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Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs

System Destruction Warfare and the PLA

Briefing for Keystone

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A Party-Army

- PLA established in 1927
- Officers are CCP members who take an oath to the party, not the nation
- Typically led by the party general-secretary, currently Xi Jinping
- Central Military Commission - the high command - is a party organ; culture of micromanagement from the center
- System of political commissars and party committees to ensure compliance; units must make decisions based on consensus
- 20-25% of a soldier's time is on political indoctrination - increased after troops failed to follow orders in 1989
- *Incomplete civilian party control breeds paranoia, corruption, stove-piping*

A Very Different Oath

I am a member of the People's Liberation Army. **I promise that I will follow the leadership of the Communist Party of China**, serve the people wholeheartedly, obey orders, observe strict discipline, fight heroically, fear no sacrifice, work hard to improve my fighting ability, prepare for battle at all times, and under no circumstances will I ever betray the Military or the Motherland.

China's Military Strategy

Year	Name	Primary Opponent	Primary Direction	Basis of Preparations for Military Struggle	Main Form of Operations
1956	Defending the motherland	US	northeast	US amphibious assault	Positional defense, mobile offense
1960	Resist in the north, open in the south	US	northeast	US amphibious assault	Positional defense, mobile offense
1964	Luring the enemy in deep	US		US amphibious assault	Mobile, guerilla warfare
1977	Active defense, luring the enemy in deep	USSR	North-central	Soviet armored/airborne assault	Mobile, guerilla warfare
1980	Active Defense	USSR	North-central	Soviet armored/airborne assault	Positional warfare or fixed defense
1988	Dealing with local wars and military conflicts				
1993	local wars under high tech conditions	Taiwan	southeast	Warfare under high-tech conditions	Joint operations
2004	local wars under informationized conditions	Taiwan/US	southeast	Warfare under informationized conditions	Integrated joint operations
2014	informationized local wars	Taiwan/US	Southeast and maritime	Informationized warfare	Integrated joint operations
2019	Informationized local wars	Taiwan/US	Southeast and maritime	Informationized warfare	Integrated joint operations

Sources: Fravel (2019), Fravel and Wuthnow (2022)

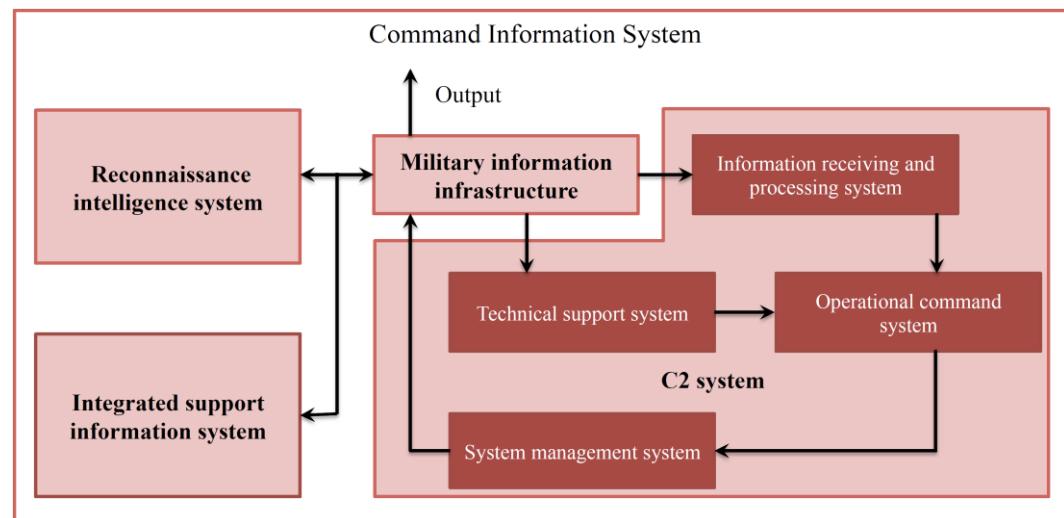
Core Operational Concepts

System Destruction Warfare and “Multi-Domain Integrated Joint Ops”

According to this theory of victory, the enemy “loses the will and ability to resist” once its operational system cannot function (assuming that one’s own system can continue to function)

