

Statement before the  
U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission  
“CCP Decision-Making and the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress,”

A Testimony by:

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## Introduction and Main Points

Chairman Bartholomew, Vice Chairman Cleveland, and Commissioners, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

My testimony focuses on Chinese party-military relations. The four main questions I would like to address are:

1. How much does Xi trust the PLA to follow his directives and be politically loyal? Please address the significance of Xi reimplementing the “CMC Chairman responsibility system” in your response.
2. How much progress has Xi made in establishing his dual role as both the political leader and the operational leader of the PLA? Please explain how the emphasis given to each of his two military titles, CMC Chairman and Commander in Chief, has changed over time.
3. What are the critical positions in the military that Xi feels he needs to control? How successful has he been at installing individuals loyal to him into these positions? Who are the most important individuals on military decision-making other than Xi, and which are most trusted by Xi?
4. What were the goals and impacts of Xi’s anticorruption campaign with regards to China’s military and internal security forces?

## Xi Jinping and the CMC Chairman Responsibility System

On 25 October 2017, state media announced that Xi Jinping had been reappointed chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. The accompanying article recited all of Xi’s previous military positions throughout his career, once again striving to bolster his credentials to run the military.<sup>1</sup> Other articles credited him with promoting Zhang Shengmin, head of PLA Central Discipline Inspection Commission carrying out the anti-corruption campaign in the military, to be one of six uniformed members of CMC, along with Xu Qiliang, Zhang Youxia, Wei Fenghe, Li Zuocheng and Miao Hua.<sup>2</sup> Offering strategic guidance, Xi himself was quoted as declaring that “the military should make an all-out effort to become a world-class armed forces by 2050 and to strive for the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”<sup>3</sup> For the first time, he introduced new time thresholds for PLA development, asserting “...by 2020, the PLA will basically achieve its mechanization, make big strides in informatization, and gain substantial improvement in strategic capabilities...turn itself into a modernized power by 2035—as well as a long-term one—to become a top-tier military by

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<sup>1</sup> James Mulvenon, “Hotel Gutian: We Haven’t Had That Spirit Here Since 1929,” *China Leadership Monitor* 46, Winter 2015, accessed at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/hotel-gutian-we-havent-had-spirit-here-1929>

<sup>2</sup> “China Promotes Military Anti-Graft Chief to General,” *Xinhua*, 2 November 2017; “Nation's Top Military Body Appoints New General,” *China Daily*, 2 November 2017.

<sup>3</sup> “PLA To Be World Class Force By 2050,” *China Daily*, 27 October 2017; “China To Build World Class Armed Forces By Mid 21st Century: Xi,” *Xinhua*, 18 October 2017.

2050.”<sup>4</sup> Overall, the media coverage of the military aspects of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress left no doubt that Xi had retained unchallenged authority over the People’s Liberation Army.

In the two months prior to the Congress, a *Xinhua* and *Liberation Army Daily* team laid the propaganda groundwork for Xi’s dominance of the Congress and the consolidation of control of the CMC with a “joint” series on how Xi Jinping was “rejuvenating the military.”<sup>5</sup> Invoking the spirit of Gutian,<sup>6</sup>) the capstone article asserted that XJP is the CCP’s “core,” “focusing on the major issues of building the party with ideology and building the armed forces with politics under the new historical conditions.”<sup>7</sup> To that end, the article emphasized the “four awarenesses” (awareness of politics, the overall situation, the core, and aligning with the Central Committee) and claimed that military personnel “are self-aware of being loyal to the core, supporting the core, and safeguarding the core.”<sup>8</sup> In a nod to the dominant post-Congress theme, the authors asserted that “in staunchly safeguarding the core, the most important thing is resolutely safeguarding and implementing the CMC chairman's responsibility system.”<sup>9</sup> Specifically, the PLA is “accomplishing all the important items that Chairman Xi has determined, and doing all the work that Chairman Xi has put them in charge of, and in all their actions obeying Chairman Xi's commands.”<sup>10</sup> In case they missed the point, the article closed by demanding that the troops “resolutely respond to appeals from Chairman Xi, resolutely execute requirements put forward by Chairman Xi, and resolutely accomplish the assignments entrusted by Chairman Xi.”<sup>11</sup>

With this groundwork laid, Xi in his work report to the party congress provided an assessment of the current state of the PLA and laid out his vision for the military for the next thirty-plus years. At the strategic level, he linked the “realization of the Chinese dream” to “the dream of strengthening the military forces.”<sup>12</sup> For Xi, the PLA is a critical part of his objective to “realize the two centenary goals [toward which] to strive and to realize the strategic support of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Beginning with politics, he pointed to the 2014 All-Army Political Work Conference in Gutian as the start of the restoration of “the glorious tradition and fine work style of our party and our army.”<sup>13</sup> Then Xi lauded the reorganization of the PLA, repeating the structural triptych: “the Central Military Commission (CMC) is in charge of the overall affairs, the Theater Commands are in charge of warfare, and the branches of the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Xinhua* and *Liberation Army Daily* journalists, “Politics Builds an Army: Consolidate the Base, Make an Opening for the New, and Forever Forward -- The Leadership of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, with Comrade Xi Jinping as the Core, Carries Forward Strengthening and Rejuvenating the Army: Record of Actual Events Number Two,” *Xinhua*, 30 August 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid..

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Full Text of Report Delivered by Xi Jinping at 19th CPC National Congress,” *Xinhua*, 18 October 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

armed forces are in charge of army building.”<sup>14</sup> All of these moves support the objective “of build[ing] a people's army that obeys the commands from the party, is able to win battles, and has a fine work style, and to make the people's army a world-class armed force”<sup>15</sup> Xi also repeated his earlier timeline revision for PLA development, insisting that the PLA “ensure basic realization of mechanization by 2020” and make “major progress in informatization construction and a great rise in strategic capability.” By 2035, the PLA must “basically realize modernization of national defense and military” and by 2050 it must “comprehensively build the people's army as the world's first-rate army.”<sup>16</sup>

Within a day, PLA leaders began obsequiously praising Xi and his report. CMC Vice-Chairman Xu Qiliang lauded him as the “core of the party Central Committee, the core of the entire party, and commander (*tong shuai*) of the military,” and asserted that Xi “has won the heartfelt support of the entire party and military for his outstanding achievements in administering the party, the country, and the military.”<sup>17</sup> Fan Changlong took it to another level, referring to Xi Jinping in terms previously reserved for Chairman Mao, such as “leader (领袖, *lingxiu*).”<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, at a 31 October CMC study session, senior military leaders declared that PLA must follow the command of the CCP Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and its chairman Xi Jinping “at any time and in any circumstance.”<sup>19</sup> A 5 November CMC circular demanded that “the army should be absolutely loyal, honest and reliable to Xi,” and, most touchingly, asserted that “the army should follow Xi's command, answer to his order, and *never worry him* [emphasis added].”<sup>20</sup>

In a striking display of political authority, Xi was then successful in adding some surprising revisions to the CCP constitution, including his “Chinese dream of national rejuvenation.”<sup>21</sup> In terms of military-related issues, the Constitution was amended to include the follow statements:

The Communist Party of China shall uphold its absolute leadership over the People's Liberation Army and other people's armed forces; implement Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the military; strengthen the development of the People's Liberation Army by enhancing its political loyalty, strengthening it through reform and technology, and running it in accordance with the law; build people's forces that obey the Party's command, can fight and win, and maintain

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> “Fan Changlong, Xu Qiliang Attend Discussions of PLA Delegation to the 19th Party Congress,” *Xinhua*, 18 October 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Top Military Officials Pledge Loyalty To CPC, Xi,” *Xinhua*, 30 October 2017; “Top Military Officials Pledge Loyalty To CPC, Xi,” *China Daily* 31 October 2017.

<sup>20</sup> “PLA Builds Strong Army in New Era,” *Xinhua*, 15 November 2017.

<sup>21</sup> “Full Text Of Resolution On Amendment To CPC Constitution,” *China Daily*, 24 October 2017.

excellent conduct; ensure that the People's Liberation Army accomplishes its missions and tasks in the new era.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the document was revised in light of the PLA reorganization to charge the chairman of the Central Military Commission with overall responsibility over the work of the commission.<sup>23</sup> Right on cue, at the new Central Committee's First Plenum on 25 October, Xi Jinping was re-elected CMC chairman.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most striking features of the state media coverage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and its aftermath has been the escalation of cult of personality language to describe Xi Jinping as "leader" (领袖), often eerily reminiscent of Mao-era terminology. At its high point at the dawn of the Cultural Revolution, for example, Mao was glorified as the "great leader, great commander-in-chief, great helmsman and great teacher (伟大的领袖, 伟大的统帅, 伟大舵手, 伟大的导师)."<sup>25</sup> In *People's Daily*, the party's most authoritative mouthpiece, only Mao and his Soviet counterpart Stalin have been officially referred to as a "great *lingxiu*".<sup>26</sup> When Fidel Castro died in 2016, Xi called him the "great *lingxiu* of the people of Cuba" in his condolences for the communist revolutionary, which were reported by *People's Daily*.<sup>27</sup>

Before the party congress, Xi himself had been sporadically been referred to as "*lingxiu*" in official media, including by state news agency Xinhua and state broadcaster CCTV. During and after the congress, however, at least three members of the Politburo, two generals and eight provincial party bosses referred to Xi as "*lingxiu*,"<sup>28</sup> which University of Oxford Professor Rana Mitter assesses having a "rather more spiritual, grander air" than the more widely used word "*lingdao*" (领导)<sup>29</sup> Beijing party chief Cai Qi, a protégé of Xi's since the early 1990s, hailed him as a "wise *lingxiu*," which is a term ironically that had only previously been used for Mao's aborted successor Hua Guofeng.<sup>30</sup> Politburo member Sun Chunlan told the press that "with Secretary General Xi Jinping as the *lingxiu* and core (核心) to take the helm, our party and country will certainly brave all winds and waves and be invincible in our cause."<sup>31</sup>

The PLA media also went into overdrive about Xi during and after the Congress, devoting entire front pages to his pictures and words. But the most interesting theme was a reprise about the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "Xi's Thought And 'Absolute' Party Leadership of PLA Written Into the Constitution," *China Daily*, 24 October 2017; "Xi's Military Thinking, Party's 'Absolute' Leadership Over Army Written Into CPC Constitution," *Xinhua*, 24 October 2017.

