

# COMING TO A (NEW) THEATER NEAR YOU

Command, Control, and Forces

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In late 2015, China enacted a series of sweeping military reforms that ostensibly laid the groundwork for a more viable joint force.<sup>1</sup> These reforms—long anticipated by Western observers due to the gap between the command structure of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and its force development goals—give the military an opportunity to align its organizations and processes with these objectives. Consolidating the former seven military regions (MRs) into five new theater commands (TCs) (see figures 1 and 2); abolishing the four general departments; forming the Strategic Support Force to consolidate space, cyber, and electronic warfare responsibilities; and creating a separate army command are all massive steps meant to address many chronic shortcomings that constrained the development of the joint force and generation of combat power.

Among many details that are not yet clear and will no doubt require years for Western observers (and the PLA) to sort out, perhaps the most important is its success or failure in implementing a new approach to commanding and controlling theater forces. As PLA expert Roger Cliff points out, there are significant cultural, doctrinal, and technical impediments ahead before the PLA arrives at even an interim joint capability at the theater level.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1. MR System Boundaries**



All locations are approximate.  
Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative.

Source: *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2016), 2.

**Figure 2. Approximate TC Boundaries**



All locations are approximate.  
Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative.

Source: *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2016), 2.

Despite more than a decade of experimentation and sometimes citing a generation gap, critiques in official press continue to highlight the inexperience and lack of commitment to “informationization” [*xinxi hua*, 信息化] on the part of PLA officers and leaders.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the decision to finally set aside the MR structure in favor of a joint TC construct has removed perhaps the biggest obstacle in executing integrated joint operations [*yitihua lianhe zuozhan*, 一体化联合作战], which is how the PLA seeks to operate jointly under informationized conditions.

This chapter examines in depth one aspect of these new reforms: the shift from military regions to theater commands. In so doing, it consults a broad range of Chinese and English sources, including authoritative news media, publications by Chinese military institutions, and commentary by PLA experts. The first section examines the logic behind this shift, particularly what Chinese leaders hope to achieve from such a transition. The second section looks at the missions and responsibilities of each of the five new TCs. It further presents a draft order of battle, sketching out what ground, naval, air, and other assets have been assigned to the new theater commands. The third section looks at the prospects of success for these reforms.

### **The Logic Behind the Shift to Theater Commands**

When trying to quantify the importance of the reforms—and the dissolution of the MR system, in particular—it is necessary to revisit a long arc of study and publications on military theory and the nature of modern warfare by the PLA and its political leaders. This section reviews the background of PLA efforts to improve its ability to conduct integrated joint operations. It further examines how these efforts are connected with the shift from MRs to TCs and what Chinese leaders hope to achieve.

Over the past 20 years, PLA thought leaders have written extensively on the criticality of information technology for military innovation, prompted by the U.S.-led coalition’s success in the First Gulf War and in particular by its perceived ability to effectively command and control joint forces in dynamic maneuver warfare. Their exploration of the topic highlighted the

important role of integrating advanced information technology with joint forces. This led to the incorporation of a number of related concepts in the Chinese military lexicon, including information warfare [*xinxi zhanzheng*, 信息战争], digital forces [*dianzi budui*, 电子部队], and information operations [*xinxi zuozhan*, 信息作战]. The PLA eventually settled on Information System–based System of Systems Operations [*jiyu xinxi xitong tixi zuozhan*, 基于信息系统体系作战] as their approach to conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Many of these themes are illustrated in a 2010 interview with a prominent PLA theorist at the Chinese National Defense University of Science and Technology. Citing the U.S. military’s experience not only in the Gulf War but also in Operation *Iraqi Freedom* as well as *Joint Vision 2020* materials, the article laid out China’s information system–based system of systems operations as “basically identical or similar” to the Western concept of network-centric warfare.<sup>5</sup> A background section prefacing the article laid out what can be interpreted as an official PLA endorsement of its new approach: “System operations based on the information system have become a basic pattern of joint operations under informationized conditions, and information capability has become the primary capability in joint operations.” Moreover, after describing the critical importance of new command information systems and weapons platforms to the PLA, the senior Chinese strategist quoted in the article cited joint air strike operations during Operation *Desert Storm* as evidence that it was “absolutely impossible to use traditional command means and methods to successfully direct a complicated informationized joint operation, and it is necessary to rely on an integrated command information system.”<sup>6</sup> The PLA’s command system itself, then, was a major impediment to achieving longstanding force development and capability goals.

Both the command structure changes and the path to joint operations writ large have been arduous and nonlinear. As PLA analyst Kevin Pollpeter notes, Chinese leaders in the late 1990s began to aim for the creation of an informationized force, and one of the ways to achieve this was through jointness. In 1999, the PLA issued a *gangyao* [纲要], or outline, that formally

instituted joint operations into PLA warfighting. Pollpeter notes that in 2009, “the General Staff Department (GSD) provided training objectives that for the first time fully committed the services to joint operations.”<sup>7</sup> Yet during this period, the PLA made less progress toward achieving jointness than hoped. This was due to a combination of factors, including a focus on coordination rather than true jointness, the lack of permanent joint structures, and a mindset of single service domination. Individual services during this period were able to develop robust vertical command and control systems but failed to take the initiative to do the same across services.<sup>8</sup>

Chinese leaders have also attempted to change the PLA’s mindset regarding joint operations. As Defense Intelligence Agency analysts Wanda Ayuso and Lonnie Henley detail, from 2008 onward, these efforts centered on three areas: “developing the expertise of academic faculty in the military educational institutions; getting PLA commanders and staff to think in terms of joint training rather than combined arms training; and developing information systems and material solutions to facilitate joint command.”<sup>9</sup> The PLA also gained knowledge from its interactions with other countries in bilateral and multilateral exercises.<sup>10</sup> In spite of these efforts, however, the PLA continued to have difficulty applying joint operational concepts to actual situations and in changing its way of thinking about military conflict.

The shift from an MR to TC system may be viewed in this context as the continuation of these previous efforts to achieve jointness for the PLA. China watchers and analysts for decades have pointed out the limitations of China’s MR system, with its built-in impediments to deploying maneuver forces across or in the air over invisible lines at MR boundaries and the PLA’s reliance on this structure to provision logistics and other combat service support in both peacetime and wartime.<sup>11</sup> Even veteran PLA officers recognized that the MR system was not a functional command and control system for modern warfare. PLA campaign literature makes clear that an ad hoc joint command and control system would be employed in wartime. This ad hoc entity would have been led by an army general attached to the GSD,

but potentially by an MR officer in smaller army-dominated contingencies such as a small border crisis with a Southeast Asian neighbor. Maneuver and strike forces would be led by GSD officers for large joint operations, but potentially could be led by army leader to MR leader grade officers drawn from participating military regions.