Key systems

- Command system
- Firepower strike system
- Information confrontation system
- Reconnaissance intelligence system
- Support system

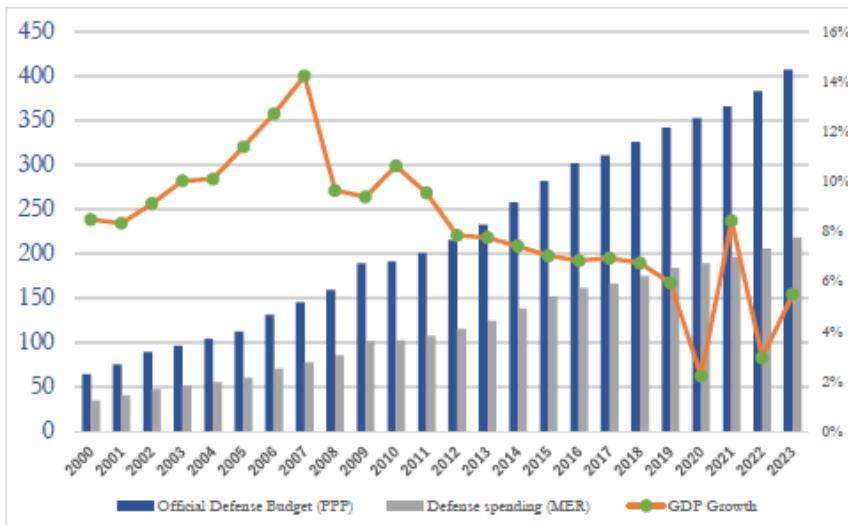


Source: Engstrom, 2018

PLA is developing a related idea of “multi-domain integrated joint ops” that blends conventional precision strike with emerging technology (big data, AI, etc.) to assess and target adversary operational systems

Resourcing

- Official budget: \$246 billion (2025)
 - More than \$300 billion when accounting for off-budget expenses, e.g. R&D
 - China also derives perhaps ~\$150B in value due to PPP differential
 - Largest defense budget in Asia (but behind U.S. \$824.3 billion)
 - Budgets growing at high single-digit rates
 - *Still small as percentage of GDP and central government expenditures*
- Shift towards technological innovation
 - 1990s, 2000s: mostly relying on foreign absorption. Allows PLA to catch up quickly but remains dependent on foreign technology
 - Today: PLA imports very little from abroad. Mostly self-sufficient. Unclear what impact U.S. restrictions in AI, semiconductors, quantum will have.





“World Class” Hardware

Conventional strike enables “system destruction warfare”/“multi-domain precision warfare”

- PLA upgrading its inventory as part of its 2027-2035-2049 modernization goals
- Fifth-generation fighters – 140+ J-20s allocated to all five theaters; new “sixth-gen” fighters
- Progress towards H-20 (stealth) bomber – will have extended range
- Rolling out Type-055 cruiser (13,000-ton ship with Aegis-like defenses)
- Quiet, high-performance diesel electric submarine fleet plus growing SSN force
- Long-range precision munitions fitted with hypersonic glide vehicles (DF-17, DF-27)

Expanding means of “strategic deterrence”

- Expanding nuclear inventory – tripling warheads by 2027, nuclear triad
- Emphasis on “information age” weapons – space, cyberspace, EW



