

**NAVAL LEADERSHIP RESHUFFLE,
EVOLVING MARITIME STRATEGY
AND PROFESSIONALISATION**

LI Nan

EAI Background Brief No. 1240

Date of Publication: 27 April 2017

Executive Summary

1. An anticipated reshuffling of China's naval leadership took place in January 2017. Vice Admiral Yuan Yibai succeeded General Wang Jiaocheng as commander of the Southern Theatre of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), while Shen Jinlong replaced Wu Shengli as commander of the PLA Navy (PLAN).
2. Wang Hai became commander of PLAN's South Sea Fleet, and Zhang Wendan and Wei Gang took over as commanders of PLAN's East Sea Fleet and North Sea Fleet respectively.
3. Appointing a naval officer to command a theatre is unprecedented in PLA history, reflecting a shift in China's military posture from continental defence to maritime security.
4. Appointing a naval officer to command the Southern Theatre, whose primary missions concern the South China Sea, indicates the relative importance of the South China Sea as perceived by the PLA.
5. South China Sea is critical for its vital position straddling strategic sea lanes; its deep depth, immense space and unfettered transit to the Western Pacific for operating PLAN's strategic nuclear submarines and major surface ships; and US challenges to China's construction of artificial islands and facilities in the South China Sea.
6. Besides political considerations, functional and technical expertise-based, or professional criteria may play primary roles in the reshuffling of the upper-echelon PLAN leadership.
7. These criteria include expertise in operating and commanding major surface and subsurface combatants, commanding surface-subsurface and air-sea operations, planning and executing combined-arms exercises involving surface ships, submarines, naval combat aircraft and amphibious force, and carrying out missions

relating to counter-piracy, international or multinational naval exercises, and naval diplomacy.

8. The reshuffling of PLAN leadership has also presented major challenges. The decision to appoint a naval officer to command the Southern Theatre is clearly based on the institutional lens of the PLA, which sees South China Sea as a maritime arena of military competition.
9. The increased tension as a result clearly contradicts China's foreign policy goal of creating a benign external environment for developing China's economy. How to mitigate the narrow military perspective by strengthening civilian control of foreign policy constitutes a major challenge for China's leadership.