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C H I N A A E R O S P A C E
S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

**Commanders of the
People's Liberation Army Air Force:
An Overview**



Kenneth W. Allen

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Introduction

In the era of great power competition, it is important to understand all of the actors. Not just organizations and structure, but people as well. On 27 August 2017, Lieutenant General Ding Laihang became the 12th Commander of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force (PLAAF) since 1949. He received his third star with the rank of General in July 2019.ⁱ He is expected to remain in this billet until the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 20th Party Congress in October 2022, at which time he will meet his mandatory retirement age of 65.

While the PLA is organized differently from the U.S. Air Force, and those of our allies and partners around the world, and it isn't a one to one match with the U.S., it is important to understand who leads the PLA's Air Force, where he came from, and who might succeed him.

This report provides an overview of General Ding's predecessors, his career, how PLAAF Commanders are selected, and the role that the PLA Air Force Commander plays. It also makes a prediction about the officers who might be eligible to replace him in 2022 are.

We hope you find this volume helpful in parsing the PLA's leadership, and understanding some of the counterparts to our own aerospace forces.

Dr. Brendan S. Mulvaney
Director, China Aerospace Studies Institute

ⁱ Note: As of 2021, the PLA does not have a 4-star General rank.

Key Terms and Acronyms

A list of key terms, acronyms, and their Chinese characters that are noted in the report as shown below:

Academician (院士)

Air Force Aviation University (AUAF / 空军航空大学)

Air Force Combat Readiness Combined Training (空军作战战备集训)

Air Force Command College (AFCC / 空军指挥学院)

Air Force Construction and Development Academician and Advisory Meeting (空军建设发展院士顾问全体会议)

Air Force leaders (空军领导)

Air Force's 11th Military People's Congress (空军第十一次军人代表大会)

Cadre (干部)

CCP aka CPC Party Congress (中国共产党全国代表大会/党代表大会/党代会)

Central Military Commission (CMC / 中央军事委员会/中央军委/)

China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition / Zhuhai Airshow (中国国际航空航天博览会)

Chinese Communist Partyⁱⁱ (CCP / CPC / 中国共产党)

Ding Laihang (DLH / 丁来杭)

Discipline Inspection Commission/Committee (纪律检查委员会/纪委)

Element (分队)ⁱⁱⁱ

General officer rank promotion (晋升将官军衔)

Grassroots Party Committees (基层党委)

ⁱⁱ The Chinese also call this the Communist Party of China (CPC).

ⁱⁱⁱ This term is normally translated as “element,” but is also often translated as “subunit,” “detachment,” “battery” (SAM or AAA), or “flight” (maintenance); however, this report uses the term “element” for the sake of continuity. It specifically refers to operational and support organizations subordinate to units at the battalion, company, and platoon levels. Occasionally, squads, which are solely manned by enlisted personnel, are identified as an element.

Headquarters (HQ)^{iv}
Integrated air and space capabilities and coordinated offensive and defensive operations (空天一体、攻防兼备)
Military-Civil Fusion (MCF / 军民融合)
Mobilization meeting (动员会议)
National Airspace Safety and Development Forum (国家空天安全与发展论坛)
National martyrs (国家烈士)
National People's Congress (NPC / 全国人民代表大会/全国人大)
Noncommissioned Officer (NCO / 士官长)
Party Branch (党支部)
Party Committee (党委)
Party Committee Standing Committee (党委常委)
Party Committee Central Group (党委中心组)^v
Party Deputy Secretary (党委副书记)
Party General Branch (党总支部)
Party Secretary (党委书记)
Party small group (党小组)
Peacetime mentalities (纠治和平积习)
People's Liberation Army (PLA / 人民解放军)
People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF / 人民解放军空军)
People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国)
PLAAF Building (空军建设)
PLA National Defense University (解放军国防大学)
PLAAF Party Committee Standing Committee (空军党委常委)
PLAAF Party Congress (空军党代表大会)
Plenary Session (全体会议 / 全会)

^{iv} Note: The PLAAF does not have a term for Headquarters.

^v The Party Committee establishes Central Groups (党委中心组) to lead study sessions on specific topics of political importance.

Policy promotion (政策升级)
Political Commissar (PC / 政治委员 / 政委)
Protocol order (组织序列)
Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM / 地空导弹)
Theater Command Air Force (TCAF / 战区空军)
To study and implement (学习贯彻)
Unit (部队)
Video Teleconference (VTC / 电视电话会议)
VTC on Safety and Stability Work (安全稳定工作电视电话会议)
Xi Jinping (XJP / 习近平)
Xi Jinping's Strong Military Thought (强军思想)
Yu Zhongfu (YZF / 于忠福)
Zhuhai Airshow (珠海航展)

Previous Commanders

The PLAAF had eight Commanders from 1949 to 2002. When Deng Xiaoping gained control of the CCP in 1978, his leadership group attached special political weight to the PLAAF, because Defense Minister Lin Biao had wrested control of the Air Force through PLAAF Commander Wu Faxian during the Cultural Revolution, especially at the onset of Lin's abortive coup against Mao in 1971. As a result of these and other power struggles in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) that involved the PLAAF, Party leaders thereafter sought to keep a much tighter rein over the PLAAF than the other service arms. Following the 1979 border conflict with Vietnam, in which the PLAAF did not fly a single sortie across the border or engage the Vietnamese Air Force, Deng sought to upgrade China's airpower capabilities. However, one of his unstated purposes was to assert his authority over what he and other senior officials regarded as a "potentially dangerous service" partly because of its ability to move troops around China rapidly in times of crisis.¹ For example, in 1965 Lin Biao and Wu Faxian used the airborne troops, which belong to the PLAAF, to support a particular faction in the Cultural Revolution. When Lin Biao's air force aircraft went down over Mongolia in September 1971, Wu Faxian was immediately arrested. The PLAAF subsequently went without a Commander until May 1973. Even then, after Ma Ning served as the Commander for four years (1973-1977), he was replaced as the Commander by his Political Commissar (PC), Zhang Tingfa, for the next eight years (1977-1985). The next and final PC to serve as the Commander was Qiao Qingchen (2002-2007), who had previously served as the PC for three years (1999-2002).

According to interviews in China in the 1990s and 2000s by the author of this report, General Wang Hai was relieved of duty and placed under house arrest in 1992 at the age of 67 for political reasons after he attended a meeting hosted by General Political Department Director and CMC Vice Chairman Yang Baibing without then-CMC Chairman Jiang Zemin's knowledge. The charges were dropped almost immediately. His successor, Cao Shuangming (1982-1984), had met his mandatory retirement age of 65 but was also reportedly relieved of duty due to numerous aircraft accidents. Although Yu Zhenwu had filled all the right squares to replace Wang Hai as the Commander in 1992, he was not

selected as the Commander (1994-1996) until after Cao Shuangming left office.^{vi} Once he became the Commander, Yu was reportedly chastised by senior PLA Army leaders for “advocating independent PLAAF missions,” including wanting a separate Air Force Strategy. Although Wang, Cao, and Yu had each reached the mandatory retirement age when they were replaced, they could have been extended if necessary. Further interviews indicate that Liu Shunyao (1996-2002), who became Commander at the age of 58, was selected by the Army-dominated CMC because then-CMC Chairman Jiang Zemin wanted another officer and the CMC did not want him to have control, so Liu was selected because “he had no influence.”

- All eight Commanders from Wang Hai to Ding Laihang served as a Military Region Air Force (MRAF) / Theater Command Air Force (TCAF) Commander.
- Two of the Commanders served as a Deputy Chief of the General Staff.
- One of them served as the Commandant of the PLA National Defense University (NDU).
- In 1973, Ma Ning became the first Commander with any pilot experience; however, the next Commander was a Political Commissar.
- Even though each Commander from Wang Hai to Liu Shunyao were pilots, the PLAAF reverted to a Political Commissar as the Commander in 2002.
- The first 11 commanders served from two years to 16 years.^{vii}

^{vi} Yu Zhenwu was the Commander of the 7th Air Corps in Nanning in the Guangzhou MRAF when Wang Hai was the MRAF Commander. When Wang became a PLAAF Deputy Commander, Yu became the Guangzhou MRAF commander. When Wang became the PLAAF Commander, Yu became a Deputy Commander and was listed first in protocol order. However, based on interviews by the author of this report with PLAAF officers in the late 1990s, Wang and Yu did not get along and Wang did everything he could to keep Yu from becoming his successor. Although Yu did not succeed Wang immediately, he did become the Commander two years later.

^{vii} Liu Yalou (16 years), Wu Faxian (6 years), Ma Ning (4 years), Zhang Tingfa (8 years), Wang Hai (7 years), Cao Shuangming and Yu Zhenwu (2 years) when the maximum age limit of 65 was enacted, Liu Shunyao (6 years), and Xu Qiliang and Ma Xiaotian (5 years).

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the key leadership positions each Commander served in before assuming the command position.

Table 1: PLAAF Commanders' Career Path

Commanders	PLAAF HQ PC	PLAAF HQ Deputy Commander	PLAAF Chief of Staff	MRAF/TCAF Commander	Deputy Chief of the General Staff	Commandant, NDU
Liu Yalou						
Wu Faxian	X					
Ma Ning						
Zhang Tingfa	X	X	X			
Wang Hai		X		X		
Cao Shuangming				X		
Yu Zhenwu		X		X		
Liu Shun Yao		X		X		
Qiao Qingchen	X	X		X		
Xu Qiliang			X	X	X	
Ma Xiaotian				X	X	X
Ding Laihang				X		

First 11 PLAAF Commanders' Profiles

This subsection provides a profile for the first 11 PLAAF Commanders that includes the following information in each profile: date of birth, date passed away, place of birth, when they joined the PLA, their career path, when they received their rank promotions, and when they served as a Member on the National People's Congress (NPC). Of note: With the exception of Wang Hai, who served as the PLAAF Commander from 1985-1992, no information was found concerning the types of aircraft flown or the number of hours flown for any of the other Commanders.

As shown in the following bullets and in Table 1, there is no clear path to becoming the PLAAF Commander:

- The PLAAF's first four Commanders (1949-1985), were all ground force officers who moved into various command positions after the PLAAF was formed.
- Of the 12 Commanders, three served first as the PLAAF Political Commissar.

- Only five Commanders served as a Deputy Commander in PLAAF Headquarters and two of them served as the Chief of Staff.^{viii}

1. Liu Yalou (刘亚楼): 1910–1965; Wuping, Fujian Province. He joined the Red Army in 1929; served in various Army command and political officer positions; studied at Soviet Frunze Military Academy in 1939; joined the Soviet Army in 1942 following the German attack on Russia; returned to China in 1945 and served in the northeast; October 1947 served as Commandant of Northeast Democratic Joint Aviation School; and became Commander of 14th bingtuan in April 1949, which became the core of the PLAAF in November 1949. November 1949 (age 39) to May 1965 (age 55), he served as the PLAAF Commander. November 1956 to May 1965, he was concurrently a CMC Member. In 1959, he was concurrently assigned as a Deputy Minister of Defense, a Deputy Chairman of the National Defense Science and Technology Commission (NDSTC), and Director of the Ministry of National Defense’s 5th Research Institute, which was responsible for missile development. He received the rank of General in 1955. He was a Deputy at the 1st NPC (1954) and a Member of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd National Defense Committee. He was a Member at the 8th Party Congress (1956), where he was selected as a CMC Member.²

2. Wu Faxian (吴发宪): 1915-2004; Yongfeng, Jiangxi Province. He joined the Red Army in 1930; served as a political officer in the Eighth Route Army and New Fourth Army; participated in the Long March; served as a Deputy PC and Director of the Political Department in the 14th bingtuan, which became the core of the PLAAF in November 1949. In May 1950, Wu became a PLAAF Deputy PC and concurrently Director of the Political Department. For all practical purposes, he served as the PC, since Xiao Hua was transferred to the General Political Department (GPD) in April 1950. Wu officially became the

^{viii} The PLAAF has always had multiple Deputy Commanders at the same time, which typically has ranged from three to five. They are normally listed in protocol order by importance and each one of them has a portfolio, including responsibilities for the different second-level departments/bureaus under the Headquarters / Staff Department, Logistics Department, and Equipment Department. The Chief of Staff (Director of the Headquarters / Staff Department) is the same grade and is responsible for “implementing the Commander’s decisions.”

PLAAF PC in February 1957. In May 1965 (age 50), he became the Commander and, in December 1967, was simultaneously assigned as a Deputy Chief of the General Staff and Deputy Director of the CMC's General Office. In April 1969, he became a Member of the CCP Politburo. He was a member of Defense Minister Lin Biao's clique during the Cultural Revolution and was arrested the day Defense Minister Lin Biao's aircraft crashed in Mongolia in September 1971. He was kicked out of the Party in August 1973 and was sentenced to 17 years in prison in January 1981. He received the rank of Lieutenant General (LGEN) in 1955. He was a Deputy at the 2nd and 3rd NPC (1959 and 1964) and a Member of the 9th Party Congress' Politburo (1969).³

Note: The PLAAF did not have a Commander following Wu Faxian's arrest in September 1971 until Ma Ning became Commander in May 1973; however, it did have a PC during that time.