Type-055 cruiser

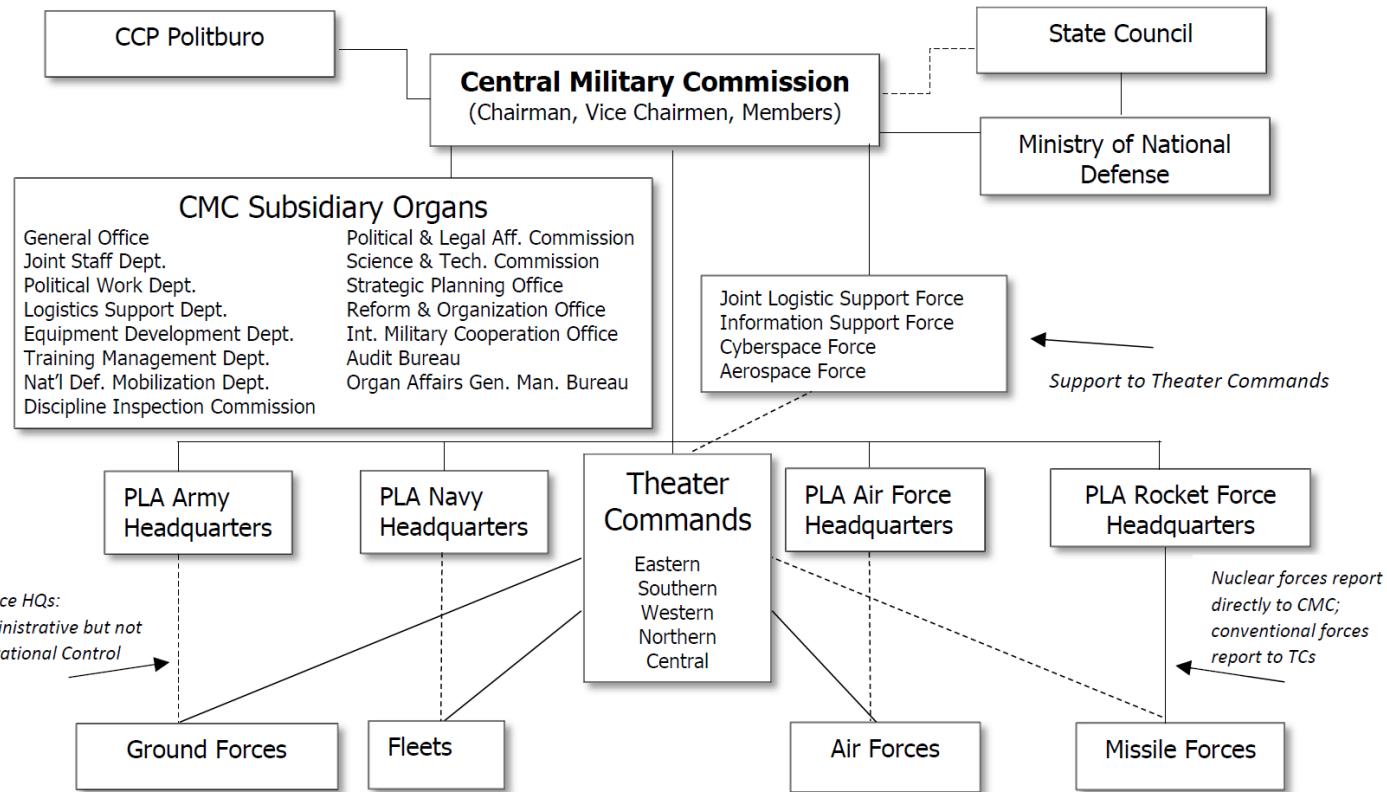


J-20 fighter



DF-17 MRBM

Structural Reforms



Organizational reforms promote multi-domain joint operations and allow for a more rapid transition from peace to crisis to war

Building a “Modern Major General”

- **Training system:** Increased focus on confrontation training; TCs taking the lead in joint training; “on-the-job” training in joint command/staff duties
- **Education system:** Greater use of gaming and simulation, greater attention to modern joint warfare
- **Personnel system:** Still army centric leadership, limited opportunities for joint command/staff tours. Officers mostly stay within their regions and functional specialties.



Xi visits PLA NDU, March 2016

Many interdependent elements that have to all change at once!



Assessment

PLA is in a stronger position to pursue system destruction warfare / "multi-domain integrated joint ops"

- Focuses on the U.S. military center of gravity
- Ideas, organization, and technology already in place
- Resourcing for the future is sustainable, key question is how much can U.S. restrictions slow them down

PLA is also developing stronger tools of “strategic deterrence”

