

## The Likely Composition of the Central Military Commission of the 18th Party Congress of China



*Mandip Singh*

*Mandip Singh is Senior Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.*

**October 31, 2012**

### ***Summary***

The leadership transition in the PLA is an integral part of the leadership transition in China. As D-Day draws close on 8 November, the Party released the list of new postings of the PLA's top leadership. These postings are a precursor to the 'election' of the members of the Central Military Commission of the PRC at the 18th Party Congress. There are major changes in the CMC, with eight out of 12 members likely to bow out of office. The cascading effect on the change of guard in the General Departments and the operational units will keep the PLA unsettled for some time. All the four key staff and administrative departments of the PLA have new bosses: the General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department and the General Armaments Department. As many as four of the seven military regions will have new incumbents, while the PLAAF and the Second Artillery Corps (SAC) have new Commanders at the helm. Such a large scale changeover has never happened in the PLA's history.

The leadership transition in the PLA is an integral part of the leadership transition in China. As D-Day draws close on 8 November, the Party released the list of new postings of the PLA's top leadership. These postings are a precursor to the 'election' of the members of the Central Military Commission of the PRC at the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. There are major changes in the CMC, with eight out of 12 members likely to bow out of office. The cascading effect on the change of guard in the General Departments and the operational units will keep the PLA unsettled for some time. All the four key staff and administrative departments of the PLA have new bosses: the General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department and the General Armaments Department. As many as four of the seven military regions will have new incumbents, while the PLAAF and the Second Artillery Corps (SAC) have new Commanders at the helm. Such a large scale changeover has never happened in the PLA's history.

Interestingly, the composition of the CMC members has varied significantly in the past, depending on the political climate and power balance. From 1949 to 1954, it had 28 members, which shrunk to 22 between 1954 and 1966. During the Cultural Revolution (1969-1977), it ballooned to 52 and peaked at 64 during 1977 to 1982. It was Deng Xiaoping, who in 1982, cut the PLA to size, limiting the CMC to heads of departments and some deputies. Till 1992, the CMC had a Secretary General and a Deputy Secretary General responsible for the daily functioning of the CMC. This was abolished. After Hu Jintao took over, in 2004, he inducted the Commanders of the PLAAF, the PLAN and the SAC into the CMC.<sup>1</sup>

## The Likely CMC Candidates

The eight members of the CMC of the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress bowing out of office are Hu Jintao, the Chairman, and seven other military officers. While it is unclear whether Hu will continue as Chairman CMC for some time, as his predecessor Jiang Zemin did, Xi Jinping along with three other military officers will continue to serve in the new CMC. The seven military officers bowing out of office include the two Vice Chairs, the Minister of National Defence and the Directors of the four General Departments.

The postings of the PLA's top leadership were announced recently. These are the probable candidates for the new CMC. The bio-data and brief record of service of each is discussed in the succeeding paragraphs:<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Central Military Commission, Sinodefence.com, available at <http://www.sinodefence.com/overview/organisation/cmc.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> Biodata of the PLA generals has largely been taken from media reports and 'China Vitae', available at <http://chinavitae.com/>.

