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PLA's New Military Revolution: Developing Talent

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The PLA underwent a dazzling round of reshuffles of senior officers in the past few months, including the job transfer of former deputy chief of General Staff Zhang Qinsheng. This new round of military personnel changes has to be understood in the broader context of China's new military revolution programme. The PLA is taking concrete measures, including reforms in the personnel system, to train military commanders with comprehensive skills in order to cope with demands and requirements of its "leap-frog" military revolution – and to retain its talent.

THE CHINESE People's Liberation Army (PLA) has launched a series of personnel changes since June this year, the most notable case being the swap of posts between Lieutenant General Zhang Qinsheng, deputy chief of General Staff of the PLA headquarters, and General Liu Zhenwu, commander of the Guangzhou Military Region. Within a few months, Beijing, Nanjing, and Lanzhou Military Regions also had their new commanders. There were also quite a number of other personnel changes between departments of the headquarters and regional military units and between different regions.

Media commentators have noticed that this new round of reshuffles of senior officers demonstrates Beijing's consideration of training and promoting PLA leaders on the basis of expertise in military affairs, commanding skills, and relatively young age. These new leadership changes also indicate that the PLA is increasingly implementing its strategy of cultivating "multi-talented" military commanders to cope with the requirements of China's new military revolution and army building. One approach of fostering comprehensive skills for senior military leaders is to place them at positions or places where they have had no prior experience, a departure of the traditional way of usually letting them rise up in the same unit or sector. The Zhang-Liu swap represents such trend and the new importance of switching posts for the cultivation of comprehensive skills.

"External Transfer" as a Stepping Stone for Possible Promotion

In the Chinese military hierarchy, a deputy position of the four general departments of the PLA headquarters, which include the departments of General Staff, General Armament, General Political Affairs, and General Logistics, is equivalent to a full position at a Military Region or other military units that enjoy a Military Region status -- the air force, the navy, the second artillery force, the National Defence University, and the Academy of Military Sciences. In this sense, LG Zhang's "external transfer" is a lateral move in position, with no change in ranking.

However, a deputy position at the Department of General Staff is usually preferred over a full position at a Military Region because it is often an inevitable step for possible promotion to the position of chief of general staff and ultimately to the membership of the Central Military Commission. With few exceptions, full-position leaders at a Military Region level usually have to go through the deputy positions of the general departments to move upward to the Central Military Commission. It looks like Zhang's transfer was a nominal demotion, but his case needs to be understood in the relevant context.

Normally, as is also true in the Chinese civilian sectors, an "external transfer" would take place for two purposes. First, the person to be transferred is about to retire or has no prospect of being promoted, or in some cases as an implicit penalty. The transfer is meant to vacate the position for a newcomer who may be seen as more promising in the eyes of the superior. Another possible cause is to transfer the person to a position out of the headquarters to gain more practical experience for possible promotion or assuming additional responsibilities in the future.

Zhang's change of job most likely represents the second pattern. Zhang served a long time career at PLA headquarters, including director of the Campaign Teaching and Research Office under the National Defense University (NDU), dean of studies at the NDU, and director of the Operations Department of the General Staff Department. Zhang is known as an expert in integrated war fighting and training, particularly under conditions of information technologies. He was promoted twice in two years, first assistant chief of staff in 2004 and then deputy chief of staff in 2006. His expertise on military operations under information conditions helped him in the rise.

In addition to his extensive expertise, Zhang performed fairly well first as assistant chief of staff and then as deputy chief of staff. He took over the responsibility of the retired General Xiong Guangkai to be in charge of the PLA's external affairs, including joint military exercises with foreign troops and China's military diplomacy. His job performance in these areas has been positively acknowledged by observers. Zhang is 59 years old, which, according to relevant PLA regulations, gives him at least 6 more years to stay at the full position of a Military Region level. Age requirement for membership in the Central Military Commission is a bit more flexible. In light of these factors, Zhang's temporary transfer to the Guangzhou Military Region likely will be a stepping stone for further promotion or at least being trusted with more additional important duties.

PLA's Emphasis on Comprehensive Skills

The case of LG Zhang's transfer represents the importance that the PLA attaches to training senior leaders with multi-faceted skills. Zhang has already got extensive experience working at the PLA headquarters, but he lacks the actual experience of commanding the troops. His transfer is perhaps meant to provide an opportunity for him to obtain more practical experience and knowledge of field commanding. This is increasingly an approach of the Chinese military to cultivate senior military officers with multiple talents or comprehensive skills.

The emphasis on comprehensive skills is regarded as an indispensable part of the PLA's new "leap-frog" military revolution programme. Starting from the 1990s, Chinese senior military leaders called for the PLA to give priority to preparing for future local wars that would center on information technologies. A key component of future information-oriented war fighting is integration, which requires commanders to be knowledgeable in multiple areas and to sharpen their speed of response and standard of coordination.

As a matter of fact, this new round of military personnel changes for the purpose of building comprehensive skills is not something new. In the past few years, the PLA adopted unprecedented organizational measures at the very top level to ensure that multiple skills are available in military

operations. For instance, the inclusion of the commanders of the air force and navy into the Central Military Commission and the promotion of generals of the air force and the second artillery force into the leadership of the General Staff were meant to allow the top decision bodies to have immediate access to all sorts of skills, not just the traditional lop-sided dominance by the army.

Chinese military experts have also vehemently called for an emphasis on comprehensive skills in education programmes at military universities. More recently, the PLA issued a publication called the Regulation on Attracting and Keeping Senior Professional and Technical Talents in the Military. This document vows to provide preferential treatments to civilians with professional skills and technological expertise if they want to work for the military. This is another indication that the PLA is attaching utmost importance to talent.

Conclusion: No turning back

The PLA is accelerating its new military revolution programme. In addition to introducing various hard weapons systems, the Chinese military is also paying unprecedented amount of attention to human talent. The job transfer of LG Zhang Qinsheng is representative of the PLA's attempt to cultivate senior officers with multiple sets of skills. No doubt, this practice is the road to the future for China's military.

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