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PLA reshuffle draws battle lines

By Willy Lam
11/15/2012

The Beijing leadership has reshuffled the high command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as the military goes through its own leadership transition separate from but linked to the 18th Party Congress. The move has also given hints about the reorganization of the policy-setting Central Military Commission (CMC). The membership of a much rejuvenated CMC will be confirmed by the 18th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress.

Although this round of personnel selection reinforces the PLA's increasing dedication to professionalism in its upper echelons, this series of personnel changes also reflects intense horse-trading among the party's principal factions.

The new chiefs of the "Four General Departments" - the General Staff Department (GSD), General Political Department (GPD), General Logistics Department (GLD) and General Armaments Department (GAD) - are respectively General Fang Fenghui (aged 61); General Zhang Yang (61); General Zhao Keshi (65); and General Zhang Youxia (62). Moreover, General Ma Xiaotian, (aged 63) and General Wei Fenghe (58) have been appointed commander of respectively the Air Force and the Second Artillery (which is in charge of the country's nuclear armory).

The incumbent Commander of the Navy, Wu Shengli (67) is expected to remain in his post for the foreseeable future. Also named were a dozen-odd new deputy and assistant chiefs of the headquarters units as well as the Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery.

The chiefs of the four general departments as well as the three military divisions will become

ordinary members of the CMC. Uncertainties, however, still hang over the identities of the top CMC leadership. According to reports out of Beijing and Hong Kong, President Hu (aged 69) will stay on as CMC chairman for at least two years beyond his retirement from the Politburo and the Central Committee at the 18th CCP Congress. The precedent for this in the post-revolutionary generation was set by ex-president Jiang Zemin, who continued being CMC chair for almost two years after his retirement from all other party slots at the 16th Party Congress in 2002. This means that Vice President Xi Jinping (59), who is slated to soon replace Hu as CCP general secretary, will remain CMC vice chairman for the time being.

The two new CMC vice chairmen are former PLA Air Force Commander General Xu Qiliang (62) and Commander of the Jinan Military Region General Fan Changlong (who is aged 65). The newly retired GAD Director, General Chang Wanquan (age 63) is set to replace General Liang Guanglie as Defense Minister.

The just-named Chief of the General Staff General Fang perhaps best exemplifies the new generation of professionally savvy officers. Fang, a native of Shaanxi Province and graduate of the elite National Defense University, was the youngest of China's seven regional commanders when he was given the No. 1 post of the Beijing Military Region (MR) in 2007. Apart from his command-and-control skills, Fang is a much-published author on military strategy, particularly in the areas of computer-aided war games and the synchronization of different branches of the military forces.

One of General Fang's favorite mottoes is that "radically changing times demand innovation in strategic theories". President Hu was said to be very impressed with Fang's orchestration of the 2009 military parade in Beijing, which marked the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. Last year, Fang won plaudits when he supervised complicated-scale maneuvers involving more than 30,000 soldiers from the Beijing, Lanzhou and Chengdu MRs. While the great majority of his predecessors as Beijing MR commander went into retirement after serving in this sensitive position, General Fang seems to have a bright future ahead of him.

Two hot contenders for the post of GPD director lost out apparently due to their close association with the disgraced Politburo member and Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai. They are the Political Commissar of the General Logistics Department General Liu Yuan (aged 61) and the Political Commissar of the Second Artillery General Zhang Haiyang (63).

Like Bo, who is the son of revolutionary hero Bo Yibo, Generals Liu and Zhang are deemed high-profile princelings. General Liu is the son of the late state president Liu Shaoqi, while General Zhang is the son of former Politburo member General Zhang Zhen. While Bo has never served in the PLA, he has a large following amongst the "princeling generals". The charismatic former Politburo member is due to be put on trial for alleged crimes including large-scale corruption and dereliction of duty.

After Bo was detained by authorities in mid-March, PLA disciplinary authorities have run numerous campaigns to promote the ideal of "the party's absolute leadership over the army". An August 1 Army Day commentary in the PLA Daily made an unusual reference to the army's immunity against being manipulated by "ambitious careerists" in the mould of Bo.

