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## Assessment of the PLA's 3-Star Promotions in September 2021

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On 6 September 2021, Xi Jinping, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Central Military Commission (CMC), presided over the promotion of two Army lieutenant generals, one Navy vice admiral, and two Air Force lieutenant generals to full general/admiral (3-stars), the highest rank in the People's Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1: 3-Star Promotion Ceremony



First row, left to right, Zhang Shengmin, Li Zuocheng, Zhang Youxia, Xi Jinping, Xu Qiliang, Wei Fenghe, Miao Hua. Second row, left to right, Xu Xueqiang, Dong Jun, Wang Haijiang, Lin Xiangyang, Chang Dingqiu.

These senior officers have taken command of two of the five Theater Commands (TC), the Navy, the Air Force, and National Defense University (NDU). This promotion ceremony was the third 3-star ceremony in less than nine months<sup>1</sup>; previously, four officers were promoted on 18 December 2020 and four more on 5 July 2021.<sup>2</sup> Significant aspects of the latest promotions include

- The assignment of the third new commander to the Western TC in less than two years, an unexplained phenomenon during the period in which China and India have been engaged in a tense and deadly border confrontation in Aksai Chin
- The assignment of an Army general to command the Central TC, replacing the former Air Force commander, resulting in Army generals in command of all five TCs
- The assignment of only the second Air Force general to be appointed as President of the National Defense University<sup>3</sup>

Currently there are approximately 37 3-star generals and admirals in the two million-strong active-duty PLA.<sup>4</sup> The recent promotions may reflect aspects of the announced goal to change the PLA's hierarchical structure from a "grade-based" to a "rank-based" system.<sup>5</sup> All PLA officers are assigned one of 10 ranks (from second lieutenant to general/admiral) and one of 15 grades (from platoon leader to CMC vice chairman).<sup>6</sup> Previously, an officer's grade was more important than rank. However, the details of this major change from "grade-based" to a "rank-based" have not been revealed but could involve the length of time in service between promotions/assignments or which ranks are associated with specific grades. Every officer also is assigned to an organizational billet (or post) appropriate to both rank and grade. Promotion ceremonies like this one publicly acknowledge officers' ranks and duty billets, but do not announce their grades, which can nonetheless be discerned by a ribbon worn on their uniforms.<sup>7</sup>

In their official promotion photograph above, the four new generals and one admiral stand in the back row behind the seven members of the CMC. The newly promoted officers are listed below in protocol order (as announced), identified by service (Army, Navy, Air Force), followed by their current assignment, date of birth and age, date of last rank promotion, and previous assignments. Of particular importance, two of them received their second star in 2018, two in 2019, and one in 2020:

1. Wang Haijiang (Army) (汪海江): Commander Western TC, born October 1963 (age 58), received 2nd star in December 2019, former Commander Xinjiang Military District (MD) from March 2021 to August 2021, Commander Tibet MD from December 2019 to February 2021, prior to that Deputy Commander, Tibet MD starting in 2016, Commander

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<sup>1</sup> This was the 31st 3-star promotion ceremony since the PLA reinstated ranks in 1988. Since 1998, a total of 192 PLA and 9 People's Armed Police (PAP) officers have been promoted to 3-stars. The first ceremony was held in 1988 when the PLA re-introduced ranks; however, the next ceremony was not held until 1993. From 1994 through 2006, ceremonies were held only every two years except for special ceremonies in 1999 and 2004 to promote two people each time. Since 2007, a ceremony has been held every year in July, except for 2018. Two separate ceremonies were held in 2019 and 2020 in July and December. Three special ceremonies were also held in 2007, 2012, and 2017 to promote a total of four people. The number of officers varies considerably from ceremony to ceremony, ranging from a single individual to 19. The Chairman of the CMC oversees the promotion of officers to 3-star rank

Nanjiang (Southern Xinjiang) MD, Commander 61st Division (Lanzhou Military Region [MR]).<sup>8</sup>

