, the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* published an article claiming that the PLA was planning to transform the seven military regions into five "military areas," which would "allow the military to immediately respond to emergency situations."⁹ Citing a senior Chinese military official, the article asserted that "each of the five areas will have a joint operations command for ground, naval and air forces, and the second artillery corps (the strategic missile corps)," with the goal of improving "the PLA's offensive capability to secure air and naval supremacy in the East China Sea and the South China Sea by transforming itself from a defense-oriented military mainly dependent on the ground force into one with more mobile, coordinated operations of the ground, naval and air forces and strategic missile units." The core of the plan reportedly involves the conversion of the three military regions along the coastline (Jinan, Nanjing, and Guangzhou) into new military areas, organized around a joint operations command that will cover the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea, respectively. The other four inland military regions would be later consolidated into two "military areas." The plan, which would be completed by 2022, mandates "a personnel reduction of about 300,000 from the current 2.3 million, mainly from the ground force's noncombatants, to allow diverting military funds to the naval, air and strategic missile forces, which require high-tech weapons."

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks”

The official Chinese media reacted quickly to the Yomiuri article, though the response seemingly tried to both confirm and deny the facts at the same time. On 3 January, *China Daily* published a relatively mild response, entitled “New Joint Command System ‘On Way’,” confirming that the PLA will establish a joint operational command system “in due course,” with observers saying this will result in more-coordinated and combat-capable forces to efficiently respond to a crisis.”¹⁰ To this end, the military has “launched positive pilot programs.”¹¹ This first reaction should not surprise anyone, especially considering that military reorganization was specifically called out in the “Decision” document resulting from the 18th Congress’s Third Plenum in November 2013:

Deepen adjustment and reform of the organization and composition of the armed forces. Advance reform of the leadership and management system, optimize the allocation of functions and the structure of the leaders and staffs of the Military Commission and PLA General Headquarters, and perfect the leadership and management systems of the various arms and services. Create a sound Military Commission joint operations command structure and theater joint operations command system, and advance reform of the joint operations training and support system. Perfect the leadership system of new-type combat forces. Strengthen centralized, overall management of informatization. Optimize the structure of Armed Police forces and their command and management system.¹²

Two days later, however, an article from China News Service reverted to form, quoting officials from the Ministry of National Defense Information Affairs Office that the PLA will establish a joint operational command “at an appropriate time,” but insisting reports that “a pilot project effort is already under way” are “groundless.”¹³ This walkback was confirmed a day later in *Liberation Army Daily*, which rejected the “rumors” and “speculation” of domestic and foreign newspapers about a joint operational command, but then contradicted itself by confirming that a joint operational command is a “basic requirement of operations and informatized conditions.”¹⁴

Conclusion

Pity the poor Western analyst of Chinese military developments. On the one hand, she has leaked reports from foreign newspapers about a planned reorganization of the military region system. On the other hand, she has confusing responses from Chinese official press, ranging from confirmation to self-righteous denial. How to square this circle? Boiled down to its essence, the intended message from Chinese official media appears to be: “We are going to set up a new joint command system, but we are pissed off that you foreigners are reading our Chinese party and military publications and found out about it before we were ready to tell you about it, so we are going to refute this report while actually implementing what the report says.” As one astute Western observer put it, “it seems that the roll-out got ahead of reality.” Or yet another example of ham-fisted strategic communication from Beijing, which, given the myriad of tensions over China’s

new ADIZ and territorial disputes, increasingly appears to be a strategic luxury that the PRC can no longer afford.

Postscript: Gu Junshan Corruption Update

As discussed in *China Leadership Monitor* 37, General Logistics Department Deputy Director Gu Junshan was arrested in January 2012 on corruption charges, stemming from his misappropriation of PLA properties. Since then, there has been almost no reporting on Gu's fate, despite a clear push from Xi Jinping to battle high-level corruption in the party and the military. The only exception was an unexpected comment by a PLA scholar to a Hong Kong newspaper in August 2013, euphemistically declaring that "Gu and his predecessor's [Wang Shouye, see *CLM* 19] cases made citizens unsatisfied."¹⁵ As 2014 opened, however, the national leadership appeared to be ratcheting up the anti-corruption campaign in the military. On 13 January, the General Logistics Department publicized its ongoing investigation into misuse of construction projects and real estate, which had been Gu's main source of illicit income, and promised to complete the review by September 2014.¹⁶ On 15 January, Xi Jinping addressed the Central Discipline Inspection Commission, describing the corruption situation as "grim" and "a disease that calls for strong medicine."¹⁷ He did not mince words about the difficulty of the struggle, comparing it to "a man who severs his snake-bitten hand to save his life," and warned that "every party official should keep in mind that all dirty hands will be caught."¹⁸