<sup>24</sup> "Xi Jinping Named Chairman of CPC Central Military Commission," *Xinhua*, 25 October 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Nectar Gan, "What Do You Call Xi Jinping? China's Elite Echo Language of Mao To Sing the Praises of Their 'Leader...,'" *South China Morning Post*, 22 October 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

so-called “CMC chairman responsibility system” (军委主席负责制, hereafter referred to as CRS). The term began to be used in earnest to describe Xi’s dominant role in the PLA in late 2014 in the run-up to the seminal November 2014 Gutian Conference on political work.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to what had previously been described somewhat derisively as the “CMC vice-chairman responsibility system” in the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras, the CRS appeared at first to be “another piece of Xi Jinping’s ongoing effort to consolidate his leadership power, with specific focus on consolidating his actual control over the PLA during a period of both aggressive modernization and political turmoil caused by the anti-corruption campaign.”<sup>33</sup>

In the 2014 telling, the CRS had multiple key features. First, the buck stops at the chairman’s desk, as ultimately “all significant issues in national defense and Army building [are] planned and decided by the CMC chairman.”<sup>34</sup> PLA personnel are also encouraged to develop a “commander in chief mentality.”<sup>35</sup> Once the decision has been made, the chairman conducts “concentrated unified leadership” and “efficient command” of the entire military.<sup>36</sup> As a result, the PLA is more likely to carry out the “comprehensive, accurate, timely and effective implementation of the resolute intent and strategic directives of the CMC chairman.”<sup>37</sup> If for some reason the implementation is delayed or obstructed, the “CMC chairman responsibility system” provides for “supervision” and “inspection” mechanisms to identify the source of resistance to the chairman’s instructions and break the logjam.<sup>38</sup>

On 7 November 2017, the Central Military Commission promulgated the “CMC Opinion on Chairman Responsibility System,” formalizing many of these concepts in an official document, though with an appropriately grandiose tone:

The CMC's implementation of the chairman responsibility system is a major achievement made by the party and the state in the long-term development of the military leadership system and a condensation of the valuable experiences and fine tradition of our party in the building and administration of the armed forces. The comprehensive deepening of the implementation of the CMC chairman responsibility system concerns the fundamental direction of the building of the

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<sup>32</sup> See James Mulvenon, “Hotel Gutian: We Haven’t Had That Spirit Here Since 1929,” *China Leadership Monitor* 46, 19 March 2015, accessed at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/hotel-gutian-we-havent-had-spirit-here-1929>

<sup>33</sup> James Mulvenon, “The Yuan Stops Here: Xi Jinping and the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System,” *China Leadership Monitor* 47, 14 July 2015, accessed at: <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm47jm.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> “The Work System Must Be Made Stricter and More Realistic.” [Source?]

<sup>35</sup> Li Chunguo and Liu Peijun, “Nanjing Military Region Holds 4th Plenary (Enlarged) Meeting of Its 12th CPC Committee to Sum Up 2014 Work, Arrange 2015 Tasks, Emphasizing the Need to Clearly See the Situation and the Tasks, Firmly Keep in Mind the Missions and the Important Responsibility, Build a Strong Force for Performing Heavy Tasks for Military Strengthening,” *人民前线(People’s Frontline)*, 1 January 2015.

<sup>36</sup> “The Work System Must Be Made Stricter and More Realistic.”

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

people's army, concerns the development of the cause of making the country and the armed forces strong for a new era, concerns the long-term stability of the party and country, and concerns the future destiny of socialism with Chinese characteristics... We must, with the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, comprehensively implement Xi Jinping's thought on making the armed forces strong; comprehensively implement the fundamental principle and the system of the party's absolute leadership over the armed forces; provide firm support for the implementation of the CMC chairman responsibility system in politics, ideology, organization, system, and work style; and ensure that the entire armed forces are absolutely loyal, absolutely pure, and absolutely reliable as well as resolutely follow the command of and are responsible to Chairman Xi, enabling Chairman Xi to feel assured.<sup>39</sup>

The "Opinion" also puts forth the specific requirements for the whole armed forces at all levels to comprehensively deepen the implementation of the CMC Chairman responsibility system.<sup>40</sup>

The most detailed explication of the CRS so far can be found in an article on the People's Armed Police (PAP) in the Central Party School theoretical journal, *Xuexi Shibao*.<sup>41</sup> The article begins by explicitly linking the authority of the CMC chairman to the "core" of the party leadership, cementing the legitimacy of Xi's power in both military and party realms:

What is most fundamental is that we must resolutely safeguard the authority, safeguard the core, and safeguard and implement the CMC chairman responsibility system and, while in the midst of resolutely safeguarding and implementing the CMC chairman responsibility system, enhance [our] ideological and operational awareness of safeguarding the authority and safeguarding the core.<sup>42</sup>

It then draws a direct connection between the CRS and the requirement for absolute command and control of China's military forces:

Only by resolutely safeguarding and implementing the CMC chairman responsibility system can we then centralize the highest decision-making authority and command authority in the party's Central Committee, the CMC, and Chairman Xi, thus assuring that the entire military and the PAP, under the

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<sup>39</sup> "CMC Issues Opinions on Comprehensively Implementing CMC Chairman Responsibility System," *Xinhua*, 5 November 2017; and "Central Military Commission Issues the 'Opinion on Comprehensively Deepening the Implementation of the Central Military Commission Chairman Responsibility System,'" *Jiefangjun Bao*, 5 November 2017, p.1.

<sup>40</sup> "CMC Issues Opinions on Comprehensively Implementing CMC Chairman Responsibility System," *Xinhua*, 5 November 2017.

<sup>41</sup> "Resolutely Safeguard and Implement the Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman Responsibility System to Ensure Absolute Leadership of the Party Over the Armed Police," *Xuexi Shibao*, 7 November 2017.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

absolute leadership of the party, are highly centralized and united, march to the same drummer, guarantee the PAP's effective implementation of its missions and responsibilities to safeguard national security and social stability.<sup>43</sup>

Piling on, the authors then assert that the CRS is critical for the PLA's anti-corruption campaign and fighting factionalism:

This [safeguarding and implementing the CMC chairman responsibility system] is really needed for comprehensively and completely eradicating the pernicious influence of Guo [Boxiong] and Xu [Caihou] and for returning the armed forces to their traditional true qualities. In a past period, Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou nullified and weakened the CMC chairman responsibility system, seriously violated the political bottom line, and put the armed forces in a very precarious situation. The party Central Committee and Chairman Xi decisively investigated and dealt with Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, improved the work-style of the CMC chairman absolute authority from top to bottom, punished corruption, eradicated pernicious influences, and at a critical moment saved the party and the armed forces. Only by resolutely safeguarding and implementing the CMC chairman responsibility system can we then ensure that the gun is forever grasped by the reliable hands of people loyal to the party and ensure that our red land never changes color.<sup>44</sup>

For good measure, the article then throws in some structural Marxist and institutionalist justifications for the leadership configuration:

The CMC chairman responsibility system organically combines Marxist political party and state doctrines as well as China's national, party, and military conditions to reflect the inevitable internal connections among the party, the state, and the armed forces. Just for this very reason, the party's CMC from beginning to end is the party Central Committee's supreme military leadership mechanism and, in establishing the national CMC, the party's CMC Chairman, after election by the National People's Congress, assumes the office of chairman of the state CMC. By means of this kind of systemic design and arrangement, there is established a unified party and state supreme military leadership structure that, from the highest leadership levels, ensures that China's army is forever the party's armed power, the people's armed power, and the socialist state's armed power.<sup>45</sup>

And for the historical determinists in the audience, it provides the appropriately bracing cautionary tales from the past:

Zhang Guotao premeditated [a plan] to split the party and the Red Army, Lin Biao conspired and schemed for an armed *coup d'état*. In the end, however, they did

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



not prevail [because] fundamentally the CMC chairman responsibility system played the role of a "secret weapon."<sup>46</sup>

In order to implement the CRS, the article also suggests a self-improvement regimen for the reader that involves counting on all ten fingers:

Earnestly implement the requirements of the "five musts" [must uphold the Central Committee's authority, party unity, organizational procedure, organizational decisions, and must control relatives and close colleagues] and the "five never allows" [never allow deviating from the Central Committee's requirements, cultivating personal power, making a decision without authorization, engaging in non-organizational activities, and never allow the monopolization of power, interference in government, or seeking personal gain].<sup>47</sup>

Finally, the article offers some recommended readings for extra credit, including "Xi Jinping's Discussion of Governing the Nation and Managing State Affairs" and "Xi Jinping's Discourse on a Powerful and Rejuvenated Military."<sup>48</sup>