2. Lin Xiangyang (Army) (林向阳): Commander Central TC, born October 1964 (age 57), received 2nd star in 2020, former Commander Eastern TC Army and concurrent Deputy Commander Eastern TC from April 2020 to 2021, prior to that Commander 72nd Group Army (in the Eastern TC), Commander 82nd Group Army (Central TC), Commander 47<sup>th</sup> Group Army (Lanzhou MR), Deputy Commander 31st Group Army (Nanjing MR), Commander 91st Motorized Infantry Division/31st Group Army.<sup>9</sup>
3. Dong Jun (Navy) (董军): Commander PLA Navy, date of birth uncertain,<sup>10</sup> received 2nd star in July 2018, former PLA Navy Deputy Commander since March 2021, Deputy Commander Southern TC from January 2017 to February 2021, prior to that Deputy Chief of Staff PLA Navy, Deputy Commander East Sea Fleet, Deputy Chief of Staff North Sea Fleet.
4. Chang Dingqiu (Air Force) (常丁求): Commander PLA Air Force, born 1967 (age 54), received his 2nd star in July 2018, former Deputy Chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department since July 2018, prior to that Deputy Commander of the Southern TC in 2016, Chief of Staff of the Shenyang Military Region Air Force (MRAF), Assistant to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Commander 3rd Air Division.<sup>11</sup>
5. Xu Xueqiang (Air Force) (许学强): President, PLA National Defense University, born November 1962 (age 59), received 2nd star in June 2019, former Commander, Northern Theater Command Air Force (TCAF) and concurrent Deputy Commander, Northern TC since August 2017, prior to that Chief of Staff of the Nanjing MRAF, Commander of the Air Force Shanghai Command Post, Commander of an Air Force Air Division.<sup>12</sup>

The newly promoted 3-stars replaced the following officers:

1. Xu Qiling (Army) (徐起零), born July 1962 (age 59), became the Western TC Commander in July 2021 at which time he also received his 3rd star. He previously served as the Western TC Army Commander starting in 2020, which was his first assignment in China's western region. He served in this billet for two months.
2. Yi Xiaoguang (Air Force) (乙晓光), born July 1958 (age 63), became the Commander of the Central TC in August 2018 and received his 3rd star in July 2016 when he was a Deputy Chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department. He served in this billet for three years.
3. Shen Jinlong (Navy) (沈金龙), born October 1956 (age 64), became the PLA Navy Commander in January 2017 and received his 3rd star in July 2019. He served in this billet for over four years.
4. Ding Laihang (Air Force) (丁来杭), born September 1957 (age 64), became the PLA Air Force Commander in August 2017 and received his 3rd star in July 2019. He served in this billet for four years.
5. Zheng He (Army) (郑和), born November 1958 (age 63), became the President of the NDU in June 2017 and received his 3rd star in July 2019. He served in this billet for four years.

Shen is the only one of these five who have met the PLA's maximum retirement age of 65 (as of October).<sup>13</sup> An unconfirmed report indicates Zheng He was laterally-transferred to become the NDU political commissar in August 2021; the other three could be in line for follow-on lateral assignments.<sup>14</sup> Table 1 indicates the year the 10 officers affected by these promotions will become 65.

**Table 1: Year Reaching TC Leader Grade Maximum Retirement Age**

Officer	Age 65 in Year	Officer	Age 65 in Year
Wang Haijiang	2028	Xu Qiling	2027
Lin Xiangyang	2029	Yi Xiaoguang	2023
Dong Jun	Unknown	Shen Jinlong	2021
Chang Dingqiu	2032	Ding Laihang	2022
Xu Xueqiang	2027	Zheng He	2023

Of the approximately 37 PLA full generals and admirals on active-duty, we estimate at least 9 not on the CMC will reach 65 by 2022 and are likely to retire before the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, during which the new composition and members of the CMC will be announced.<sup>15</sup> However, demonstrating that there are always exceptions to the rule in the PLA, Air Force political commissar General Yu Zhongfu (于忠福) and Northern TC political commissar General Fan Xiaojun (范晓骏) have already exceeded their maximum age of 65 but appear to still be on active duty. The composition of the CMC is not set by law or regulation so the number of officers or specific duty billets on the CMC varies; the selection criteria and process for CMC membership has not been made public.<sup>16</sup> 2022 is likely to be turbulent as roughly two dozen Theater Command leader-grade generals and admirals vie for promotion to these most senior leadership positions. It is unclear how the recent 3-star promotions fit into that puzzle.