- **General Fang Fenghui.** Born in 1951 and a native of Shaanxi Province, Fang was commissioned in 1968. He spent a large part of his service in Lanzhou Military Region (MR) and took over as Commander 21 Group Army (GA) of Lanzhou MR responsible for operations against India and the Central Asian Republics (CARs). He was Chief of Staff of Guangzhou MR before taking over as Commander Beijing MR in 2007. Promoted to General in 2010, Fang earned his spurs when he commanded the 2009 military parade commemorating 60 years of the PRC and caught the attention of the Party leadership. He takes over the key portfolio of Director of the General Staff Department (GSD) from General Chen Bingde and will be responsible for operations, intelligence, military diplomacy and training of the PLA.
- **General Zhang Wang:** Born in 1951 and a native of Hebei Province, Zhang was commissioned in 1968. He has served as Political Commissar of 42 Group Army based at Huizhou in Nanjing MR responsible for operations off the eastern seaboard in the Taiwan theatre. A member of 17<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee, he was posted as Political Commissar of Guangzhou MR in 2010. Promoted to General in 2010, he takes over as the Director of the General Political Department (GPD) of the PLA. The GPD is the Party watchdog in the PLA and is responsible for ideological indoctrination, morale, discipline, military justice and maintaining the personal records of all ranks of the PLA. Through a system of political commissars at every level in the PLA, the GPD executes its task of ensuring political loyalty to the Party. Zhang earned laurels during the conduct of the Hong Kong leg of the Olympics where he was responsible for security. He also earned recognition during disaster relief missions while in the Guangzhou MR.
- **General Zhao Keshi:** Born in 1947 and a native of Hebei province, Zhao was commissioned in 1968. He has spent a large part of his service in Nanjing MR and commanded the 31 Group Army at Xiamen in Fujian province from 2001 to 2004. He was appointed Commander of Nanjing MR in 2007 and made a General in 2010. He takes over as Director of the General Logistics Department (GLD) from General Liao Xilong, and will be responsible for production, supply, transportation, housing, pay and medical services.
- **General Zhang Youxia:** Born in 1950 and a native of Shaanxi province, Zhang Youxia was commissioned in 1968. He has spent over 35 years of his service in the Chengdu MR responsible for operations against India, Myanmar and Vietnam. A 'princeling', he is the son of General Zhang Zongxun, a former head of the GLD. He is one of the rare PLA generals with war experience, having fought in the 1979 war with Vietnam. He is a member of the 17<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee. He served as a Deputy Commander in Beijing MR and assumed the command of Shenyang MR in 2007. He takes over as the Director of the General Armaments Department (GAD) from General Chang Wanquan, who is likely to be promoted as one of the Vice Chairs of the CMC. Zhang

will be responsible for procurement and equipping the PLA including the Second Artillery Force. One of the key challenges for Zhang will be developing China's military industrial complex to world standards through the infusion of technology and private partnership. The GAD is also responsible for China's space programme including satellites, space stations and manned space programmes.

- **Lt. Gen. Wei Fenghe:** Born in 1954 and a native of Shandong province, Wei is the youngest among the Generals who have been elevated to higher appointments in the PLA. He has a missile background having commanded 53 Base in the general area of Kunming in the Chengdu MR and Chief of Staff of 54 Base in Nanjang in Eastern China. He is an alternate member of the 17<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee and has vast experience in the headquarters of the Second Artillery Corps (SAC), having served both as Deputy Chief of Staff and Chief of Staff. He assumes command of the SAC from General Jing Zhiyuan who is retiring on completing 68 years of age.
- **General Ma Xiaotian:** Born in 1949 and a native of Henan province, Ma was commissioned into the PLAAF in 1965. He is an ace pilot. It is not clear whether he actively participated in the 1979 war with Vietnam. General Ma has had a chequered career having served as a Deputy Commander in Nanjing MR, President of the National Defence University and Deputy PLAAF commander in Lanzhou MR responsible for operations in Ladakh sector of India and the CARs. Promoted to General in 2009, Ma was an active face of the PLA's military diplomacy in South Asia and seen regularly at various forums while serving as Deputy Chief of General Staff (Dy CGS) in the GSD. He takes over as Commander of the PLAAF from General Xu Qiliang, who is already a member of the CMC and likely to take over as one of the Vice Chairs in the CMC. Ma will be responsible for taking the PLAAF into the 'fifth generation' with the J-20 project and enhance 'strategic projection' with the Y-20 and C-919 programmes.
- **General Fan Changlong:** Born in 1947 and a native of Liaoning province, Fan was commissioned in 1969. He commanded 16 Group Army in the Shenyang MR till 2000 and was also Chief of Staff in Shenyang MR. He took over command of Jinan MR in 2004 and was promoted General in 2008. A member of the 17<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee, Fan was an assistant to General Liang Guanglie, the Defence Minister, when he was CGS. One of the oldest Generals in the PLA at 65, Fan is the 'dark horse', since most Generals are not considered for further promotion after crossing the age of 63.<sup>3</sup> With his age and seniority, he is eligible to become either of the two Vice Chairs or the Minister of National Defence.

---

<sup>3</sup> 'General Fan Changlong tipped for top post in China military commission', *South China Morning Post*, 22 October 2012.