"In the midst of even the most dangerous situations, not a single troop in our army's history has mutineered or surrendered to the enemy," said the Daily commentary, "And not even the most cunning and ambitious careerist has been able to use the army to realize his conspiracy". In a talk last month, then-CMC vice chairman Xu Caihou urged officers and soldiers to "ensure that the troops must uphold a high level of unison with the central party leadership and the CMC in the areas of thought and politics." Xu added "We must resolutely listen to the directions of the party central leadership, the CMC and Chairman Hu".

In terms of factional dynamics, President Hu seems to be a major beneficiary of the reshuffle. Apart from Chief of the General Staff General Fang, GPD Director General Zhang is said to be close to the supremo. Given that the GPD controls functions including appointments and discipline, Hu may through his close ties with General Zhang be able to maintain some say in personnel matters even after his departure from the CMC.

Hu's clout also is evidenced by the surprise appointment of another protege, the relatively inexperienced Hong Kong Garrison commander Zhang Shibo, as General Fang's successor as Beijing MR commander. Before assuming the Hong Kong posting in late 2007, Zhang, a 60-year-old lieutenant general, was commander of the 20th Group Army.

Other appointments may reflect the preferences of ex-president Jiang and Vice President Xi. The probable promotion of Jinan MR Commander General Fan to the CMC vice chairmanship reflects Jiang's residual influence. General Fan is the protege of soon-to- retire CMC Vice Chairman General Xu, who is deemed Jiang's "unofficial representative" in the CMC. Both Generals Xu and Fan had served for long periods in the 16th Group Army. Earlier this year, General Fan (65) was expected to be leaving the armed forces after having reached the mandatory retirement age for regional commanders.

Xi's influence in the PLA has been adversely affected by the fact that the career of several princeling generals has been hurt by their association with Bo Xilai. New Air Force commander General Ma Xiaotian and GAD Director General Zhang Youxia, however, are notable princelings. General Zhang is thought to be particularly close to Xi. The fathers of Xi and General Zhang, respectively Xi Zhongxun and General Zhang Zongxun, were close allies when both worked in northwestern China before the CCP came into power in 1949.

The marathon reshuffles also have followed the tradition begun by President Hu of the frequent movement of personnel not only across different military divisions but also from headquarters to the regions. For example, the Political Commissar of the Chengdu MR, General Tian Xiusi, was made the Political Commissar of the Air Force. Assistant GPD Director General Wei Liangzhong became the Political Commissar of the Guangzhou MR, while General Wang Guanzhong, the veteran Director of the PLA General Office, was appointed a Deputy Chief of the GSD.

Also notable are the proverbial "helicopter rides" taken by the likes of General Fan of the Jinan MR and General Zhang of the Hong Kong Garrison. It is very rare for a regional commander to be elevated directly to CMC vice chairman. General Zhang's promotion to the post of Beijing

MR Commander is also unusual. In light of the importance of the Beijing MR, only officers who had held senior posts such as deputy commander or chief of the general staff of the country's seven MRs had been named to that sensitive slot.

Given that factional loyalty is a key consideration behind the on-going personnel movements, it is perhaps not surprising that not as much priority has been given to weeding out corruption in the military. This is despite the fact that General Liu Yuan - one of the high-profile losers in the promotion sweepstakes - was praised highly for initiating an anti-graft campaign within the GLD early this year.

Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu, a professor at the National Defense University and a respected military commentator, pointed out recently that "corrupt generals" were an even more serious problem than "corrupt cadres". Last month, Liu said "Corruption is the only force that can defeat the PLA."

"Yet the forces of corruption are more powerful than those of fighting corruption," he added. "And perpetrators of corruption are more resourceful than graft busters". The onus is on the post-18th Party Congress leadership to demonstrate that members of the newly promoted top brass live up to the oft-repeated motto of *decai jianbei*, that is, "having high moral attributes as well as being professionally competent".