3. Ma Ning (马宁): 1922–2010 ; Qinyang, Henan Province. He joined the Red Army's Eighth Route Army in 1938 and served in various Operations Department, Regiment Chief of Staff, Regiment Deputy Commander, and Regiment Commander positions. July 1950 to January 1952, he was a student at the PLAAF's 1st Aviation School in Harbin. January 1952 until April 1959, he served as a Deputy Commander and Commander in the 21st Air Division in Shanghai. April 1959 to April 1970, he served as a Deputy Commander and then Commander of the 1st Air Corps in Changchun. April 1970 to May 1973, he was a Deputy Commander in the Lanzhou MRAF. May 1973 (age 51) until April 1977 (age 55), he was the PLAAF Commander. He received the rank of Major General (MGEN) in 1964. He was a Member of 10th Party Congress (1973), 10th Party Central Committee, and the 4th NPC (1975).⁴

4. Zhang Tingfa (张廷发): 1918–2010: Shaxian, Fujian Province. He joined the Red Army in 1933; he participated in the Long March. During the 1930s and 1940s, he served as a Platoon Commander, Director of a Communications Regiment, a Brigade Chief of Staff, and the Director of Communications and Operations Departments in various headquarters. After the PRC was established, he served as a Deputy Army Commander before being transferred to the PLAAF in 1951. After transferring to the PLAAF, he served

in the PLAAF Headquarters as a Deputy Chief of Staff (1953 to 1958), Chief of Staff (November 1958 to March 1962), Deputy Commander and concurrent Chief of Staff (March 1962 to September 1966), Deputy Commander (September 1966 to October 1975), PC (November 1975 to April 1977), and then became the Commander from April 1977 (age 59) until July 1985 (age 67). As PLAAF Commander, he was also a CMC Member from August 1977 to September 1982, and was a Member of the CCP Politburo from August 1977 until September 1985. He received the rank of MGEN in 1955. He was a Member at the 10th, 11th, and 12th Party Congresses (1973, 1977, and 1982), a Member of the 11th and 12th Party Central Committee and Politburo, and a Deputy at the 5th NPC (1978).⁵

5. Wang Hai (王海): 1925–2020; Weihai, Shandong Province. He joined the anti-Japanese youth team in 1944. 1944 to 1946, he studied at the Shandong Revolutionary University. He joined the PLA in June 1946. 1946 to 1950, he was a student in the Northeast Aviation School in Mudanjiang. 1950 to 1951, he completed his flight training at the PLAAF 4th Aviation School in Shenyang and served as a Squadron [Company] Commander in the 4th Combined Brigade's 10th Air Regiment. 1951 to 1952, he was a Flight Group [Battalion] Commander in the 3rd Air Division's 9th Air Regiment's 1st Air Group. 1952 to 1965, he move up through the 3rd Air Division as a 9th Regiment Deputy Commander and Regiment, and 3rd Division Deputy Commander and Commander. During that time, the 3rd Air Division was equipped with the MiG-15 and MiG-17. The 3rd Air Division was the first unit to receive the J-7 in the 1960s.⁶ During the Korean War, he flew the MiG-15 and shot down four aircraft and damaged five aircraft.⁷ 1965 to 1969, he was a Deputy Commander of the 5th Air Corps in Hangzhou. 1969–1975, he was the Director of the PLAAF Headquarters' Training Department's 2nd Department. July 1975 to November 1982, he was the Commander of the Guangzhou MRAF. November 1982 to July 1985, he was a PLAAF Deputy Commander. July 1985 (age 60) to November 1992 (age 67), he was the PLAAF Commander and the Deputy Secretary of the PLAAF Party Committee. He received the rank of General in September 1988. He was a Member at the CCP 12th, 13th, and 14th Party Congress (1985, 1987,

and 1992), a Member of the 12th, 13th, and 14th Party Central Committee, and a Member of the 3rd and 5th NPC (1964 and 1978).⁸

6. Cao Shuangming (曹双明): 1929–2019; Linchuan, Henan Province. He joined the PLA in 1946; served in the 2nd Field Army; 1951 to 1952 was a pilot cadet in the PLAAF 4th Aviation School in Shenyang. 1952 to 1965, he served in an Air Division as a pilot, Squadron Commander, Flight Group Deputy Commander and Commander, Air Regiment Deputy Commander and Commander. During 1958, he shot down one Nationalist aircraft. 1965 to 1970, he served as the 16th Air Division's 48th Regiment Commander and then the Division Commander. 1970 to 1974, he was an unidentified Air Corps Deputy Commander. 1974 to 1983, he was a Deputy Commander in the Shenyang MRAF (during 1982, he spend one-half year as a student in the Central Party School). In 1983, he became the Shenyang MRAF Commander and, in 1988, he became a concurrent Shenyang MR Deputy Commander.^{ix} He became the PLAAF Commander from November 1992 (age 63) to October 1994 (age 65). He received the rank of LGEN in 1988 and General in May 1993. He was a Member at the 12th and 14th Party Congress (1982 and 1992), was a Member of the 14th Party Central Committee, and was a Deputy at the 6th and 7th NPC (1983 and 1987).⁹

7. Yu Zhenwu (于振武): 1931; Kuandian, Liaoning Province. He joined the PLA in 1947; served in the ground forces until 1950. 1950 to 1951, he attended three of the PLAAF's Aviation Schools (2nd, 1st, and 4th). 1951 to 1954, he served as a pilot and Regiment Navigation Director. 1954 to 1957, he was a Flight Group Commander and Air Division's Flight Skills Inspection Director. 1957 to 1959, he was the Firing Training Director in an unidentified Air Corps. 1959 to 1964, he served in the Shenyang MRAF Headquarters Department's Military Training Department as a Flight Skills Inspection Director and Flight Training Division Deputy Director. 1964 to 1965, he was an

^{ix} From 1979 to 1988, all of the MRAF Commanders had the grade of *bingtuan* leader under the 18-grade system. In 1988 when the number of grades were reduced to 15, the *bingtuan* leader grade was merged with the MR deputy leader grade. As such, from that time forward, all of the MRAF Commanders served concurrently as an MR Deputy Commander.

Air Regiment Commander and Flight Group Commander. 1965 to 1969, he was the Deputy Director in the Shenyang MRAF Headquarter Department's Flight Training Division. 1969 to 1973, he was an Air Division Deputy Commander. 1973 to 1979, he was a Deputy Director and then Director of the PLAAF Headquarters' Headquarters Department's Military Training Department. 1979 to 1983, he was Commander of the 7th Air Corps in Nanning. 1983 to 1985, he was the Guangzhou MRAF Commander. July 1985 to October 1994, he was a PLAAF Deputy Commander. October 1994 (age 63) to November 1996 (age 65), he served as the PLAAF Commander and Deputy Secretary of the PLAAF Party Committee. He received the rank of LGEN in 1988 and General in January 1996. He was a Member at the 12th and 14th Party Congress (1982 and 1992), and was an Alternate Member of the 13th and 14th Party Congress Central Committee (1987 and 1992).¹⁰

8. Liu Shunyao (刘顺尧): 1939–2002; Zhaoyuan, Shandong Province. He joined the PLA in 1958; served as enlisted member before attending the PLAAF 1st Aviation Preparatory School from January 1959 to February 1960. February 1960 to August 1964, he was a pilot cadet at the PLAAF 5th Flying School in Jinan. August 1964 to November 1981, he served as an Air Division pilot, Flight Squadron Deputy Commander, Flight Group Commander, Regiment Commander and Division Deputy Commander. October 1977 to October 1978, he was a student at the PLAAF Command College. November 1981 to May 1983, he served as an Air Division Commander. May 1983 to August 1985, he was a Deputy Commander of the Wulumuqi/Urumqi Command Post. He then served as the Wulumuqi/Urumqi Command Post Commander from August 1985 to June 1990. June 1990 to April 1994, he was a Deputy Commander of the Lanzhou MRAF. During this period, he attended the PLA NDU from September to December 1992. April to October 1994, he was the Lanzhou MRAF Commander and concurrent Lanzhou MR Deputy Commander. October 1994 to November 1996, he was a Deputy PLAAF Commander. November 1996 (age 57) to May 2002 (63), he was the PLAAF Commander and Deputy Secretary of the PLAAF Party Committee. He received the rank of MGEN in September 1988, LGEN in May 1995, and General in June 2000. He was a Member of the 13th Party Congress (1987) and 15th Party Central Committee (1997).

9. Qiao Qingchen (乔清晨): 1939; Zhengzhou, Henan Province. He joined the PLAAF in July 1956 and attended the 2nd Aviation Preparatory School until June 1958. He was a cadet at the 1st Aviation Preparatory School from July 1956 to February 1959 and joined the Communist Party in May 1960. February 1959 to June 1962, he was a cadet at the 6th Aviation School. June 1962 to December 1965, he was a regimental pilot. December 1965 to June 1970, he was a pilot in an Independent Flight Squadron. June 1970 to May 1971, he was a Deputy PC in an Independent Flight Group. May 1971 to July 1978, he served as the PC in an Independent Flight Group. July 1978 to September 1979, he was an Air Division Deputy Commander. September 1979 to May 1983, he was an Air Division Commander. May 1983 to October 1985, he was the Director of the Political Department and Deputy PC of the 4th Air Corps in Shanghai. October 1985 to January 1990, he was the Director of the Political Department in the 8th Air Corps in Fuzhou; January to June 1990, he was a Deputy PC of the 8th Air Corps. June 1990 to January 1993, he was the PC of the Xi'an Command Post (from March to July 1990, he attended a course at the Central Party School). January 1993 to January 1996, he was a Deputy PC in the Jinan MRAF. January 1996 to October 1997, he was the Beijing MRAF Commander, concurrently a Beijing MR Deputy Commander, a Member of the Beijing MR Party Committee's Standing Committee, and Deputy Secretary of the Beijing MRAF Party committee. October 1997 to January 1999, he was a PLAAF Deputy Commander and Member of the PLAAF Party committee's Standing Committee. January 1999 to May 2002, he was the PLAAF PC and Secretary of the PLAAF Party committee. May 2002 (age 63) to October 2007 (68), he was Commander of the PLAAF and Secretary of the PLAAF Party committee. During the 4th Plenum of the 16th Party Congress in September 2004, he also became a CMC Member. He was promoted to MGEN in September 1988, LGEN in July 1997, and General in May 2002.¹¹

10. Xu Qiliang (许其亮): 1950; Linqiu, Shandong Province. He joined the PLAAF in July 1966. July 1966 to December 1967, he attended the PLAAF 1st Aviation Preparatory School. December 1967 to August 1969, he was a pilot cadet at the PLAAF 8th Aviation School and 5th Aviation School. August 1969

to May 1983, he served as an Air Division pilot, Flight Group Deputy Commander and Commander, and Air Division Deputy Commander. March to October 1982, he was a student at the PLAAF Command College. May 1983 to August 1984, he was an Air Division Commander. August 1984 to August 1984, he was an Air Corps Deputy Commander. August 1985 to July 1988, he was the Chief of Staff in the PLAAF Shanghai Command Post (while still assigned in Shanghai, he was a student in the PLA NDU's Basic Course from September 1986 to July 1988). July 1988 to July 1989, he was an acting Deputy Commander in an unidentified Air Corps. July 1989 to January 1993, he was the Chief of Staff before being promoted as the Commander of an unidentified Air Corps. January 1993 to October 1994, he was a Deputy Chief of Staff at PLAAF Headquarters. October 1994 to February 1999, he moved up to become Chief of Staff at PLAAF Headquarters and a Member of the PLAAF Party Committee's Standing Committee. February 1999 to July 2004, he was Commander of the Shenyang MRAF and concurrently a Deputy Commander of the Shenyang MR. From July 2004 to October 2007, he was a Deputy Chief of the General Staff with the grade of MR leader. In October 2007 (age 57), he became the PLAAF Commander and concurrently a CMC Member. In 2012 (age 62), he became a Vice Chairman of the CMC. He was promoted to MGEN in June 1991, LGEN in July 1996, and General in July 2007. He was selected as an Alternate Member of the 14th and 15th Party Congress (1992 and 1997), and was selected as a Member of the 16th Party Central Committee (2002) and the 17th Party Central Committee (2007).¹²

In October 2012, Xu became a Vice Chairman of the CMC and a concurrent CCP Politburo Member and will serve until the 20th Party Congress in 2022^x. Depending on the topic covered, the media normally identifies Xu as a member of the Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and Vice Chairman of the CMC or just a CMC Vice Chairman.¹³ He has been a Member of the 18th (2012) and 19th CCP Central Committee (2017). Of note, from 2012 to 2017, Xu was always listed second in protocol order behind the other CMC Vice Chairman, General Fan Changlong.¹⁴ However, from 2017 to

^x At the 19th Party Congress in November 2017, Xu moved from being number two in protocol order to being number one in protocol order for the two Vice Chairman positions.

present, since he had already served one full term as a Vice Chairman, Xu has always been listed first in protocol order in front of the other Vice Chairman, General Zhang Youxia, who replaced Fan.¹⁵

As a CMC Vice Chairman, Xu attends numerous meetings or visits operational units every year. Four examples include: 1) annual 3-star flag officer promotions ceremonies where Xu either announces the orders of promotion or presides over the ceremony;¹⁶ 2) the Plenary Sessions of PLA Delegations to the NPC where he has either attended or presided over;¹⁷ 3) a visit to a PLAAF division ahead of the Chinese Lunar New Year in February 2018;¹⁸ and 4) attended the 9th Beijing Xiangshan Forum in October 2019 where he gave a presentation.¹⁹ Xu oftentimes gives speeches at various meetings as shown in the following five examples:

At the PLA's Political Work Conference that was held in November 2014 in Gutian, which was a former revolutionary base in Fujian Province, Xu Qiliang said that "The conference aimed to seek the root of the issue and the rectification atmosphere is dense." He also stressed that "The keynote for next year's political work is rectification and correction of styles of work and we should resolutely clean up the long-standing wrong doings in the military's ideological and political fields."²⁰

In November 2017, Xu gave a presentation at an unidentified meeting where he stated, "President Xi Jinping's Thought on Strengthening the Military provides a scientific guide for the Chinese Army to become a world-class force. Firmly upholding the guiding role of the thought is of great significance practically and historically for adherence to the path of building a powerful Army with Chinese characteristics and for advancing the modernization of national defense and armed forces. The troops should unswervingly follow the absolute leadership of the Party, and the top priority is to safeguard the system in which the CMC Chairman assumes overall responsibility over the military. The Army should strengthen the consciousness of the need to maintain political integrity, think in big-picture terms, follow the leadership core

and keep in alignment.” Finally, he “ordered the troops to improve their capabilities of fighting and accelerate the building of a modern combat system with Chinese characteristics, in which the basic fighting forces are from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the newly formed Rocket Force and Strategic Support Troops.”²¹

During his visit to a PLAAF division in February 2018 noted above, Xu said “The Army should pursue the goal of building a strong and world-class force. Strengthening the military is part of ‘Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,’ which was unveiled at the 19th CPC National Congress and enshrined in the Party Constitution in October.” Xu also underscored “the importance of governing the military with strict discipline in every respect, requiring the military to continue the anti-corruption campaign and to keep fighting formalities and bureaucratism.” Finally, he “urged the force to continue to conduct military training under combat conditions and improve their fighting capabilities.”²²

At the 9th Beijing Xiangshan Forum in October 2019, Xu stated that “The world is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century, and peace and stability call for deepened dialogue and cooperation. China always upholds the international system with the United Nations as its core, supports and practices multilateralism, and holds high the banner of peace, development, cooperation and win-win. China adheres to the new thinking on common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security, he said. Finally, the Chinese military will remain a force for peace and justice no matter how strong it becomes.”²³

In December 2020, Xu wrote an article that stated, “The Chinese military is poised to adopt more intelligent technologies in its modernization drive. The goal of the modernization efforts of the People’s Liberation Army and the People’s Armed Police Force in the coming years will be characterized by better hardware, stronger information

capabilities and the wide use of intelligent technologies. The goal of our military modernization evolves with the times. As our nation has entered a new era, President Xi Jinping has urged the armed forces to develop and use intelligent technologies as the pillar of their future combat capabilities, and at the same time they should continue upgrading their weapons, equipment and information capabilities. Intelligent technologies have become a defining factor in modern warfare, they are reshaping military systems around the world, and China must keep pace with this trend to further its military modernization.’²⁴

Since becoming the CMC Vice Chairman, Xu has hosted at least 34 meetings^{xi} with foreign Defense Ministers, Defense Secretaries, Presidents, Prime Ministers, and Service Chiefs of Staff and Commanders.^{xii,25} In addition, since becoming the Vice Chairman, Xu has only traveled abroad five times, including Belarus and Ukraine in May 2013, Russia in October 2013, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Cambodia in 2014, Laos in 2015, and Myanmar in 2016.²⁶

11. Ma Xiaotian (马晓天): 1949; Gongyi, Henan Province. He joined the PLAAF in July 1965. July 1965 to December 1966, he attended the PLAAF 2nd Aviation Preparatory School in Xi’an, Shaanxi Province. December 1966 to May 1968, he served as a cadet in the PLAAF 12th Aviation School, in Linfen,

^{xi} The years and number of visits per year that Xu hosted include: 2012 (4), 2013 (8), 2014 (8), 2015 (5), 2016 (4), 2017 (3), 2018 (3), 2019 (0), and 2010 (0).