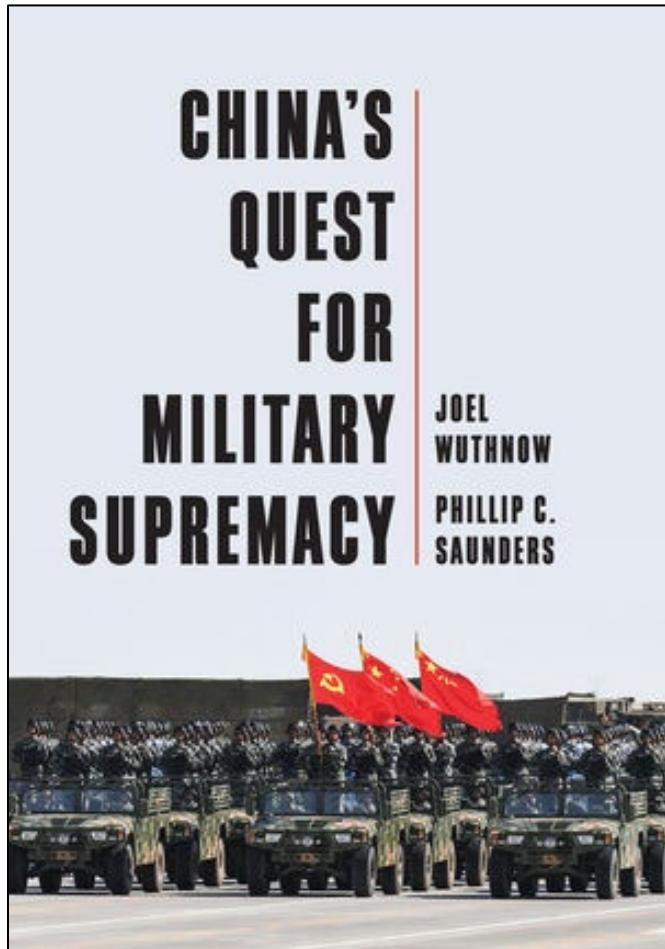
- Focuses on the U.S. political center of gravity
- Larger nuclear and strategic non-nuclear forces could promote optimism in ability to deter (vice defeat) U.S. intervention in an Indo-Pacific conflict
- Xi likely encouraged by Putin’s apparent success in limiting NATO role in Ukraine

Institutional legacies provide opportunities to frustrate PLA calculus

- PLA remains corrupt and party-army trust is probably low
- Organizational culture prizes micromanagement and consensus decisions
- Officers don’t have much joint or career-broadening experiences
- OUR advantages: mission command, individual empowerment, speed, lethality, maneuver across domains and theaters, global presence, leadership quality (NDU,9 KEYSTONE and CAPSTONE!)



Further Reading/Contacts



NDU:

Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs
<https://inss.ndu.edu/About/Center-for-the-Study-of-Chinese-Military-Affairs/>

Army War College:

China Landpower Studies Center
<https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/CLSC/>

Air University:

China Aerospace Studies Institute
<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/>

Naval War College:

China Maritime Studies Institute
<https://usnwc.edu/Research-and-Wargaming/Research-Centers/China-Maritime-Studies-Institute>



Backup Slides



Operational Thought

1993: A Key Shift

- From luring deep to **fighting forward**
- From a war of annihilation to a campaign against **key points**
- From a war of attrition to a decisive campaign with a **decisive first battle**
- From waiting for the first blow to deterring the first blow by force
- From a defensive campaign to an “**offensive defense**” campaign
- From “advance and retreat boldly” to checking the initial enemy advance
- From a “front army campaign” to a “war zone” campaign
- From the principle of mass to the principle of concentration of firepower
- From four single service campaigns to **joint campaigns**.

Source: Finkelstein (2000)