The propaganda emphasis on the "chairman responsibility system" in PLA media and Party journals matches the tone and content of the broader 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress meme of "Xi in command" with the not-so-subtle overtones of "Xi as the new Mao." But how is this working in practice? One expert observer with apparently excellent sources offers a portrait of a hands-on leader making decisions:

The so-called "CMC chairman responsibility system" means that in all the issues of discussions, the final decision-making authority lies with Xi Jinping. At present, Xi goes to the CMC administrative building at least twice a week and he was there even more often during the military reforms. Some of the plans were even proposed by Xi himself, while the CMC members were only passing 'such proposals.'<sup>49</sup>

The same analyst notes that the consolidation of the four general departments into a "super CMC" means that the CMC Chairman has even more authority and span of control than before the reorganization, making the CRS even more significant for party-military relations and command and control of the military in peacetime, crisis, and war.<sup>50</sup> Yet the entire edifice raises the same questions plaguing observers of the wider Chinese political landscape: has Xi genuinely consolidated power for the next five years and beyond, or are we too influenced by the press releases? Will there be any elite backlash or counter-reaction to the seemingly heavy-handed and

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> "CMC Chairman Accountability System and China's Diplomacy," *Kanwa Asian Defense Review*, 1 April 2017, No. 150, pp.32-35.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

atavistic cult of personality content in the propaganda apparatus? Does the non-stop demand for the PLA to obey Xi's commands actually have the opposite intended effect, perhaps raising doubts about the legitimacy of his authority because he protest too much? Probably too early to draw conclusions, but the CRS process itself does suggest one troubling implication: Xi's erection of the "chairman responsibility system" could provide an additional institutional rationale in five years for his continued exercise of power over the military, in contravention of the previous age-based and position-based institutional norms about retreating to second-line (到二线) elder status like Jiang or Hu. From that vantage point, Xi could then overcome whatever party opposition he faces for a third term as general secretary or even "general secretary for life."

### **Xi Jinping as Commander in Chief**

On 20 April 2016, Xi Jinping formally inspected the Central Military Commission's (CMC) joint battle command center (军委联合作战指挥中心). The event was broadcast on national television,<sup>51</sup> and he was accompanied by all members of the CMC,<sup>52</sup> signifying the importance of the event. His visit was notable for many reasons, including the public glimpse of the command center itself, Xi's decision to wear the PLA's new digital camouflage uniform instead of his usual green tunic, and most strikingly, the commentary's description of Xi using the new nomenclature "commander-in-chief of the CMC Joint Operations Center (军委联指总指挥)." The latter announcement produced a bow wave of foreign press coverage, propelled by an unusual break in the standard atmosphere of military secrecy and the insatiable prurience of Pekingologists eager to ascribe significance to subtle terminological distinctions.<sup>53</sup>

Xi's visit to the command center began predictably enough, greeting on-site personnel and observing them working at their duty stations.<sup>54</sup> It was striking that he wore a green military uniform for the occasion, rather than his usual black or green *zhongshanzhuang*. The uniform itself modeled the PLA's new digital camouflage pattern, though without any rank insignia. While some observers asserted that this was the first time he had worn a military uniform, official Chinese media clarified that this was "the first time a Chinese president had inspected a

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<sup>51</sup> Li Xuanliang and Li Yun, "Xi Jinping Inspects CMC Joint Operations Command Center on the Morning of 20 April," *Xinhua*, 20 April 2016; "President Xi Visits Joint Battle Command Center," *Xinhua*, 20 April 2016.

<sup>52</sup> CMC Vice-Chairs Fan Changlong and Xu Qiliang, as well as other CMC members Chang Wanquan, Fang Fenghui, Zhang Yang, Zhao Keshi, Zhang Youxia, Wu Shengli, Ma Xiaotian, Wei Fenghe.

<sup>53</sup> "China's Xi Jinping Takes Commander in Chief Military Title," BBCnews, 21 April 2016; Austin Ramzy, "China's President, Xi Jinping, Gains a New Title: Commander in Chief," *New York Times*, 21 April 2016; "Xi Jinping Named as 'Commander in Chief' by Chinese State Media," *The Guardian*, 21 April 2016; Jeremy Page, "China's Xi Adds 'Commander-in-Chief' to His Titles," *Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 2016; Ankit Panda, "Xi Jinping Has a New Title: Commander-in-Chief of the People's Liberation Army," *TheDiplomat.com*, 22 April 2016; Kayleigh Lewis, "Chinese President Xi Jinping Named as Military's 'Commander-in-Chief'," *The Independent*, 23 April 2016; Eric Baculinao, "China's President Xi's New Role: Military Commander-in-Chief," *NBC News*, 21 April 2016; Ed Adamczyk, "Chinese President Xi Jinping Takes Title of Commander in Chief," *UPI.com*, 21 April 2016;

<sup>54</sup> Li Xuanliang and Li Yun, "Xi Jinping Inspects CMC Joint Operations Command Center on the Morning of 20 April," *Xinhua*, 20 April 2016.

top military body in a combat uniform and the second time Xi had appeared in public in such a uniform.”<sup>55</sup> Retired PLA major general Xu Guangyu insisted the uniform matched the “battle commander” context of the venue and the meeting:

Xi's camouflage military suit showed that he is top commander of the PLA's supreme joint battle command body, which was set up to meet today's modern warfare demands, and is capable of commanding land, navy and air forces, as well as other special troops like the Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force. It [was a meeting for battle commanders] as other CMC members and senior officials participating were all wearing the camouflage uniform.<sup>56</sup>

In a separate article, *China Daily* averred that Xi had in fact worn “a camouflage uniform for the first time in January 2014 when he inspected a border defense regiment in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region,” but did not provide an explanation for why he initially wore the uniform in 2014 in such an obscure context, or why he had not worn it again during the intervening 26 months.<sup>57</sup>

Things veered sharply away from the normal inspection script, however, when Xi “sat down at the seat for ‘commander-in-chief’ (总指挥),” listened to a report by the CMC Joint Operations Command Center about the current situation, and received briefings from the commanders of each of the newly established north, south, east, west and central theater commands via video links.<sup>58</sup> The word “seat” is a bit of an understatement, as the accompanying video shows Xi on a raised throne-like dais facing the entire room of military officers. PRC official media immediately trumpeted Xi’s new title of “commander-in-chief,” which was explicitly added to his traditional three titles of CCP General-Secretary, PRC state president, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. One *Xinhua* article muddies the issue by referring to him as “commander-in-chief of China's armed forces,”<sup>59</sup> but all of the other sources are consistent.

After listening to the situation reports from personnel at the central and then theater command level, Xi made a speech of his own. The themes of his speech fall into two broad categories. The first addressed the emerging development of the joint battle command system itself, which is clearly a top priority of the PLA’s reorganization.<sup>60</sup> Xi called on the audience to build a joint battle command system “with Chinese characteristics,” the standard code-phrase for not slavishly copying foreign examples like the US Joint Staff at the expense of China’s own unique “conditions.”<sup>61</sup> He exhorted them to build a “professional and efficient” system<sup>62</sup> that “meets the

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<sup>55</sup> “President Xi urges stronger military,” *China Daily*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Minnie Chan, “China's President Xi Steps Out With A New Military Title – And The Uniform To Match,” *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>57</sup> “President Xi urges stronger military,” *China Daily*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Li Xuanliang and Li Yun, “Xi Jinping Inspects CMC Joint Operations Command Center on the Morning of 20 April,” *Xinhua*, 20 April 2016.

<sup>59</sup> “Xi Brings Strength, Integrity to Chinese Armed Forces,” *Xinhua*, 30 July 2016.

<sup>60</sup> “Xi Stresses Joint Battle Command for Military Reform,” *Xinhua*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>61</sup> “Xi Stresses Joint Battle Command for Military Reform,” *Xinhua*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>62</sup> “President Xi urges stronger military,” *China Daily*, 21 April 2016.

needs of fighting and winning an informatized war.”<sup>63</sup> Specifically Xi highlighted that one of the goals of the recent reforms was to “strengthen the capabilities of the CMC Joint Command Headquarters” itself, which he had apparently appointed himself to command.<sup>64</sup> Small wonder he also exhorted the military personnel of this joint battle command system to be “absolutely loyal” to the CCP, which he coincidentally also leads.<sup>65</sup>

The second theme concerned the characteristics and expectations for the joint battle command system’s personnel. Xi told them to “regard their positions at the headquarters as their combat positions on the battlefield,” doing their part to “resolutely safeguard the country’s sovereignty, security, and development interests.”<sup>66</sup> He called for officers to have “a clear sense of crisis,” honing their “ability for informatized warfare.”<sup>67</sup> Xi promised “special measures” to train personnel for joint operations, as well as acceleration of “the development and deployment of advanced military technologies.”<sup>68</sup> In particular, he called for this training to implement “the military strategies under the new situation” and focus on the “core key functions of studying and commanding wars.”<sup>69</sup>

Outside observers offered a wide range of opinions about the significance of Xi Jinping’s new title of “commander-in-chief.” Liang Guoliang notes the choice of official *Xinhua* translation, comparing the new title to the US president’s position as the “commander-in-chief” of the country’s armed forces.<sup>70</sup> Xu Guangyu contrasts it with his CMC chairmanship, insisting that the “CMC is responsible for the PLA’s management and defense building, while the joint battle command center focuses on combat and relevant strategies.”<sup>71</sup> In addition, the linking of the new title to the venue of the joint battle command center suggest that it is a wartime command role, whereas his title of CMC Chairman represents his CCP-derived “political” leadership of the military in peacetime. You Ji calls the title a “symbol of ultimate command and control of the armed forces,”<sup>72</sup> while others go further and insist that it shows Xi “is not only the political and administrative leader of China but also its overall military commander.”<sup>73</sup> Some analysts provided the evidence-free assertion that the move showed Xi had “built up a level of personal authority over troops on par with late leaders such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping,” while