^{xii} Xu hosted the following personnel:

- 16 Defense Ministers (Belarus, Maldives, India, Finland, Republic of Congo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Armenia, Denmark (Danish), Netherlands (Dutch), Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Russia, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Afghanistan)
- 2 Defense Secretaries (Kenya, and India)
- 4 Presidents (Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Thailand)
- 1 Prime Minister (Cambodia)
- 8 Service Chiefs of Staff/ Commanders (Commander of the Russian Air Force, Chief of the Defense Force of Australia, Finnish Chief of Defense Staff, Deputy Chief of General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee of Pakistan, Chief-of-Staff of the U.S. Air Force, Chief of Naval Staff of Bangladesh, and Chief of the Army Staff of the Indian Army).

Shanxi Province. May 1968 to December 1970, he served as a flight instructor in the 12th Aviation School. In July 1969, he joined the CCP. December 1970 to January 1972, he served as a cadet in the PLAAF 5th Flight School in Jinan, Shandong Province. From January 1972 to May 1983, he transitioned up the career ladder from starting as a pilot, to becoming a Flight Squadron Commander, a Flight Group Deputy Commander, a Regiment Deputy Commander, and a Regiment Commander. From May 1983 to May 1993, he served in an unidentified Air Division as a Deputy Commander and Commander. From April 1994 to March 1997, he served as the Chief of Staff and then the Commander of the 10th Air Corps in Datong, Shanxi Province. From March 1997 to August 1998, he was a Deputy Chief of Staff in the PLAAF Headquarters' Headquarters Department. From August 1998 to June 1999, he served as the Chief of Staff in the Guangzhou MRAF Headquarters. From June 1966 to January 2001, he served as Commander of the Lanzhou MRAF and a concurrent Deputy Commander of the Lanzhou MR, as well as being a Member of the Lanzhou MR Party Committee Standing Committee and Deputy Secretary of the Lanzhou MRAF Party Committee. From January 2001 to July 2003, he served as Commander of the Nanjing MRAF and a concurrent a Deputy Commander of the Nanjing MR, as well as a Member of the Nanjing MR Party Committee Standing Committee and Deputy Secretary of the Nanjing MRAF Party Committee. He was a Member of the 16th CCP Central Committee. From July 2003 to August 2006, he served as a PLAAF Deputy Commander. From August 2006 to September 2007, he served as the Commandant of the PLA NDU with the grade of MR leader. From September 2007 to December 2012, he served as a Deputy Chief of the General Staff with responsibilities for foreign relations and the grade of MR leader. He was a Member of the 17th and 18th CCP Central Committee. From December 2012 (age 63) to August 2017 (68), he served as the PLAAF Commander and a concurrent CMC Member, as well as being the Deputy Secretary of the PLAAF Party Committee. He was promoted to MGEN in December 1995, LGEN in July 2000, and General in July 2009.

Who Was Eligible to Become the 12th Commander?

Based on analysis leading up to who was eligible to become the 12th Commander in 2017, it was surprising that Ding was selected. However, events that occurred during and after the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, including not adding the PLAAF Commander to the CMC, helps provide a better understanding as discussed below. The following subsections discuss the changes that affected the selection process for the PLAAF Commander billet starting in 2004 and then changing again in 2017.

PLAAF Commander Added to the CMC in 2004

As shown in the previous section, the PLAAF's first eight Commanders were a combination of pilots and political officers.²⁷ Two of those Commanders, Liu Yalou (1949-1965) and Zhang Tingfa (1977-1985), served concurrently as a CMC Member for part of the time.

Historically, the CMC has been dominated by Army officers.²⁸ The CMC has evolved from a nondescript department under the CCP Central Committee in 1926 to one of the most powerful organizations in the CCP today. Although the CMC had several different names from 1926-1954, it served the same basic functions. Chairmen of the CMC have included Zhou Enlai, Zhu De, Mao Zedong, Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and now Xi Jinping. During its history, the CMC had 18 Vice Chairmen from 1954-1968, all of whom were Army officers. It also had 38 Members in 1970 and 63 after the 11th Party Congress in 1977. With the exception of Liu Yalou and Zhang Tingfa noted above, all CMC Members until 2004 were Army officers.

However, an important milestone occurred in 2004 when the 9th PLAAF Commander, Qiao Qingchen, along with the Commanders of the Navy and Second Artillery Force were added as CMC Members. Although the grade of the Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery Force organizations remained as MR leader grade, the three commanders received a "policy promotion" to CMC Member grade.²⁹ This was an important development because it was the first time the PLA made it a norm for the service commanders to serve as CMC Members by virtue of their position, rather than on the basis of personal stature or political connections. In addition to assigning the PLAAF Commander as a

CMC Member, the PLA also established a permanent billet in 2004 for a PLAAF officer as one of the Deputy Chiefs of Staff for the General Staff Department (later the Joint Staff Department). According to DOD's 2005 Annual Report to Congress, "The CMC expanded from eight to eleven Members and added the Commanders of the PLA Air Force, Navy, and Second Artillery. Air Force and Navy officers were also appointed Deputy Chiefs of the General Staff, reflecting China's emphasis on joint capabilities and inter-service coordination."

Yet another important reason for adding them as Deputy Chiefs of Staff was so that they could have the grade of MR / TC leader for at least two years before they could be selected as the next service Commander and receive the grade of CMC Member.³⁰ For example, the 10th Commander, Xu Qiliang (2007-2012), served as a Deputy Chief of the General Staff from July 2004 to October 2007 and received his third star in July 2007. The 11th Commander, Ma Xiaotian (2012-2017), served as the Commandant of the PLA NDU, which had the grade of MR leader, from August 2006 to September 2007. From September 2007 to December 2012, he served as a Deputy Chief of the General Staff with responsibilities for foreign relations. He received his third star in July 2009. As such, they both already had served in an MR leader-grade billet for three to six years and had their third star before they could become the commander and receive the grade of CMC Member.

Equally important was that the CMC approved the PLAAF's first service-specific strategic concept in 2004.³¹ While the details of that CMC directive are not publicly available, authoritative PLA sources describe the concept as "integrated air and space capabilities and coordinated offensive and defensive operations," and the concept has been referred to in official State media and other sources as constituting a "Strategic Air Force."^{xiii}

^{xiii} For more on the "Strategic Air Force" concept, please see Chase and Garafola, "China's Search for a 'Strategic Air Force.'" As one example of the linkage between "Strategic Air Force" and the "integrated air and space, offensive and defense" concept, a *China Daily* article on the PLAAF's 70th anniversary defines "'空天一体、攻防兼备'战略空军架构" as "a Strategic Air Force that integrates aviation and space power, and strike and defense capabilities." ["Daily Vocab Word | World-Class Air Force"] ["每日一词 | 世界一流空军 World-Class Air Force"], *China Daily*, 12 November 2019, <https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201911/12/WS5dca0358a31099ab995eb4af.html>.

Background in a Training Billet

Former PLAAF Commander Wang Hai (1985-1992) wrote in his autobiography in 2000 that one criteria for becoming the commander is that, at one point in their career, they need to have served in a billet that is responsible for training.³² Those billets include the Director of the Headquarters Department's Training Department/Bureau/Office/Branch in the headquarters at the regiment level or above, the Commander of a Training Base, or serving as the Commandant of the Air Force Command College or the PLA NDU. In addition, each Deputy Commander and Deputy Chief of Staff has a portfolio that includes responsibilities for various components of the Headquarters / Staff Department. One of those portfolios is training. The Chief of Staff also has the overall responsibility for training. Most likely, each of the likely candidates in 2017 and for 2022 discussed later had the responsibility for training at one time or another.

Analysis Prior to the 19th Party Congress

Given that background, analysis leading up to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 indicated that only one PLAAF officer, General Yi Xiaoguang, met the requirements. Specifically, he had served as a Deputy Chief of the General Staff starting in August 2014 and retained the position when the General Staff Department became the Joint Staff Department in January 2016. He also received his third star in July 2016. As such, the author of this report co-authored an article predicting that Yi would become the next Commander, which was not correct.³³ As it turned out, Yi became the Commander of the Central TC in October 2017 with the grade of TC leader, making him the only PLAAF officer to be a TC Commander.

Guanxi is Important

Personal relationships (guanxi) have always been important in selecting key military leaders. In hindsight, a review of the relationship between Ding Laihang and Xi Jinping may help explain why Ding was selected as the Commander. According to Lieutenant Colonel (USAF, retired) Terry Vance, who served as an Assistant Air Attaché in Beijing from 2015-2018, "An assessment of the respective career paths of Xi Jinping and Ding Laihang potentially places them together as junior Party officials as early as 1985 in Hebei Province when Xi

was the Zhengding County Party Secretary and Ding was at the 24th Air Division in Pingquan, Hebei Province. More likely, they would have crossed paths around 2001 once Xi was Governor of Fujian Province and Ding was Chief of Staff of the 8th Air Corps (Fuzhou Command Post). Xi then went on to Zhejiang Province from 2002-2007, which was Ding's place of birth. Then during the 2008 Summer Olympics, Vice President Xi, who was also the President of the Central Party School, likely had direct contact with Ding, who was the Commandant of the Air Force Command College. Their relationship throughout this time was most likely due to both operational and Party/ideological portfolios. Therefore, while this is a bit speculative, there is some potential that Xi knew, or knew of Ding, for several decades, which made him a stronger candidate for PLAAF Commander, in addition to his Air Force credentials."³⁴

Concerning the next PLAAF commander, Lieutenant Colonel Vance noted that "It is unlikely that Ding's successor will have the potential for this type of history or crossover with Xi, so the next PLAAF Commander will likely be determined based on demonstrated adherence to Xi Jinping's Thought, experience in recent border/territorial operations, and on experiences that lean toward Theater Command and General Staff responsibilities. As such, it appears the historical path of climbing the PLAAF Headquarters ladder through guanxi may no longer be the path to the top."

Protocol Order

The PLA is a very protocol oriented institution. When the PLA lists its former four CMC General Departments and current 15 CMC organizations,^{xiv} four services,^{xv} seven Military Regions (MR),^{xvi} five Theater Commands (TC),^{xvii} branches/arms, administrative and functional organizations,^{xviii} and its key personnel, the lists are always in protocol order.^{xix} The criteria for listing personnel in protocol order within a particular organization is based on their importance and probability of being promoted in grade, not necessarily on their seniority in grade, rank, or position.^{xx} Therefore, when a new person, such as a Deputy Commander, moves to the top of the protocol order among all of the Deputy Commanders, it usually implies he is being groomed for promotion in grade and that the other Deputy Commanders listed below him will not be promoted and will most likely retire within a reasonable time when they meet their mandatory retirement age. See Appendix 3 for information about the PLA's grade and rank system.

^{xiv} The protocol order for the former four CMC General Departments was General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armament Department. The protocol order for the current 15 CMC organizations is General Office; Joint Staff Department; Political Work Department; Logistic Support Department; Equipment Development Department; Training Management Department (aka Training and Administration Department); National Defense Mobilization Department; Discipline Inspection Commission; Politics and Law Commission; Science and Technology Commission; Office for Strategic Planning; Office for Reform and Organizational Structure; Office for International Military Cooperation; Audit Office; and Agency for Offices Administration.

^{xv} The protocol order for the four services is Army, Navy, Air Force, Second Artillery Force / Rocket Force. Note that the former Second Artillery Force was an independent branch/arm not a service, but it became a service when the name changed to the Rocket Force in 2016.

^{xvi} The protocol order for the former seven Military Regions and Military Region Air Forces was Shenyang, Beijing, Lanzhou, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, and Chengdu.

^{xvii} The protocol order for the current five Theater Commands and Theater Command Air Forces is Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, and Central.

^{xviii} This refers to first-, second-, and third level departments within a headquarters down to the regiment level.

^{xix} *China Military Encyclopedia*, 1997, Vol 3, 856.

^{xx} For example, during the late 1980s, the PLAAF had four deputy commanders. Lieutenant General Yu Zhenwu was the youngest and was the last one promoted to this position, but he was listed first in protocol order.

Everything Changed at the 19th Party Congress

Other than the fact that Yi became the Central TC Commander, the primary reason the analysis was incorrect was because, starting with the 19th Party Congress, the service Commanders were not added to the CMC and the total number of CMC Members was reduced from eight to four. In addition, the grade for the Deputy Chiefs of the Joint Staff Department and the Commandant of the PLA NDU, which were previously used as placeholders for becoming the PLAAF Commander, were all downgraded to TC deputy leader grade in 2017. As such, it appears that the eligibility criteria for the next Commander has changed, including that they do not already have to have the rank of General (3 stars).