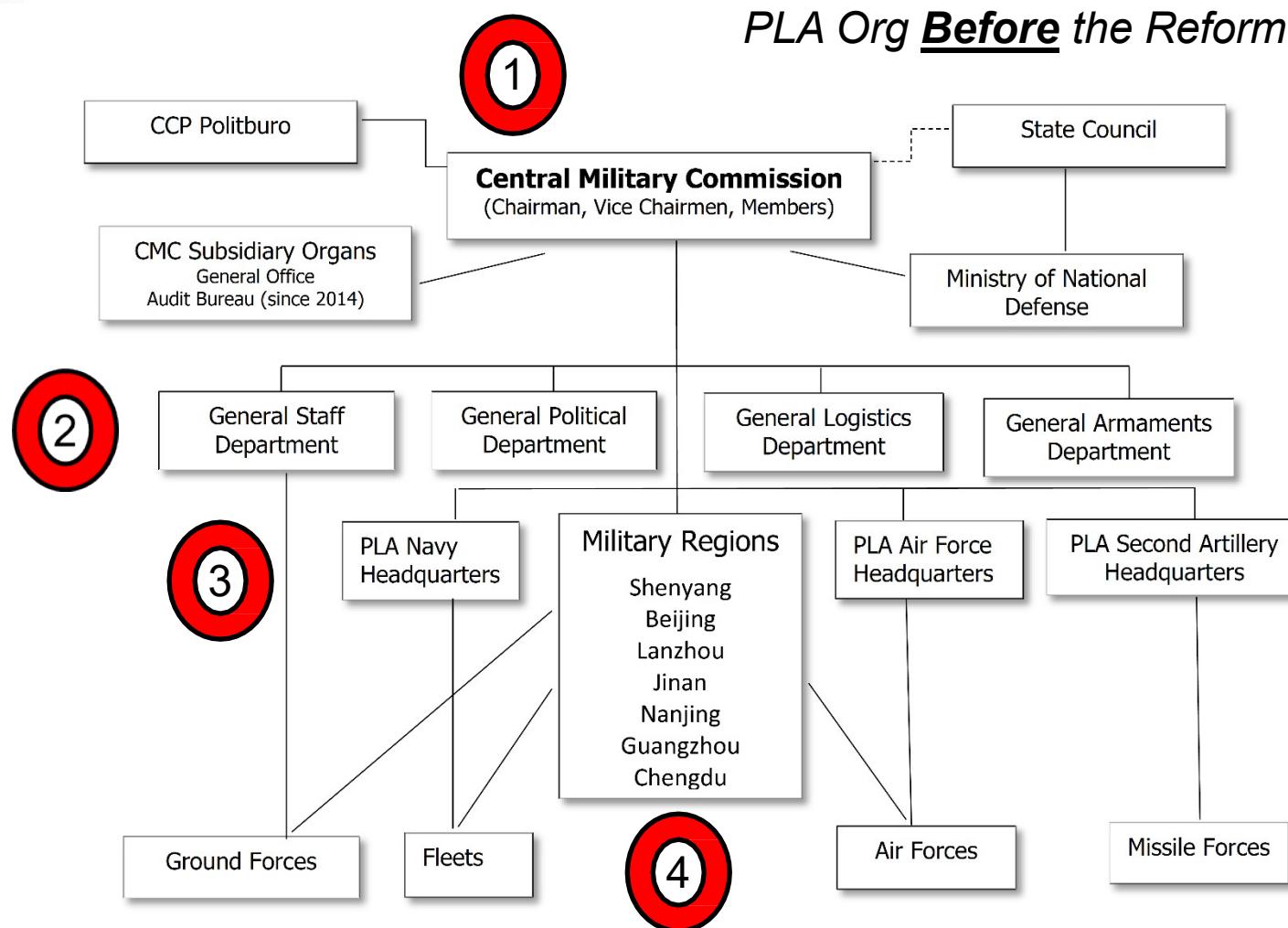
Operational Thought

“Informationized local wars” (2004, 2014, and 2019 updates)

- Information plays a key role in modern battle (lessons from the Gulf War and other U.S./NATO campaigns)
- Development of the Integrated Command Platform and IT modernization in the logistics system
- From basic coordination between the services to “integrated joint operations” featuring seamless communication between units from the different services
- Greater focus on the space, cyber, and electromagnetic domains reflected desire to attain information dominance
- **Multi-domain precision warfare (MDPW)** as a new core operational concept