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<sup>63</sup> “Xi Stresses Joint Battle Command for Military Reform,” *Xinhua*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>64</sup> “President Xi urges stronger military,” *China Daily*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>65</sup> “Xi Stresses Joint Battle Command for Military Reform,” *Xinhua*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>66</sup> “President Xi urges stronger military,” *China Daily*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>67</sup> “President Xi urges stronger military,” *China Daily*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>68</sup> “President Xi urges stronger military,” *China Daily*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>69</sup> “Xi Stresses Joint Battle Command for Military Reform,” *Xinhua*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Minnie Chan, “China’s President Xi Steps Out With A New Military Title – And The Uniform To Match,” *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Minnie Chan, “China’s President Xi Steps Out With A New Military Title – And The Uniform To Match,” *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Austin Ramzy, “China’s President, Xi Jinping, Gains a New Title: Commander in Chief,” *New York Times*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Eric Baculinao, “China’s President Xi’s New Role: Military Commander-in-Chief,” *NBC News*, 21 April 2016;

others saw the move primarily as a denigration of the circumscribed authority of Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin over the PLA during their tenures.<sup>74</sup>

Some observers instead focused on the message to the outside world; namely that “Xi was not only the top administrative leader of the world's biggest army, but also the chief commander of the fighting force.”<sup>75</sup> Some even went so far as to say that “his appearance in military fatigues may also be a display of strength aimed at China's rivals.”<sup>76</sup> Others focused on the implications of the title for PLA modernization. The BBC opined that the title showed “China is modernizing its armed forces fast, and Xi Jinping is at the center of that change.”<sup>77</sup> Zhang Lifan, a noted political historian takes a comparative view, arguing that “by reforming the old military command and serving as commander-in-chief, he was discarding the old Soviet-style structure and emulating the U.S. model of joint command for faster execution of decision.”<sup>78</sup> Michael Raska agrees, positing that “this long, funky title is part of accelerating reforms at the operational level.”<sup>79</sup> Andrei Chang, however, cautioned against over-emphasizing the military aspect of the announcement, insisting that Xi's new title remains “more political than military” and doesn't imply “he will take charge of the day-to-day running of the PLA.”<sup>80</sup> Instead Chang asserts the visit was designed “to show off his muscle to his potential enemies and show that he is tough and in charge.”<sup>81</sup> Dennis Wilder also points to the broader party-military dynamic as well as leadership concerns about social stability, arguing

By donning both military fatigues and a new title, Xi may be sending a signal to the military that he intends to exercise closer control than other leaders have done in the past...Xi's move is therefore also a signal to the wider society and his rivals within the regime that he can and will use force to counter domestic challenges.<sup>82</sup>

In the end, however, I think Xi's decision to wear a military uniform actually signals the weakness and dysfunction of the Chinese system, rather than its strength. In more mature and resilient political systems, such as the United States or countries in Western Europe, the civilian

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<sup>74</sup> Minnie Chan, “China's President Xi Steps Out With A New Military Title – And The Uniform To Match,” *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>75</sup> Minnie Chan, “China's President Xi Steps Out With A New Military Title – And The Uniform To Match,” *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>76</sup> “China's Xi Jinping Takes Commander in Chief Military Title,” BBCnews, 21 April 2016;

<sup>77</sup> “China's Xi Jinping Takes Commander in Chief Military Title,” BBCnews, 21 April 2016;

<sup>78</sup> Eric Baculinao, “China's President Xi's New Role: Military Commander-in-Chief,” *NBC News*, 21 April 2016;

<sup>79</sup> Austin Ramzy, “China's President, Xi Jinping, Gains a New Title: Commander in Chief,” *New York Times*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Eric Baculinao, “China's President Xi's New Role: Military Commander-in-Chief,” *NBC News*, 21 April 2016;

<sup>81</sup> Eric Baculinao, “China's President Xi's New Role: Military Commander-in-Chief,” *NBC News*, 21 April 2016;

<sup>82</sup> Andrew Nathan and Tai Ming Cheung, “Xi Jinping's New Military Position: A ChinaFile Conversation,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 May 2016.

political leadership does not feel compelled to don the garb of their professional armed forces, primarily because of their confidence in the mechanisms of civilian control of the military and the popular legitimacy of their governments but also because it would be perceived as an insult to the professional officer corps. By contrast, the adoption of military uniforms by political leaders is common in shallow, tinpot dictatorships where their tenuous, personalized grasp on power lacks institutional or popular legitimacy. In some cases, such as Libya under Gaddafi or his fictional representation as Admiral General Aladeen in *The Dictator*, the leader even feels compelled to design outlandish, garish uniforms for himself with unearned medals and ranks in a spasm of overcompensation. In this case, Xi went with the more understated choice of camouflage with no rank insignia, but it still prompts the same question: if you need to announce that you are appointing yourself “commander-in-chief,” are you really?

### **Xi Jinping and Key Appointments**

In October 2017 at the first plenary session of the 19th Central Committee, Chinese state media announced the lineup of the new Central Military Commission (CMC). While a smaller CMC had been rumored in the weeks prior, the new configuration shattered previous paradigms of military leadership. Not only was the number of members reduced from eleven to seven, but there was a wholesale change in the assignment of seats by office, reflecting the tectonic changes from the PLA’s massive reorganization.<sup>83</sup> This section of my testimony examines the transition, analyzes the individuals chosen and the logic for their selection, and assesses the implications for party-Army relations.

The prescribed makeup of the CMC, as promulgated in the PRC Constitution, is flexibly vague. According to Article 93,

The Central Military Commission of the People’s Republic of China directs the armed forces of the country. The Central Military Commission is composed of the following: Chairman; Vice-Chairmen; and Members. The Chairman of the Central Military Commission has overall responsibility for the commission. The term of office of the Central Military Commission is the same as that of the National People’s Congress.<sup>84</sup>

The constitution does not specify the number of “members,” nor does it specify the ex officio positions those members need to hold within the military. Frankly, the ambiguity of the language could even be flexible enough to accommodate previously unseen configurations, such as “co-chairman” or a single vice-chairman. As a result, the “drop” from eleven to seven members does not by itself have any institutional significance, particularly when compared with Xi Jinping’s counter-norm move to eliminate the two-term rule in the constitution. Indeed, the prior 11

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<sup>83</sup> James Mulvenon, “China’s ‘Goldwater-Nichols’? The Long-Awaited PLA Reorganization Has Finally Arrived,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 49, Winter 2016, accessed at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-goldwater-nichols-long-awaited-pla-reorganization-has-finally-arrived>.

<sup>84</sup> “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China,” accessed at: <http://en.people.cn/constitution/constitution.html>.

members of the 18th Central Military Commission was an historical outlier, and the CMC since the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre was consistently smaller.

Instead, the much more interesting dynamic is the change in the military positions of those officers appointed to the CMC, driven most persuasively by the actual top-level organization of the PLA rather than political considerations. Appendix A delineates the titles of every member of the CMC since the 14th Party Congress in 1992. The 14th through 16th CMC memberships clearly reflect the dominance of the General Department system, with the traditional dual vice-chairmen honchoing operational and political issues, respectively, a minister of defense handling external military relations, and the heads of the four General Departments rounding out the group. The 17th and 18th CMCs in retrospect now appear to be transitional configurations for the Xi Jinping reorganization, with the configuration from the 14th through 16th CMCs supplemented by the commanders of the respective armed service branches to inject more jointness into the national command structure. The 19th CMC, by contrast, reflects the “demotion” of the General Departments to departments under the CMC, the “demotion” of the armed service branches to “train and equip” organizations, and the heightened political significance of the anti-corruption investigation. As a result, the 19th CMC includes Chairman Xi, the traditional dual vice-chairmen (Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia),<sup>85</sup> a minister of defense (Wei Fenghe) overseeing a supposedly expanded scope of responsibilities, the directors (Li Zuocheng and Miao Hua) of the two most powerful CMC departments (Joint Staff and Political Work), and the head of the PLA Commission for Discipline Inspection (Zhang Shengmin).<sup>86</sup> At 67 years of age, Xu and Zhang are the oldest of the seven members, suggesting that Xi followed the party’s unwritten “seven up, eight down” rule, which means leaders aged up to 67 can stay on for another term while those 68 or older must retire.<sup>87</sup>

*Meet the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress Central Military Commission!*<sup>88</sup>

**Vice-Chairman Xu Qiliang (许其亮).** Xu Qiliang, like many prominent military leaders over the years, hails from Shandong Province. Born in 1950, he joined the Air Force at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, when it was a powerful political entity under Marshal Lin Biao’s son, Lin Liguo. After three years of schooling, which was notable in a time when most technical schools were closed and “experts” were suspect, Xu became an aviator. For the next 30 years he systematically worked his way through increasingly senior Air Force command positions, with predictable stops along the way at National Defense University from 1986 to 1988. Xu’s career intersected with Xi Jinping when became commander of the PLAAF’s Eighth

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<sup>85</sup> Liu Zhen, “What Changes at The Top Mean for China’s Military,” *South China Morning Post*, 26 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2116856/what-changes-top-mean-chinas-military>.