## The Vice Chairs

The CMC has three Vice Chairs – two from the uniformed community and one civilian. Xi Jinping was appointed to the Vice Chair of the CMC as late as October 2010 at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 17<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee. If this is precedence then it is unlikely that a civilian Vice Chair is likely to be inducted to replace Xi Jinping into the CMC for the next 7 to 8 years. Of course, the issue of whether Hu Jintao would relinquish the appointment of Chairman of CMC immediately is an overriding consideration. Normally, age and seniority are key factors in determining the selection process, while the domination of the Army and personal equations do influence the process. The retirement age for Politburo members is likely to be 70, calculated “based on the year they were born and the year that a Party Congress opens or closes.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the two Vice Chairs of the PLA are likely to be given to General Chang Wanquan (63), the Director of GAD and the senior most in protocol, and General Xu Qiliang (62), the Commander of PLAAF. It is unlikely that Admiral Wu Shengli, the Chief of PLAN will be promoted to Vice Chairman as he is 67 and would retire next year at 68, which is the retiring age for CMC members. Besides, no PLAN officer has been promoted or transferred in the announcements made last week to take over from Admiral Wu, lending credibility to his continuation in office as Commander of PLAN.

## The Minister of National Defence or Defence Minister

The post of Defence Minister has also seen relegation in protocol since the last Party Congress. Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the Defence Minister also held the appointment of Vice Chairman of the CMC, thus being an automatic member of the powerful Politburo. General Chi Haotian and General Cao Gangchuan, former Defence Ministers, were members of the Politburo of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> CPC Politburo, respectively. After the 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, General Liang Guanglie was retained as CMC member but not promoted as one of the Vice Chairs.<sup>5</sup> Neither was he a member of the Politburo. This is indicative of a tighter control of the Party over the military and its relegation in Party affairs in recent years. Since General Fan Changlong has neither been a member of CMC nor a Vice Chair, despite his age and service, his nomination to the Party Congress suggests that he may be earmarked to take over the job of Defence Minister. The fact that he has served as the assistant to the present incumbent may favour him further. However, since the Ministry of National Defence is under the State Council, he can only be appointed Defence Minister at the 12<sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress when it meets early in 2013. For the present he may just be nominated as member of the CMC.

---

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Allen, “Assessing The PLA’s Promotion Ladder To CMC Member Based On Grades Vs Ranks-Part2”, *China Brief*, Volume 10, Issue 16, 5 August 2010.

<sup>5</sup> James Mulvenon, ‘Chinese Military Leadership After the 17th Congress: Hu’s Guys or Whose Guys?’ *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 23, 23 January 2008.

## CMC Members

It is important to note that the Directors of the four General Departments are normally automatically nominated as members of the CMC and enjoy a CMC grade level status. The Service Chiefs of the PLAAF, PLAN and SAC are also members of the CMC and CMC grade level officers. Organizationally, however, the three services are MR level grade organizations. This decides the *inter se* protocol between the General Departments (GSD, GPD, GLD and GAD rated 1 to 4 in that order) and the three other services (Navy, Air Force and SAC rated 5 to 7 in that order of protocol). Thus, the selection of General Ma Xiaotian, Commander PLAAF and Admiral Wu Shengli (already member of the 17<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Military Commission) as CMC members is clear. The case of Lt. General Wei Fenghe, posted to take over as Commander SAC is, however, peculiar. Wei is unlikely to be made a CMC member immediately as he is still only a MR grade level officer.<sup>6</sup> He was promoted to Lt. General in 2008 and served as Chief of Staff of the SAC. In his second tenure as Lt. General, he was transferred as Deputy of General Staff in the GSD in January 2011. He has done about two years in this appointment and stands posted as the Commander of SAC almost a year ahead of the normal tenure of three years.<sup>7</sup> He is likely to be promoted to full General in 2013 after which he may become eligible to be a CMC grade officer and member CMC.<sup>8</sup>

## Those Who Missed the Bus

The nomination to the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of General Fan Changlong has resulted in some of his colleagues, all of whom have completed 65 years of age, being overlooked. They are:

- General Wang Guosheng (65), Commander Lanzhou MR.
- General Chen Guolin (65), Political Commissar Nanjing MR.
- General Liu Zhenqi (66), Deputy Director GPD.
- General Deng Changyou (65), Political Commissar PLAAF.
- General Chi Wanchun (66), Political Commissar GAD.
- Admiral Tong Shiping (65), Deputy Director GPD.

<sup>6</sup> To understand the grades versus ranks issue regarding PLA, See Kenneth Allen, 'People's Liberation Navy - The PLA's Grade and Rank Structure', available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/plan-org-graderank.htm>; also see Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell, Travis Tanner, 'The "People" in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China's Military' *Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College*, 2008, pp. 204-07.