Over the past decade, as joint training and joint operations increasingly became focal points for the PLA, the MR construct became a greater impediment for operational forces in terms of exercising command and control and in training realism. If the joint command element would be formed from and by the Central Military Commission (CMC) and staffed with GSD officers in wartime, how realistic could the operational/maneuver force training have been in the absence of a real command element exercising with them? If MR staff officers were not responsible for joint training, how could they simulate this command element in a realistic manner? How could anyone gain useful joint command experience in this structure? The following section explains how the TC system helps to rectify these issues.

### **Chinese Explanations of the TC System**

Chinese researchers framed the need for restructuring as a strategic requirement—even as the framework of the radical reforms was being debated and shaped. In September 2015, Senior Colonel Wang Xiaohui of the Strategy Research and Teaching Department at China's National Defense University highlighted what he saw as the most pressing strategic preparations [*zhanlüe zhunbei*, 战略准备] the PLA needed to make. While not necessarily authoritative, Wang concisely detailed the shortfalls that would soon be addressed with the broad military reforms later that year.<sup>12</sup> First, Wang contended that China could not exercise unified command over the joint force without first establishing what he termed an integrated joint operation command system [*yitihua lianhe zuozhan zhihui tizhi*, 一体化联合作战指挥体制] to command and control all PLA forces, to which the theater system would be subordinate. He specifically cited the U.S. military experience with combatant commands,

highlighting that its most prominent features are a simple hierarchy and command smoothness and that the campaign and tactical command levels from theater to division were reduced from five to three. The envisioned Chinese command entity would be responsible for training theater forces in peacetime and operational command in wartime. The supporting theater departments—manpower and personnel, intelligence, operations, training, and support—would then be formed under the theater command.

Second, Wang noted the weakness of combining military administration with operational command, pointing to the U.S. experience separating the two. Wang went on at length regarding the challenges the PLA faced under its current system:

For example, the command organs are oversized and overstaffed, with unreasonable internal structure. Functions of various departments in a command organ are overlapped to a serious extent. Most departments are responsible for peacetime training, management, and support. As a result, over a long period, there were two major shortcomings in our military's leadership and command system: First, the function of commanding forces to fight battles was weak. Second, the strategic management capability of directing the whole military's building and development was weak. Such a state of affairs is far from meeting the required "flat-shaped" joint operation command system in informationized warfare, and also directly restricts and affects the conducting of scientific leadership and management of national defense and armed forces building.

Third, Wang emphatically highlighted the often-cited imbalance of forces due to the historic primacy of the PLA Army and the need to rationalize the mix of combat to noncombat forces:

Furthermore, the most prominent issue related to the quantity and scale of the Chinese military forces is the inappropriate proportion of forces in the army, the navy, the air force, and the Second

Artillery, the inappropriate proportion of combat units to non-combat units, the inappropriate proportion of combat personnel to noncombat personnel, and consequently the inappropriate proportion of officers to enlisted personnel. . . . In particular, it is necessary to energetically reinforce the building of the navy and the air force, improve the proportion of various services, establish a scientific and reasonable ratio of combat personnel to noncombat personnel, and thus enhance the combat power of the Chinese armed forces.

The strategic drivers that Wang laid out no doubt reflect the arguments that won the day in terms of the reforms. Official statements and commentary by experts within and outside of the PLA cite four primary reasons for the shift from MRs to TCs:

- streamlining responsibilities
- strengthening jointness
- increasing readiness
- making China's military policy vis-à-vis external actors more coherent.

This section discusses each of these factors.

### **Streamlined Responsibilities**

First, under the old system, the MRs fulfilled a wide range of functions, which included force-building, management, command, and peacetime administration.<sup>13</sup> This made the MR a type of composite organization that ended up dealing more with routine administration in peacetime than actual preparations for wartime operations. As noted, during wartime the affected MRs would have been replaced by a command drawn from staff in Beijing, not exclusively officers from the particular MR.<sup>14</sup> This was the case in 1979, when the GSD set up a separate ad hoc organ responsible for the overall prosecution of the Sino-Vietnamese War. The MRs adjoining Vietnam continued to conduct operations separately and provide support



for their specific strategic direction.<sup>15</sup> In the context of the Cold War, this was considered an optimal setup, as China's political and military leaders judged that if a war were to break out, it would likely be an all-out war. Thus, it was better to leave the responsibility for preparing operations to the GSD, which would create temporary theater command organs as needed.<sup>16</sup> The shift brought about by the reforms is an attempt to move away from this arrangement by stripping the new TCs of many of their non-warfighting functions, moving these responsibilities to other leadership organs, and making the TCs solely responsible for joint training and operations. Mobilization, for example, now falls to the CMC's National Defense Mobilization Department, 1 of its 15 new functional departments.

At the same time, the reforms clarify the lines of authority flowing from various PLA leadership organs. The new system allows the CMC to more effectively and directly exercise overall authority over the country's armed forces. Meanwhile, the TCs are responsible for operations, and the services are responsible for force-building.<sup>17</sup> Under this arrangement, the TCs are able to concentrate on performing a more narrowly defined, clearer set of roles, theoretically allowing them to do so more effectively and with better results than under the responsibilities assigned to the military regions.

### **Strengthened Jointness**

Second, the TCs' focus on joint operations and training, in turn, supports another longstanding force development goal: increasing jointness among the armed forces. As mentioned, Chinese military experts strongly believe that informationized warfare and system of systems warfare will predominate in modern conflicts and that only a truly joint force is suited for this.<sup>18</sup> However, there was a noticeable lack of jointness under the old MR system. In particular, regional naval and air forces commanders were dual-hatted as deputy MR commanders, but under their dual chain of command they also reported to their service chiefs in Beijing in peacetime. This duality impeded a true sense of jointness at the MR echelon. In a February 2016 interview, Southern TC Commander Wang Jiaocheng

explained the rationale for separating administrative management and command of regional forces from preparing for joint combat:

In the traditional military region structure, the functions of combat command and construction management were combined, construction and use were integrated, and because of that the combat command function was weakened, and the joint operations structure was not complete enough. Faced with the new challenges of the revolution in military affairs, the shortcomings of joint command and joint operations were worsened further. The lack of smoothness in the joint operations command structure also constrained the building of joint training and joint support structures. That contradiction became the most significant structural impediment to our armed forces' ability to fight [win] battles.<sup>19</sup>

