

Building the Next Generation of Chinese Military Leaders

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How does the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) People's Liberation Army (PLA) treat senior military leadership development? This article answers this question by looking at what the PLA views as a good leader, how it develops such leaders, and when the new generation of PLA leaders will emerge.

But why does it matter? US Department of Defense operational concepts such as joint all-domain operations, multi-domain operations, and distributed maritime operations require our joint force to execute harder, better, and faster than our opponents. However, our opponents, namely China, are not static forces. China is also trying to build a military “system of systems” that will execute harder, better, and faster than ours. It is relatively easy to observe and measure how different hardware components of the PLA function. Measuring how the “software”¹ functions is a more difficult but equally important part of determining how well the system as a whole will operate. The leaders of the PLA are in some ways the operating systems of the PLA as a whole.

While we do not have access to canonical literature discussing the specific question of “How the PLA views senior leadership development,” we *can* extrapolate themes based on publicly available, native-language literature written by the PLA on the subjects of command and leadership. In an effort to break down the aforementioned question into more tractable terms, we look at the following three subquestions:

1. What does the PLA view as a good leader?
2. How does the organization develop such leaders?
3. When will these leaders show up?

The bottom line is that the PLA views a “good leader” as an expert strategic war fighter who always listens to orders. They plan to get there by first deliberately selecting only desirable officer candidates and second inducting them through a rigorous professional military education (PME) process focused on skill building. The PLA can expect their efforts to pay off between roughly 2035 and 2050.

Complicating Factors

To fully understand what the PLA wants out of its senior leaders, there are three complicating factors unique to the PLA that have major implications for the leadership within the PLA:

1. Military leaders in the PLA operate within a collective CCP leadership mechanism. This makes it difficult to find direct analogues to US military leadership concepts.
2. Until 2012 and possibly as recently as 2017, the PLA often promoted leaders based on a corrupt “pay-to-play” system rather than anything that resembled merit-based promotions. As such, the PLA cannot presently assume all its senior leaders possess competence in basic military leadership skills.
3. Current PLA leaders have a narrower range of experiences to draw on compared to US counterparts, because PLA career paths up to the present day emphasize depth of knowledge rather than breadth of knowledge.

The subsequent sections discuss these three factors in greater detail.

Factor One: Party, Collective, and Dual Leadership

True leadership over the PLA is entirely derived from the CCP and thus the Party core (presently Xi Jinping).² Stemming from that, the PLA operates within the larger CCP ideology that views unified leadership and central authority as key tenants of its philosophy.³ In some ways, one can view the PLA as the militant wing of a centralized religion with an individual leader representing the vanguard of that ideology (e.g., a highly centralized Catholic Church).

Within this centralized leadership mechanism, the PLA practices a form of collective leadership known as the “military and political dual-leadership system.” Under this system, a unit’s commander and the political officer serve as co-equals.⁴ Political officers and unit commanders share joint responsibility for issuing orders, giving directions to lower levels, and overseeing all daily unit work.⁵ The political officer and unit commander also share responsibility for leading their unit’s Party committee and usually serve as the Party committee secretary and deputy secretary, respectively.

The unit’s Party committee, of which both the political officer and the unit commander are members (along with varying numbers of other unit officers, all CCP members), holds the power at the heart of the command-and-control mechanism of the PLA. It is the embodiment of the CCP’s overall leadership over the PLA and thus is the formal decision-making mechanism for each PLA unit.⁶

Typically, decisions within a unit's Party committee are made through democratic centralism, wherein each committee member may voice opinions and vote on a decision, but once the committee makes a decision, it is the responsibility of all committee members to support that policy. In the event of a time-sensitive decision, the individual best suited to make a decision (typically the unit commander in a combat situation) is permitted to make a unilateral decision. However, the unit's party committee still shares collective responsibility for that individual's decision. As a result, the committee is likely to review such unilateral decisions at an appropriate time.

Factor Two: Corruption

The CCP's arrest of Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice-Chairmen Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong in 2014 as well as CMC members Fang Fenghui and Zhang Yang in 2017 on corruption charges represents a much larger problem within the PLA. President Xi's anticorruption campaign implicated dozens if not hundreds of PLA general and flag officers (GFO), many of whom were responsible for personnel appointments and promotions.⁷

Because the CMC must approve all GFO promotions, between 2002 and at least 2012 during the tenures of the corrupt officers Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, it is reasonable to assume that most GFOs promoted in that period paid for that promotion.⁸ Although no complete "price list" is available, anecdotal evidence through official People's Republic of China (PRC) state media and unofficial press outlets suggests that a promotion to an O-9 or O-10 equivalent cost between 1.4 to 2.8 million USD.⁹ Unofficial sources claim that O-7 and O-8 promotions ran roughly 700,000 USD.¹⁰ To fund these promotions and the bribes necessary to stay in the good graces of senior officials, this system had a trickledown effect, wherein even field grade officers were forced to pay into the system.¹¹ This system may have persisted into 2017, when the PLA arrested CMC members generals Fang Fenghui (the officer in charge of overall military operations in the PLA) and Zhang Yang (the officer in charge of overall personnel issues in the PLA).¹²

The end result is a system that promoted individuals into senior leadership positions based on cash amounts rather than talent or competence. The handful of competent senior leaders in the PLA succeeded in climbing the ladder in spite of the system during this time—not because of it.