In hindsight, Table 2 shows the four PLAAF officers besides Yi Xiaoguang who were eligible to become the Commander based on the fact that they had served in the grade of TC leader for more than three years, they all had the rank of LGEN for more than two years, and that they would not be over 60 years old at the time of the Party Congress and could serve a full five years before reaching their mandatory retirement age of 65 at the time of the 20th Party Congress in 2022.³⁵ One of the most likely reasons that Ding was selected was because of his diverse background as discussed above. As can be seen in Ding's profile, he met the criteria of being in charge of training by having served as the Commander of the Test and Training Base and as the Commandant of the Air Force Command College. He also served as an MR / TC Deputy Commander, which most likely included responsibility for training. Table 2 includes their name in English and Chinese, their MR / TC deputy leader grade billets leading up to 2017, the date they assumed the billets, their year of birth and their age in 2017, and when they received the rank of MGEN and LGEN. The names are organized alphabetically.

Regarding the selection of LGEN Ding as PLAAF Commander, one U.S. attaché commented that, "during my time in Beijing, I got the sense the PLAAF knows how backward it remains compared to the United States and other modern, western Air Forces. The desire to implement modern doctrine, training, etc... is a top priority and they know they really do have a long way to go. From this point of view, and in the context of the ongoing PLA modernization, as well as the removal of the Service Commanders from the CMC, General Ding was a

great fit. Perhaps he was the leader the PLAAF needed, when the PLAAF needed him.”³⁶

Table 2: Other Potential PLAAF Commanders in 2017

Name	Billet (Date)	DOB (2017)	Flag Officer
Ding Laihang 丁来杭	Northern TC DCDR & TCAF CDR (3/2016) Shenyang MR DCDR & MRAF CDR (6/2012)	1957 (60)	MGEN 2003 LGEN 2013
Huang Guoxian 黄国显	Eastern TC DCDR & TCAF CDR (3/2016) Nanjing MR DCDR & MRAF CDR (7/2013)	1962 (55)	MGEN 2011 LGEN 2014
Zhan Houshun 战厚顺	Western TC DCDR & TCAF CDR (2/2016) Chengdu MR DCDR & TCAF CDR (1/2013)	1957 (60)	MGEN 2002 LGEN 2014
Zhang Yihu 张义瑚	Central TC DCDR (2/2016) Lanzhou MR DCDR & MRAF CDR (7/2013)	1962 (55)	MGEN 2009 LGEN 2014

* CDR = Commander; DCDR = Deputy Commander, TC = Theater Command, TCAF = Theater Command Air Force, MGEN = Major General, and LGEN = Lieutenant General.

DING Laihang Selected

GEN Ding Laihang (丁来杭)

(b. September 1957, Zhejiang Province, Han Chinese) became the 12th Commander of PLA Air Force on 27 August 2017 with the grade of TC leader.

There is no information about when he joined the PLAAF, but he most likely joined during the mid-1970s at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Given that almost all schools were closed during the Cultural Revolution, he most likely joined the PLAAF as an enlisted

member and either received a direct promotion as an officer within three years or, like his two predecessors Xu Qiliang and Ma Xiaotian, became a cadet at one of the PLAAF's aviation preparatory schools. The only information found was that he attended the 9th Flight School in Hubei Province, which most likely was for only one to two years at which time he graduated and became an officer and then became a Flight Squadron [company] Commander and then a Flight Group [battalion] Deputy Commander and Commander. No information was found concerning the types of aircraft he flew or the number of hours he flew, but it was most likely the J-7 and J-8. The same situation was found concerning all of the PLAAF's Commanders who were pilots.

Other than attending the 9th Flight School, the only references to any education show that he did receive a bachelor's degree from the Air Force Command College with a specialty in political work. Normally, only political officers have this specialty, so this is unique. In addition, no information was found about him receiving any education at the PLA NDU, which is also unique for someone at his level, since the PLA NDU is the only academic institution that has the responsibility for teaching about joint operations. Finally, no information was found about any foreign travel prior to becoming the PLAAF



Commander, including when he was the Commandant of the Air Force Command College for one year.

Concerning moving up his career path one grade at a time, as is typical for all PLAAF officers who will eventually serve in senior-level command billets, Ding served his early years in a single MRAF (Beijing MRAF) and then expanded his abilities by moving to leadership billets in at least two to three other MRAFs – Nanjing MRAF, Chengdu MRAF, and Shenyang MRAF/Northern TCAF – as well as serving as the Commandant of the Air Force Command College for one year and the Commander of a Training Base, which was most likely the Cangzhou/Cangxian Test and Training Base in Hebei Province, for at least one year. While serving as the Commander of the Training Base, he transformed the role of the “Blue Force” to being more aggressive and less scripted against the “Red Force”, such that the “Blue Force” actually beat the “Red Force” more often.

Since 2007, the PLA has held an annual promotion ceremony in July for all new three-star flag officers. As a general rule, after approximately three years as a LGEN in a TC (MR) leader-grade position, key officers receive a rank promotion to full General. However, it took Ding six years before he received his third star in July 2019.

In the 1980s and 1990s, he served in the Beijing MRAF as a Deputy Commander and Commander of the 24th Air Division’s 71st Air Regiment and Deputy Commander of the 24th Air Division, and then Commander of the Beijing MRAF Training Base (most likely the Cangzhou/Cangxian Test and Training Base in Hebei Province) until 2001. He then transferred to the Nanjing MRAF where he served as Chief of Staff (Director of the Headquarters Department)^{xxi} of the 8th Air Corps and Commander of the Air Force Fuzhou Command Post, which was the 8th Air Corps successor, and then became the Commandant of the Air Force Command College in Beijing in 2007. In 2009, he became the Chief of Staff of the Chengdu MRAF. In 2012, he became the Commander of the Shenyang MRAF and concurrent Deputy Commander of the Shenyang MR. In February 2016, when the Shenyang MR and MRAF became

^{xxi} The name changed from Headquarters Department to Staff Department during the 2016 reorganization. Regiments are the lowest organization to have a Headquarters / Staff Department.

the Northern TC and TCAF, respectively, he continued as the TCAF Commander and concurrent TC Deputy Commander. He received rank promotions in July 2003 (MGEN), July 2013 (LGEN), and July 2019 (General). It appears that he did not travel abroad before becoming the Commander. Since taking office, he has only traveled abroad once (Thailand and Pakistan in April 2018). Since 2008, he has served as a Deputy in the 11th, 12th, and 13th National People's Congress (NPC). In October 2017, he was selected as one of 204 Members of the CCP's 19th Party Congress.

According to U.S. attachés, "General Ding comes across as a thoughtful listener and a genuinely nice person; several PLAAF officers remarked they each liked him and respected him. One U.S. attaché commented, 'I met each of the PLAAF deputies during my time in Beijing and they all came across as pretty standard PLA generals. General Ding was different.'"³⁷ Of note, he was not added as a Member of the CMC when the previous Commander, General Ma Xiaotian, retired in October 2017 at the 19th Party Congress.

For more details on Ding's career, please see appendix 1.

Ding Laihang's Participation in Meetings

Since becoming the Commander in August 2017, Ding Laihang has attended at least 37 senior-level Party Committee-related meetings. As a general rule, when the meeting is held to discuss Party-related issues, he is always identified as the Party Deputy Secretary. However, if the meeting focuses on other issues, such as training and safety issues, then he is identified as the Commander and either chairs the meeting or is a keynote speaker. In many cases, the Chief of Staff or the Deputy Commander with the training portfolio chair the meeting. Table 4 in Appendix 2 provides a matrix showing all of the Party-related meetings that Ding has attended since taking office.

Besides Party-sponsored meetings, Ding has also visited several organizations, such as the Air Force Command College, where he previously served as the Commandant, the Air Force Aviation University, and the Zhuhai Airshow, as well as some operational units. He has occasionally participated in video teleconference (VTC) meetings. In addition, he has hosted four foreign air force counterparts, which are discussed later. Finally, Ding served as the Flight Commander in the KJ-2000 airborne early warning and command (AEW&C) aircraft that led all of the PLAAF aircraft over Beijing to celebrate the 70th

anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 2019.³⁸ Table 5 in Appendix 2 provides a matrix showing all of the non-Party-related meetings that Ding has attended since taking office.

Content of Key Speeches

Depending on the type and theme of the meeting, Ding's speeches usually focus on following Party guidelines laid out by Xi Jinping, who is the General Secretary of the CCP, President of the PRC, and the Chairman of the CMC, or on training in order to create a stronger air force. Below are six examples.

First, in August 2017 Ding stated that "exercises on the open seas will become a regular part of training."³⁹ He elaborated that the PLAAF was "gradually expanding its blue-water training, and that its weapons and equipment, communication systems, supplies, and aviation search-and-rescue skills must catch up with the mission."⁴⁰ Since then, he has emphasized that high-level focus on the maritime training and combat capabilities have continued.

Second, in November 2017, Ding visited the Air Force Command College, the Air Force Research Academy, and an unidentified main communications station in Beijing.⁴¹ The purpose of his visit was portrayed as surveying and emphasizing the importance of studying the 19th Party Congress' reports and consolidating the status of CMC Chairman Xi Jinping's Thought on Building a Strong Army as the guiding principles. Ding also emphasized that the construction and development of the PLAAF should be led by building a "Strategic Air Force." During the meetings, Ding stated:

"The PLAAF is focusing its efforts on studying warfare, studying actual combat and how to use actual-combat training principles, increasing joint exercises with the other services and training with foreign countries, and exploring new models of flight instructor training, new training and war readiness mobility drills, training for capability of using the planning command system under the new base-brigade system, regularized training in the open/far seas and plateau regions, and actual-combat training."^{xxii,42}

^{xxii} The term *yuanhai* (远海) has been translated as open seas and far seas as shown in the following sources: "Open Seas" (远海), *PLA Military Terminology* dictionary, 2nd ed., 2011. 952, and in the official English version of the 2013 *Defense White Paper on China's Military Strategy* translates this as "open seas"; however, the 2019 *Defense White Paper* translates this as "far seas." Based on the context of training articles

Third, from 5-7 December 2017, Ding led a PLAAF Headquarters working group to visit the front line of an Airborne Force/Corps unit and an unspecified flight training base. He emphasized the utmost importance of implementing Xi Jinping's Thought on Building a Strong Army and requested the forces to study combat missions and models based on the features of the new weapons and equipment.⁴³

Fourth, at a major PLAAF Military Training Conference in January 2018, Ding emphasized the need to further deepen research and training to resolve the important and difficult issue of maritime combat operations.⁴⁴

Fifth, on 23 March 2018, the Air Force held a Headquarters cadre meeting. Ding spoke at the meeting and highlighted Xi Jinping's Thought on Building a Strong Army as the cardinal guidance rule in leading the Air Force Headquarters' transformation into a first-class strategic service headquarters that is loyal to the core, that dares to take on responsibilities, is adept at strategizing and innovation, and exercises strict self-discipline.⁴⁵

Sixth, Ding has focused on helping to build a "World-class Air Force" and a "Strategic Air Force." For example, at the PLAAF's 6th National Aerospace Security and Development Forum in Beijing in July 2019, he gave a comprehensive exposition of the strategic design of the "World-class Air Force" at the opening ceremony of the forum, and clarified the three-stage strategic goal of building a World-class Strategic Air Force by the middle of this century. He emphasized that, in the new era, it is more urgent than ever to build a combat air force that can fight and win wars.^{xxiii} Building a Strategic Air Force that is "integrated in air and space, with both offensive and defensive capabilities" is more sacred than ever before. Furthermore, accelerating the transformation of the air force into a "world" "first-class" Air Force is more necessary than ever before.⁴⁶

Diplomatic Relations

This subsection briefly discusses Ding Laihang's involvement in diplomatic relations since he became the Commander in 2017. It provides a brief overview

mentioning this, the Chinese meaning usually refers to the training and/or exercises to increase the ability for long-range navigation for operations outside China's borders.

^{xxiii} The Chinese term for fight and win wars is "能打仗,打胜仗."

of his two successors, Generals Xu Qiliang and Ma Xiaotian, to include how many times they traveled abroad and how many counterparts they hosted. As can be seen, Ding has had only very minimal involvement in traveling abroad or hosting counterparts. It is not clear why this is the situation.

Historically, the PLAAF Commander has hosted about five counterparts each year and, by law, has been allowed to travel abroad only once per year.⁴⁷ For example, while serving as the Commander from 2007-2012, General Xu Qiliang visited 9 countries and hosted counterparts from 11 countries.^{xxiv} He did not travel at all during 2012 before Ma Xiaotian replaced him in October.

While serving as the PLAAF Commander from October 2012 to August 2017, General Ma Xiaotian made it public knowledge that he was not going to travel abroad because he had traveled abroad several times while serving as the Deputy Chief of the General Staff in charge of military diplomacy. He wanted to spend all of his time focusing on the PLAAF's daily issues. Even though he did not travel while serving as the Commander, he hosted over 20 air force leaders.^{xxv} In addition, in November 2016, Ma met with Air Force leaders from 30 countries who were visiting the 11th China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province. While serving as the Commander, Ma also held separate meetings with other foreign military leaders hosted by other key PLA leaders.

Since taking office, Ding Laihang has reportedly only hosted four counterparts. In November 2017, he met separately with the Commander of the Bulgarian Air Force and the Zambian Air Force.⁴⁸ Ding expressed that the PLAAF was willing to continue to offer assistance within its resources to the development of Zambia's Air Force, but no details were given. In May and June 2018, he hosted his Mexican and Pakistani counterparts, respectively.⁴⁹ No

^{xxiv} The 9 countries he visited were Chile, Cuba, Finland, Germany, India, Japan, Malaysia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. He was scheduled to visit the United States in 2008, but the trip was cancelled due to the Sichuan Earthquake. The counterparts he hosted were from the following countries: Australia, Bangladesh, Chile, Germany, India, Jordan, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Turkey, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the United States.

^{xxv} The counterparts were from the following countries: from Australia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Egypt, France, Greece, Iran, Myanmar, New Zealand, Pakistan, Portugal, Russia, South Korea, Spain, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

information was found concerning any hosted visits during 2019 or 2020. In addition, he has only travelled abroad once, which included a visit to Thailand and Pakistan in April 2018.⁵⁰ Of note, the official PLAAF Website kj.81.cn did not have any articles about the visits abroad.⁵¹

One U.S. attaché commented that “General Ding’s seeming lack of senior foreign engagement may reflect the relative immaturity of PLAAF foreign partnerships in general. Beijing Military Attaché Corps (BMAC) attachés often complained about the relative inexperience the PLAAF possessed when interacting with their militaries compared to the PLA Army and especially the PLA Navy. This inexperience translated to countless tactical frustrations during execution of military-to-military engagements. I doubt that many foreign Air Force - PLAAF relationships are sufficiently mature to warrant General Ding hosting his counterpart in Beijing. In many cases, the PLAAF might try to delegate the senior face of the relationship to a Deputy Commander, especially when the substance of the relationship in question is virtually non-existent.”⁵²

Potential Successors

This section provides the historical background about the first 11 PLAAF Commanders and what the current situation is concerning who might be selected as the 13th Commander in 2022. Of note, one of these officers might also have the opportunity to replace General Yi Xiaoguang as the Commander of the Central TC. Yi will be 65 years old at the time of the 20th Party Congress and could either retire or possibly replace Xu Qiliang as a CMC Vice Chairman.