While the precise command and control relationship between conventional missile forces at the brigade echelon and the theaters in which they are based is unclear, like other conventional forces they will be available to support any of the five theaters through theater joint operations command centers if needed. Nuclear forces, on the other hand, are different. One *Global Times* article notes that "According to tradition, nuclear weapons are instruments of the utmost importance to the nation. In all countries, they are controlled by the highest authority and cannot be assigned to the theater commands."<sup>20</sup> Logically, though, if theater commanders and their staffs have responsibility for planning for their strategic direction, then conventional missile forces will almost certainly be part of planning considerations not only in the theaters in which they are based but also in supporting other theaters.<sup>21</sup> Beijing fielded these operational forces based on perceived wartime needs, and those needs have not changed under the reforms. These forces would be under the command and control of those theater commanders in wartime, but able to support other theaters as well. Assigning the theater commander responsibility for an operational direction and large-scale training of the joint force for that contingency

are strong arguments for wartime command and control of conventional forces for strike missions in that theater.

### Increased Readiness

Third, a primary aim of the introduction of TCs is to increase the readiness of the PLA. Indeed, Xi Jinping has been emphatic about the PLA concentrating on combat readiness.<sup>22</sup> Modern PLA military texts stress that limited, localized wars are far likelier than the all-out wars (and the concomitant long warning times that accompany these conflicts) anticipated during the Cold War period. For instance, of the four likeliest future wars that China will have to fight that are listed in the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, three are essentially localized wars. One is a relatively large-scale, high-intensity conflict with Taiwan. Another is a medium- to small-scale, mid- to low-intensity war against bordering countries. The last is a small-scale, low-intensity war to counter terrorist activities, maintain stability, and maintain sovereignty.<sup>23</sup> Rather than create temporary joint headquarters, Chinese planners argue that it makes more sense to have TCs already established for each strategic direction so that China will have planned and be prepared for its most likely contingencies. Such a system is envisioned to “allow for the rapid shift from a peacetime to wartime stance . . . [and] greatly improve the nation’s ability to respond to crises and protect national security.”<sup>24</sup>

The new command mechanisms to promote both jointness and readiness include new standing joint command entities known as Joint Operations Command Centers, which exist at two levels. At the national level, there is the CMC Joint Operations Command Center, of which Xi is commander in chief. Each TC also has its own Joint Operations Command Center.<sup>25</sup> How these centers will work in practice, or who will serve in specific leadership positions beyond the identified theater commanders and deputies, is not currently known. For example, will theater joint commanders still exercise command and control through operations groups, or will those entities now be subsumed at the theater level? What seems certain is that, in the short term, these command positions will continue to be dominated by army officers as

the PLA works through the process of promoting more officers from other services into staff and leadership positions at the theater level.

### **Greater Coherency Externally**

Fourth, a further consequence of establishing theaters with operational control of forces within their assigned geographic regions is to provide greater coherency to China's military policy vis-à-vis external actors. As the example of the Sino-Vietnamese War demonstrates, the old system had more than one MR for each strategic direction. In the event of a conflict, the ad hoc "front" approach meant that coordination had to take place across MR boundaries, thereby complicating planning, mobilization, and communications at precisely the wrong time. As Yang Yujun, spokesman for the Ministry of National Defense, stated, the "TC will serve as the sole supreme joint operational command organ for its strategic direction."<sup>26</sup> How the new TC system attempts to accomplish this goal is discussed in the following section.

Finally, it may also be worth noting the role that outside sources of inspiration have played. Several commentary pieces have compared China's theater commands to Russia's joint strategic commands (military districts) and U.S. unified combatant commands.<sup>27</sup> The shift to TCs, in that sense, suggests a desire to demonstrate that the PLA aspires to be a peer of the Russian and U.S. militaries in terms of how it plans and prepares for conflict. The ultimate goal of this, as China's civilian and military leadership has stressed repeatedly, is to make the PLA capable of fighting and winning wars.<sup>28</sup>

### **Theater Command Responsibilities**

Each of the new TCs has its own defined set of roles and is responsible for a particular strategic direction. In general, each TC has under its command ground and air forces, and some capacity to either call for fires or have some command authority over conventional missile units based in the TC (see table). The three coastal TCs (Northern, Eastern, and Southern) also have an assigned naval fleet, while the Central TC

most likely includes some lower echelon naval elements not subordinate to one of China's three fleets. Of course, various support and nuclear missile units are based in each theater, but their chain of command is not under question: The consensus among analysts is that they remain directly under the command of the CMC and would support any of the theaters or directions at CMC discretion.

<b>Table. Order of Battle for Theater Commands</b>				
<b>Theater Command</b>	<b>Group Armies</b>	<b>Fleet</b>	<b>Air Assets</b>	<b>Rocket Force Base (Brigades)/Unit</b>
Eastern	71 <sup>st</sup> , 72 <sup>nd</sup> , 73 <sup>rd</sup>	Ea <sup>st</sup> Sea Fleet	10 <sup>th</sup> Bomber Division; 40 <sup>th</sup> , 41 <sup>st</sup> , and 42 <sup>nd</sup> fighter brigades; 26 <sup>th</sup> Special Mission Division; 83 <sup>rd</sup> Attack Brigade; Fuzhou Base; Shanghai Base	61 Base (807, 811, 815, 817, 819, 820 brigades), 96180 Unit
Southern	74 <sup>th</sup> , 75 <sup>th</sup>	Sou <sup>th</sup> Sea Fleet	4 <sup>th</sup> , 5 <sup>th</sup> , 6 <sup>th</sup> , 25 <sup>th</sup> , 26 <sup>th</sup> , 27 <sup>th</sup> , 52 <sup>nd</sup> , 54 <sup>th</sup> , 96 <sup>th</sup> , 98 <sup>th</sup> , a <sup>nd</sup> 99 <sup>th</sup> fighter brigades; 8 <sup>th</sup> Bomber Division; 13 <sup>th</sup> Transport Division; 20 <sup>th</sup> Special Mission Division; Kunming Base; Nanning Base	61 Base (818 brigade), 96166 Unit; 62 Base (802, 808, 821, 825 brigades), 96212 Unit; 63 Base (803, 805, 814, 824, 826 brigades)
Western	76 <sup>th</sup> , 77 <sup>th</sup>	N/A	16 <sup>th</sup> Fighter Brigade; 36 <sup>th</sup> Bomber Division; 4 <sup>th</sup> Transport Division; Lanzhou Base; Urumqi Base; Xi'an Flying Academy	64 Base (809, 812, 823 brigades)
Northern	78 <sup>th</sup> , 79 <sup>th</sup> , 80 <sup>th</sup>	North Sea Fleet	15 <sup>th</sup> , 31 <sup>st</sup> , 32 <sup>nd</sup> attack brigades; 34 <sup>th</sup> , 35 <sup>th</sup> , 36 <sup>th</sup> , 61 <sup>st</sup> , a <sup>nd</sup> 63 <sup>rd</sup> fighter brigades; 16 <sup>th</sup> Special Mis- sion Division; Dalian Base; Jinan Base; Harbin Flying Academy	65 Base (810, 816, 822 brigades)
Central	81 <sup>st</sup> , 82 <sup>nd</sup> , 83 <sup>rd</sup>	N/A	19 <sup>th</sup> , 55 <sup>th</sup> , 56 <sup>th</sup> , 70 <sup>th</sup> , 71 <sup>st</sup> , and 72 <sup>nd</sup> fighter brigades; 43 <sup>rd</sup> and 44 <sup>th</sup> fighter/attack brigades; Datong Base; Wuhan Base; Shijiazhuang Flying Academy	65 Base (806 Brigade); 66 Base (801, 804, 813, 827 brigades)