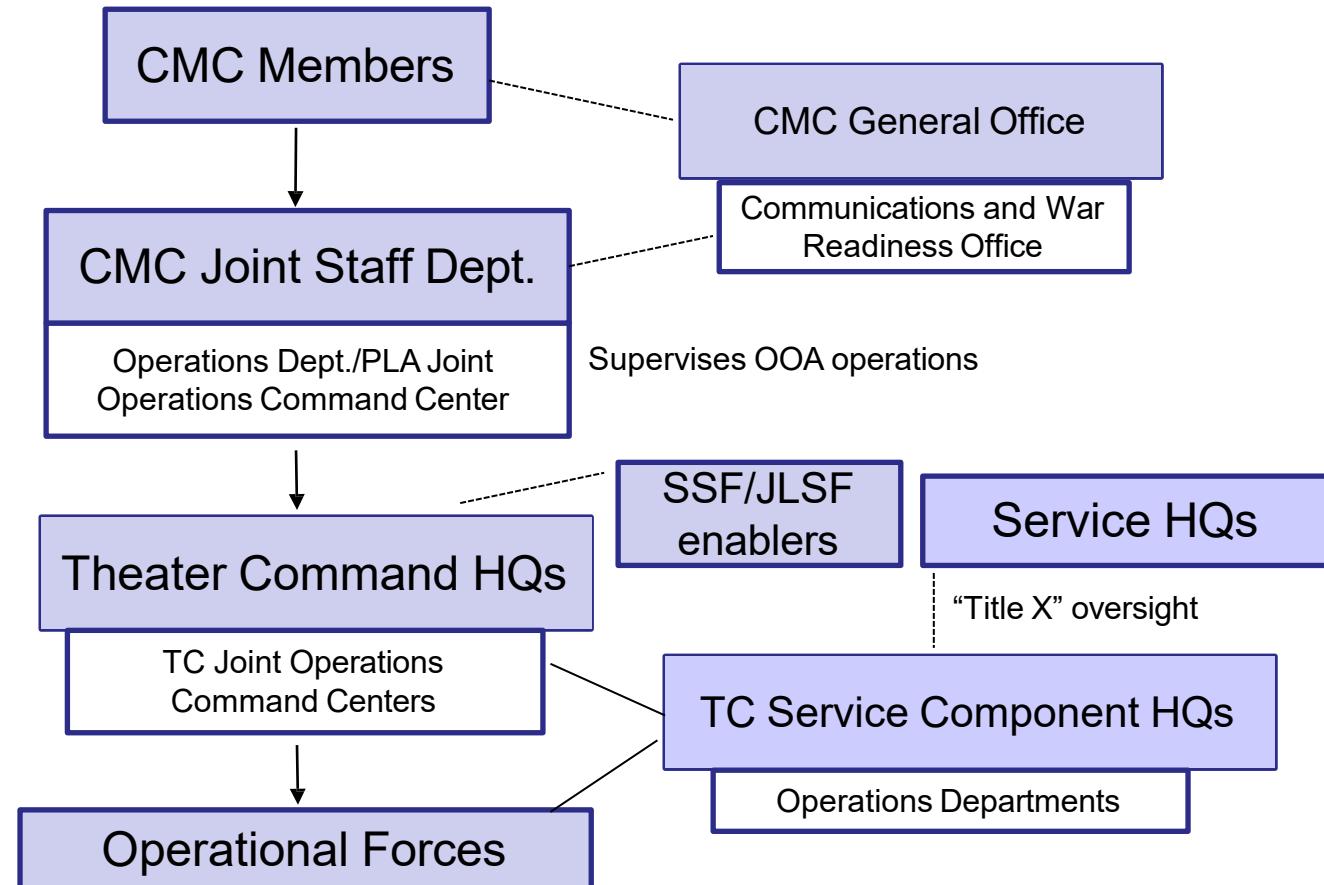
Pre-Reform PLA



A New Joint C2 Structure

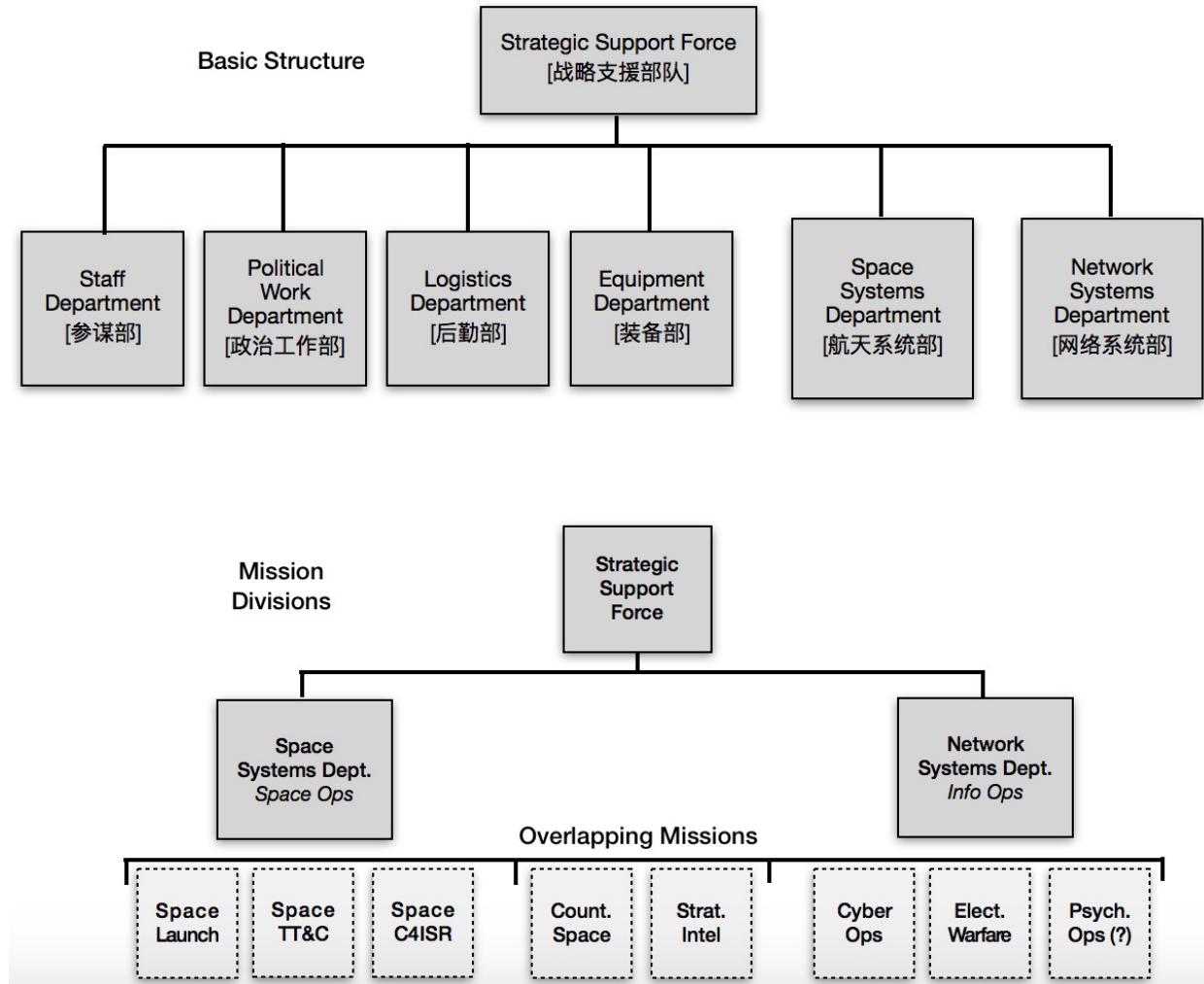
Strategic Decision-Making

Operational Decision-Making





Strategic Support Force



Systems Destruction Warfare Concepts

- Conflict is won by the belligerent that can disrupt, paralyze, or destroy the operational capability of enemy's operational system through kinetic *and* nonkinetic strikes against key points and nodes

1. Flow of Information	2. Essential Elements	3. Operational Architecture	4. Time Sequence
<p>Disrupt or destroy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key data links Information network sites 	<p>Disrupt and paralyze:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> C2, reconnaissance, intelligence, firepower, maneuver, protection, support, etc., capabilities 	<p>Destroy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical nodes of essential elements 	<p>Disrupt and paralyze:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reconnaissance-control-attack evaluation process

System Destruction Warfare Capabilities

- The PLA has invested heavily in ISR, long-range and precision-strike, electronic warfare, counter-space systems, and offensive cyber capabilities that can attack key nodes in adversary systems and the C4ISR network that supports them
 - DF-21D and DF-26 Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles
 - Land-attack cruise missiles and accurate terminally-guided ballistic missiles
 - Anti-satellite systems and jamming capabilities
- These complement more capable conventional ships, submarines, and aircraft; longer-range offensive and defensive missiles; and longer-range bombers and aircraft carriers that are giving the PLA a significant power projection capability
- In a conventional war, many of these power projection capabilities would fall off significantly as the conflict gets further away from the Chinese mainland