Current Situation

Given that the PLAAF Commander is no longer a CMC Member and the grade for the CMC Joint Staff Department's Deputy Chiefs of Staff and the Commandant of the PLA NDU have all been downgraded to TC deputy leader, the requirements for becoming the next PLAAF Commander have changed. Based on the current criteria, this subsection identifies the officers who are potential successors for Ding Laihang in 2022. Of note, General Xu Qiliang will also retire as a CMC Vice Chairman at the 20th Party Congress in 2022. It is not clear who will replace him. It could be another PLAAF officer, including Yi Xiaoguang, or an Army officer.

According to DIA's Directory of PRC Military Personalities (March 2020) and the CASI PLA Aerospace Power: A Primer on Trends in China's Military Air, Space, and Missile Forces (2nd Edition) published in July 2019, the PLAAF has 11 officers serving in operational command billets (versus political officer billets) with the grade of TC deputy leader who are eligible to become the next Commander in 2022.⁵³

By law, PLA officers with the grade of TC deputy leader must retire at age 63 and TC leader at the age of 65, so they cannot serve past that age. This means that Ding Laihang and Yi Xiaoguang will both retire at the time of the 20th Party Congress, or Yi could possibly replace Xu Qiliang as a CMC Vice Chairman. In addition, at least six additional officers in TC deputy leader-grade billets today will have retired by 2022 or will not be able to serve for a full five years if they are selected as the next Commander. Therefore, their names are not included in Table 3 below.

Table 3 provides information about the 11 PLAAF flag officers who serve in operational command billets that are assigned the grade of TC deputy leader

and will have not retired by 2020, and, as such, are eligible to become the next PLAAF Commander or possibly replace Yi Xiaoguang as the Central TC Commander. Note that some of the officers held billets in the former MR and MRAF structure before they became TCs and TCAFs in January 2016. In addition, no date of birth was found for two of the officers, but they received their MGEN promotions in 2013, which implies they are still young enough to be eligible to become the next Commander.

Although 11 officers have the grade of TC deputy leader as of early 2021, only four of them—Chang Dingqiu, Han Shengyan, Ma Zhenjun, and Zhang Yihu—have served in more than one TC deputy leader-grade billet, which appears to be one of the criteria for becoming the Commander. As such, they are the most likely candidates to become the next Commander. However, at least one or more of the other officers (Huang Guoxian) could possibly serve in a second billet before the 20th Party Congress and be eligible to become the Commander. Table 3 lists all 11 of them divided into “Most Likely Candidates” and “Other Possible Candidates.” The table includes their name in English and Chinese, their current billet, their previous billet if it was also a TC deputy leader-grade billet, the date they assumed the billet, their year of birth and their age in 2022, and when they received the rank of MGEN and LGEN. The names are organized alphabetically. Besides the MR / TC deputy leader-grade billets they have served in and their age noted in Table 3 other key factors appear to be whether they have been a delegate to an NPC or a member of the CCP Party Congress.

Table 3: Potential Candidates as the 13th Commander in 2022

Name	Billet (Date)	DOB (2022)	Flag Officer
Most Likely Candidates			
Chang Dingqiu 常丁求	Deputy Chief of Joint Staff Department (7/2018) Southern TC DCDR (3/2016)	1967 (55)	MGEN 2012 LGEN 2018
Han Shengyan 韩胜延	Central TC DCDR & TCAF CDR (12/2018) Western TC DCDR (3/2016)	1963 (59)	MGEN 2009 LGEN 2017
Ma Zhenjun 麻振军	PLAAF DCDR (12/2018) PLAAF Chief of Staff (82013)	1962 (60)	MGEN 2008 LGEN 2013
Zhang Yihu 张义瑚	Central TC DCDR (2/2016) Lanzhou MR DCDR & MRAF CDR (7/2013)	1962 (60)	MGEN 2009 LGEN 2014
Other Possible Candidates			
Huang Guoxian 黄国显	Eastern TC DCDR & TCAF CDR (3/2016) Nanjing MR DCDR & MRAF CDR (7/2013)	1962 (60)	MGEN 2011 LGEN 2014

Jia Zhigang 贾志刚	Southern TC DCDR (1/2019)	Unk	MGEN 2013 LGEN 2018
Wang Qiang 王强	Western TC DCDR (1/2019)	1963 (59)	MGEN 2014 LGEN 2019
Xu Xueqiang 许学强	Northern TC DCDR & TCAF CDR (12/2017)	1962 (60)	MGEN 2013 LGEN 2019
Yu Qingjiang 俞庆江	PLAAF Chief of Staff (2/2018)	1963 (59)	MGEN 2010 LGEN 2019
Zheng Yuanlin 郑元林	PLAAF DCDR (1/2019)	1962 (60)	MGEN 2010 LGEN 2019
Zhou Li 周利	Southern TC DCDR & TCAF CDR (1/2019)	Unk	MGEN 2013 LGEN 2019

* CDR = Commander; DCDR = Deputy Commander, TC = Theater Command, TCAF = Theater Command Air Force, MGEN = Major General, and LGEN = Lieutenant General.

For Every Rule, There Are 32 Exceptions

Although Table 3 lays out the top four candidates based on their career path, I have always said that, in the PLA, “for every rule, there are 32 exceptions.” For example, age is also a key factor in predicting who the next CMC Vice Chairmen and Members will be. According to Dr. Alice Miller of the Hoover Institution:⁵⁴

“The retirement age of 68 for Politburo Members is based on the year they were born and the year that a Party Congress opens or closes. Specifically, if the Party continues to adhere to this rule for the 18th Party Congress in 2012, any Politburo Member who was born in 1944 or before will retire, and anyone who was born in 1945 or after is eligible to remain in their position until the next Party Congress. The year 1945 would be the cutoff date for Politburo Members. So if [emphasis added] the 1994 PLA regulations still hold, then 1) the retirement age for CMC Members is 70, which means their cutoff date to retire would be 1942, and 2) they could remain in their position if they were born in 1943 or later. However, if the age for CMC retirement has been lowered to 68, then 1945 is the cutoff date”.

As such, the CCP’s 18th Party Congress in November 2012 saw a major change in the PLA’s leadership.⁵⁵ At the time of the Congress, the two logical people to become the Vice Chairmen were PLAAF Commander Xu Qiliang and PLAN Commander Wu Shengli; however, it appears that the Army was not pleased with not having an Army officer as a Vice Chairman, so some horse

trading occurred.^{xxvi} Specifically, the Army would let one of them become a Vice Chairman but not both of them. As such, Wu Shengli most likely decided to remain as the PLAN Commander until he reached his mandatory retirement age of 63 so he could continue to make a direct impact on the PLAN. Second, if Xu Qiliang had remained as the PLAAF Commander until his mandatory retirement age of 65 in 2015, then Ma Xiaotian would have also reached his mandatory retirement age of 65 for his grade before Xu retired and would not have been selected as the next Commander.^{xxvii} Finally, in order to assign an Army officer as a Vice Chairman, the Army broke the rules and allowed General Fan Changlong to “skip a grade” since he had yet to serve in a CMC Member grade billet.⁵⁶

Finally, as such, there is always the possibility that someone other than the top four PLAAF officers may be selected based on other criteria, including personal relationships (*guanxi*). Only time will tell what happens.

As noted earlier, besides the MR / TC deputy leader-grade billets they have served in and their age noted in Table 3, other key factors appear to be whether they have been a Deputy in an NPC or a Member of the CCP Party Congress. This information is included in their profiles below. They are listed the same order as in Table 2, including the four most likely candidates listed first. Unless noted, the information comes from PLA Aerospace Power: A Primer on Trends in China’s Military Air, Space, and Missile Forces, 2nd Edition.

Travel Abroad as an Indicator for Promotion

As a general rule, most senior officers only get to travel abroad one time, if at all, which includes as a student in the Command College or PLA NDU, or as a member of a delegation led by senior PLA leaders.⁵⁷ For example, in July 2006, one of the PLAAF’s Deputy Commanders, LGEN Liu Chengjun, accompanied CMC Vice Chairman General Guo Boxiong to the United States. In October 2009, PLAAF General Ma Xiaotian, who had been one of the Deputy Chiefs of

^{xxvi} This is the lead author’s analysis of the situation at that time.

^{xxvii} General Ma Xiaotian, who served as a Deputy Chief of the General Staff since 2007 and received his third star in 2009, replaced Xu as the 11th PLAAF commander, Party deputy secretary, and CMC Member in 2012. While serving as a Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Ma received his third star in 2009 and had the intelligence and foreign affairs portfolios.

the General Staff since 2007, accompanied CMC Vice Chairman General Xu Caihou to the United States.

Their participation often presages promotion. For example, according to PLAAF 2010, as a PLAAF Deputy Commander, LGEN Liu Shun Yao accompanied Defense Minister General Chi Haotian to the United States in November 1996 and was appointed as the PLAAF Commander the following month. In September 1998, Deputy PC, LGEN Qiao Qingchen, accompanied Vice Chairman of the CMC, General Zhang Wannian, to the United States. In December, he became the PLAAF PC and later the Commander. When Xu Qiliang was a Deputy Chief of the General Staff from 2004 to 2007, he led delegations to Romania, France, Finland, Australia and Tajikistan.

Potential Successor Profiles

This subsection provides profiles for the 11 potential successors for General Ding Laihang as the 13th Commander. Of note, no information was found concerning the type of airframes they flew or the number of hours they flew. However, with the exception of Zheng Yuanlin, who is a transport aircraft pilot, they most likely all flew the J-7 and/or J-8, and possibly the J-10, J-11, or Su-27. None of them were assigned to fighter-bomber or bomber units. The types of airframes assigned to their air divisions are noted in the profiles.⁵⁸ In 1986, the PLAAF established age limits for its pilots.⁵⁹ Therefore, as each pilot noted in the profiles below moved up their career path, they all had to stop flying at a certain age based on their age as shown in the following bullets:

- 43 to 45 for fighter and fighter-bomber pilots
- 55 for transport pilots.

Finally, as noted earlier, former PLAAF Commander Wang Hai wrote in his autobiography in 2000 that one criteria for becoming the commander is that, at one point in their career, they need to have served in a billet that is responsible for training. Given that each of the 11 candidates served as a Deputy Commander and some as a Deputy Chief of Staff, they all most likely had a portfolio at one time or another that included training.

The following 11 profiles are organized in the same order as shown in the list of the four “Most Likely Candidates” and seven “Other Possible Candidates” in Table 3.



LGEN Chang Dingqiu (常丁求) (b. 1967, Hunan Province) became a Deputy Chief of Staff in the CMC Joint Staff Department in July 2018 with the grade of TC leader.⁶⁰ Of note, the Deputy Chief of Staff billet was empty from the time General Yi Xiaoguang left to become the Commander of the Central TC in October 2017 until Chang assumed the PLAAF billet in July

2018. As discussed earlier, the grade of the Deputy Chief of Staff billet and the Commandant of the PLA NDU were downgraded from TC leader to TC deputy leader in 2017. These downgrades coincided with the CMC not adding the service commanders as CMC Members, which led to their billets being downgraded to TC leader. Chang joined the PLAAF in 1984 as a pilot cadet. He moved his way up the career ladder as a pilot, Flight Group Commander, Air Regiment Commander (Nanjing MRAF's 14th Air Division's 40th Regiment),^{xxviii} and Deputy Commander and Commander of the 3rd Fighter Division (Nanjing MRAF).^{xxix} In 2003, he studied abroad at a Russian Military Academic Institution. In 2011, he served as an Assistant to the PLAAF Chief of Staff and, in 2014, he became the Chief of Staff of the Shenyang MRAF. In February 2016, he became a Deputy Commander of the Southern TC. He received a rank promotion in 2012 (MGEN) and in 2018 (LGEN). In 2017, he was an Alternate Member of the CCP's 19th Party Congress' Central Committee. In June 2017, he accompanied the Director of the CMC Equipment Development Department, General Zhang Youxia, on a visit to Hungary and Belarus.⁶¹ No information was found concerning him being an NPC Deputy.

The Saga of Regiment Commander Chang Dingqiu

During August and September 2002, Air Force News carried a six-part series on Lieutenant Colonel Chang Dingqiu, who at that time was a special

^{xxviii} The 14th Air [Fighter] Division began with MiG-17s (J-5s) and J-6s during the 1950s and 1960s, was equipped with J-7s in the 1980s. It was later equipped with J-11s and Su-27UBKs.

^{xxix} The 3rd Air [Fighter] Division, which is known as the Wang Hai Division, was the first unit to receive the J-7 in the 1960s, the first Russian Su-27s in the early 1990s, and the first Russian Su-30MKKs in 2000.

grade pilot^{xxx} and Commander of the Nanjing MRAF's 14th Air Division's 40th Regiment at Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, equipped with the latest J-7 fighters.⁶² The April 2002 issue of China Air Force magazine also had an article on Chang that incorporated some of the same material. Note that the primary rank for a regiment commander is a Colonel and the secondary rank is a Lieutenant Colonel, which means he was a fast burner and received the rank of Colonel fairly rapidly. This article and his fast promotion shows that Chang was definitely identified as a future star in the PLAAF. One of the messages of this series of articles is that pilots are told they must "follow the plan no matter what," but Chang used his theoretical knowledge and experience to consider safety and many other factors before challenging higher headquarters.

In October 1994, Chang represented the Nanjing MRAF in the PLAAF-wide aviation theory competition. He won the competition based on a presentation he made about aiming at ground based targets. In August 1996 he was a Flight Group Commander and the leader for four aircraft that went to the Gobi Desert to participate in flight training. While en route, high winds occurred ahead, and he had to decide whether to continue. The regulations stated he could not proceed with less than 300 liters of fuel. With weapons loaded against a head wind, the aircraft would theoretically use two liters of fuel per minute. Chang recalculated the data and showed that the regulations were incorrect. Higher headquarters agreed with his calculations and approved a change to the regulations.