Operationally, one notable feature of these promotions is Wang Haijiang's transfer to take command of the Western TC, relieving Xu Qiling two months after he had been promoted to general and made commander of the Theater. Except for being assigned as the Western TC Army Commander in April 2020 (a deputy Theater leader billet), Xu's prior experience had mostly been in the Eastern and Northern TCs and the Jinan MR before that. At 59, Xu should have several more years to serve as a general with Theater leader grade. Xu took over from Zhang Xudong (张旭东) who had only been in command for about six months from December 2020 to June 2021. Zhang, however, had little recent experience in the west, previously serving in the Shenyang MR and Central TC.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Zhang's predecessor the first commander of the Western TC, Zhao Zongqi (赵宗岐), was in command for nearly five years after spending much of his career in the southwest and Tibet.<sup>18</sup>

Like Zhao Zongqi, Wang Haijiang has long experience in Xinjiang and Tibet (plus the Lanzhou MR) and would be familiar with the operational, geographic, and cultural conditions in the Western TC. Wang's background has prepared him for leading the Theater during the standoff with India in the Aksai Chin. Left unsaid by official Chinese sources is why there has been so much turnover in the Western TC commander over the past two years- is this an example of "ticket-punching" for selected officers to groom them for higher responsibility or did something go wrong that led to their early departure?

Another important result of the recent promotions is the replication of the situation in 2016 when the five Theater Commands were created: all five Theater commanders are once again Army officers. Army General Lin Xiangyang relieved Air Force General Yi Xiaoguang the Central TC. When he took command of the Central TC, Yi was only the second non-Army officer to command a Theater (none had ever commanded a Military Region), joining Admiral Yuan Yubai (袁誉柏) who commanded of the Southern TC from January 2017 to July 2021, retiring at age 65, after Army General Wang Xiubin (王秀斌) assumed his command.<sup>19</sup> At 63, Yi Xiaoguang has a chance for continued service. However, unless rectified by near-term transfers or promotions, all five Theaters under the command of Army officers could be considered a step backwards in the PLA's quest to develop a more joint force and break "Big Army" thinking and influence.

It is noteworthy that Lin commanded three group armies in three different regions; however, these three separate commands were held over a span of only four years, including two of those years at the 82<sup>nd</sup> Group Army in the Central TC, the Theater he now commands. One of the missions of the Central TC is to provide reinforcements as necessary to other Theaters. Lin's series of relatively short command experience (compared to the three or four years many commanders spend in a single unit) in different parts of the country, including a year as Commander of the Eastern TC Army opposite Taiwan, might have been intended to prepare him for his current assignment in which his troops could be dispatched anywhere in the country.

The promotion of Xu Xueqiang, the second Air Force officer to serve in this position, to general and President of NDU is somewhat complicated.<sup>20</sup> In May 2018, NDU was reported to have been downgraded from a TC leader-grade organization to a TC deputy leader-grade organization, but incumbent President Zheng He retained his TC leader grade.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, the rank of full general is associated only with the grade of TC leader or CMC member/vice chairman, implying that NDU's new President Xu continues to hold the grade of TC leader. Xu's promotion now begs the question of whether the NDU organizational grade has been restored to TC leader level. The unverified report that Zheng He is now the NDU political commissar suggests that might be the case. However, Zheng turns 65 in 2023, so perhaps this is a final assignment at his current grade before he retires. The Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) is in the same situation.<sup>22</sup> In order to restore prestige to these two institutions directly subordinate to the CMC, it is possible the earlier decision to downgrade NDU and AMS has been reversed.

Dong Jun appears to have served primarily as a senior staff officer including deputy commander of the PLA Navy since March 2021 and prior to that in all three fleets but is reported to have commanded only one unit (the unidentified 92269 unit) at an unspecified time.<sup>23</sup> His date of birth has not been found in a search of official sources, so his age is unknown at this time. His

performance as a staff officer has been impressive enough for successive promotions. More information on his background likely will become known the longer he serves as Navy commander.