Factor 3: Lacking in Breadth of Experience

All PLA officers up to the present day are likely to have had a stove-piped career. Aviators will have only served almost exclusively in aviation units, likely of

the same type, until they reach roughly the O-6 equivalent level. The same can be said about submarine officers, tankers, surface warfare officers, and infantrymen.¹³ This trend is not only an observable career tendency in most PLA officers but also codified in official career trajectories. The PLA Air Force Officer's Handbook and PLA Navy Officer's Handbook both stipulate that, up to an O-6 equivalent level, an officer is expected to remain within the same discipline for virtually his or her entire career up to that point.¹⁴

Making matters worse was the total lack of joint assignment opportunities until 2016.¹⁵ Prior to 2016, the PLA had virtually no joint organizations and, thus, no opportunities for officers to gain joint experience. The closest equivalents the PLA had to institutionalized joint assignments were cross-service assignments, wherein an officer from one service (e.g., the Navy) would take up a position in another service (e.g., the Air Force). However, this was a rare occurrence.

This lack in career diversity results in exceptional depth in knowledge but little in the way of breadth. While this is advantageous early in one's career, it becomes a major handicap later in one's career. This major deviation in the career experiences that senior leaders in the PLA draw from versus the experiences that senior US military leaders draw from factors into how the PLA is now looking to develop its leaders going forward.

What Is a Good Leader in the PLA?

I feel that no matter how the system is adjusted and how missions change, we should all be politically sound, align with the Party, listen to the Party's command, and work hard to improve the joint operational command capability under realistic combat conditions.

—PLA National Defense University
Senior Officer's Course student in 2017

The PLA regularly talks about deficiencies within its force—many of which are associated with its people rather than its technical systems. The most commonly discussed deficiencies are seen below:

"Five Inabilities" ¹⁶	"Five Weaknesses" ¹⁷	"Two Insufficients" ¹⁸
Inability to analyze a situation	Ability to adapt to the circumstances	Insufficient ability to fight modern wars
Inability to understand the higher echelon's intent	Ability to manage and coordinate	
Inability to make a decision on a course of action	Ability to operate equipment	Insufficient ability of cadres at all levels to command modern combat
Inability to deploy forces	Ability to command operations	
Inability to handle unexpected situations	Ability to organize training	

While the inverse of some of these deficiencies suggest desirable leadership traits (e.g., inability to analyze a situation implies they want leaders who are good at analyzing situations), the PLA also discusses desirable traits that it wants its leaders to have. A survey of publicly available PLA literature since 2015 reveals the following broad trait categories that the PLA views as desirable in its leaders:

Politically Loyal: A PLA military leader's worldview is in lockstep with the CCP, and they understand their role within the CCP.

The PLA views politics as being an integral part of its identity and tradition. Understanding political factors within the scheme of the CCP is not just a fundamental skill that is necessary for leaders in the PLA. Military commanders in the PLA must always put ideological and political development first and foremost. This can be accomplished by strengthening political beliefs in communism, reiterating the philosophy of serving the people, and emphasizing the Party's absolute leadership in all matters.¹⁹

Strategically Aware: A PLA military leader should have a solid understanding of how what they are doing fits into the bigger picture, how various different parts interact, and how actions will play out over time.

Given that the PLA is moving toward becoming an "informatized force," wherein overall force effectiveness is determined by the extent to which the force is networked with access to information, the PLA not surprisingly sees strategic awareness as a crucial element that its leaders must have. Specifically, it wants its leaders to have a holistic understanding of where they fit in within the overall strategy, possess the skills to determine how different factors will interact with each other, and have the foresight to understand how a situation will evolve.²⁰ This also leads to PLA leaders being able to conduct mission command to a certain degree, wherein they are able to continue operating absent of direct command guidance based on their understanding of the situation.

Skilled in Military Affairs: A PLA military leader should have the requisite skills to command combat operations at their respective level of war.

As indicated in the section discussing the problem of corruption and breadth of experience, the PLA is essentially starting over in terms of military skills. Skills that the US military would consider prerequisites such as understanding joint operations, operational art, integration of new technical capabilities, and the importance of information superiority often must be taught to senior PLA leaders.²¹ The PLA views leaders that already possess such fundamental skills as extremely desirable, not just minimally successful.

Appropriate Military Culture: A PLA military leader adheres to a particular set of intellectual achievements, beliefs, and norms that the PLA collectively regards as canonical.