Sources: For ground and naval assets, *The Military Balance 2018* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018); for air assets, *The Military Balance 2018*, and Lawrence Trevethan, "Brigadization" of the PLA Air Force (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2018); for Rocket Force brigades and bases, *Directory of PRC Military Personalities* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2018), and various Chinese and English media reports.

Another important facet of the military reforms is the establishment of separate service headquarters for PLA Army units within each of the five theaters, thereby creating an equivalency between all services in the new theater construct. These perform the same function as TC air forces and TC navy forces—operational and administrative oversight of operational units, in this case group armies. More than that, the TC service headquarters will likely play an important role in ensuring that units meet training requirements, in line with the new division of labor within the PLA—with the CMC exercising overall control, the theater commands responsible for operations, and the services responsible for force-building. These would include both service-specific and joint requirements. As one commentator noted, Xi Jinping in his report at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress stressed the need to build a modern operational system with Chinese characteristics. For the services to “implement and carry out the spirit of the commander’s speech, they must not only do a good job of building their own weapons/armaments and operations systems, [but] they must also improve their consciousness of the overall situation, their joint thinking, and do a good job of resolving the problem of integrating theater services command into the theater joint operational command system.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Eastern Theater Command**

Headquartered in Nanjing, the Eastern TC area of jurisdiction is exactly identical to that of the former Nanjing MR. It has responsibility for Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Fujian, and Jiangxi and initially had command of all of the Nanjing MR’s group armies—the 12<sup>th</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup>, and 31<sup>st</sup>.<sup>30</sup> In late April 2017, the PLA ground force underwent another reform that saw the number of group armies reduced from 18 to 13 in addition to being renumbered from 71 through 83.<sup>31</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup>, and 31<sup>st</sup> Group Armies were redesignated as the 71<sup>st</sup>, 72<sup>nd</sup>, and 73<sup>rd</sup> Group Armies, respectively.<sup>32</sup> For the maritime dimension, the Eastern TC has responsibility for the East China Sea and Taiwan. The East Sea Fleet has been assigned to the Eastern TC, with the fleet commander simultaneously serving as deputy theater

commander and commander of the Eastern TC naval forces, which were initially referred to as the East Sea Fleet and then referred to as the Eastern TC Navy as of February 2018.<sup>33</sup>

Because the Eastern TC includes the same provinces as the former Nanjing MR, it should theoretically also have retained its air assets. According to the 2018 edition of the *Military Balance*, the Eastern TC's air assets currently include the 10<sup>th</sup> Bomber Division, 14<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Divisions, 26<sup>th</sup> Special Mission Division, 28<sup>th</sup> Attack Division, Fuzhou Base, and Shanghai Base.<sup>34</sup> (All PLA Air Force fighter divisions and attack divisions have now been converted into brigades. The table shows the new brigade designations for each TC.) Finally, the Rocket Force's 52 Base, now known as the 61 Base and headquartered at Huangshan in Anhui, is based in the Eastern TC as well.<sup>35</sup> While command and control of PLA Rocket Force nuclear units will remain held at the CMC level, 61 Base's subordinate conventional missile units will no doubt feature prominently in Eastern TC planning. Much of China's conventional missile firepower is also based within the Eastern TC, as it was fielded there to support Taiwan contingency operations. As mentioned previously, these highly maneuverable assets would be allocated to any TC at CMC direction.<sup>36</sup>

### Southern Theater Command

The Southern TC is headquartered in Guangzhou and was created by combining parts of the Guangzhou and Chengdu MRs. From the former, it received the provinces of Hunan, Guangdong (and by extension, the Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions), Guangxi, and Hainan, as well as the 41<sup>st</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> Group Armies. From the latter, it received the provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou and the 14<sup>th</sup> Group Army.<sup>37</sup> Following the changes to the group armies in April 2017, the 14<sup>th</sup> Group Army was eliminated, while the 41<sup>st</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> were renumbered as the 74<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup>, respectively.<sup>38</sup>

The South Sea Fleet has additionally been assigned to the Southern TC, serving as its naval force component.<sup>39</sup> According to Liang Fang, professor at China's National Defense University, the Southern TC has responsibility

for the South China Sea.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps mirroring the importance of the South China Sea in its planning, in early 2017 the Southern TC became the first to be led by a PLA Navy officer when Admiral Yuan Yubai was named commander, replacing PLA Army General Wang Jiaocheng.<sup>41</sup> While this may be a primary planning task for the theater, operational units of the former Guangzhou MR also had responsibility for Taiwan contingencies and participated in high-profile exercises on the Taiwan Strait. The Southern TC may have at least partially inherited this responsibility. It may no longer lead planning and preparation for conflict with Taiwan, but it will still have to support the Eastern TC. Southern theater commanders will therefore have to ensure that it schedules and accomplishes rigorous joint training for a variety of contingencies, some of which it may not command. Moreover, the theater has added border regions with Laos and Myanmar. While the combat tasks and campaigns are the same, planning for border conflicts in terms of intelligence preparation, terrain analyses, and logistics is presumably more complex when planning for multiple opponents.