<sup>86</sup> Minnie Chan, “Xi Jinping Rolls Out Leaner Top Line Up for China’s Military Machine,” *South China Morning Post*, 26 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2117004/xi-jinping-rolls-out-leaner-top-line-chinas-military>.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Most biographical data in this section is taken from *China Vitae*, accessible at: <http://chinavitae.com>.

Corps, based in Fuzhou, in late 1989, while Xi became the city's party head in 1990.<sup>89</sup> After serving as PLAAF chief of staff in the mid- to late 1990s, Xu finally made the transition to the military region level, promoted to deputy commander of the Shenyang Military Region and then commander of the Shenyang MR Air Force. He then made the leap to Beijing, posted first as a deputy chief of the General Staff, then commander of the PLAAF and a member of the Central Military Commission. In 2012, he was elevated to be a vice-chairman of the CMC as well as a deputy director of the Leading Group for Deepening Reform in National Defense. He is currently one of two PLA officers on the Politburo and the first non-ground officer to be vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission.

**Vice-Chairman Zhang Youxia (张又侠).** Zhang Youxia was born in Weinan City, Shaanxi Province, in 1950. His father was Zhang Zongxun, who commanded the Northeast Army Corps in the late 1940s, when Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun, who also hailed from Weinan, was its political commissar.<sup>90</sup> One PLA officer describes Zhang and Xi as "sworn brothers" because of their mutual experience of suffering through their father's purges during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>91</sup> Zhang joined the PLA in December 1968 and joined the CCP in May 1969.<sup>92</sup> Little is known about his early years in the PLA, except that he worked his way through the 14th Group Army to eventually command the 40<sup>th</sup> Division. He did two tours during the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979-84) and is described as having performed with "meritorious service."<sup>93</sup> From 1994 to 2005, Zhang was deputy commander and then commander of the 13<sup>th</sup> Group Army.<sup>94</sup> In 2005, Zhang moved to the military region level, posted first as deputy commander of the Beijing MR and then commander of the Shenyang MR. In 2012, he was elevated to the Central Military Commission and appointed director of the General Armaments Department, overseeing military research, development, and acquisition.

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<sup>89</sup> Minnie Chan, "General Xu Qiliang: How a Chinese Air Force Top Gun Shot to the Top of Military," *South China Morning Post*, 25 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2116939/general-xu-qiliang-how-chinese-air-force-top-gun-shot>

<sup>90</sup> Minnie Chan, "General Zhang Youxia: Xi Jinping's 'Sworn Brother' Now His Deputy on China's Top Military Body," *South China Morning Post*, 25 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2116936/general-zhang-youxia-xi-jinpings-sworn-brother-now-his>

<sup>91</sup> Minnie Chan, "General Zhang Youxia: Xi Jinping's 'sworn brother' now his deputy on China's top military body," *South China Morning Post*, 25 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2116936/general-zhang-youxia-xi-jinpings-sworn-brother-now-his>

<sup>92</sup> "Zhang Youxia -- Member of Political Bureau of CPC Central Committee," *China Daily*, 26 October 2017, accessed at: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-10/26/content\\_33723562.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-10/26/content_33723562.htm)

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<sup>94</sup> "Zhang Youxia -- Member of Political Bureau of CPC Central Committee," *China Daily*, 26 October 2017, accessed at: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-10/26/content\\_33723562.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-10/26/content_33723562.htm)



**General Wei Fenghe (魏凤和), Defense Minister.** Wei Fenghe is China's new defense minister, replacing Chang Wanquan. Born in 1954 in Chiping County, Shandong Province, Wei joined the PLA in 1970 and became a CCP member in 1972.<sup>95</sup> He spent his entire career in the Second Artillery, now the PLA Rocket Force. In 1975, Wei studied rocket engineering at a missile school under the Commission for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (COSTIND).<sup>96</sup> He went on to train as a strategic missile commander at the Second Artillery Corps' college in Wuhan. Wei worked his way up through the ranks at the 53rd Base and then serving as deputy chief of staff, chief of staff, and finally commander of the force. He has the distinction of being the youngest deputy chief at age 56 of the former General Staff Department in 2010. In 2012, he joined the CMC as an ex officio member, and was reinstated in 2017 without portfolio but with the expectation that he would become minister of defense at the National People's Congress in early 2018. Wei is now the first non-ground force officer to serve as Minister of Defense.

**General Li Zuocheng (李作成), Director, CMC Joint Staff Department.** Born in 1953 in Anhua County, Hunan Province, Li has enjoyed a typical Army career, promoted to command the 41st Group Army, and then serving as deputy commander, deputy chief of staff, and then commander of the Chengdu Military Region. In 2016, he assumed command of the newly formed Army Headquarters, and one year later became director of the new CMC Joint Staff Department (formerly General Staff Department). This latter position was sufficiently senior to merit elevation to the CMC in 2017. According to a reputable Hong Kong media source, Li is "a decorated hero of the [1979] Sino-Vietnamese war and a veteran leader of disaster relief campaigns."<sup>97</sup> In Vietnam, he was awarded a "first-class merit," and his combat company won a collective order of merit.<sup>98</sup> When Li was promoted to division commander in 1994, his combat unit was awarded a second-class merit for their part in a flood-relief mission in Guangxi.<sup>99</sup> In

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<sup>95</sup> Minnie Chan, "'Reticent' General Wei Fenghe Could be China's New Defence Minister, Sources Say," *South China Morning Post*, 24 February 2018, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2134555/reticent-general-rockets-ranks-central-military>

<sup>96</sup> Minnie Chan, "'Reticent' General Wei Fenghe Could be China's New Defence Minister, Sources Say," *South China Morning Post*, 24 February 2018, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2134555/reticent-general-rockets-ranks-central-military>

<sup>97</sup> Minnie Chan, "Xi Jinping Rolls Out Leaner Top Line Up for China's Military Machine," *South China Morning Post*, 26 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2117004/xi-jinping-rolls-out-leaner-top-line-chinas-military>.

<sup>98</sup> Minnie Chan, "War Hero Tipped as Xi Jinping's Choice for Key Role in World's Biggest Army," *South China Morning Post*, 17 August 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2106947/war-hero-tipped-xi-jinpings-choice-key-role-worlds>

<sup>99</sup> Minnie Chan, "War Hero Tipped as Xi Jinping's Choice for Key Role in World's Biggest Army," *South China Morning Post*, 17 August 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2106947/war-hero-tipped-xi-jinpings-choice-key-role-worlds>

1998, when he was 41<sup>st</sup> Group Army commander, he was a key leader in the two-month effort to respond to flooding across 24 provinces.<sup>100</sup>

**Admiral Miao Hua (苗华), Director, CMC Political Work Department.** Miao Hua was born in 1955 in Fuzhou City, Fujian Province. He has been a career political officer, beginning on the Army side in the 31<sup>st</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Group Armies, and then moving to the military region level as the director of the Lanzhou MR Political Department and then deputy political commissar of the Lanzhou MR itself. In 2012, Miao was posted to the CCP Central Discipline Inspection Commission during the height of the first years of Xi's anti-corruption campaign. He moved over to the Navy as headquarters political commissar in 2014 and was promoted to admiral in 2015. Miao assumed the directorship of the new CMC Political Work Department in 2017, and was elevated to the CMC. Miao's reported connection to Xi Jinping was during his service as head of the Fujian-based 31<sup>st</sup> Group Army political department between 1999 and 2005, which overlapped with Xi Jinping's tenure in the province.<sup>101</sup>

**Lieutenant General Zhang Shengmin (张升民), Director, CMC Discipline Inspection Commission.** Born in 1958 in Shaanxi Province, Zhang is youngest member of the CMC. Also a career political officer, he served as the director of the Second Artillery Political Department, and then Political Commissar of the Second Artillery Force Command Academy.<sup>102</sup> In 2010, Zhang led reconstruction work following the 2010 Yushu earthquake in Qinghai Province.<sup>103</sup> According to CCTV, his unit helped to build emergency living quarters for the monks at the Changgu Monastery (禅古寺), the largest Kagyu Tibetan Buddhist temple in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.<sup>104</sup> Zhang then moved quickly from political commissar of the CMC Logistics Supply Department to the secretary of the PLA Discipline Inspection Commission, where he oversees the sensitive anti-corruption investigation within the military. Zhang is well-known for his award-winning calligraphy.

## **Xi Jinping and the Anti-Corruption Campaign**

In November 2014, Central Military Commission Chairman Xi Jinping used the occasion of the 85th anniversary of the 1929 Gutian Conference to convene a critical meeting on political work in the People's Liberation Army. Xi addressed the 420 generals and senior military officials in attendance for the two-day meeting, reminding them of Mao's dicta about party control of the military and connecting the themes to his current anti-corruption campaign.

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<sup>100</sup> Minnie Chan, "War Hero Tipped as Xi Jinping's Choice for Key Role in World's Biggest Army," *South China Morning Post*, 17 August 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2106947/war-hero-tipped-xi-jinpings-choice-key-role-worlds>

<sup>101</sup> Bo Zhiyue, "The Rise of the 31st Army in Chinese Politics," *The Diplomat*, 30 December 2014, accessed at: <https://thediplomat.com/2014/12/the-rise-of-the-31st-army-in-chinese-politics/>

<sup>102</sup> "履历不凡 新晋上将两年三履新 曾是"打虎干将"刘源继任者," *CCTV*, 3 November 2017.

