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China focuses on 'far sea defense'

By Joseph Y Lin
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Recent discourse concerning the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) modernization has principally focused on technological advances and less on the human dimension of PLA force transformation. In particular, a review of these discussions revealed the absence of a publicly available [database](#) of Chinese military leaders with the rank of full general (*shangjiang*).

Against the backdrop of the PLA's stated intention to reorient the armed forces as part of its modernization efforts, an analysis of promotion patterns of the 118 PLA generals (1981-2009) may yield important insights into the foci of PLA force transformation.

PLA to build up navy and air force

A string of recent statements by senior Chinese military officials alluding to the realignment of the PLA indicates that significant

changes in the composition of the armed forces may be in the offing.

In April, the Chinese Defense Ministry's spokesperson Senior Colonel Huang Xueping stated during an interview, "It's quite natural that we want to build up a *streamlined* [emphasis added] military force which has more focus on [technologies](#) rather than man power." Huang's statement, taken in the context of increasing Chinese naval assertiveness in international waters near Japan and in the South China Sea in recent years, has raised questions over the PLA's intentions and capabilities.

To be sure, the Chinese military leadership seems to be signaling its intention to depart from its long-held emphasis on the army for the air force and navy. By enhancing the role of the navy and air force, the goal of its effort appears aimed at extending China's military power projection capability into the Pacific while reducing the size of its total military force.

According to Senior Colonel Yang Chengjun, a researcher with the Second Artillery Force of the PLA, the proportion of the army in the Chinese military is a "problem" rooted in history and points out the need to "optimize the composition of different arms" in order for the Chinese military to meet its modern day challenges.

Echoing the Chinese Defense Ministry's position, the director of the Center for Arms Control and International Security Studies at the China Institute of International Studies in Beijing, Teng Jianqun, considers China's focus on naval and air force development to be "inevitable".

Taking the analysis one step further, Xu Guangyu, a retired PLA major general now with the [government](#) think-tank China Arms Control and Disarmament Association (CACDA), believes that China can achieve these transformative goals with a budgetary allocation among China's army, navy and [air force](#) at a 50:25:25 ratio, representing a shift from the current 60:20:20 ratio.

Xu does not see a 40:30:30 ratio since he believes that China's naval and air power will "mostly be used to enhance the combat effectiveness of our [China's] ground forces". Xu's statement seems to imply that the PLA - at least for the time being - is not emulating American global power projection capabilities supported and enabled by US military budgets that have in recent years allocated resources among the army, navy and air force roughly along a 40:30:30 ratio [1].

'Far sea defense' strategy

The advent of the People's Liberation [Army Navy's](#) (PLAN's) "far sea defense" (*yuanyang fangyu*) strategy calling for the development of China's long-range naval capabilities, appears to be one of the major [drivers](#) behind the push to transform the composition of the Chinese armed forces.

Yin Zhuo, a retired PLAN rear admiral who is now a senior researcher at the navy's Equipment Research Center, stated in an interview with People's Daily Online that the PLAN is tasked with two primary missions: preservation of China's maritime security (including territorial integrity) and the protection of China's burgeoning and far-flung maritime economic interests.

And while the former is still the PLAN's chief concern, the PLAN is beginning to prioritize more attention to the latter. Rear-Admiral Zhang Huachen, deputy commander of the PLAN's East Sea [Fleet](#) argues, "With the expansion of the country's economic

interests, the navy wants to protect the country's transportation routes and the safety of our major sea lanes." The rear-admirals' statements present a legitimate rationale behind the PLAN's new strategy.

The far sea defense strategy is significant for two reasons. First, it declares that China's naval ambitions extend beyond its traditional coastal area or "near sea" (*jinyang*). Secondly, it expands the PLAN's defense responsibilities to include the protection of China's maritime economic interests - which China's latest defense whitepaper did not explicitly address [2].

It stands to reason then that a possible key motivation behind the reorientation of China's armed forces stems from China's perceived need to project power beyond its coastal area to where the PLAN is required to carry out the newly expanded far sea defense duties.

CMC as China's highest military commanding body

As the highest military policy and commanding body in China, the CMC supervises and commands five service branches of China's armed forces: the PLA ground forces, PLAN, People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), Second Artillery Corps (SAC) and the People's Armed Police (PAP) (which falls under the joint leadership of the CMC and the State Council).