In terms of air assets, the 2018 *Military Balance* notes the Southern TC as having the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> Fighter Divisions; 8<sup>th</sup> Bomber Division; 13<sup>th</sup> Transport Division; 20<sup>th</sup> Special Mission Division; Kunming Base; and Nanning Base.<sup>42</sup>

### Western Theater Command

In terms of geographic extent, the Western TC is the largest of the five new theaters. It is headquartered in Chengdu and has responsibility for most of the provinces under the Chengdu and Lanzhou MRs. From the former, it received Sichuan, Tibet, Chongqing, and the 13<sup>th</sup> Group Army. From the latter, it received Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, and Xinjiang, as well as the 21<sup>st</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> Group Armies.<sup>43</sup> Later on, the 47<sup>th</sup> Group Army was eliminated, while the 21<sup>st</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Group Armies were respectively renumbered as the 76<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> Group Armies.<sup>44</sup> Initial reporting from *Global Person* argues that this TC is in an especially strategically sensitive position because it borders multiple countries in Central Asia and India.<sup>45</sup> This range of



border issues suggests that counterterrorism will also be prominent in mission planning.

While it lacks subordinate naval forces, from a planning perspective, the Western TC staff is responsible for a potential conflict with India, which could certainly include a maritime dimension requiring PLA Navy involvement. As a result, naval forces likely would be operationally controlled by the Western TC command but overseen by a naval command element deployed to the area to command an operations group in a large-scale conflict with India. It is unclear if the units subordinate to the Central TC are assigned some responsibility for an India contingency, as some Central TC ground units no doubt are. With the planning contingencies relative to India ranging from a quick border crisis to a full-scale conflict between two nuclear powers, the theater planners will have to coordinate closely with navy counterparts based in multiple theaters, as well as working through service lines of authority to complete their diverse tasks.

For air assets, the 2018 *Military Balance* notes that the Western TC has the 4<sup>th</sup> Transport Division, 6<sup>th</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Divisions, 36<sup>th</sup> Bomber Division, Lanzhou Base, Urumqi Base, and Xi'an Flying Academy.<sup>46</sup>

### Northern Theater Command

The Northern TC is headquartered in Shenyang and has jurisdiction over all three provinces formerly under the Shenyang MR opposite the Korean Peninsula—Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Liaoning. It is further responsible for Inner Mongolia, formerly under the Beijing MR.<sup>47</sup> It has under its command all three group armies from the former Shenyang MR—the 16<sup>th</sup>, 39<sup>th</sup>, and 40<sup>th</sup>—as well as the 26<sup>th</sup> Group Army from the former Jinan MR.<sup>48</sup> The Northern TC further has jurisdiction over Shandong, which was also formerly under the Jinan MR. Following the most recent reform to the PLA Ground Force, the 40<sup>th</sup> Group Army was eliminated, while the 16<sup>th</sup>, 39<sup>th</sup>, and 26<sup>th</sup> Group Armies, respectively, became the 78<sup>th</sup>, 79<sup>th</sup>, and 80<sup>th</sup> Group Armies.<sup>49</sup>

In terms of other component services under this command, there was some initial speculation that the North Sea Fleet would be placed under

the Central TC,<sup>50</sup> but this was clarified in March 2016 when Rear Admiral Yuan Yubai, then-commander of the North Sea Fleet, was appointed to the additional positions of deputy commander of the Northern TC and commander of the Northern TC naval forces.<sup>51</sup> Inclusion in the Northern TC makes more sense from a planning perspective, as this theater is responsible for conflict on the Korean Peninsula, which could require heavy navy participation in both the air and maritime domains.

According to the 2018 *Military Balance*, the Northern TC has the 5<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Attack Divisions, 12<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Fighter Divisions, 16<sup>th</sup> Special Mission Division, Dalian Base, and Jinan Base.<sup>52</sup>

### Central Theater Command

Chinese military experts describe the Central TC as being an innovation of China's system: Its unique position allows it to respond to crises on its own while also being able to provide support to other theater commands. It subsumed the former Jinan MR, which also served this role for the CMC.<sup>53</sup> As a result, the Central TC provides the capital region with its own dedicated military force, allowing it to respond to crises without having to rely on troop transfers from other parts of the country. Defense of the capital is a primary role; perhaps reflecting that defense of China's leadership against enemy air attack is a top consideration, the Central TC is now commanded by PLA Air Force General Yi Xiaoguang.<sup>54</sup> It is headquartered in Beijing and was created on the foundations of the Beijing and Jinan MRs. From the former, units based in Hebei, Shanxi, Beijing, and Tianjin were presumably reassigned, as well as the 27<sup>th</sup>, 38<sup>th</sup>, and 65<sup>th</sup> Group Armies. From the latter, it received Henan-based units and the 20<sup>th</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> Group Armies.<sup>55</sup> It further has jurisdiction over Shaanxi, formerly under the Lanzhou MR, and Hubei, formerly under the Guangzhou MR.<sup>56</sup> This setup makes the Central TC the most diverse of the new commands in terms of its origins as well as the largest in terms of the number of group armies assigned to it. It also added the distinction of being the first TC to have a group army relocate: the 27<sup>th</sup> Group Army reportedly moved its headquarters from Hebei to Shanxi

Province by early January 2016 according to PLA press reporting.<sup>57</sup> The relocation likely accommodated the establishment of the TC army command at Shijiazhuang,<sup>58</sup> which was formerly the site of the 27<sup>th</sup> Group Army headquarters. Like their counterparts in the other TCs, the group armies in the Central TC also underwent changes in late April 2017. Both the 20<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Group Armies were eliminated, while the 65<sup>th</sup>, 38<sup>th</sup>, and 54<sup>th</sup> Group Armies, respectively, became the 81<sup>st</sup>, 82<sup>nd</sup>, and 83<sup>rd</sup> Group Armies.<sup>59</sup>

According to Xinhua, the component services of the Central TC include not only Ground Force but also navy, air force, and missile units.<sup>60</sup> The Hong Kong-based *Ming Pao* newspaper noted that there are no military ports within the Central TC, but there are a number of technical stations and training bases for naval aviation. These include the “naval aviation training base located at Qinhuangdao; its associated Shanhaiguan airfield; the naval aviation academy at Changzhi, Shanxi; and at Jiyuan, Henan, the fighter aircraft branch of the naval aviation academy.”<sup>61</sup> In early August 2016, it was reported that a Ground Force air defense brigade from the Central TC had conducted exercises with naval aviation units around the Bohai area.<sup>62</sup> In light of this, it appears that naval forces based in the Central TC will not include surface vessels but encompass the other service branches of the navy based in this geographic area. Until further information is available, however, the exact nature of the naval component of the Central TC remains a matter of speculation.

