



## Assessment of the PLA's 3-Star Promotions in January 2022

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On 5 January 2022, Xi Jinping chaired a promotion ceremony for seven officers as either a commander (CDR) or political commissar (PC).<sup>1</sup> Each new general has the grade of Theater Command (TC) Leader and each previously held a billet at the grade of TC deputy leader.<sup>1</sup>

As a TC leader-grade officer, they can remain on active duty until they are 65; however, the PLA has made exceptions and replaced certain personnel before they reached their mandatory retirement age. For example, General Ding Laihang, who became the PLAAF commander in 2017 was replaced in December 2021 at the age of 64.



### Previous Promotion System

The following bullets demonstrate the previous generic path to full general (3 stars) which combines rank and grade promotions consisting of three observable steps:<sup>2</sup>

- Step One: Lieutenant generals (2-stars) in a Military Region<sup>2</sup> (MR); now Theater Command/TC) deputy leader-grade move laterally to a second position in the same grade

<sup>1</sup> See the table at the end for a chart with PLA grades and ranks.

<sup>2</sup> In 2016 the Military Regions were replaced with Theater Commands, their grade level remained the same

- Step Two: After three or so years, they receive a grade promotion to an MR leader-grade position, and
- Step Three: After three years or so as a LTG in an MR leader-grade position, they receive a rank promotion to full general<sup>3</sup>

In addition, in order to become a Central Military Commission (CMC) member-grade officer, an officer first had to serve in one of the above MR leader-grade billets; however, not every officer who serves in one of these billets becomes a CMC member.

Since 2007, a promotion ceremony has been held every year in July. Three special ceremonies were also held (2007 and 2012 and 2017) to promote a total of four people. Of note, no ceremony was held in 2018; however, two separate ceremonies were held in 2019 and 2020 in July and December. Two ceremonies were held in 2021 (July and September).<sup>3</sup> Historically, each officer already held his billet, so these were rank, not grade, promotions. However, over the past couple of years, the rank promotions have also coincided with assuming new billets.

### **Current Changes to the System**

There were clear indications leading up to the PLA's 11<sup>th</sup> force reduction that began in 2016 that the PLA wanted to shift to a rank-based system that consists of 10 ranks rather than the grade-based system that consists of 15 grades.<sup>4</sup> In mid-December 2016 the first official confirmation of such plans was reported when General Zhang Yang, a member of CMC and Director of the CMC Political Work Department, told members of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress that "China will build a rank-centered military officer system (军衔主导的军官等级制度) that is fit for the construction of a modern armed force and, furthermore, that military rank will reflect officers' capabilities, identities and status". He added that ranks would determine career development, and that the appointment system would be rebuilt to promote "excellent" officers and professional training. In December 2019, the CMC issued a Notice on Adjusting the Policy Concerning the Promotion of Military Ranks of Officers at and above the Corps Level.<sup>5</sup> The Notice emphasized that the military would "adjust the military officers' promotion policy that is based on the military ranks system and takes into account the needs of officers with various ranks and categories. Starting with the reform of the ranks promotion system for commanding officers at and above the corps level, the Chinese military will streamline the corresponding relationship between military ranks and positions at various levels, so as to set an example and provide practical support for the revision and implementation of the Law on Officers."

Based on analysis of the last three groups of promotions (2021-2022), it appears that the PLA is gradually implementing the new rank-based system one step at a time. The first change appears to be that 3-star promotions now occur at the same time as a promotion in grade. Specifically, the seven officers identified above in the 2022 ceremony received their third star and assumed a new billet with the grade of TC leader. Each of them previously held TC deputy leader-grade billets. As such, it appears that TC leader-grade billets now only have one, rather than two, assigned ranks.

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<sup>3</sup> Since the rank-to-grade adjustment in 1994, all MR leader-grade officers in the PLA have received their third star

It appears that the next change will be to link all 2-star rank promotions and TC Deputy leader-grade promotions together. As shown in the bullets for the seven officers promoted in January 2022, three of the seven officers received their second star at the same time they received a grade promotion to TC Deputy leader-grade. In addition, the bullets for the seven officers indicate that the average time to receive a 3-star promotion that coincides with a grade promotion now appears to be only 2 to 2.5 years.

Historically, a one-star served 5-10 years before receiving the 2<sup>nd</sup> star. During that time, they would have served in two to three different Corps Leader-grade positions followed by a grade promotion to a MR/TC Deputy Leader-grade billet, still as a one star. After a year or two as a one-star in a MR/TC Deputy Leader-grade billet, they would be promoted to two-stars. As General Zhang Hongbing's promotion pattern, shown in the next section, demonstrates, the pattern for promotion to rank and grade for 2-stars and TC Deputy-level positions may also be changing from staggered to simultaneous. Changes to the promotion patterns such as this will most likely take several years to fully implement.

Officers normally have served in at least two TC Deputy Leader-grade billets before being promoted to a TC Leader-grade billet. In this round of promotions, however, five of the seven officers promoted served in only one TC Deputy Leader-grade billet before being promoted to a TC Leader-grade billet.

The bottom line is that, although the PLA has announced that it is shifting to a rank-based system and has apparently begun doing this at the TC Leader-grade level, there are still many hurdles it is facing in order to be able to fully implement it and, if it can actually fully implement it, it will take several years.

