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China's New Military Leaders: Civil-Military Relations in Xi Jinping Era

By James Char

Synopsis

The recently-concluded 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party has confirmed Xi Jinping's dominance over the trident of party-state-military power. The downsizing of the Central Military Commission and its appointment of Xi's favoured generals endorsed his status as China's new strongman. Whether Xi can translate his huge clout into a fundamental transformation of the Chinese military remains to be seen.

Commentary

THE CHINESE Communist Party's (CCP) recently concluded 19th Congress all but confirmed Xi Jinping's status as China's new paramount leader since Deng Xiaoping. Alongside the promotion of his key aides – namely, Li Zhanshu and Zhao Leji – to the apex of Chinese politics that is the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, a cohort of new civilian leaders associated with Xi also gained membership in the elite 25-member Politburo.

The incorporation of the Chinese leader's eponymous governance philosophy *Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era* into the Party constitution was seen by analysts as conclusive evidence of his unassailable position in the CCP hierarchy. Besides rejecting the succession norms established by Deng, Xi's pre-eminent status in Chinese domestic politics is reflected in the revamped Central Military Commission (CMC) – the highest military authority that runs China's nearly 2.3 million-strong People's Liberation Army (PLA) for which Xi is commander-in-chief.

New Central Military Commission

Apart from reducing the number of uniformed members on the CMC from ten to six – Xu Qiliang, Zhang Youxia, Wei Fenghe, Li Zuocheng, Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin – Xi has further boosted his own politico-military clout whilst enhancing the efficiency of Chinese national security and foreign policymaking.

It is no coincidence that the new CMC membership is stacked with Xi Jinping's favoured generals. While the two CMC deputies – Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia – share a long association with Xi, the remaining members had either served in the former Nanjing Military Region (MR) encompassing Xi's former Fujian and Zhejiang strongholds; or have been groomed for higher office since Xi assumed the CMC leadership.

The career path of Xu Qiliang – now the CMC first vice-chair – had crossed with Xi's when the former PLA Air Force (PLAAF) commander was based in the 8th Corps in Fuzhou. A trusted general of Xi, Xu was made executive deputy leader of the Leading Group for National Defence and Military Reform even though he was then ranked below general Fan Changlong in the CMC.

Indeed, knowledgeable sources also attest to the PLAAF's role in providing Xi's security detail when he first became CMC chair. Additionally, in appointing Xu as China's top soldier, Xi has underscored that the PLA will shift from being a predominantly land-based power to a 'joint' military force.

The second-ranked Zhang Youxia is another core member of Xi's military allies. As a fellow princeling, Zhang shares close family ties with Xi since their fathers had been comrades-in-arms during the Chinese Civil War. An experienced and influential army officer, Zhang is believed to have been a key supporter of Xi's efforts to dismantle and reorganise the PLA's former general headquarters, military regions and service branches.

As the former director in charge of military hardware, Zhang can be also expected to play an important role as the PLA continues to improve its ability to conduct informationised warfare.

Rise of Xi's Younger Generals

As the first officer to be promoted by Xi to the rank of general, Wei Fenghe, who oversaw China's nuclear arsenal as chief of the PLA Rocket Force; and Miao Hua, a political commissar who rose from the 31st Group Army in the former Nanjing MR, are expected to improve the PLA's combat readiness and tighten the CCP's political control over the PLA, respectively.

Given how former political officers had failed in their duties to uphold the Party's ideological guidelines, Miao's role in strengthening CCP control over PLA organisational cohesion and personnel management will be especially crucial to Xi.

Li Zuocheng's inclusion also comes as no surprise in keeping with the commander-in-chief's calls for the PLA to become a modern military by 2035 and a world-class force by 2050. Appointed the head of the Joint Staff Department just prior to the recent

congress, and as one of two CMC members with combat experience (the other being Zhang Youxia), Li is an ideal candidate to enhance PLA professionalism.

Lastly, the elevation of Zhang Shengmin to the grade of CMC member also empowers the discipline and inspection functions of the CMC as the military continues to deepen its anti-graft drive.

Problems and Prospects in China's Civil-Military Relations

Whilst some pundits have questioned Xi Jinping's ability to assert civilian control over the PLA – with one analysis going as far as speculating that the recent China-India standoff in Doklam was the result of willful disobedience on the part of a former CMC member – such an assumption, however, cannot be verified. Truth be told, the CCP's civilian oversight over the PLA in the post-Reform era has never been stronger.

Since becoming CMC chairman, Xi has assiduously worked to harness the PLA as his personal powerbase by emphasising the 'CMC Chairman Responsibility System' (军委主席负责制) as well as enhanced the power of his office. Indeed, the trimming of the CMC follows his previous criticism that military elites (prior to the recent PLA reforms) had "accumulated too much power, gained too much autonomy and affected the CMC's unified leadership".

Just as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping had owed their political longevity to absolute authority over the Party's armed servants, Xi also appears to have won the PLA's backing to dominate China's political landscape for the foreseeable future. Xi achieved this through a combination of psychological intimidation and institutional mechanisms, embodied respectively in his signature anti-corruption campaign and unprecedented military reforms. In China, then, as it is now, whoever controls the PLA controls the CCP.

Notwithstanding the reliability of the new CMC members in enacting their chairman's directives to the best of their abilities, however, the risk of groupthink cannot be entirely discounted. Furthermore, Xi will also need to reconcile the competing needs for the Party's army to be both red and expert, as the politicization of an increasingly professional corps continues to intensify.

The real problem for Xi then, perhaps, is that when he does decide to retire, the centralization of power in himself will lead to civil-military challenges for his anointed successor.

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