<sup>103</sup> "履历不凡 新晋上将两年三履新 曾是"打虎干将"刘源继任者," *CCTV*, 3 November 2017.

<sup>104</sup> "履历不凡 新晋上将两年三履新 曾是"打虎干将"刘源继任者," *CCTV*, 3 November 2017.

The Gutian Congress was held on 1 November 1929 in Shanghang County in southeastern Fujian Province.<sup>105</sup> It was the ninth meeting of the Chinese Communist Party since its founding in 1921, and the first following the Nanchang Uprising in August 1927 that marked the founding of the Red Army. Most of the attendees of the 1929 congress were soldiers, and Mao Zedong chaired the meeting as the Comintern-appointed political commissar.

Mao authored the meeting's concluding resolution, entitled "On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party," which addressed a set of "non-proletarian ideas" within the party and Army, including "ultra-democracy," "the disregard of organizational discipline," "absolute egalitarianism," "subjectivism," "individualism," "the ideology of roving rebel bands," and "the remnants of putschism."<sup>106</sup> But the lasting legacy of the Gutian meeting was Mao's criticism of what he called "the purely military viewpoint." Specifically, Mao was criticizing a number of wayward views in the military. The first was the belief that "military affairs and politics were opposed to each other," even going so far as to say that "military affairs [had] a leading position over politics."<sup>107</sup> The second was the incorrect view that the task of the Red Army "is merely to fight," instead of serving as "an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution" as well as "doing propaganda among the masses, organizing the masses, arming them, helping them establish revolutionary political power and setting up political organizations."<sup>108</sup> Indeed, the Gutian Conference was the seminal moment where the principle of CCP control of the military was enshrined as core party doctrine, and "set the tone for the army's political work during the revolutionary era" and beyond.<sup>109</sup>

Prior to the 2014 Gutian Conference, the party and military propaganda systems were in full swing on the issue of party control of the military. The most complete read-ahead material for the conference attendees was a Yu Guang article in the July 2014 issue of *Seeking Truth* entitled "Looking at Casting the Military Soul from the Contemporary Values of the Gutian Conference."<sup>110</sup> Describing party leadership of the military as "the immutable military soul of the Chinese military" and "an important political advantage of the party and of the nation," the author insists that this arrangement is essential for "achieving the goals of the dream of a powerful nation and the dream of a powerful military." At the same time, Yu Guang reminds his readers that the party-military relationship was not always so clearly subordinated, recalling the "intense debate at the Seventh and Eighth Party Conferences of the Fourth Red Army over the core issues of who was to lead the Red Army and who was to command it." He argues that "achieving consensus had proven difficult" until Mao suggested a reorientation with the

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## Notes

<sup>105</sup> "Xi Urges Serious Reflection On Xu Caihou's Case," *China Daily*, 1 November 2014.

<sup>106</sup> Mao Zedong, "On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party," December 1929, *Collected Works of Mao Zedong*, Vol. 1, accessed at: [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_5.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_5.htm).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> "Xi Urges Serious Reflection On Xu Caihou's Case."

<sup>110</sup> All subsequent quotes are taken from Yu Guang, "Looking at casting the military soul from the contemporary values of the Gutian Conference," *Qiushi*, 31 July 2014, No. 15.

following elements: (1) “a new military leadership system of absolute party leadership of the military,” (2) a mission statement that declared that the “Red Army is an armed group that executes the political tasks of the revolution,” (3) imperatives that the “military not lead politics” and that “the military not control political power,” and (4) the primacy of “party organization within the military.”

Pivoting to the contemporary situation, Yu argues “the times have changed, but the logic remains the same.” Specifically, he asserts, “the development of our party and military are at a new historical starting point,” especially given “major changes . . . in the environment both inside and outside the military,” but “China’s basic national situation and military situation have not changed.” Among the immutable elements are: (1) “the important status and role of the [party] to lead the military”; (2) the primacy of “people” as the key “factor that determines who wins and loses wars.” More interesting are the author’s list of “changes in the environment,” which includes professional concerns about the “profound development of the new world revolution in military affairs,” which creates a set of “arduous and complex tasks of deeply reforming and strategically transforming the Chinese military.” These difficult efforts are complicated by “plots of westernization by enemy forces” and “corrosion by various incorrect ideological trends,” which the author describes darkly as “diverse,” “varied,” “acute,” and “complex.” Enemies in “the West” are “pointing the spears of westernization and differentiation at the Chinese military in a reckless attempt to pull the Chinese military out from under the party’s banner.” They are attempting to undermine the current system by promoting ideas such as “departyizing and depoliticizing the military,” “nationalizing the military,” and the so-called “universal values” and “constitutional democracy.” This subversion has “blurred the understanding of the legal principle of absolute party leadership of the military in some officers and men” and “blurred their understanding of the special advantages of the military system with Chinese characteristics,” leading “some” to “blindly admire the military system and military control model of the west.”

Yet the weakness of Yu’s article and the great challenge for the party is the lack of effective, concrete measures for combating these trends. In the vacuum, Yu offers more of the same, no doubt with greater intensity and revolutionary spirit. He calls for “actively exploring effective ways and scientific methods of implementing and enforcing the basic system of absolute party leadership of the military,” “promoting inner-party democracy,” “improving decision-making mechanisms,” and “strengthening supervision, selecting people, and appointing people within the party.” In the end, he concludes with the view that success will be determined by finding people who are “absolutely reliable,” implicitly suggesting that some of the current crew may not be completely up to snuff. This last point was likely front and center in the minds of the hundreds of attendees at the November 2014 meeting, who were collectively under greater scrutiny than at any time since the post-Tiananmen political purges.

The 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Gutian Conference on 1 November 2014 was held at the historic site of the original 1929 meeting. According to a Xinhua report, Xi Jinping personally proposed that the gathering be held in Gutian.<sup>111</sup> Attendance at the meeting was no doubt

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<sup>111</sup> Cao Zhi and Li Xuanliang, “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian; Xi Jinping attends meeting, delivers important speech, emphasizes need to develop role of political work as lifeline for strengthening the army and invigorating the military, and to struggle

mandatory for any senior military leader who was ambulatory and breathing. Xinhua reports that all members of the Central Military Commission showed up, including Fan Changlong, Xu Qiliang, Chang Wanquan, Fang Fenghui, Zhang Yang, Zhao Keshi, Zhang Youxia, Wu Shengli, Ma Xiaotian, and Wei Fenghe.<sup>112</sup> Additional non-military attendees included Politburo member Wang Huning and CCP General Office Director Li Zhanshu.<sup>113</sup> The rest of the crowd was drawn from “relevant leaders of the four general headquarters, the major leaders and political department directors of the large units, leaders of CMC General Office, political commissars of quasi-military regions and army-level units, the relevant comrades of the general headquarters and large units’ offices, representatives of the grassroots and heroic models, and the relevant leaders of Ministry of Public Security.”<sup>114</sup> In total, the 2014 event was witnessed by “more than 420 representatives.”<sup>115</sup>

The color commentary that accompanied the conference provided some details about the venue and the activities of the participants. Faithful to the propaganda style manual, the building’s white walls and green roof tiles “looked solemn, old, and plain,” adorned with a “glistening” banner reading “Gutian Congress Shines Forever.”<sup>116</sup> Xinhua tells us that attendees “visited the museum,” gazed upon a statue of Mao Zedong “with reverence,” dined on a likely spartan representation of something called the “Red Army meal” (reportedly brown rice and pumpkin soup), studied historical documents, listened to lectures about “tradition,” and saw “red movies.”<sup>117</sup> There was the requisite cleansing ritual of criticism and self-criticism, with special emphasis on “the negative lesson and the harmful influence of Xu Caihou’s case.”<sup>118</sup> Xinhua also wins a Marxist poetry award for its evocative assertion that “the meeting was full of a pungent gunpowder smell, and the attendees collectively underwent a round of party character tempering and spiritual baptism.”<sup>119</sup>

Apart from the atmospherics, the propaganda apparatus was resolute in its view that Xi Jinping was large and in charge. He began his morning by “cordially” receiving all of the participants, and then he “led” all CMC members in touring the site. Xi Jinping closely inspected the ground, “stopping at the photos and exhibition boards to examine them,” and “now and then asking the docent some related questions.”<sup>120</sup> While viewing the hall that housed the 1929 meeting, he “joined the people around him in remembering the utmost hardships and strenuous struggles that the forefathers endured in search of the revolutionary path, and talked to them about the situation

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for realization of the party’s goal of strengthening the army under the new situation,” Xinhua, 1 November 2014.

<sup>112</sup> Cao Zhi and Li Xuanliang, “All-PLA Political Work Conference concludes at Gutian; Fan Changlong, Xu Qiliang attend and address the conference,” Xinhua, 2 November 2014.

<sup>113</sup> “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> “All-PLA Political Work Conference concludes at Gutian.”