Since the restoration of military rank (*junxian*) in 1988, the CMC has promoted 118 military leaders to generals: 17 under Deng Xiaoping (1981-1989), 79 under Jiang Zemin (1989-2004) and 22 to date under Hu Jintao (2004-present)

The Chinese military has traditionally been influenced by its ground forces because of China's historical status as a land power. Additionally, the PLA ground forces can trace their roots to the 1920s, predating the founding of the People's Republic of China and all other service branches.

Therefore, ground forces generals not surprisingly represent a lion's share or 71% of the total. Yet, Hu has promoted substantially more "non-ground forces" (PLAN, PLAAF, SAC and PAP) generals than his predecessors. In percentage terms, 45% of Hu's generals are non-ground forces, compared to 25% and 24% for Jiang's and Deng's, respectively.

Strategic	Second	Artillery	Corps
The CMC directly supervises and commands the SAC, which controls China's nuclear arsenal and conventional missiles. Its small manpower (estimated at 100,000 or 3% of Chinese military manpower) notwithstanding, the SAC has produced a disproportionately large number of generals.			

Of the 118 military leaders promoted to generals, six (or 5% of the total) were SAC generals - which may be an indication of the SAC's special status in China's armed forces. Hu has promoted the most SAC generals in percentage terms (9%), compared to

Deng (6%) and Jiang (4%). Hu's relative overweight in his SAC generals is a reflection of the strategic emphasis he places on the SAC.

Internally oriented People's Armed Police

While other service branches are externally oriented, the internally oriented PAP is charged with "the fundamental task of safeguarding national security, maintaining social stability and ensuring that the people live in peace and contentment" [3].

Jiang successfully incorporated the PAP into the CMC's command structure by promoting the first PAP general in 1998. Altogether, he promoted five PAP generals, representing 6% of his total. Continuing the emphasis on PAP generals, Hu has promoted two PAP generals, representing 9% of his total. Since domestic stability remains among Hu's and the CCP's highest governing priorities, one can expect Hu to continue promoting PAP generals.

Hu to promote more admirals

Excluding the strategic SAC and the internally oriented PAP to determine the relative proportions among the army, navy and air force generals, one finds that 33% of Hu's generals are non-ground forces (PLAN and PLAAF), compared to 17% and 19% for Jiang's and Deng's, respectively.

In other words, Hu's generals are 67% army, 11% navy and 22% air force. Jiang's generals were 83% army, 7% navy and 10% air force, whereas Deng's generals were 81% army, 13% navy and 6% air force.

Hu appears to have begun the process of reorienting his generals by emphasizing the promotions of military leaders in the navy and air force. Given China's naval ambitions and the relative under-representation of PLAN admirals (when benchmarked against Xu's stated target proportion at 25%), one can therefore expect Hu to emphasize the promotions of PLAN admirals.

As CMC chairman, Deng promoted 17 generals in a single "class" in 1988. Jiang on average promoted generals once every two years between 1989 and 2004, with the average "class size" at about 10 generals. Hu on average has promoted generals once every year between 2004 and 2009 with the average class size at four generals. Where Jiang appears to have institutionalized the promotion process, Hu appears to have regularized the promotion process.

Implications

If Hu continues to promote generals at roughly the same pace as he has in the past, he could reasonably promote another 10 generals by the end of his tenure as CMC chairman in 2012 (although he may hold on to CMC chairmanship beyond 2012 following Jiang's example). Given the reorientation of China's armed forces as a PLA priority, one should

expect to see an overweighting in the promotions of non-ground forces generals in Hu's remaining tenure.

Of the additional 10 Hu generals, assuming one slot is set aside for each of the SAC and PAP, one may find it reasonably likely that the other eight could comprise three army, three navy and two air force generals.

This combination will result in a final relative weighting of 58% army, 19% navy and 23% air force for Hu's generals - a directionally consistent outcome when compared with Xu's stated goal of 50% army, 25% navy and 25% air force.

The number of PLA Navy admirals is not likely to leapfrog as Hu is expected to continue his gradualist and balanced approach in promoting his generals in the future, taking into consideration each service branch's interests and representation as in the past. This also reflects Hu's rather cautious approach to the military given his lack of a military background. Yet the goals are clear. This is only the beginning of a long-term trend.

Notes

1. Todd Harrison, Analysis of the 2010FY [Defense Budget Request](#) (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, August 12, 2009): 38. When the "defense-wide" item is excluded from the US military budget, the relative budgetary ratio among the army, navy (including the [Marine Corps](#)) and air force has been approximately 40:30:30 in recent years.
2. [Information Office](#) of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense 2008", January 2009, Section V: 7.
3. Ibid, Section VIII: 10.