At 54, Chang Dingqiu is the youngest of all the officers discussed above and has been a division commander and served on the CMC, Air Force, Southern TC, and Shenyang MRAF staffs.<sup>24</sup> This resume suggests a tour of duty of several years as Air Force commander, with the potential for CMC membership afterwards.

Procedurally, three of the five new generals (Wang, Lin, and Xu) were promoted in rank after only two years as lieutenant generals. Part of the talk about changes to establish a “rank based” system involves shortening the length of time between promotions. The twice-a-year 3-star promotion ceremonies since 2019 and information provided surrounding future high-level promotions could provide evidence to indicate of such a trend. But keeping track of exact promotion dates for individual officers below the flag rank is difficult and inconsistent, at best.

The resurgence of an all-Army contingent of Theater commanders may be a temporary anomaly as the PLA is intent on increasing its joint capabilities. Non-Army officers serve on all the joint staffs (CMC and Theater) and some non-Army officers also are being assigned to the PLA’s local headquarters system of provincial Military District, Military Subdistrict/Garrison, and People’s Armed Forces Departments throughout China (responsible for defense mobilization, conscription, emergency response, and military-civil integration activities). Based on the PLA’s declared objectives, it seems likely more non-Army officers be promoted to leadership positions in the CMC and Theater Commands to increase jointness and provide examples to which junior Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force officers can aspire.

The exact methodology and criteria used in selecting officers for promotion to general/admiral rank and higher-level billets is not public information, but the subject of endless speculation and rumor. Thousands of officers have been investigated and removed for corruption over the past decade.<sup>25</sup> Needless to say, allegations of corruption can be used for political purposes and to derail the careers of rivals.

Finally, political loyalty to Xi Jinping plays an important role in high-level PLA promotions as well as all other policy issues in China. While it is widely assumed that Xi plays a personal role in the selection of senior officers, the details are unknown. All senior PLA officers are senior Party members and are either full or alternate members of the Central Committee and, therefore, by definition, “Xi’s men” — if not, they don’t become senior PLA officers.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Xi presents orders to promote military officers to rank of general,” [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2021-09/06/content\\_4894199.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2021-09/06/content_4894199.htm)

<sup>2</sup> For lists of 3-star promotions, see <https://baike.baidu.com/item/中国人民解放军上将/9979730> and <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/中国人民解放军上将列表>.

<sup>3</sup> The first PLAAF President of NDU (2006-2007) was Ma Xiaotian, who then became a Deputy Chief of the General Staff (2007-2012) and then the PLAAF Commander (2012-2017).

<sup>4</sup> There are also two full generals in the People’s Armed Police (PAP); both are direct transfers from the PLA.

<sup>5</sup> “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on January 28,” [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2021-02/01/content\\_9978790.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2021-02/01/content_9978790.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Each grade from platoon leader to Theater Command leader is assigned a primary and secondary rank, and some ranks, such as major general, can be assigned to four different grades. Traditionally, if selected for promotion, officers are promoted in rank up to senior colonel about every four years; grade promotions usually occur every three years. Each of the 15 officer grades has a maximum retirement age assigned. As such, with few exceptions, if not promoted to a higher grade, officers must retire when they reach the maximum age for the grade they are assigned. The two ranks of general and lieutenant general are associated with the Theater Command leader grade; only the rank of full general is associated with CMC member or vice chairman grades. Officers who reach Theater Command leader grade must retire at 65; officers who are promoted to CMC member or vice chairman grade must retire at age 72 or 68, depending on their age at the time of the Party Congress when CMC appointments usually are made.

<sup>7</sup> Ceremonies for 2-star (lieutenant general/vice admiral) and 1-star (major general/rear admiral) promotions are conducted by the services (Army, Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force).

<sup>8</sup> <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/汪海江>

<sup>9</sup> [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/林向阳\\_\(1964年\)](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/林向阳_(1964年))

<sup>10</sup> No date of birth is given in Chinese Wikipedia [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/董军\\_\(上将\)](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/董军_(上将)) and Baidu <https://baike.baidu.com/item/董军/16524460>. Some sources appear to confuse the reference to Shen Jinlong’s birthdate of 1956 with Dong.

<sup>11</sup> <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/常丁求>.