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

and his feelings of his various visits to Gutian.”<sup>121</sup> In a striking performance of ancestor worship, Xi climbed the 151-flight staircase of the Chairman Mao Memorial Garden, “respectfully laid a floral basket at Mao Zedong statue, personally smoothed out the ribbons on the floral basket, led the people to bow three times to Mao Zedong statue, paid homage to the statue, and deeply remembered the great exploits of the revolutionaries of the older generation.”<sup>122</sup>

During the course of the conference, Xi made it abundantly clear that this was not his first visit to Gutian, which is not surprising given his official postings to Fujian from 1985 to 2002. He told the participants that he had been to the old revolutionary base area on 19 occasions, “every time making a special trip to visit with the veteran red armymen and the dependents of the armymen and martyrs.”<sup>123</sup> On this trip to Gutian, Xi Jinping again specially invited “ten veteran red armymen, dependents of the armymen and martyrs, as well as representatives of veteran underground party members, veteran guerillas, veteran transporters, veteran liaison men, and veteran township cadres in the old soviet areas.”<sup>124</sup> During their meeting at the Party Member-Cadres Education Center, Xi Jinping was at his paternalistic best, holding the “veteran comrades’ hands and show[ing] concern about their comfort.”<sup>125</sup> Naturally, the “veteran comrades were especially moved on seeing Xi Jinping,” and reciprocated his concern by expressing “their trust in the party central committee and their delights over the nation’s development and achievements.”<sup>126</sup>

The centerpiece of the conference was Xi Jinping’s speech. After the customary throat-clearing about the “Party commanding the gun” and the military’s fine traditions of political work, Xi offered a relatively positive assessment of military developments since the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, crediting the PLA with “closely focusing on the goal of strengthening army, stepping up and improving political work, concentrating on forging the army spirit, servicing the center, rectifying the prevalent practice, strictly enforcing the discipline, and punishing corruption.”<sup>127</sup> At the same time, he identified 10 “outstanding problems” in the military, with particular emphasis on “leading cadres’ ideology, politics, and work style.”<sup>128</sup> The main causes of these problems were spiritual, and included “problems in ideals and beliefs, principle of party spirit, revolutionary spirit, [and] organizational discipline.”<sup>129</sup> At the same time, he called out “insufficient education of the instructors themselves, excessive leniency and softness in managing the leading cadres, failure to effectively develop the supervision system’s functions,

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> All quotes in this section can be found in “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

<sup>128</sup> All quotes in this section can be found in “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

<sup>129</sup> All quotes in this section can be found in “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

and loopholes in developing rules and regulations.”<sup>130</sup> In a blinding flash of the obvious, Xi complained that management of officials is “too lax” and “the supervision system has flaws.”<sup>131</sup> Directly contradicting unnamed individuals arguing that the PLA should spend more time on military professional tasks than political work, Xi countered that domestic and foreign trends demand that “political work should only be strengthened, not weakened.” Xi then cast a pall over the room by discussing the case of Xu Caihou, who was investigated in March 2014, expelled from the party in June 2014, and confessed to accepting “extremely large” bribes on 28 October 2014.<sup>132</sup> Highlighting Xu’s case as a cautionary tale, Chairman Xi called for the attendees to “deeply reflect on the lessons learned and thoroughly exterminate its influence.”<sup>133</sup>

After diagnosing the disease, Xi then proceeded in his speech to offer the remedy in the form of five directives. As with all speeches of this sort, the cardinal order of the remedies is often as significant as the content of the remedies, especially as a reflection of the priorities for political guidance. The first, as usual, was spiritual, focused on reinforcing the ideological commitment to party leadership over the military. The second was managerial, centered on recruiting and promoting reliable people who will not be swayed by negative ideological trends. The third directive specifically addressed the anti-corruption campaign, emphasizing that it was a long-term, existential fight not a short-term correction. All the way down in the fourth position was warfighting and combat proficiency, though even here Xi was less interested in “winning” than cultivating the “dauntless, heroic, and adamant combat style of the officers and men.” The fifth directive was a throwaway line about “innovating the development of political work.” All in all, a strikingly political agenda with little if any concentration on military professional tasks.

Immediately following Xi’s speech, senior military leaders rose to praise the speech and the speaker. CMC Vice Chairman Fan Changlong polished the cormorant by describing the meeting as an “historic event of milestone significance” and Chairman Xi’s speech as a “very profound” message that “greatly shocked and deeply educated” him.<sup>134</sup> CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang declared that the speech “contains profound thoughts” and “shines with the truth of our times.”<sup>135</sup> Other highlights of the more than 20 *biaotai* remarks from military leaders include comments from controversial PLA officers, such as GLD Political Commissar Liu Yuan and NDU Political Commissar Liu Yazhou. In Liu Yuan’s speech, “Earnestly Implement Demand on ‘Three Strict and Three Solid Things’,” he repeats his earlier prescient and unpopular warnings about the “destruction of the armed forces’ political ecology” by the corruption of officers like “Xu Caihou and Gu Junshan.” Liu Yazhou’s speech, entitled “Vigorously Cultivate Outstanding Talented Military Personnel Who Can Shoulder the Heavy Responsibility of Strengthening the Army,” focused on “cultivation of talented military personnel” as the remedy, with no mention of some of his more controversial beliefs about political reform. Finally, Wang Jianwei, political

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<sup>130</sup> All quotes in this section can be found in “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

<sup>131</sup> “Xi urges serious reflection on Xu Caihou’s case,” Xinhua, 1 November 2014.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> All quotes in this section can be found in “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”

<sup>134</sup> “All-PLA Political Work Conference concludes at Gutian.”

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

commissar of the National University of Defense Technology, offered a technological perspective in his speech, “Strengthen and Improve the Armed Forces’ Political Work in the Information Network Era,” arguing that ideological supremacy on the “information network should become a position that must be fought for, defended, and occupied.”<sup>136</sup>

It is always important to closely examine post-meeting or speech propaganda work, both to confirm the important *tifa* but also to try to detect any important variations or subtle disagreements with the official line. In this case, there was very little evidence of the latter. Authoritative state media summarized the meeting thusly:

The conference deeply studied and implemented the spirit of a series of important speeches by Chairman Xi, especially his important speech at this conference, adhered to the principle of ideological party building and political army building established by the Gutian Conference [in 1929], carried forward the fine tradition of our army’s political work, studied and settled major practical issues concerning our party’s ideological and political army building with a spirit of reform and rectification.<sup>137</sup>

Xinhua offered three “highlights” of the meeting:

—The contemporary theme of the army’s political work is to closely center on realizing the Chinese dream of the Chinese nation’s great rejuvenation, and provide a strong political guarantee for realizing the party’s goal of strengthening the army under the new situation.

—To strengthen and improve our army’s political work under the new situation, the most important thing now is to erect four fundamental things: Firmly erect the ideals and beliefs throughout the army, firmly erect the principle of party spirit throughout the army, firmly erect the standards for combatworthiness throughout the army, and firmly erect the prestige of political work throughout the army.

—To strengthen and improve our army’s political work under the new situation, we should now focus on the following five areas: Focus on firmly forging the army spirit, focus on effectively managing senior and middle-ranking cadres, focus on improving the work style and struggling against corruption, focus on nurturing the combatant spirit, and focus on innovating the development of political work.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> “Provide strong political guarantee to achieving party’s strong-military objective in new situation—Excerpts of speeches by representatives to All-Army Political Work Conference,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 3 November 2014, pp.6–7.

<sup>137</sup> “All-PLA Political Work Conference concludes at Gutian.”

<sup>138</sup> “(Military) All-Army Political Work Conference held in Gutian.”



The subsequent *Liberation Army Daily* editorial<sup>139</sup> and commentator article<sup>140</sup> were long on reflexive ideological cant about the glories of the past and the challenges of the present but short on any tangible policy changes or new ideas, other than doing more of the same with greater energy. One very direct *Liberation Army Daily* article insisted that the Gutian Conference sent a “clear signal,” reiterated that the Party must maintain absolute control of the military, piled on the criticism of Xu Caihou, and issued more broadsides against calls to “nationalize” the military as “conceited and naïve . . . ideals from the West.”<sup>141</sup> *Qiushi* described the speech, which was given at “a holy place of the revolution,” as “a new ‘political blueprint’ for strengthening and developing the military” that will allow the PLA to scrape “poisoned tissues off bones.”<sup>142</sup> The only false note came from a very brave Professor Ni Lexiong in Shanghai, who told the *South China Morning Post* that “Xi’s move to promote such ‘Red Army spirit’ will fail because such utter devotion is contrary to current basic social values, where people just pursue economic interests under the market economy.”<sup>143</sup> Professor Ni’s current location and health are unknown at the time of writing.

What to make of this very “retro” move by Xi Jinping, forcing hundreds of senior military leaders to revisit one of the touchstones of the revolution and haranguing them with ideological and moral exhortation? Was the meeting and his speech really a “major innovative development of the party’s military guidance theory” filled with “new thoughts, new viewpoints, new requirements for energetically building political organs and political cadre contingents that are absolutely loyal to the party, competent in focusing on war-fighting, and able to keep a good style and image”?<sup>144</sup> Did it really “open a new chapter of political army building and of strengthening and developing the military in our times,” providing “a profound answer to the important practical issue in the domain of political work” and “an explicit roadmap and a guideline for unfolding action for political work under the new situation”?<sup>145</sup> Is “political work,” rather than the technical and professional achievements of military modernization since the late 1990s, really the PLA’s “greatest feature and greatest advantage” and essential for achieving the “China dream”?<sup>146</sup> Can ideological purity and revolutionary spirit defeat a carrier strike group?

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<sup>139</sup> Editorial, “Provide strong political guarantee for fulfilling the party’s military strengthening goal under the new situation,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 2 November 2014.

<sup>140</sup> Staff commentator, “It is urgently necessary to settle prominent problems in political work—Second Talk on seriously studying and implementing chairman xi’s important speech at the All-PLA Political Work Conference,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 5 November 2014, p. 1.

<sup>141</sup> “‘Party Commands Gun’ Must Be Upheld,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 3 November 2014.