Then the other shoe dropped. In a development that had all of the hallmarks of an official leak, China's leading investigative media outlet, *Caixin*, ran a highly detailed and well-sourced exposé on 16 January detailing General Gu's malfeasance.¹⁹ The article opened by describing a January 2013 raid on Gu's "mansion" in Puyang, Henan, where 20 policeman carted away crates of expensive liquor and a boat, washbasin, and Mao Zedong statue made of solid gold. The police also tried to raid the home of Gu's brother, Gu Xianjun, who was also the chief of Dongbaicang Village, but he had already skedaddled and stayed on the lam for another seven months. *Caixin* then detailed how lackluster Solider Gu had discovered his true talents for currying favor with higher echelon, working the banquet table, and exploiting the military's then-participation in business activities to make profit. Gu reportedly "bought quota-controlled resources, such as steel, lumber and oil, from state-owned dealers and sold them for a high price," protecting himself by buying expensive gifts for local military leaders. As Gu was promoted through the ranks to senior positions in the General Logistics Department, he was able to exploit increasingly larger deals selling military land for housing developments and buying up dozens of properties in Beijing for his own use. The publication of this investigatory information, combined with the coordinated timing of its release with a new campaign against military corruption, strongly suggests once again that Chinese military officers hoarding illicit gains should probably go the mattresses immediately.

Notes

¹ Kenneth Allen, "Introduction to the PLA's Administrative and Operational Structure," *The PLA as Organization, v1.0*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002, p. 3.

² Kenneth Allen, "Introduction to the PLA's Organizational Reforms: 2000–2012," *The PLA as Organization, Volume 2.0*, Vienna, VA: Defense Group, Inc, forthcoming.

³ Allen, "Introduction to the PLA's Administrative and Operational Structure," p. 8.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Wang Jingguo and Wang Yitao, "Fan Changlong stresses seriously studying and implementing Chairman Xi's important decisions and instructions, making contributions and setting up undertaking in realizing goal of strengthening military when attending National Defense University's 2013 academic year's winter commencement ceremony," Xinhua, 17 January 2014.

⁶ Professor Yang Yunzhong, "The military should be built in line with how war is fought," *International Herald Leader*, 3 January 2014.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ To its credit, the PLA has weathered 10 RIFs since 1949, occurring in 1952, 1953, 1957, 1966, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1997, and 2003.

⁹ "China plans military reform to enhance its readiness," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2 January 2014.

¹⁰ Zhao Shengnan, "New Joint Command System 'On Way'," *China Daily*, 3 January 2014.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Full Text of 18th CPC Central Committee 3rd Plenum Communiqué," Xinhua, 12 November 2013.

¹³ Tao Shelan, "With regard to the recent reports in the media that 'the Chinese military will establish a joint operational command at the 'appropriate time' and that a pilot project effort is already under way,' on the 5th, the Chinese military clarified this, indicating that 'the reports are groundless'," *Zhongguo xinwen she*, 5 January 2014.

¹⁴ "MND Clarifies Rumors About 'Joint Operational Command'," *Liberation Army Daily*, 6 January 2014.

¹⁵ Minnie Chan, "PLA Urged To Reform, Upgrade to Fight Hi-Tech Wars," *South China Morning Post*, 3 August 2013.

¹⁶ "GLD urges to push forward investigation into construction projects and real estate resources," *Liberation Army Daily*, 13 January 2014.

¹⁷ "Graft Situation is Grim, Xi Warns Party's Anti-Corruption Commission," *South China Morning Post*, 15 January 2014.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Wang Heyan, "How a PLA general built a web of corruption to amass a fortune," *Caixin*, 16 January 2014.