<sup>7</sup> To get a grade promotion an officer has to complete at least three years of tenure in that appointment.

<sup>8</sup> General Jing Zhiyuan, the present Commander of SAC, was appointed Commander of SAC as a Lt. General in 2003, promoted to a full General in 2004 and nominated member CMC in 2005. This case may be seen as precedence for my assessment of Lt. General Wei Fenghe.

Two Generals who have been overlooked, possibly for supporting or being associated with Bo Xilai, are: General Liu Yuan, an outspoken 'princeling' and son of former Chairman CPC, Liu Shaoqi; and General Zhang Haiyang, Political Commissar of the SAC.<sup>9</sup>

## Trends

- The process of selection has generally been predictable, with age and seniority being the chief criterion.
- Loyalty to the Party has been rewarded.
- The GSD has been overhauled; it had one member each from the PLAAF, PLAN and the SAC. The relief of General Ma (PLAAF), Lt. General Wei Fenghe (SAC) has been from the Ground Forces making it an Army dominated department.
- Admiral Wu Shengli (67), a member of the CMC, is likely to continue as chief of PLAN till next year. It is unlikely that he will be appointed as a Vice Chair or Defence Minister as none of the seven new appointees is from the PLAN to succeed him. While his successor is not clear, although previous trends indicate that Vice Admiral Sun Jianguo, presently Deputy Chief of Staff at GSD, is his likely successor.
- Most of the promotions have been from the MRs and the GSD, clearly establishing their primacy over other departments and organs of the PLA. For example, none of the Generals of the Academy of Military Sciences, the National Defence University or the National University of Defence Technology have been shifted or promoted. This is also indicative of the importance to professionalism and operational experience, as MRs and GSD are directly responsible for prosecution of operations.
- Among the top leadership of each department up to the rank of Lt. General, all deputy chiefs of GSD, four out of six of GPD, three out of five of GLD and four out of eight of GAD have been nominated to attend the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress as delegates. This is indicative of the *inter se* importance of the departments. This appears to conform to the ranking as per protocol.
- General Fan Changlong (65) is the 'dark horse'. He has been a MR Commander for eight years and a General for over four years. He is ideally tipped to take over as Defence Minister as he is unlikely to get a 'double promotion' to become a Vice Chair directly without becoming a member of the CMC first. Thus, Generals Chang Wanquan and Xu Qiliang, who are both sitting members of the CMC, are most likely to be the Vice Chairs.

---

<sup>9</sup> 'Bo's Ties to Army Alarmed Beijing', *Wall Street Journal*, 17 May 2012.

- Almost all members have over 40 years of service and have been appointed Generals by Hu Jintao. Hu's influence in the PLA is thus likely to remain visible for some time.
- There are no indications that the number of CMC members is likely to undergo any change in this Party Congress.

### Summary of the Likely Members of the CMC of the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress

SERIAL NUMBER	NAME	PREVIOUS APPOINTMENT	NEW APPOINTMENT	REMARKS
1	Mr. Xi Jinping	Vice President and Vice Chairman CMC	Likely Chairman CMC	May retain previous appointment if Hu Jintao continues as Chair
2	VACANT		Vice Chairman	To be appointed later
3	Gen. Chang Wanquan	Chief of General Armaments Department (GAD)		Likely Vice Chairman CMC
4	Gen. Xu Qiliang	Commander PLA AF		Likely Vice Chairman CMC
5	Gen. Fan Changlong	Commander Jinan MR		Likely Minister for National Defence in 2013 and Member CMC
6	Gen. Fang Fenghui	Commander Beijing MR	Chief of General Staff Department (GSD)	Likely Member CMC
7	Gen. Zhang Yang	Political Commissar, Guangzhou MR	Chief of General Political Department (GPD)	Likely Member CMC
8	Gen. Zhao Keshi	Commander Nanjing MR	Chief of General Logistics Department (GLD)	Likely Member CMC
9	Gen. Zhang Youxia	Commander Shenyang MR	Chief of General Armaments Department (GAD)	Likely Member CMC
10	Gen. Ma Xiaotian	Deputy Chief of GSD	Commander PLA AF	Likely Member CMC
11	Adm. Wu Shengli	Commander PLAN		Member CMC
12	Lt. Gen. Wei Fenghe	Deputy Chief of GSD	Commander Second Artillery Corps (SAC)	Likely Member CMC in 2013