Before Chang moved to become the 40th Regiment's Commander on 28 March 2000, he was on a task force at the Nanjing MRAF Headquarters. After Chang arrived, he developed the regiment's 10-year Development Plan that started in 2001 and set targets for every two years. In November 2000, Chang encountered problems with bad weather during an exercise. He defied orders to continue and was allowed to reroute his aircraft after he pled his case to higher

^{xxx} In 1986, the PLAAF began awarding one of four aeronautical ratings to all aircraft crew members, including pilots, navigators, communications personnel, gunnery personnel, and instructor pilots. The PLAAF has not published figures on the number of pilots in each grade. The four grades are as follows, listed from highest to lowest: Special grade (特级); First grade (一级); Second grade (二级); and Third grade (三级). The criteria for acquiring these grades include time on station, flying hours, special missions, ability to fly in daytime and nighttime, and ability to fly under instrument flight rules (IFR) and visual flight rules (VFR) conditions.

authorities. His actions were later investigated, but no results were identified. When the unit received new aircraft, some of the pilots had a difficult time adjusting to using a heads-up display (HUD). In August 2001, the regiment flew to an unknown airfield to conduct flight activity over the ocean.

During an exercise in June 2001, two “Blue Force” fighters were attacking and Chang led a 4-ship formation to intercept them [No results were given].

In June 2002, Chang conducted a cross-border mobility mission that involved navigation of more than 2,000 kilometers [probably round-trip distance]. On 15 July 2002, Chang led a small regiment delegation to participate in the mandated Air Force Tactics Training Month and Combat Methods Exam, which was based on the new Outline of Military Training and Evaluation (OMTE).

After he became the Regiment Commander, Chang wanted to add four more instructors and four more lead pilots to the regiment, but had to fight higher headquarters all the way. His argument was that the regiment trained six instructors and eight lead pilots during 2002, which took only three months. Furthermore, Chang stated it took only 20 sorties to produce an instructor or lead pilot. He also argued that his regiment had a ratio of three people who gave advice for every two pilots. Finally, he was allowed to train more people for those duties.

In August 2002, a new batch of pilots came from the north. Chang decided to have them transition to new aircraft after leading only three to four sorties, but ran into problems because they were not qualified to fly in the southern weather. On one occasion, a cross-border mobility mission originally scheduled for April was delayed until June 12th due to bad weather. In another case, his unit had to fly night flights, but some tires blew out as they were preparing to take off. In early August 2002, the unit simulated a battle in an ECM environment, where Chang lost radio contact with the tower shortly after taking off for an intercept.

One of the articles noted that PLAAF regulations require that, during peacetime, pilots can continue to fly in bad weather while the lower edge of clouds is 200 meters and visibility is 2 kilometers. In the past, however, pilots did not come close to flying at the required minimums.



LGEN Han Shengyan (韩胜延) (b. 1963, Hebei Province) became the Commander of the Central TCAF in December 2018.⁶³ He is currently a TC deputy leader grade officer. In the early 1990s, he studied abroad in an unidentified country. Starting around 2000, he served as a Deputy Commander of the 3rd Air Division (Nanjing MRAF), Commander of the 1st Air Division (Shenyang MRAF), Commander of the 3rd Air Division, a Deputy Chief of Staff in the Chengdu MRAF, Chief of Staff of the Lanzhou MRAF, a Deputy Commander of the Chengdu MRAF, and Commander of the Dingxin Test and Training Base (Jiuquan, Gansu Province), where he oversaw the annual Golden Helmet competition in 2014 and 2015. In February 2016, he became one of the Western TC Deputy Commanders. He received a rank promotion in 2009 (MGEN) and 2017 (LGEN). He was a Member of the 17th Party Congress. No information was found concerning him being an NPC Deputy or any travel abroad.



LGEN Ma Zhenjun (麻振军) (b. 1962, Henan Province) became a PLAAF Deputy Commander in November 2017.⁶⁴ Prior to that, he was the 13th PLAAF Chief of Staff (i.e. Director of the Headquarters Department / Staff Department) in August 2013 with the grade of TC deputy leader. He worked his way up the career ladder as a pilot and unit Deputy Commander and Commander to the Air Division level in the Guangzhou MRAF, including serving as one of the first Su-27 Fighter Regiment Commanders.^{xxxi} After serving as Commander of the 2nd Fighter Division (Guangzhou MRAF) in Suixi, Guangdong Province, he became a Deputy Chief of Staff in the Guangzhou MRAF HQ, a Deputy Commander in the Jinan MRAF, Chief of Staff for the Beijing MRAF, and a Deputy Chief of Staff in the PLAAF HQ. Prior to becoming the PLAAF Chief of Staff, he served as the Commander of the Beijing MRAF for one year. He received a rank promotion in 2008 (MGEN) and 2013

^{xxxi} The 2nd Air [Fighter] Division received its first Su-27s in 1997. It then replaced its J-8s with J-11s.

(LGEN). He was a Member of the 19th Party Congress and an Alternate Member of the 19th Party Central Committee. No information was found concerning him being an NPC Deputy or any travel abroad.



LGEN Zhang Yihu (张义瑚) (b. 1962, Jiangsu Province) became one of the Deputy Commanders of the Central TC in February 2016.⁶⁵ He is currently a TC deputy leader grade officer. He joined the PLAAF in the 1980s and served as a Flight Squadron Commander and Flight Group Commander. He was

also a Regiment Commander for a regiment under 3rd Air Division (Nanjing MRAF), when the regiment received the first Russian Su-27s. In 1999, he was the overall Commander of the flight demonstration over Tiananmen for the PRC's 50th anniversary. In 2002, he became the Commander of the 33rd Air Division (Chengdu MRAF). He then served as one of the Deputy Chiefs of Staff in the Chengdu MRAF, an assistant to the Chief of Staff in PLAAF HQ, the Chief of Staff for the Lanzhou MRAF, the Chief of Staff of the Beijing MRAF, and finally a concurrent Commander of the Lanzhou MRAF and Deputy Commander of the Lanzhou MR. He received a rank promotion in July 2009 (MGEN) and 2014 (LGEN). He was a Deputy of the 13th NPC. No information was found concerning being a Member or Alternate Member of any Party Congresses or for any travel abroad.



LGEN Huang Guoxian (黄国显) (b. 1962, location unknown) became the Commander of the Eastern TC Air Force and a concurrent Deputy Commander of the Eastern TC in February 2016.⁶⁶ He is currently a TC deputy leader grade officer. He previously served in the Chengdu MRAF as a Flight

Group Commander in a flight training base, as an Air Regiment Commander, and as an Air Division Chief of Staff and Commander in an unidentified Air Division. He then served as the Commander of the Air Force Fuzhou Command Post (Nanjing MRAF). While serving as one of the PLAAF HQ Deputy Chiefs of Staff in 2011, he was selected to become the Nanjing MRAF Chief of Staff.

In 2013, he became the Nanjing MRAF Commander. He received a rank promotion in 2014 (LGEN). He was a Member of the 19th Party Congress and an Alternate Member of the 19th Party Central Committee. No information was found concerning him being an NPC Deputy. He conducted several trips abroad since 2014.⁶⁷ On 23 September 2014, Huang led a delegation of Nanjing MRAF personnel to visit a U.S. military base in Hawaii. On 25 September, he led the delegation to visit Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska. During this visit, the U.S. military invited Huang's delegation to view and take a photo with a fifth-generation F-22A Raptor Stealth Tactical Fighter of the U.S. Air Force's 525th Fighter Squadron. Huang's delegation was the first group of Chinese military personnel to come in close contact with the advanced F-22A Raptor.³ On 9 March 2015, Huang left Beijing to make official visits to the Czech Republic, Romania, and Poland as a member of a six-person delegation led by Deputy Chief of the General Staff Sun Jianguo. From 3-4 November 2015, Huang accompanied State Councilor and PRC Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan to the third Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN_ Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), which was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. After the ADMM+, Huang accompanied Chang on an official goodwill visit to Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



LGEN Jia Zhigang (贾志刚) (b. unknown, Jiangsu Province) became a Deputy Commander of the Southern TC in January 2019 with the grade of TC deputy leader.⁶⁸ He previously served as the Commander of an unidentified Lanzhou MRAF Air Division, a Deputy Commander of a PLAAF Test and Training Base, and a

Deputy Commander in the Eastern TCAF. He received rank promotions in 2013 (MGEN) and in 2018 (LGEN). No information was found concerning being a Member or Alternate Member of any Party Congresses, an NPC Deputy, or any travel abroad.



LGEN Wang Qiang (王强) (b. unknown) became a Deputy Commander of the Western TC in January 2019 with the grade of TC deputy leader.⁶⁹ He previously served as the Commander of the Jinan MRAF's 12th Air Division,^{xxxii} a Deputy Chief of Staff of the Jinan MRAF, and then the Chief of Staff of the Western TCAF and a

concurrent Deputy Chief of Staff of the Western TC. He received a rank promotion in 2014 (MGEN) in 2019 (LGEN). No information was found concerning being a Member or Alternate Member of any Party Congresses, an NPC Deputy, or any travel abroad.



LGEN Xu Xueqiang (许学强) (b. unknown) became the Commander of the Northern TCAF and most likely a concurrent Deputy Commander of the Northern TC in November 2017 with the grade of TC deputy leader.⁷⁰ He previously served as the Commander of the Nanjing MRAF's 29th Air Division,^{xxxiii} the Commander of the Nanjing MRAF's Shanghai Command Post and the successor

Shanghai Base, and Chief of Staff of the Nanjing MRAF. He received a rank promotion in 2013 (MGEN) and in 2019 (LGEN). No information was found concerning being a Member or Alternate Member of any Party Congresses, an NPC Deputy, or any travel abroad.



LGEN Yu Qingjiang (俞庆江), (b. 1963, Jiangsu Province) became the PLAAF's Chief of Staff in December 2017.⁷¹ He is currently a TC deputy leader grade officer. He is also a special-grade pilot. From 1981-1984, he was a Flight Cadet at the Air Force 3rd Aviation School in Jinzhou, Liaoning Province. Upon graduation, he served in the Shenyang MRAF as a Deputy Commander and Commander of a Flight Squadron, Flight Group, and Air

^{xxxii} The 12th Air [Fighter] Division began with J-6s and transitioned to J-7s in the 1980s. It flew the J-8s in the 1990s and 2000s, and received the J-10 in 2012.

^{xxxiii} The 29th Air [Fighter] Division was equipped with J-7s and then the Su-30MKK.

Regiment in the 1st Air Division before becoming a Deputy Commander and then Commander of the same Air Division. He remained in the Shenyang MRAF as the Commander of the Dalian Command Post and then as one of the MRAF Headquarters' Deputy Chiefs of Staff. He then moved laterally to the Jinan MRAF as a Deputy Chief of Staff before becoming the MRAF's Chief of Staff. He then became the Commandant of the PLAAF's Command College in Beijing. He received a Master's Degree in Management and Engineering (apparently by correspondence) from the Air Force Engineering University. He has traveled abroad to the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, and the U.S.. He received a rank promotion in 2010 (MGEN) and 2019 (LGEN). No information was found concerning being a Member or Alternate Member of any Party Congresses or an NPC Deputy. According to one U.S. attaché, "LGEN Yu comes across as distinctive from other PLA generals; he is charismatic, engaging, and seems modern-minded."⁷²



LGEN Zheng Yuanlin (郑元林) (b. 1962, Shandong Province) became a PLAAF Deputy Commander in December 2018.⁷³ He currently holds the TC deputy leader grade. He joined the PLAAF in 1978 and became a transport pilot. He served as a Transport Regiment Commander, Transport Division Chief of Staff, 13th Transport Division xxxiv (Guangzhou MRAF)

Commander, a Guangzhou MRAF Deputy Chief of Staff, an Assistant to the PLAAF HQ Chief of Staff, Chengdu MRAF Chief of Staff, and Guangzhou MRAF/Southern TCAF Chief of Staff. He studied at the PLAAF Command College's Campaign Course. He received a rank promotion in 2010 (MGEN) and 2019 (LGEN). No information was found concerning being a Member or Alternate Member of any Party Congresses, an NPC Deputy, or any travel abroad.

^{xxxiv} The 13th Air [Transport] Division has been equipped with Y-7s, Y-8s, and An-26s. It received the IL-76 in 2013.



LGEN Zhou Li (周利) (b. unknown) became the Commander of the Southern TCAF in December 2018 with the grade of TC deputy leader.⁷⁴ It is not clear when he joined the PLAAF and what units he was assigned to early in his career. He previously served as the Director of the Training Department in the PLAAF HQ Headquarters' Department, a Deputy Chief of Staff in the Nanjing MRAF HQ, the Chief of Staff of the Jinan MRAF, a Deputy Commander of the Jinan MRAF, and Director of the Jinan MRAF's Post-Reform Settlement Office that was created to deal with the MRAF HQ that was downgraded as a base in early 2016. In April 2017, he became the Commander of the Henan Military District, which was subordinated to the CMC's National Defense Mobilization Department, and apparently served as the first Air Force officer to ever serve as a Military District Commander. He received a rank promotion in 2009 (MGEN) and 2019 (LGEN). He was a Member of the 19th Party Congress Central Committee. No information was found concerning being an NPC Deputy or any travel abroad.

Appendix 1: Ding Laihang Career Information

Rank Promotions:

- July 2003: Major General (1 star)
- July 2013: Lieutenant General (2 stars)
- July 2019: General (3 stars)

Career

The following billets show Ding's career path. When possible, his grades and ranks are identified or at least estimated.

- Unknown [probably 1975-1978]: Joined the PLAAF as an enlisted member or probably as a pilot cadet at a PLAAF aviation preparatory school. He attended the PLAAF's 9th Aviation School (空军第九航空学校) in Hubei Province.
- Unknown [1980s]: Although nothing was found, he most likely worked his way up from a Flight Squadron Deputy Commander to Commander, and then from a Flight Group Deputy Commander to Commander.
- Unknown [late 1980s and/or early 1990s]: Deputy Commander (副团长), 71st Regiment in Pingquan (平泉), Hebei Province), 24th Air Division, Beijing MRAF (北京军区空军)^{xxxv}
 - Grade: Regiment deputy leader
 - Rank: Major and lieutenant colonel
- Unknown (1990s): Commander (师长), 71st Regiment, 24th Air Division, Beijing MRAF
 - Grade: Regiment leader
 - Rank: Lieutenant colonel and colonel
- Unknown (1990s-2001): Deputy Commander (团长), [24th Air Division], Beijing MRAF
 - Grade: Division deputy leader
 - Rank: Colonel and Senior Colonel

^{xxxv} At that time, the 24th Air Division, whose headquarters was Hebei Province, was equipped with J-7 and J-8 aircraft. See Andreas Rupprecht, *Chinese Air Power in the 20th Century: Rise of the Red Dragon*, (Houston, TX: Harpia Publishing, 2019), 213-215.