### **Officers who were promoted:**

**Admiral Liu Qingsong** (刘青松) (PLAN officer)<sup>6</sup>: Northern TC PC; DOB 11/1963 (58)

- 7/2018: (PLAN officer) Eastern TCN PC and concurrent Eastern TC Deputy PC (TC Dep Ldr grade)
- 1/2017: (PLAAF officer) PLAAF HQ PWD Deputy Director (Corps Ldr grade)
- 1/2016: (PLAAF officer) Northern TCAF PWD Director (Corps Ldr grade)
- 2nd-star promotion: 6/2019

**General Wu Yanan** (吴亚男) (PLAA officer)<sup>7</sup>: Central TC CDR; DOB 8/1962 (59)

- 12/2020: CMC JSD Deputy Chief of Staff (TC Dep Ldr grade)
- 4/2020: Northern TCA CDR and concurrent Northern TC Deputy CDR (TC Dep Ldr grade)
- 3/2017: 78th Group Army CDR (Corps Ldr grade)
- 2nd-star promotion: 4/2020

**General Xu Deqing (徐德清)** (PLAA officer)<sup>8</sup>: Central TC PC; DOB 7/1963 (58)

- 4/2018: Western TCA PC and concurrent Western TC Deputy PC (TC Dep Ldr grade)
- 3/2017: 71st Group Army PC (Corps Ldr grade)
- 8/2015: 47th Group Army PC (Corps Ldr grade)
- 2nd-star promotion: 6/2019

**General Qin Shutong (秦树)** (PLAA officer)<sup>9</sup>: PLA Army HQ PC; DOB 11/1963 (58)

- 4/2018: PLA Army HQ PWD Director (TC Dep Ldr grade)
- 3/2017: 75th Group Army PC (Corps Ldr grade)
- 9/2015: 1st Group Army PC (Corps Ldr grade)
- 2nd-star promotion: 6/2019

**Admiral Yuan Huazhi (袁华智)** (PLAN officer)<sup>10</sup>: PLA Navy HQ PC; DOB 10/1961 (60)

- 3/2019: (PLAN officer) PLA Navy HQ Deputy PC (TC Dep Ldr grade)
- 12/2018: (PLAAF officer) Eastern TCAF PC (TC Dep Ldr grade)
- 3/2017: (PLAN officer) Marine Corps HQ PC (Corps Ldr grade)
- 2nd-star promotion: 12/2019

**General Li Yuchao (李玉超)** (PLARF officer)<sup>11</sup>: PLARF HQ CDR; DOB 1963 (58)

- 4/2020: PLARF HQ Chief of Staff (TC Dep Ldr grade)
- 3/2017: PLARF 63rd Base CDR (Corps Ldr grade)
- 7/2016: PLARF 55th Base CDR (Corps Ldr grade)
- 2nd-star promotion: 4/2020

**General Zhang Hongbing (张红兵)** (PAP officer)<sup>12</sup>: PAP PC; DOB Unknown

- 12/2019: (Army officer) Eastern TCA PC and concurrent Eastern TC Deputy PC (TC Dep Ldr grade)
- 3/2017: (Army officer) 76th Group Army PC (Corps Ldr grade)
- 2014: (Army officer) 20th Group Army Political Department Director (Corps Dep Ldr grade)
- 2nd-star promotion: 12/2019

## PLA Grades and Ranks

Grade	Primary Rank	Secondary Rank
CMC Chairman (军委主席) Vice Chairmen (军委副主席)	N/A GEN (上将)	N/A
CMC Member (军委委员)	GEN (上将)	
TC Leader (正战区职) [Former MR Leader (正大军区职)]	GEN (上将)	LTG (中将)
TC Deputy Leader (副战区职) [Former MR Deputy Leader (副大军区职)]	LTG (中将)	MG (少将)
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 (排职)	2LT (少尉)	1LT (中尉)

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup><https://tv.cctv.com/2022/01/21/VIDEnQ8TREtw5KWQ43WbDwmj220121.shtml?spm=C31267.PXDChrDGdt.EbD5Beq0unIQ.5>. [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2022-01/21/content\\_10125550.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2022-01/21/content_10125550.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth W. Allen, “Assessing the PLA’s Promotion Ladder to CMC Member Based on Grades vs. Ranks,” Jamestown Foundation China Brief Part 1 (Volume 10, Issue 15, 22 July 2020) and Part 2 (Volume 10, Issue 16, 5 August 2010).

<sup>3</sup> See *Assessment of the PLA’s 3-Star Promotions in September 2021* accessed at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2780853/assessment-of-the-plas-3-star-promotions-in-september-2021/>.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Allen, “China Announces Reform of Military Ranks,” Jamestown Foundation China Brief, Volume 17, Issue 2, 30 January 2017. Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Sanders, “A New Step Forward in PLA Professionalization,” Jamestown Foundation China Brief, Volume 21, Issue 5, 15 March 2021.

<sup>5</sup> “China to reform military ranks promotion system,” 9 December 2019, accessed at [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-12/09/content\\_4856476.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-12/09/content_4856476.htm).

<sup>6</sup> [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/刘青松\\_\(解放军\)](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/刘青松_(解放军)).

<sup>7</sup> [https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/吴亚男\\_\(陆军\)](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/吴亚男_(陆军)).

<sup>8</sup> <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/徐德清>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/秦树桐>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/袁华智>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/李玉超>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/张红兵>.