The 2018 *Military Balance* notes that the Central TC has the following air assets: the 7<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Fighter Divisions, 15<sup>th</sup> Fighter/Attack Division, 24<sup>th</sup> Fighter Division, Datong Base, Wuhan Base, and Shijiazhuang Flying Academy.<sup>63</sup>

## **Prospects for Success**

Whether or not these reforms to the PLA succeed will depend greatly on the ability of Chinese leaders to overcome a number of continuing challenges in the medium to long term. This section identifies several remaining challenges for the new TC system, including training of command personnel,

command and control, and potential service resistance in a still-army-dominated military.

Phillip Saunders and Joel Wuthnow of the U.S. National Defense University have dubbed the reforms as “Goldwater-Nichols with Chinese characteristics,”<sup>64</sup> which seems an apt description that promises the same opportunities and pitfalls for the PLA. Much of the promise for increased jointness will not be realized for years—well past 2020, and probably more realistically by about 2030.

In the near term, success will depend on the details of the practical, day-to-day relationship between the services and theaters in training units for new joint operational capabilities. To be most effective, theater-level training departments will need to have a mechanism to provide input into (or at least a way to express their requirements to) services responsible for force development. Similarly, theater commanders need to have staffs and mechanisms in place to express their capability requirements both up a command chain to the CMC level and to the military services, which are peer organizations at the same grade. This is not to suggest that the PLA lacks the personnel to staff these organizations because it clearly does not. However, these kinds of relationships are not the norm in the PLA and represent a substantial cultural change in that new relationships among theater and service staffs may be workable in theory but are untested, which will lead to uncertainty and confusion.

In addition, TCs will likely also be advising on and overseeing professional military education initiatives for senior officers steeped in their old systems, as well as for more junior officers presumably less invested in old processes. All of this precedes the complexities of joint training, which requires not only designing new training approaches but also becoming more familiar with existing service training plans in order to integrate them across service lines among like and similar operational elements in ways the PLA has never done.

The changing dynamics of the command and control relationship between theater commanders and theater-based operational forces will also take some time to sort out. These dynamics are different from those that

officers have experienced throughout their careers. The forces allocated to each theater presumably meet some kind of basic planning factor for that theater based on their historic missions and strategic directions under the MR system, but the theater no longer has to be concerned with the administration of subordinate forces. The separation of administrative responsibilities from operational command and warfighting responsibilities may be sensible and best for operations, but this division of labor will not be a matter of habit or standard procedure for commanders for some time.

The continued dominance of ground commanders at the TC level is also problematic. A jaundiced view of the reforms from a non-PLA Army viewpoint would be that the names of the organizations have changed, but the uniforms are predominantly still green at the TC level. As mentioned, the five new army headquarters give the army, navy, and air force counterpart commands at the operational echelon, presumably commanded by officers of the same rank. The theater Joint Operations Command Centers' staff is ostensibly the venue through which jointness among these services will manifest itself for the time being. The elevation of navy Admiral Yuan Yubai to Southern TC commander in January 2017 and the assignment of air force General Yi Xiaoguang as Central TC commander in August 2017 also signal the CMC's intent to break this ground dominance, especially where it makes more operational sense to do so.<sup>65</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The decision to do away with the old military regions and replace them with theater commands is a major step in a decades-long effort to create an informationized joint force. By doing so, Chinese military leaders aim to streamline responsibilities, strengthen jointness among the services, increase PLA readiness, foster a more coherent external military policy, and, ultimately, create a force that is capable of fighting and winning wars. The attainment of such a goal may not be so simple as replacing one organizational system with another, however. Chinese leaders have undertaken multiple initiatives since 1999, when joint operations were officially instituted in PLA

warfighting, to achieve this goal. These have ranged from developing new command and control technologies to altering the curricula at PLA academic institutions to exercises with foreign partners. Yet progress to date has been slow. Multiple fundamental challenges remain, particularly those related to prevailing mindsets within the PLA. Chinese leaders will have to address these as well in order for their reforms to be truly effective.

This round of Chinese military reforms is continuing, as the renumbering of group armies and Rocket Force bases attests. Areas for further research begin with the most basic, foundational information: orders of battle for each TC and service are now uncertain, as are unit designators. Evidence of the evolving command relationships between TC commanders and service chiefs, both in Beijing and at the TC level, also bears watching; it will probably become available via Chinese official and non-official media outlets. The Chinese version of joint forces could well differ from Western concepts, so researchers will be best served by gaining insights and evidence not only indirectly but also through engagement with Chinese military officials.

As a point of reference, U.S. military efforts to achieve greater jointness theoretically began immediately after World War II with the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, which eliminated independent Cabinet-level departments for each of the Services in favor of a single unified Department of Defense. The subsequent Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 strengthened the control and authority of the Secretary of Defense over the Services in part by authorizing that each department be organized under its own secretary who then reported to the Secretary of Defense; it also established “unified or specified combatant commands” responsible to the President and Secretary of Defense.<sup>66</sup> Almost 30 years later came the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 which, among other measures, “redesigned personnel incentives in order to prioritize ‘jointness’ among the Services—a characteristic that the U.S. Department of Defense demonstrably lacked prior to the reforms.”<sup>67</sup> Even by 2013, as former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey noted as he advocated for globally integrated operations, “efforts to create a fully joint force [were] not yet complete.”<sup>68</sup> In

2016, former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter stressed what he saw as the need for updates to Goldwater-Nichols that would, among other measures, redefine “joint duty assignment” to include operational functions beyond “just” planning and command and control.<sup>69</sup>

Goldwater-Nichols with Chinese characteristics sounds like a much lower bar than what the U.S. military has achieved over the years, but it certainly hinges on achieving substantial progress on planning and command and control if the PLA is to make headway on truly joint capabilities. Chinese leadership has taken decisive steps toward the future with its organizational reforms; it is now up to PLA officers at the theater level and throughout the services to execute these reforms. It will be a long time before we know the outcome.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent overview of the reforms, see Michael S. Chase and Jeffrey Engstrom, “China’s Military Reforms: An Optimistic Take,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 83 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2016), 49–52.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Cliff, “Chinese Military Reforms: A Pessimistic Take,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 83 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2016), 53–56.