- Unknown-2001: Commander (司令员), Beijing MRAF Training Base (北空训练基地) [This was most likely the Cangzhou/Cangxian Test and Training Base in Hebei Province].
 - Grade: Division leader
 - Rank: Senior colonel
- Dec 2001 – Dec 2003: Chief of Staff (参谋长), Air Force 8th Air Corps (空 8 军), Fuzhou, Fujian Province, Nanjing MRAF
 - Corps deputy leader
 - Rank: Senior colonel and Major General
- Dec 2003 -Dec 2007: Commander (司令员), Fuzhou Command Post (福州指挥所) [renamed from the former 8th Air Corps in 2004], Nanjing MRAF (南京军区空军)
 - Grade: Corps deputy leader
 - Rank: Major General
- Dec 2007 – Jan 2009: Commandant (院长), Air Force Command College (空军指挥学院), Beijing
 - Grade: Corps leader
 - Rank: Major General
- Jan 2009 – Jun 2012: Chief of Staff (参谋长), Chengdu MRAF (成都军区空军)
 - Grade: Corps leader
 - Rank: Major General
- Jun 2012 – Feb 2016: Commander (司令员), Shenyang MRAF (沈阳军区空军) and concurrent Deputy Commander (副司令员), Shenyang MR (沈阳军区)
 - Grade: MR deputy leader
 - Rank: Major General and Lieutenant General
- Feb 2016 – Aug 2017: Commander (司令员), Northern TCAF (北部战区空军) and concurrent Deputy Commander (副司令员), Northern TC (北部战区)
 - TC deputy leader (renamed from MR deputy leader)
 - Rank: Lieutenant General

Education

- Unknown [mid-to-late 1970s]: Cadet, PLAAF 9th Fight School, Hubei Province
- Unknown: Bachelor’s degree, Political Work specialty, Air Force Command College
- [Note: No mention of any education at the PLA NDU, which is unusual for any flag officer.]

Publications

Ding has authored at least one published article, which appeared in the *PLA Daily* newspaper in December 2015. In the article, titled “Use Data to Drive National Defense and Military Innovation and Development” [借助数据驱动国防和军队创新发展], Ding describes military-related big data as a fundamental strategic resource for national defense and military building. The article goes on to describe necessary measures to improve the utilization of data in the following five areas: ideological/political, weapons/equipment, military requirements, cyber/electromagnetic, and dynamic/space-time.⁷⁵ He also used this theme during presentations. On 7 March 2017, the PLA delegation to the 5th Session of the 12th NPC held its first plenary meeting. During the meeting, Ding put forward suggestions for pushing forward big data in military building and operations.⁷⁶

National People’s Congress Deputy

- 2008-2012: Deputy, PLA Delegation, 11th National People’s Congress (第十一届全国人民代表大会解放军代表)
- 2013-2018: Deputy, PLA Delegation, 12th National People’s Congress (第十二届全国人民代表大会解放军代表)
- 2019-Present: Deputy, PLA Delegation, 13th National People’s Congress (第十三届全国人民代表大会解放军代表).

Appendix 2: Ding Laihang Meetings

This appendix provides information concerning 72 different meetings that Ding Laihang has participated in since he became the Commander in August 2017. Table 4 provides a matrix with the 39 identified Party-related meetings that Ding Laihang has participated in since becoming the Commander in August 2017. Table 5 provides a matrix with the 33 identified non-Party-related meetings that Ding has participated in since becoming the Commander. Each matrix is organized in chronological order. Note: The acronym DLH is used for Ding Laihang, YZF for Yu Zhongfu (the PLAAF PC), and XJP for Xi Jinping for simplicity sake.

Party Congresses

The PLAAF has held 13 Party Congresses since 1956, with the last one occurring in 2019.⁷⁷ The Party Congress, which occurs every five years, normally takes place about 13 to 20 months after the CCP Party Congress. Therefore, the PLAAF will most likely hold its 14th Party Congress in 2024. Changes to the actual leadership of the PLAAF rarely take place during the Party Congress, but the Party Congress unanimously approves them. Since 1988, about 300 people have attended each Party Congress.

Each Party Congress lays the foundation for the next five years. For example, during the 13th Party Congress conference, “the delegates discussed how to thoroughly implement Xi Jinping’s thought on strengthening the military and the military strategy for the new era. They reviewed the work related to the Party building and military building of the Air Force over the previous five years, and drafted major plans for the next five years. The congress is aimed at mobilizing service personnel to push forward the building of a strong and modern air force, and to accomplish the missions and tasks of the new era.”⁷⁸

Party Committees

Every level in the PLAAF has at least one of the following five types of Party organizations, although each type of organization has a different name, they are identified generically as Party Committees:⁷⁹

- Unit and department Party Committees, which are established at the regiment level and above.

- Grassroots Party Committees, which are established at the element, i.e. battalion level, and in 2nd-level functional and administrative departments in higher level headquarters based on their size.

- Party General Branches are established in functional and administrative departments at the regiment level and above, when the number of Party members is too small for a directly subordinate Party Committee, but too large for a Party branch.⁸⁰

- Party Branches, which are established at the element company level or in some 2nd- and 3rd-level PLA functional and administrative departments based on their size.

- Party small groups, which are generally established at the platoon level and for ad hoc organizations at any level that are created for specific purposes and have three or more Party members.

PLAAF Headquarters also establishes Party Committee Central Groups to lead study sessions on specific topics of political importance.

The Party Secretary and Deputy Secretary

Every headquarters and every functional and administrative department within the PLAAF has a Party Committee and a Standing Committee.⁸¹ Throughout the PLAAF, the unit Party Committees elect the Secretary and a single Deputy Secretary, and the next higher-level Party Committee approves their appointment. As a general rule, the Political Commissar (PC) normally serves as the Secretary and the unit Commander serves as the Deputy Secretary for unit Party Committees. For the department Party Committees, the Director serves as the Secretary and one of the Deputy Directors serves as the Deputy Secretary. The exception is if the Commander has ever served as a political officer, then he becomes the Secretary. For example, Qiao Qingchen served as the PLAAF PC from February 1999 to May 2002. He then became the Commander until October 2007 and remained as the Party Secretary, while the PC became the Deputy Secretary until Qiao retired. Currently, the PLAAF PC, General Yu Zhongfu, serves as the PLAAF Party Secretary and Ding Laihang serves as the Deputy Secretary.

PLAAF Party Congress Plenary Sessions and Party Standing Committee Meetings

Whereas the PLAAF Party Congresses since 1978 have met only once every five years, the PLAAF Headquarters’ Party Committee holds an average of two Plenary Sessions per year to oversee the PLAAF’s work, such as reviewing the training plan for the previous six months and setting goals for the next six months.⁸² Each session lasts about two days. The first Party Committee Plenary Session occurs at the end of the Party Congress and the final meeting takes place a couple of days before the next Party Congress convenes.^{xxxvi} With the exception of the timing for these two sessions, there does not appear to be a set pattern for when the Plenary Sessions are held each year. The Plenary Sessions are attended by the Standing Committee, other Party Committee Members, and special guests. Each session focuses on specific topics.

Despite the lack of a set pattern, the Plenary Sessions often coincide with other key meetings. For example, the January 2008 Party Committee meeting was immediately followed by a PLAAF Training Conference. Between Party Committee Plenary Sessions, the unit’s Standing Committee meets regularly to make decisions that guide the unit’s activities, including training, exercises, and personnel. Quite often, various PLAAF regulations or guidance are issued under the name of the PLAAF’s Party Committee. For example, the PLAAF’s “Training Guiding Thought” is issued by the Party Committee.⁸³

Table 4: Ding Laihang Party-related Meetings

Date	Event	Content
2017/10/16	PLAAF Party Committee Standing Committee Meeting to Study 7th Plenary Session	On 16 October 2017, the PLAAF Party Committee held a Standing Committee meeting to study the thought work guidelines laid out at the 7th Plenary Session of the Communist Party’s 18th Central Committee and the “Report on the Five-Year Implementation of the Central Political Bureau’s Eight-point Regulation and the strengthening of political work within the Communist Party of China.” The meeting also studied the steps the Air Force would take to implement the 19th Party Congress’s preliminary arrangement. DLH gave an official speech. ⁸⁴
2017/10/24	19th CCP Party Congress	DLH was elected as one of 204 Members of the 19th CCP Central Committee. ⁸⁵

^{xxxvi} The PLAAF’s 10th Party Congress is identified as 空军第十次党代表大会 and the 10th Party Committee’s 3rd Plenum is identified as 空军党委十届三次全体会议.

2017/10/27	PLAAF Mobilization Meeting to Implement Spirit of 19th Party Congress	On 27 October 2017, the PLAAF held a mobilization meeting for implementing the “spirit” of the 19th Party Congress and the tasks identified during the meeting. DLH gave a speech. ⁸⁶
2017/10/30	PLAAF Party Committee Standing Committee Meeting	DLH spoke at the meeting. ⁸⁷
2017/11/02	19th Party Congress Studies	The Air Force Party Committee Central Group led a five-day-long focused group study session of the 19th Party Congress. YZJ presided over the meeting and DLH attended. ⁸⁸
2017/11/10	PLAAF Heroes Memorial	DLH attended the 68th Anniversary of the PLAAF Heroes Memorial in Beijing. ⁸⁹
2017/12/11	PLAAF Seminar for High Level Cadres to Study the 19th Party Congress	Between 11-16 December 2017, the PLAAF held a topical seminar for mid- and high-level cadres on studying and implementing the CCP’s 19th Party Congress’s ideals. DLH gave a speech. ⁹⁰
2017/12/27	PLAAF 7th Session of 12th Party Committee	DLH and YZF presided over the PLAAF 7th session of the 12th Party Committee Enlarged Meeting. ⁹¹
2018/01/16	Air Force Convenes 11th Military People’s Congress to Elect Representatives to Attend the 13th NPC	On 16 January 2018, the Air Force’s 11th Military People’s Congress convened in Beijing. The goal was to elect Air Force Representatives to attend the 13th NPC. The meeting was hosted by the Air Force Election Committee. Out of 39 candidates, a total of 32 individuals were elected to represent the Air Force. DLH spoke at the meeting. ⁹²
2018/01/25	PLAAF Discipline Inspection Commission Expanded Meeting	On 25 January 2018, the PLAAF held an Air Force Discipline Inspection Commission Expanded Meeting. DLH attended the meeting. ⁹³
2018/01/29	PLAAF Party Committee Central Group Holds 4-Day Study Session on Xi Jinping Thought	From 29 January to 7 February 2018, the Air Force Party Committee Central Group gathered for an intensive study session centered on the theme of “carefully study XJP’s socialist thought with Chinese characteristics for a new era, resolutely safeguard the authority and unified leadership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China with XJP as its core leader, and comprehensively implement the decisions of the 19th Party Congress.” DLH attended the session. ⁹⁴
2018/01/29	PLAAF Party Committee Central Group Meeting	The PLAAF Party Committee Central Group met for four days between 29 January and 7 February. DLH attended the meeting. ⁹⁵
2018/02/25	Deputy in the 13th NPC	DLH was one of 269 PLA deputies at the 13th NPC. The NPC had a total of 2,980 deputies. ⁹⁶
2018/03/02	PLAAF Standing Committee 3rd Meeting of the 19th Plenum	On 2 March 2018, the PLAAF Standing Committee held its 3rd Meeting of the 19th Plenum. DLH attended the meeting. ⁹⁷
2018/03/23	PLAAF Holds Headquarters Cadre Meeting	On 23 March 2018, the Air Force held a headquarters cadre meeting. Leaders of all departments and commissions of the Air Force Headquarters and the entire headquarters cadre contingent attended the meeting. DLH gave a presentation. ⁹⁸

2018/03/23	PLAAF Standing Committee Meeting	On 23 March 2018, the PLAAF Standing Committee a meeting with the following personnel in attendance: DLH attended the meeting. ⁹⁹
2018/04/16	PLAAF Standing Committee Meeting	On 16 April 2018, the PLAAF Standing Committee held a meeting to discuss CMC Chairman XJP's work report. DLH attended the meeting. ¹⁰⁰
2018/04/20	PLAAF Party Committee Central Group Meeting	PLAAF Party Committee Central Group held a meeting in Beijing from 20-25 April to discuss XJP's guidance. DLH spoke at the meeting. ¹⁰¹
2018/05/08	PLAAF Standing Committee Meeting	On 8 May 2018, the PLAAF Standing Committee held a meeting to discuss Marxism. DLH attended the meeting. ¹⁰²
2018/05/09	Discussion of XJP's Views of the PLAAF	Discussion on 9 May 2018 of XJP's views of the PLAAF. DLH spoke at the meeting. ¹⁰³
2018/05/25	PLAAF Party Committee Center Group Meeting	On 20-25 May 2018, the PLAAF Party Committee Center Group gathered to study the major speeches that XJP gave after listening to the work report of the Academy of Military Sciences. ¹⁰⁴
2018/05/27	Standing Committee Central Group Discussion	PLAAF Standing Committee Central Group discusses XJP's guidance. DLH spoke at the meeting. ¹⁰⁵
2018/06/29	Air Force Party Committee Holds Standing Committee Meeting Targeting Peacetime Mentality	On 29 June 2018, the Air Force Party Committee held a Standing Committee meeting to convey key points from XJP's important speech made at the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's Foreign Affairs Work meeting. The meeting highlighted the need to resolutely implement XJP's Strong Military Thought and to target the correction of peacetime mentalities. DLH spoke at the meeting. ¹⁰⁶
2018/06/29	PLAAF Party Standing Committee Meeting	On 29 June 2018, the PLAAF Party Standing Committee held a meeting to discuss XJP's guidance. DLH spoke at the meeting. ¹⁰⁷
2018/07/27	PLAAF Flag Officer Promotion Ceremony	On 27 July 2018, the PLAAF held a ceremony for 10 flag officer promotions to 1- and 2-star generals. DLH read the orders from the CMC. ¹⁰⁸
2018/08/06	DLH Chairs PLAAF Top Leadership Meeting on Ending Military-Provided For-Profit Services	On 6 August 2018, DLH chaired a meeting for the PLAAF's top leaders concerning ending military-provided for-profit services. ¹⁰⁹
2018/09/05	PLAAF Standing Committee Meeting	PLAAF Standing Committee meeting on PLAAF Building on 5-6 September 2018. DLH chaired and spoke at the meeting. ¹¹⁰
2018/09/12	AFCC 60th Anniversary	DLH gave a speech emphasizing XJP's guidance ¹¹¹
2018/09/12	PLAAF Standing Committee Meeting	PLAAF Standing Committee meeting on 12 September. DLH spoke at the meeting. ¹¹²
2018/09/30	DLH Attends Air Force Museum Event	PLAAF annual ceremony on 30 September at aviation museum to commemorate national martyrs. DLH attended the meeting. ¹¹³ The first ceremony was held in 2009.
2018/10/09	SAM Branch 60th Anniversary	DLH gave a speech emphasizing XJP's guidance ¹¹⁴
2019/03/19	PLAAF NCO Award Ceremony	DLH attended a ceremony in Beijing to award a total of 29 outstanding NCOs. ¹¹⁵