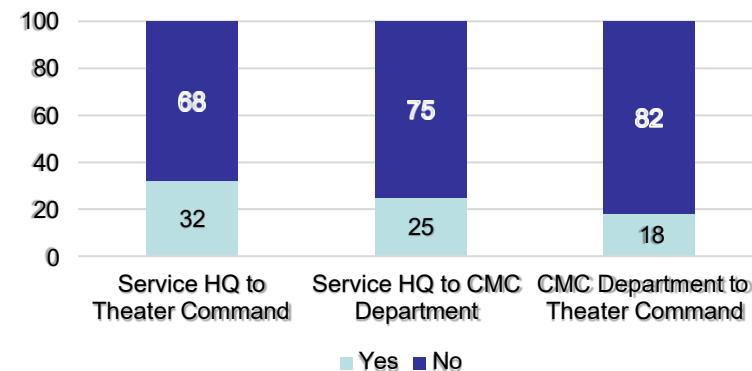
Career Patterns

PLA officers are siloed within specific career tracks

- Not much interchange between different parts of the PLA: only 18% of senior officers served in both a Theater Command *and* a CMC department in the last decade.
- Little functional crossover: PLA officers usually stay within the same general career field.
- PLA senior leaders change assignments every 2-3 years on average but wide variation. There is a “Beijing Caste” that rarely rotates. Less than average U.S. 4-star tour of about 18 months.
- Frequent geographic rotations at a senior level: 77% of 2021 cohort served in two or more theaters in the past decade. This is a long-term pattern intended to reduce patronage networks.

PLA Career Fields
Military Affairs (军事军官)
Political (政治军官)
Logistics (后勤军官)
Armaments (装备军官)
Technical Specialists (专业技术军官)

Rotations Between Position Types in the Previous 10 Years (percentage)



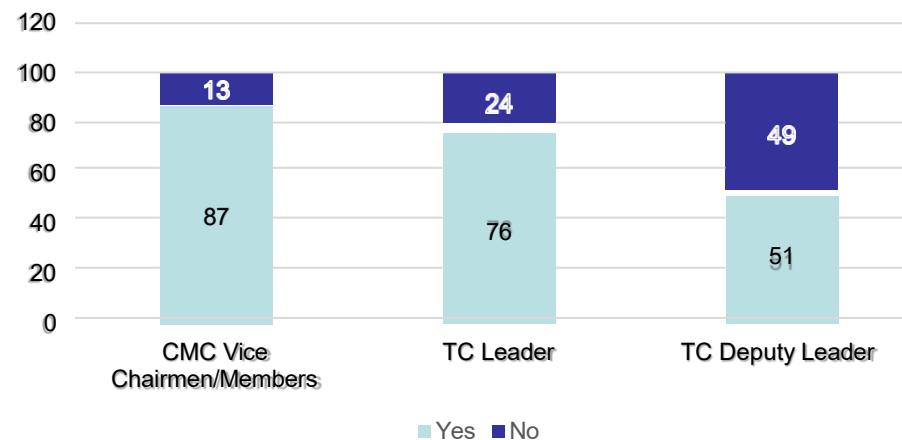


Career Patterns

The PLA Does Not Prioritize “Joint” Experience for Rising Leaders

- Only 56% of 2021 cohort held a “joint” position in the last decade (e.g., service in a General Department/CMC Department, MR/TC HQ, or NUDT/NDU/AMS)
- Joint experience drops off significantly at the Corps Leader grade and below
- There do not appear to be formal guidelines that officers need joint experience akin to the U.S. Joint Duty Qualifications, though some in the PLA have discussed such a system

Joint Assignments Previous 10 Years, by Grade (%) – 2021 Cohort





Bibliography

- Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the Chinese People's Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare* (Arlington, VA: RAND, 2018)
- John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, *China Strategic Perspectives* 13 (October 2018).
- Phillip C. Saunders Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019)