<sup>3</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, “The New PLA Joint Headquarters and Internal Assessments of PLA Capabilities,” *China Brief* 16, no. 10 (June 21, 2016), available at <[www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=45511&no\\_cache=1#.V83n65MrIb0](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45511&no_cache=1#.V83n65MrIb0)>. See also Michael S. Chase et al., *China’s Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People’s Liberation Army* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), available at <[www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR800/RR893/RAND\\_RR893.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR800/RR893/RAND_RR893.pdf)>.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent discussion of how the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) will approach conflict in the future, see Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), available at <[www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1708.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1708.html)>.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Wowen [王握文], “Information Capability: Primary Capability of Joint Operations—Interview with Kuang Xinghua, Professor and Doctoral Adviser at the National Defense University of Science and Technology” [信息能力：联合作战的第

一能力——访国防科学技术大学教授、博士生导师匡兴华], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], May 27, 2010, available at <[www.mod.gov.cn/gflt/2010-05/27/content\\_4160027\\_2.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/gflt/2010-05/27/content_4160027_2.htm)>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Pollpeter, “Toward an Integrative C4ISR System: Informationization and Joint Operations in the People’s Liberation Army,” in *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China’s Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 194–195.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 193–237.

<sup>9</sup> Wanda Ayuso and Lonnie Henley, “Aspiring to Jointness: PLA Training, Exercises, and Doctrine, 2008–2012,” in *Assessing the People’s Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2014), 171–207.

<sup>10</sup> See Kenneth W. Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications*, China Strategic Perspectives 11 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, July 2017), available at <<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1249864/chinese-military-diplomacy-20032016-trends-and-implications/>>.

<sup>11</sup> For a more in-depth discussion, see Dean Cheng, “The PLA’s Wartime Structure” in *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, ed. Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen (Vienna, VA: DGI, 2015), 453–476.

<sup>12</sup> Wang Xiaohui [王晓辉], “What Strategic Preparations Should the Chinese Armed Forces Make?” [中国军队要做哪些战略准备], *Southern Weekend* [南方周末], September 11, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Ma Ho-leung [马浩亮], “Beijing Watch: Five Major Differences Between Theater Commands and Military Districts” [北京观察：战区与军区五大不同], *Ta Kung Pao* [大公报], February 2, 2016, available at <<http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/focus/2016-02/3276428.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> Han Xudong [韩旭东], “The Difference Between Military Regions and Theater Commands” [军区与战区的不同], *Global People* [环球人物], vol. 11 (April 2014), available at <[http://paper.people.com.cn/hqrw/html/2014-04/26/content\\_1422529.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/hqrw/html/2014-04/26/content_1422529.htm)>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Han Xudong [韩旭东], “Decrypting the Military Reforms: ‘Military Regions’ Become ‘Theater Commands,’ Getting War Preparations Right” [军改解码：“军区”改“战区”，为战争做好准备], *Southern Weekend* [南方周末], April 27, 2016, available at <[www.infzm.com/content/116612](http://www.infzm.com/content/116612)>.



<sup>17</sup> Yang Yujun [杨宇军], “Transcript for MND Special Press Conference” [国防部专题新闻发布会文字实录], People’s Republic of China Ministry of National Defense [中华人民共和国国防部], February 1, 2016, available at <[www.mod.gov.cn/info/2016-02/01/content\\_4642553.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2016-02/01/content_4642553.htm)>.

<sup>18</sup> Han, “Decrypting the Military Reforms.”

<sup>19</sup> Feng Chunmei and Ni Guanghui [冯春梅, 倪光辉], “Interview of Southern Theater Commander Wang Jiaocheng: ‘Creating a Joint Operations Command Structure Which Is Comprehensively Up-to-the-Mark’” [锻造全面过硬的联合作战指挥机构], Renmin Ribao [人民日报], February 28, 2016, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Guo Yuandan [郭媛丹], “Decrypting the Military Reforms: North Sea Fleet Assigned to Northern Theater Command, Missile Force Directly Under CMC” [军改解读: 北海舰队属北部战区 火箭军直属军委], *Global Times* [环球时报], February 5, 2016, available at <<http://mil.huanqiu.com/observation/2016-02/8510312.html>>.

<sup>21</sup> *Strategic direction* [zhanlüe fangxiang, 战略方向] is a military term used by the PLA. It is the “operational direction that has a major impact on the overall war situation. It points toward strategic targets, possesses a certain depth and breadth, and encompasses a multidimensional space that includes both the ground and its associated air space, maritime space, and outer space.” There is a single primary strategic direction and multiple secondary strategic directions. For more information, see Lu Mingshan [陆明山], “Strategic Direction” [战略方向], *Chinese Military Encyclopedia: Military Learning II* [军事百科全书: 军事学术II] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], July 1997), 715.

<sup>22</sup> “Focus Vigorously and Solidly on the Work of Military Training for Combat Readiness—Second Commentary on Studying and Implementing the Important Speech Given by Chairman Xi Jinping on His Inspection Tour of the Ground Force Headquarters of the PLA Southern Theater Command” [抓紧抓实练兵备战工作—二谈学习贯彻习主席视察南部战区陆军机关时的重要讲话], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], April 24, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Shou Xiaosong [寿晓松], ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], December 2013), 99.

<sup>24</sup> Han, “Decrypting the Military Reforms.”

<sup>25</sup> Wang Shibin, An Puzhong, and Liang Pengfei [王士彬, 安普忠, 梁蓬飞], “Xi Jinping Inspects CMC Joint Operations Command Center” [习近平视察军委联合作战指挥中心], People’s Republic of China Ministry of National Defense [中华人民共和国国防部], April 20, 2016, available at <[www.mod.gov.cn/leaders/2016-04/20/content\\_4650183.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/leaders/2016-04/20/content_4650183.htm)>.

<sup>26</sup> Yang, “Transcript for MND Special Press Conference.”

<sup>27</sup> Jiang Congxiao [蒋骢骁], “Topic: What Theater Commands and Military Districts Do the U.S. and Russia Have?” [谈资: 美俄都有哪些战区和军区], Xinhua, February 2, 2016, available at <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-02/02/c\\_128695079.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-02/02/c_128695079.htm)>; and Han, “Decrypting the Military Reforms.”

<sup>28</sup> Li Xuanliang [李宣良], “PLA Theater Command Establishment Ceremony Held in Beijing” [中国人民解放军战区成立大会在北京举行], Xinhua, February 1, 2016, available at <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-02/01/c\\_1117960554.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-02/01/c_1117960554.htm)>.