The PLA does not want leaders who are just there for the paycheck. It wants leaders who are passionate about military affairs and the PLA's legacy. This means it wants officers who are actively interested in combat command, the newest military literature and theory, and the overall art of war.²² The PLA also wants a "genetic inheritance," so to speak, wherein its current generations of leaders pull from the experiences of "past PLA greats."²³ Contemporary examples of "famous generals" include Peng Dehuai, Liu Bocheng, and Xu Xiangqian. Although the PLA's National Defense University lists the Chinese intervention in the Korean War as a "famous modern campaign," all the famous "contemporary" generals listed are better known for their actions during the Chinese Civil War.²⁴

Adaptive: They can respond to new circumstances, develop innovative ideas, and incorporate new methodologies.

Not surprisingly, the PLA wants its leaders to be adaptive and innovative. Specifically, it wants leaders to learn new methods and military developments from other countries, incorporate future technologies that have not yet operationalized, and be more creative.²⁵ There is also a reasonably new emphasis on finding officers who are reasonably independent and willing to take the initiative on their own (within reason).²⁶

Other Intangible Traits: In addition to the aforementioned leadership traits, the PLA also discusses the value of leadership concepts that are intangible or not typically associated with the military. Examples include charisma, institutional leadership, leading from behind, flexible leadership, and intercultural leadership.²⁷ However, there is an absence of evidence regarding whether the PLA is systematically trying to implement such concepts across the force or not.

Development

Many of these desirable leadership traits are new to the PLA, but systematic implementation of mechanisms to promote such traits is an even more recent phenomenon. Although the PLA is relatively opaque when it comes to ongoing efforts to improve the force, leadership development within the PLA can be broken down into two categories. First, the PLA selects what it views as the optimal officer candidates. Second, it implements a fairly stringent series of PME requirements.

The Right Material

Before the PLA begins to mold officers into future senior leaders, the organization wants to ensure that the "material" that they are working with is appropriate. Specifically, PLA officer candidate prerequisites are designed to identify politi-

cally reliable individuals who have character traits aligned with some of the “soft” desirable leadership traits mentioned above. The PLA accomplishes this by conducting a series of unspecified psychological, political, and personality testing.²⁸ There is virtually no information on the PLA’s psychological and political testing, but the PLA provides broad guidelines for desired personalities.

The PLA currently uses a Myers–Briggs Type Indicator to filter out certain types of personalities. Persons who test as “INFP” (introverted, intuitive, feeling, and prospecting) are immediately flagged, while individuals who test as “ENFP” (extroverted, intuitive, feeling, prospecting), “INTJ” (introverted, intuitive, thinking, judging), or “ISTP” (introverted, sensing, thinking, prospective) require additional screening. The implication of this personality screening is that the PLA is trying to filter certain “undesirable” personalities, “INFP” being the archetype.²⁹

Professional Military Education

The aim of the PLA’s PME system likely is to build and develop military skills required to lead the next level of combat operations. There is little evidence to suggest that the PLA PME system is designed to inculcate habits of the mind, critical thinking, or intellectual integrity. This view is based predominantly on PME requirements for PLA officers and limited information about graduate programs at PLA PME institutions.

PLA PME requirements focus on training officers to conduct combat operations at the tactical and then operational level.³⁰ PME requirements can be met by attending any number of military academic institutions, but there are few opportunities for officers to attend higher-quality civilian institutions. Field grade officers attend a series of multimonth courses at military academies covering single-service and then combined arms tactics. Some junior and field grade officers that will be assigned to a larger headquarters staff will attend courses on campaign-level staff work.³¹ Senior officers will receive PME in single-service campaigns then joint campaigns at either their service’s command academy or the PLA’s National Defense University.³²

The concentrations and prerequisite readings at degree-granting programs intended for senior officers reflect the probable emphasis on building skills for war fighting. Most degrees issued are in military affairs, with concentrations in fields of military science, strategy, tactics, operational command, and military operations research.³³ The prerequisite readings cover military strategy, operations, and tactics exclusively.³⁴

Looking Forward

The PLA is clearly making efforts to fast-track the presence of some of these aforementioned desirable traits within its current generation of leaders. Through the massive culling of corrupt officers, institution of rigorous testing, and investment in PME, the hope is that the competent leaders of the current generation will form at least a solid basis for subsequent generations. However, a full generational shift in the PLA's officer corps is likely necessary before it observes substantive change in the quality of its senior leaders. Using standard trajectories for PLA officers, we can extrapolate how long that might take.

The starting point for the PLA is roughly 2017, when the PLA's anticorruption efforts peaked and the organization reformed its command-and-control structure to allow for joint operations and modernized its PME system to develop a new generation of human talent. Officers entering the "new-generation" PLA are more likely to be promoted based on merit rather than money, have a wider range of career experiences to inform their worldview, and undergo much more rigorous academic training. Based on standard career trajectories for PLA officers, officers in this new generation will reach their first major field commands around 2035 and their first senior commands around 2050.

Incidentally, 2035 and 2050 are broader benchmarks for the PLA's overall modernization. According to the PRC's 2019 Defense White Paper, the PLA is expected to, "basically complete the modernization of national defense and the military by 2035 and to fully transform the People's Armed Forces "into world-class forces by the mid-21st century."³⁵ Not only does this translate to a PLA that will be better equipped, trained, and networked but also a PLA that will be better led. ♣

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Notes

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