



Reassessment of the CMC Member grade in the PLA

Kenneth W. Allen

Over the past 24 years, I have written multiple articles about the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) 15-grade structureⁱ, with an emphasis on how every organization, not just personnel, is assigned a grade. While reviewing the announcements from the recent 3rd Plenum, where the Minister of National Defense (MND), Admiral Dong Jun, was not promoted to the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), I wondered if there was an impact to MND itself. However, based on recent feedback from the Director of the USAF's China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI), Dr. Brendan Mulvaney, it appears that my previous assessments that attributed the CMC Member grade to organizations was incorrect. As Dr. Mulvaney pointed out, there appear to be no CMC Member grade organizations, but rather only CMC Member grade individuals.ⁱⁱ

If we look at the Theater Command (TC) Leader grade people and organizations, and even the former Military Region (MR) Leader grade, level personnel, there have been times when there were 'mis-matches' between people's organizations that they headed and their position as a member of the CMC. We typically refer to these as "policy promotions". It appears that every promotion to the CMC is in fact a policy promotion, there are no organizations at the CMC Member level, only people. As such, Dong Jun is not an outlier in this respect. While the Minister of Defense is typically also appointed to the CMC, but it isn't because of his role as the head of MND, it is because he is the person that the Secretary of the CMC wanted on the CMC. So, it is unusual that Dong Jun hasn't been elevated (personally) to CMC level, but that doesn't mean anything for MND's role in a more general way.

Previous articles and reports had mis-attributed the CMC Member grade to organizations themselves. For example, in 2010, I noted in a *China Brief* article entitled "Assessing the PLA's Promotion Ladder to CMC Member Based on Grades vs. Ranks"¹ that:

"A major difference between the U.S. military and the PLA is that the U.S. military assigns grades to officers and billets, but not to organizations, whereas

ⁱ Please see Appendix B of "Assessment of Simultaneous PLA 3-Star and Theater Command Leader-grade Promotions since 2019" for more information on the PLA Grade structure. Available at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/>

ⁱⁱ A special thanks to Dr. Mulvaney for brining this issue to light.

the PLA assigns grades to every officer and billet, *as well as* every organization (e.g. operational and support unit headquarters, academic institutions, and research institutions). With only a few exceptions, the organization's grade is the same as that of the commander and political commissar. For example:

- “The Four General Departments are all Central Military Commission (CMC) member-grade organizations, and each director is a CMC member-grade officer.
- “The PLA Navy (PLAN), Air Force (PLAAF) and Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) are Military Region (MR) leader-grade organizations, and each political commissar is an MR leader-grade officer; however, since 2004, each commander is currently a CMC member-grade officer based on a ‘policy promotion’ (政策升级).
- “The one exception is that the Ministry of National Defense (MND), which actually serves as the foreign affairs arm of the PLA, is not assigned a grade.”

Furthermore, Chapter 1 to the book entitled *The PLA as Organization v2.0*,² included the following incorrect assessment:

“The PLA has only a few anomalies shown below where the grade for senior officers and their organizations are not in synch:

- “Although the General Logistics Department (GLD) and General Armament Department (GAD) are CMC Member-grade organizations and their directors are CMC Member-grade officers, their political commissars hold the grade of MR leader.
- “Although the PLAN, PLAAF, and PLASAF are MR leader-grade organizations and their commanders became CMC Member-grade officers starting in 2004, their political commissars, who serve as the Party Committee secretary, are MR leader-grade officers.”

Following the PLA reorganization that began in December 2015 and the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress in October, when the commanders of the PLAN, PLAAF, and Rocket Force (PLARF), as well as the Directors of the CMC Logistic Support Department (LSD) and Equipment Development Department (EDD) were not added to the CMC as Members, the assessment was that the CMC's Joint Staff Department (JSD), Political Work Department (PWD), and Discipline Inspection Commission (DIC), whose leaders were CMC Members, were CMC Member-grade organizations and that LSD and EDD were “downgraded”.³ This now appears to be incorrect, and they are all, and always have been, Theater Command Leader Grade organizations.

This holds true for the former Four General Departments (GSD, GPD, GLD, and GAD), each with a grade of a Military Region Leader. This explains why each of their directors were

CMC Members, but the GLD and GAD Political Commissars (PC) were not CMC Members, the PCs held the grade of the organization, i.e. MR Leader, while the Directors received policy promotions to the CMC.

The current CMC JSD, PWD, and DIC, are Theater Command Leader-grade organizations, while their directors each have a policy promotion to CMC Member-grade personnel.

As for the status of the Ministry of National Defense and Defense Minister, the current 14th Defense Minister, Admiral Dong Jun, who assumed his position in December 2023 after his predecessor, General Li Shangfu, was arrested for corruption, has not yet been added as a CMC Member or as a State Councilor. As noted in the 2010 *China Brief* article, the Ministry of National Defense, serves as the main point of interaction between the PLA and the PRC government, and is the lead foreign affairs arm of the PLA, but is not assigned a grade. The Ministry of National Defense is a theater-level unit listed in the State Council sequence and is not a unit under the jurisdiction of the CMC. In fact, the Ministry of National Defense is not responsible for any specific warfighting functions, so it is not included in the CMC sequence. The Minister of National Defense usually concurrently serves by the Vice Chairman or Member of the CMC; but as we have seen, this is not always the case.

As it turns out, this means there are fewer exceptions to the rules than I had previously thought: the Commander, the PC, and the organization share the same grade; there are no CMC Member grade organizations; all personnel on the CMC receive a policy promotion to CMC member or CMC Vice Chairman grade, separate from their organization. Hopefully this helps clarify further analysis of the PLA command and control structure, organization, and personnel.

Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency. Cleared for public release: distribution unlimited.

¹ Kenneth W. Allen, “Assessing the PLA’s Promotion Ladder to CMC Member Based on Grades vs. Ranks,” Jamestown Foundation, *China Brief*, Part 1 (22 July 2010, Volume 10, Issue 15) and Part 2 (5 August 2010, Volume 10, Issue 16). Accessed at <https://jamestown.org/program/assessing-the-plas-promotion-ladder-to-cmc-member-based-on-grades-vs-ranks-part-1/> and <https://jamestown.org/program/assessing-the-plas-promotion-ladder-to-cmc-member-based-on-grades-vs-ranks-part-2/>.

² Kenneth W. Allen, “Introduction to the PLA’s Organizational Reforms: 2000-2012,” in Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen, eds., *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, (Vienna, VA: Defense Group Inc., 2015).

³ PLA as Organization v3.0: Post-Conference Report, Exovera, 13 May 2024, accessed at [Conference-Summary-Report_Final-20240624.pdf \(exovera.com\)](#).