<sup>29</sup> Guo Ping [郭平], “Focusing on Advancing the Integration of Theater Services Command into Theater Joint Command” [着力推进战区军种指挥融入战区联指], *Rocket Force News* [火箭兵报], November 14, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Xiao Ying and Zheng Xinyi [肖莹, 郑心仪], “New Layout for the Five Theater Commands” [五大战区心布局], *Global Person* [环球人物], February 1, 2016, available at <[http://paper.people.com.cn/hqrw/html/2016-03/06/content\\_1668987.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/hqrw/html/2016-03/06/content_1668987.htm)>; and “A Month Since the Five Theater Commands Have Been Established, Where Are the 18 Group Armies?” [五大战区成立1个月 18个集团军隶属哪], *Wen Wei Po* [文汇报], February 28, 2016, available at <<http://news.wenweipo.com/2016/02/28/IN1602280050.htm>>.

<sup>31</sup> “Former 18 Group Armies Used as Basis in Adjustment and Establishment of 13 Group Armies” [以原18个集团军为基础, 调整组建13个集团军], People’s Republic of China Ministry of National Defense [中华人民共和国国防部], April 27, 2017, available at <[www.mod.gov.cn/info/2017-04/27/content\\_4779505.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2017-04/27/content_4779505.htm)>.

<sup>32</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, “What Is Known and Unknown about Changes to the PLA’s Ground Combat Units,” *China Brief* 17, no. 7 (May 11, 2017), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/known-unknown-changes-plas-ground-combat-units/>>.

<sup>33</sup> “The Arrangement of the Five Theater Commands: Under Which Theater Command’s Protection Does Your Hometown Fall?” [五大战区划设: 你的家乡在哪个战区的保护之下? ], *Global Times* [环球时报], February 11, 2016, available at <<http://mil.huanqiu.com/observation/2016-02/8526693.html>>.

<sup>34</sup> “Chapter Six: Asia,” *The Military Balance* 118, no. 1 (February 2018), 257, available at <[www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/04597222.2018.1416982](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/04597222.2018.1416982)>.

<sup>35</sup> Kenneth W. Allen and Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, “Implementing PLA Second Artillery Doctrinal Reform,” in *China’s Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army*, ed. James C. Mulvenon and David Finkelstein (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2005), 176. The new 60 series designations for Rocket Force bases are found in the *2017 Report to*

*Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2017), 219–220.

<sup>36</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 108–109.

<sup>37</sup> Xiao and Zheng, “New Layout for the Five Theater Commands”; and “A Month Since the Five Theater Commands Have Been Established, Where Are the 18 Group Armies?”

<sup>38</sup> Blasko, “What Is Known and Unknown about Changes to the PLA’s Ground Combat Units.”

<sup>39</sup> Shen Fan [沈凡], “59-Year-Old Du Benyin Reassigned as Southern Theater Command Naval Forces Deputy Political Commissar” [59岁杜本印改任南部战区海军副政委], *Caixin* [财新], March 5, 2016, available at <<http://china.caixin.com/2016-03-05/100916536.html>>.

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<sup>41</sup> Choi Chi-yuk, “Admiral Named to Head PLA’s New Southern Theatre Command,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), January 19, 2017, available at <[www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2063649/admiral-named-head-plas-southern-theatre-command](http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2063649/admiral-named-head-plas-southern-theatre-command)>.

<sup>42</sup> “Chapter Six: Asia,” 258.

<sup>43</sup> “A Month Since the Five Theater Commands Have Been Established, Where Are the 18 Group Armies?”

<sup>44</sup> Blasko, “What Is Known and Unknown about Changes to the PLA’s Ground Combat Units.”

<sup>45</sup> Xiao and Zheng, “New Layout for the Five Theater Commands.”

<sup>46</sup> “Chapter Six: Asia,” 257.

<sup>47</sup> Xiao and Zheng, “New Layout for the Five Theater Commands.”

<sup>48</sup> “A Month Since the Five Theater Commands Have Been Established, Where Are the 18 Group Armies?”

<sup>49</sup> Blasko, “What Is Known and Unknown about Changes to the PLA’s Ground Combat Units.”

<sup>50</sup> Minnie Chan and Liu Zhen, “China’s North Sea Fleet Put Under Central Command to Help Safeguard the Capital: Sources,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong

Kong), February 2, 2016, available at <[www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1908768/chinas-north-sea-fleet-put-under-central-command-jinan](http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1908768/chinas-north-sea-fleet-put-under-central-command-jinan)>.

<sup>51</sup> Jiang Ziwen [蒋子文], “North Sea Fleet Commander Yuan Yubai Becomes Deputy Commander of Northern Theater Command and TC Naval Forces Commander” [北海舰队司令员袁誉柏任北部战区副司令员兼战区海军司令员], *The Paper* [滄湃], March 20, 2016, available at <[www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1446278](http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1446278)>.

<sup>52</sup> “Chapter Six: Asia,” 256.

<sup>53</sup> Han, “Decrypting the Military Reforms.”

<sup>54</sup> Teddy Ng, “China’s Air Force Gets a Lift with Pilot’s Promotion to Top Military Job,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), February 14, 2018, available at <[www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2133405/chinas-air-force-gets-lift-pilots-promotion-top](http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2133405/chinas-air-force-gets-lift-pilots-promotion-top)>.

<sup>55</sup> Xiao and Zheng, “New Layout for the Five Theater Commands”; and “A Month Since the Five Theater Commands Have Been Established, Where Are the 18 Group Armies?”

<sup>56</sup> “Central Theater Command Areas of Jurisdiction Revealed: Area of Jurisdiction Includes 7 Provinces/Municipalities, Including Shaanxi and Hubei” [中部战区辖区曝光 辖区包括陕西湖北等7个省市], *Global Times* [环球时报], March 27, 2016, available at <<http://mil.huanqiu.com/china/2016-03/8777452.html>>.

<sup>57</sup> Guo Kai, “27<sup>th</sup> Group Army Becomes First Army in PLA to Relocate HQ,” *China Daily* (Beijing), February 25, 2016, available at <[www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-02/25/content\\_23643856.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-02/25/content_23643856.htm)>.

<sup>58</sup> “Military Theater Commands’ Army HQs Identified: Source,” *Global Times* (Beijing), February 4, 2016, available at <[www.globaltimes.cn/content/967289.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/967289.shtml)>.

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<sup>60</sup> Li Wenji [李文姬], “Five Theater Commands, Four Have Already Clearly Established Naval Forces” [五大战区 4个明确已经建立海军], *Xinhua*, April 4, 2016, available at <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-04/04/c\\_128861501.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-04/04/c_128861501.htm)>.

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