<sup>12</sup> [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/许学强\\_\(1962年\)](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/许学强_(1962年)).

<sup>13</sup> According to the PLA’s 2004 *Defense White Paper*, the maximum age for retirement for officers in the then Military Region leader grade (now the Theater Command leader grade) was 65.

<sup>14</sup> [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/郑和\\_\(1958年\)](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/郑和_(1958年)) and <https://china.caixin.com/2021-09-06/101769669.html>. Two additional generals, Li Fengbiao and Zhang Xudong, were replaced in July 2021 but also had not yet met their maximum retirement age. Their current status has not been announced.

<sup>15</sup> The potential 2022 retirees include: An Zhaoqing, He Weidong, He Ping, Zhou Yaning, Qin Shengxiang, Liu Lei, Zhu Shenling, Ding Laihang, and Wang Xiubin. PLA PC Gen Yu Zhongfu reached 65 in July 2021 and is expected to be retired. NTC PC Fan Xiaojun, Oct 1956, is due to retire this year. PAP CDR Wang Chunning and predecessor were both promoted from PLA TC deputy billets; PAP PC An Zhaoqing was transferred from PLA and his predecessor was promoted from PAP PC to GEN and CDR of CTC.

<sup>16</sup> The following information shows the historical number of CMC Vice Chairmen and Members: Vice Chairmen: 1959 (3), 1969 (6), 1976 (4), 1977 (5), 1982 (3), 1987 (2), 1995 (4), 1997 (3); CMC Members: 1954 (12), 1956 (12), 1959 (21), 1969 (49), 1976 (29), 1977 (63). Zhi Shaozeng and Lei Yuanshen, “Central Military Commission,” in

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Song Shilun and Xiao Ke, eds. *China Military Encyclopedia* (中国军事百科全书). Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, July 1997, Vol 3, 840-843. This volume covers 1949 to 1995. “The Central Military Commission,” in Hu Guangzheng, ed., *China Military Encyclopedia Version 2, Military Organization* (军制) Volume 1. Beijing: China Encyclopedia Publishing House, July 2007, 22-31. This volume updates the information from 1995 to 2005. In 2004, the PLA added the commanders of the Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery Force as CMC members. However, during the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, commanders of the Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force were removed as CMC members (prior to 2016 reforms there had been no Army commander and the Four General Departments served as the Army Headquarters and the Joint Headquarters).

<sup>17</sup> Zhang was born in March 1962 and at age 59 could have several more years of active-duty ahead of him.

<sup>18</sup> Zhao Zongqi retired in 2020 at age 65.

<sup>19</sup> <https://baike.baidu.com/item/袁誉柏/10058104?fr=aladdin>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/马晓天>.

<sup>21</sup> Ken Allen helped escort a PLA NDU delegation at the US NDU in December 2018 and was told by the delegation leader about downgrading NDU but keeping the President’s grade as a Theater leader. The PLA Academy of Military Sciences also was downgraded at the same time. Whenever an organization is downgraded, every billet is affected, so keeping the President of NDU as a TC leader-grade officer when his organization was downgraded was an anomaly.

<sup>22</sup> The AMS political commissar Fang Xiang is past the retirement age of 63 for Theater deputy leaders.

<sup>23</sup> [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/董军\\_\(上将\)](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/董军_(上将)).

<sup>24</sup> When Chang received his rank of major general in 2012 and lieutenant general in 2018, he was the youngest PLA officer in the corps leader and TC leader grades, respectively, at the time. In 2003, he also studied at a Russian Military Academic Institution. See Kenneth W. Allen, *Commanders of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force: An Overview*, CASI, February 2021, accessed at

<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2501047/commanders-of-the-pla-air-force/>.

<sup>25</sup> “Scores of PLA officers punished,” [http://www.china.org.cn/china/2015-01/30/content\\_34690726.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2015-01/30/content_34690726.htm) reported in 2015 that “total of 4,024 officers with the rank of lieutenant colonel or above, including 82 generals, have been the subject of scrutiny by PLA auditors since January 2013.” See also Roderick Lee, “Building the Next Generation of Chinese Military Leaders,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Air University Press, August 31, 2020, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2331143/building-the-next-generation-of-chinese-military-leaders/>.