2019/07/26	PLAAF Party Committee Meeting	DLH chaired the meeting and gave a speech emphasizing XJP guidance for political education for corps and above personnel. ¹¹⁶
2019/07/31	3-Star Promotion Ceremony	DLH received his third star. ¹¹⁷
2019/09/30	DLH Attends Air Force Museum Event	On the morning of 30 September 2019, the PLAAF leadership held an event at the Air Force Museum in which flowers were offered to commemorate PLAAF martyrs. ¹¹⁸
2019/11/10	PLAAF 70th Anniversary	DLH attended a performance by the PLAAF Song and Dance Troupe to celebrate the PLAAF's 70th Anniversary. ¹¹⁹
2019/12/13	PLAAF Flag Officer Promotion Ceremony	DLH read out the promotion orders for 38 1-star and 5 2-star generals signed by XJP. ¹²⁰
2019/10/16	Ceremony Honors 2019 Outstanding PLAAF Flight Personnel	On 16 October 2019, a ceremony was held at AUAF to honor outstanding flight personnel and their families. DLH attended. ¹²¹
2019/10/17	PLAAF 70 th Anniversary Celebration	DLH attended the 70 th Anniversary of the PLAAF in Changchun, Jilin, that included aerial demonstrations. ¹²²

Table 5: Ding Laihang Non-Party-related Meetings

Date	Event	Content
2017/08/29	PLAAF Holds VTC on Safety and Stability	On 29 August 2017, the PLAAF held a VTC in Beijing on safety and stability work. ¹²³ DLH attended the meeting.
2017/09/01	AUAF New Cadet Ceremony	DLH attended a ceremony to welcome more than 1,000 new pilot cadets to AUAF and gave a short presentation. ¹²⁴
2017/09/14	6th Air Force Construction and Development Academician Advisory Conference	On 14 September 2017, the 6th Meeting of the Air Force Construction and Development Academician and Advisory Meeting was held in Beijing. DLH attended this conference to celebrate 17 years of having 54 academicians from the Chinese Academy of Engineering provide advice on the PLAAF's strategic transformation. ¹²⁵ He spoke at the meeting and awarded the letters of appointment to the Academician Advisors. ¹²⁶
2017/09/27	DLH Visits Air Division	DLH visited a special mission air division and emphasized their mission. ¹²⁷
2017/11/06	DLH Visits Units in Beijing	Between 6 to 9 November 2017, DLH visited the AFCC, Air Force Research Academy, and a main communications station in Beijing. ¹²⁸
2017/11/13	DLH Visits Dingxin Test and Training Base and Xi'an Flight Academy	On 13-14 November 2017, DLH led the working group from the Air Force Headquarter to visit the Dingxin Test and Training Base and the 1st Training Brigade of the Xi'an Flight Academy. ¹²⁹
2017/11/15	DLH Hosts Zambian Air Force Commander	DLH hosted the Zambian Air Force Commander in Beijing. ¹³⁰
2017/11/27	DLH Hosts Bulgarian Counterpart	DLH hosted the Bulgarian Air Force Commander in Beijing. ¹³¹
2017/12/05	DLH Visit to Airborne Corps and Training Base	Between 5-7 December 2017, DLH led a HQ working group to visit the front line of an airborne corps unit and an unspecified flight training base. He emphasized the utmost importance of implementing XJP's thought on building a strong army and requested the forces to study combat missions and models based on the features of the new weapons and equipment. ¹³²
2017/12/14	Air Force Equipment Safety Group Training	Between 14-15 December 2017, the Air Force organized aviation equipment quality safety education group training. DLH participated in the group training and gave a speech. ¹³³
2018/01/03	CMC/PLAAF 2018 Start of Training Mobilization Meeting Attended by Top PLAAF Leaders	On 3 January 2018, the CMC held a 2018 start of training mobilization meeting. The PLAAF set up a field-like sub-venue at a flight training base airfield. DLH and other leaders attended and led several hundred

		personnel participating in training at a flight training base in watching the CMC activities. ¹³⁴
2018/01/03	2018 Training Mobilization Ceremony PLAAF Branch Venue	On 3 January 2018, the CMC held its 2018 Training Mobilization Ceremony and the PLAAF set up a branch venue at an Air Force flight training base. DLH attended. ¹³⁵
2018/01/09	PLAAF Military Training Conference	Between 9 and 10 January 2018, the PLAAF held a military training conference in Beijing. DLH spoke at the meeting. ¹³⁶
2018/02/11	PLAAF Holds Safety and Stability Work VTC	On 11 February 2018, the Air Force held a safety and stability VTC during which attendees paid tribute to the victims of the 29 January 2018 plane crash. DLH delivered a speech. ¹³⁷
2018/03/01	Air Force Senior Leaders Hold Meeting on Military Professional Education	On 1 March 2018, the Air Force held a meeting in Beijing to discuss military professional education reform. DLH chaired the meeting and delivered a speech. ¹³⁸
2018/04/10	DLH Visit to Thailand and Pakistan	DLH has only travelled abroad once (Thailand and Pakistan) from 10-14 April 2018. ¹³⁹
2018/05/02	PLAAF Safety VTC	PLAAF held a safety VTC in Beijing. DLH spoke at the meeting. ¹⁴⁰
2018/05/14	Ding Laihang Meets with Mexican Air Force Commander	On 14 May 2018, DLH met with the Commander of the Mexican Air Force. The two nations celebrated 46 years of good relations, particularly the June 2013 agreement to raise their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership. ¹⁴¹
2018/05/21	CMC Teleconference	On 21 May 2018 in Beijing, DLH participated in the CMC's 3rd Inspection Tour Team's teleconference mobilization meeting. ¹⁴²
2018/05/22	DLH Speaks at PLAAF 5th Annual National Aerospace Safety and Development Forum	On 22 May 2018, the PLAAF Research Academy held the 5th Annual National Aerospace Safety and Development Forum in Beijing. The forum was focused on the issue of "constructing and utilizing a new generation Strategic Air Force." DLH gave the opening remarks. ¹⁴³
2018/06/5	DLH Leads Fact-finding Mission to Central TCAF	Between 5 and 6 June 2018, DLH led an Air Force Headquarters working group on a fact-finding mission to several Central TCAF aviation and SAM units to obtain an accurate picture of training progress since the implementation of the new training regulations. ¹⁴⁴
2018/07/04	PLAAF Meeting on Air Force Combat Readiness Combined Training	On 4 July 2018, the PLAAF held a meeting to discuss Air Force Combat Readiness Combined Training. DLH spoke at the meeting. ¹⁴⁵

2018/07/05	PLAAF Holds Semiannual Military Training Teleconference	On 5 July 2018, the PLAAF held its semiannual military training teleconference in Beijing. PLAAF Chief of Staff Yu Qingjiang chaired the meeting. DLH delivered a speech. ¹⁴⁶
2018/07/15	DLH Hosts Pakistan Air Force Chief of Staff	DLH hosted the Pakistan Air Force Chief of Staff for a visit to China from 15-20 July 2018. ¹⁴⁷
2018/08/01	DLH Inspects Eastern TCAF Units	On 1-2 August 2018, DLH led an inspection of Eastern TCAF units. ¹⁴⁸
2018/08/29	PLAAF Hosts NCO Training Conference Featuring MCF	On 29 August 2018, a joint-conference on training for NCOs with certain specializations through MCF was held on the sideline of the PLAAF "Open House" activities at the AUAF. ¹⁴⁹
2018/09/05	DLH and YZF Meet with Tsinghua President to Discuss MCF	On 5 September 2018, DLH and YZF met with the Tsinghua University President and Party Secretary to discuss carrying out MCF. In recent years, the PLAAF and Tsinghua have cooperated in pilot cultivation, weapons and equipment technical research, and other areas, including the "Dual-Enrollment Program." ¹⁵⁰
2018/11/06	12th Zhuhai Airshow	DLH attended the opening ceremony for 12th Zhuhai Airshow. ¹⁵¹
2019/06/18	DLH Hosts Turkish Air Force Commander	DLH hosted the Turkish Air Force Commander in Beijing. ¹⁵²
2019/07/24	PLAAF's 6th National Aerospace Security and Development Forum	DLH gave a comprehensive exposition of the strategic design of the "World-class Air Force" at the opening ceremony of the forum, and clarified the three-stage strategic goal of building a World-class Strategic Air Force by the middle of this century. It is emphasized that in the new era, it is more urgent than ever to build a combat air force that can fight and win wars. Building a Strategic Air Force that is "integrated in air and space, with both offensive and defensive capabilities" is more sacred than ever before. Accelerate the transformation of the air force into a "World" "First-class" is more qualified than ever before. ¹⁵³
2019/10/01	PRC 70th Anniversary	DLH served as the Flight Commander in the KJ-2000 AEW&C aircraft that led all of the PLAAF aircraft. ¹⁵⁴
2019/10/16	Ceremony Honors 2019 Outstanding PLAAF Flight Personnel	On 16 October 2019, a ceremony was held at AUAF to honor outstanding flight personnel and their families. DLH attended. ¹⁵⁵
2019/10/17	PLAAF 70th Anniversary Celebration	DLH attended the 70th Anniversary of the PLAAF in Changchun, Jilin, that included aerial demonstrations. ¹⁵⁶

Appendix 3: PLA Grade and Rank System

Historically, the PLA has had a grade system rather than a rank system.¹⁵⁷ It established its first 21-grade system in 1952, which was revised five times, including reducing the number to 18 in 1979 and to 15 in 1988. The PLA had a rank system from 1955 to 1965, when it was abolished. A rank system was not reintroduced until 1988. As noted earlier, billets are defined by the grade system, not the rank system. As shown in Table 6 below, every grade up to CMC Member has two assigned ranks—a primary rank and a secondary rank. However, some ranks, such as Major General, can be assigned to four different grades. In addition, grade and rank promotions rarely occur at the same time. As a general rule, from Platoon leader grade to Regiment leader grade rank promotions occur every four years and grade promotions every three years, which defines the primary and secondary rank structure. All promotions up to the division level are local promotions that are approved at the next higher level. Promotions at the corps and above level are overseen by the CMC-level departments.

Table 6: PLA's 15-grade and 10-rank Structure, 1988-Present

Grade	Primary Rank	Secondary Rank
CMC Chairman (军委主席)	N/A	
Vice Chairmen (军委副主席)	GEN (上将)	N/A
CMC Member (军委委员)	GEN (上将)	
TC Leader (正战区职)	GEN (上将)	LTG (中将)
Former MR Leader (正大军区职)		
TC Deputy Leader (副战区职)	LTG (中将)	MG (少将)
Former MR Deputy Leader (副大军区职)		
Corps Leader (正军职)	MG (少将)	LTG (中将)
Corps Deputy Leader (副军职)	MG (少将)	SCOL (大校)
Division Leader (正师职)	SCOL (大校)	MG (少将)
Division Deputy Leader (副师职) / (Brigade Leader)	COL (上校)	SCOL (大校)
Regiment Leader (正团职) / (Brigade Deputy Leader)	COL (上校)	LTC (中校)
Regiment Deputy Leader (副团职)	LTC (中校)	MAJ (少校)
Battalion Leader (正营职)	MAJ (少校)	LTC (中校)
Battalion Deputy Leader (副营职)	CPT (上尉)	MAJ (少校)
Company Leader (正连职)	CPT (上尉)	1LT (中尉)
Company Deputy Leader (副连职)	1LT (中尉)	CPT (上尉)
Platoon Leader (排职)	2LT (少尉)	1LT (中尉)

Sources & Endnotes

Key sources for this report include:

*People's Liberation Army Air Force 2010*¹⁵⁸

PLA Aerospace Power: A Primer on Trends in China's Military Air, Space, and Missile Forces, 2nd Edition.¹⁵⁹

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Zhu Rongchang, ed., [Air Force Dictionary] [空军大辞典], (Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House, September 1996).

Various PLA and PLAAF websites.

Of note, the PLAAF's two volume encyclopedia published in 2005 does not have profiles for any PLAAF Commanders or Political Commissars.

ENDNOTES

¹ John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, "China's Search for a Modern Air Force," International Security, Summer 1999. William W. Whitson, *The Chinese High Command: A History of Communist Military Politics, 1927-71*, (New York, Washington, London: Praeger, 1973), 550. Stanley Karnow, *Mao and China: A Legacy of Turmoil*, Penguin Books, New York, 1972, 429. *China Today: Air Force* [当代中国空军], (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1989), 481. Lin Biao controlled the PLAAF through Wu Faxian and the PLA Navy through Li Zuopeng, who was the Navy's political commissar and basically ran the Navy. Events surrounding the fate of Wu and Li were very confusing after Lin Biao's death in a plane crash over Mongolia in September 1971. According to *China Today: Air Force* and recent interviews with PLA officials, Wu and Li Zuopeng were tried along with the Gang of Four. Wu was sentenced to seventeen years in prison and Li to twenty years.

² *Dictionary of China's Communist Party Central Committee Members for 1921-2003*, (中国共产党历届中央委员大辞典), (Beijing: Chinese Communist Party History Press, 2004), 465. Identified *CCP Dictionary*. Zhu Rongchang, ed., [Air Force Dictionary] [空军大辞典], (Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House, September 1996), 799. Identified as *Air Force Dictionary*.

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- ³ *CCP Dictionary*, 824. *Air Force Dictionary*, 819.
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