<sup>142</sup> PLA General Political Department, “The Scientific Guide to Strengthening and Developing the Military under the new situation—Deeply study and implement Chairman Xi Jinping’s important speech at the All-PLA Political Work Conference,” *Qiushi*, 1 December 2014, No. 23.

<sup>143</sup> Minnie Chan, “Communist Party ‘Controls The Gun,’ PLA Top Brass Reminded,” *South China Morning Post*, 5 November 2014, accessed at:

<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1632136/communist-party-controls-gun-pla-top-brass-reminded>.

<sup>144</sup> “The Scientific guide to strengthening and developing the military under the new situation.”

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

Short answer: not really. But the GPD's *Qiushi* article is correct when it argues "military reform has entered the stage of tackling tough issues and has come to a crucial juncture of style rectification and anti-corruption," especially given the crushing impact of the arrest of Xu Caihou, which did in fact cause "immeasurable harmful effects to the prestige of the party and the PLA, to the image of political work, and to the belief and faith of the military forces."<sup>147</sup> One certainly gets the impression that Xi saw the Xu case as rocking the very foundations of the military, especially given that Xu's "bribes for promotion" scheme is reportedly standard practice at every level of the military promotion system and *every officer attending the Gutian meeting therefore was an unindicted co-conspirator in Xu's larger crime by participating in that system*. Indeed, when the officers in the audience reflect on Xu's case, they must think some state-directed atheist variant of "there but for the grace of God go I." So it is entirely understandable that Xi, as a leader, would want to get everyone in one place and directly communicate a unifying message that combined both exhortation and warning. Ironically, however, the takeaway message from this political work conference may be entirely political in a different sense of the word; namely, given the fact that nearly every officer is complicit in the PLA corruption system to one degree or another, the criteria for investigation and arrest have as much to do with personal ties, loyalty, connections, and patronage networks as with levels of criminality. Thus, the vague messages from the meeting really offer no clear guidance to the officer corps other than "keep mouthing the right political slogans and maybe you won't end up in the dock." It is certainly the wrong time to own extensive real estate, have large sums of money ferreted abroad, send your children to expensive foreign schools, possess a foreign passport, wear expensive watches or drive a luxury car. Instead, one's time is likely better spent these days boning up on Mao's *Collected Works*, so you can whip out just the right phrase when the situation calls for you to be more red than expert. In July 2016, Chinese state media began using a new *tifa* (提法, formulation) about "eliminating the baneful [pernicious] influence of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou" from the military. Former Central Military Vice-Chairmen Guo and Xu are the highest-ranking Chinese military officers indicted in Xi Jinping's ongoing anti-corruption purge. Xu Caihou escaped the hangman's noose by dying of bladder cancer in March 2015.<sup>148</sup> Guo Boxiong, who retired in 2012, was expelled from the party in 2015, but observers wondered whether he would ever be formally tried for his crimes.<sup>149</sup>

On 25 July 2016, state media announced that Guo Boxiong, 74, had been convicted in a secret trial for accepting bribes, and was sentenced to life in prison.<sup>150</sup> According to the verdict, Guo "had taken advantage of his position to assist the promotion and reassignment of others, and had accepted huge amounts in bribes both personally and in collusion with others."<sup>151</sup> *China Daily* asserted that the trial (Star Chamber?) was conducted behind closed doors because it "touched on

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Li Rongde, "Senior Party Officials Indicted For Corruption Appear In New TV Show," *Caixin wang*, 18 October 2016, accessed at: <http://english.caixin.cn/2016-10-18/100998220.html>.

<sup>149</sup> "Ex-military leader Guo given life in bribery case," *China Daily Online*, 25 July 2016, accessed at: [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-07/26/content\\_26219276.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-07/26/content_26219276.htm).

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

military secrets.”<sup>152</sup> A reputable Hong Kong newspaper reported that the amount of the bribes in question totaled RMB80 million, or roughly \$12 million.<sup>153</sup> By the standards of discipline apparatus, these bribes were judged to be “extremely huge” and his crimes were “extremely serious”.<sup>154</sup> As befitting his party training, Guo readily “confessed to his misdeeds and repented in good faith,” though he was stripped of his political rights for life and stripped of his rank of general. His personal assets were seized, and all his illicit gains were confiscated and turned over to the State treasury.<sup>155</sup> An accompanying *People’s Daily* commentary summarized the lessons of the process, asserting that Guo was “handled in accordance with the law,” the verdict had “demonstrated the resolute stance of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the administering of the party with strict discipline and the administering of the military with strict discipline,” and the party would continue “using strong doses of medicine to cure diseases and scraping the poison off the bone” (刮骨疗毒) and “eradicate evils.”<sup>156</sup> The commentary concluded with a warning: “The military is an armed force and there must be absolutely no hideouts for the corrupt elements.”

One week prior to Guo Boxiong’s conviction, then vice-chairman of the CMC Fan Changlong on 19 July 2016 warned the new Southern Theater Command about eliminating the “baneful influence” of Xu and Guo.<sup>157</sup> While the timing of Fan’s comments strongly suggests that the results of Guo’s trial might have been “fixed” (shocking), it was an important indicator that the party and the military and their corresponding propaganda apparatuses were ready to turn a corner and begin to systematically use Xu and Guo as classic “negative examples” for the rest of the armed forces. When asked after the verdict whether there is a “Guo Boxiong faction or clique” in the PLA, however, the Defense Ministry spokesman sternly dodged the question.<sup>158</sup>

Throughout the remainder of July, the campaign was publicly conducted through a series of commentaries in *Liberation Army Daily*. A 27 July article entitled “Further clarify thinking through a thorough ideological overhaul,”<sup>159</sup> declared: “to eradicate an evil, it is necessary to look at the root cause of the evil; to cure a disease, it is necessary to look at the root cause of the disease.” Continuing the medical theme, a 29 July 2016 article exhorted the rank and file with

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Jun Mai and Minnie Chan, “Former top PLA general Guo Boxiong jailed for life over graft,” *South China Morning Post*, 25 July 2016, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1994588/former-top-pla-general-guo-boxiong-jailed-life-over>.

<sup>154</sup> “Ex-Military Leader Guo Given Life In Bribery Case.”

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Staff Commentator, “We must fight against corruption and crack down on law violation,” *People’s Daily*, 26 July 2016, p. 1.

<sup>157</sup> “Fan Changlong Conducts Investigation and Study of Units in Southern Theater Command: Constantly Deepen and Refine Preparations Sea Direction Military Struggles,” *China News Service*, 19 July 2016.

<sup>158</sup> “Defense Ministry’s Regular Press Conference on July 28,” *China Military Online*, 28 July 2016.

<sup>159</sup> Staff Commentator, accessed at: [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-07/27/content\\_7175377.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-07/27/content_7175377.htm).

the title “We cannot have one iota less calcium for spirit.”<sup>160</sup> A 30 July 2016 article entitled “Break new ground for getting stronger, take on the important task of military strengthening”<sup>161</sup> made the linkage between eliminating the Guo/Xu influence and the success of the ongoing military reforms. Finally, a 2 August 2016 article focused on the individual, asking “What is the strategic point for forging absolutely loyal political character?”<sup>162</sup>

By late August, the organizational apparatus was in full swing, manifested in a high-level meeting of the “All-Army Leading Small Group to Implement the Political Work Spirit of Gutian,”<sup>163</sup> drawing on the ideological lessons discussed in my *China Leadership Monitor* no. 46 essay.<sup>164</sup> Further preparation occurred at a 27 September 2016 All-Army Political and Legal Work conference attended by CMC Vice-Chair Xu Qiliang, who specifically mentioned the *tifa* about eradicating the influence of Guo and Xu.<sup>165</sup>

This series of meetings culminated in a 10 October 2016 meeting for “Major Units and CMC Departments,” headlined by both Fan Changlong and Xu Qiliang.<sup>166</sup> The main themes of the meeting were summarized in a high-profile 11 October commentary in *Liberation Army Daily*.<sup>167</sup> Staying true to the PLA’s peasant roots, the article employed an agricultural metaphor: “we should weed out evils in the way a farmer does to grass in fields. To weed out evils, we must be firm and root them out so that they will not return.” While excoriating Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou as “the highest-ranking leading cadres of our army since its founding to have been investigated and handled for violation of laws and discipline,” the commentary called for “a purge of deep-seated problems in ideology, politics, organization, and work style” and hinted that the campaign should be expanded to include mid-ranking officers. One Hong Kong newspaper added that the CMC reportedly ordered the destruction of “all military books containing Guo and Xu’s speeches, words or pictures.”<sup>168</sup> Interestingly, the hawkish *Global*

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<sup>160</sup> Staff Commentator, *Liberation Army Daily*, accessed at: [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-07/29/content\\_7179557.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-07/29/content_7179557.htm).

<sup>161</sup> Staff Commentator, p. 2.

<sup>162</sup> Wei Guofeng, “What is strategic point for forging absolutely loyal political character?” *Liberation Army Daily*, accessed at: [http://www.81.cn/jwgd/2016-08/02/content\\_7185507.htm](http://www.81.cn/jwgd/2016-08/02/content_7185507.htm).

<sup>163</sup> Yin Hang and Huang Chao, “The PLA Work Leading Group tasked to organize and guide the PLA Forces across the country to implement and carry out the spirit of the PLA Political Work Conference held in Gutian Town, Fujian Province, two years ago, calls a membership meeting,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 27 August 2016, accessed at: [http://www.81.cn/jwzb/2016-08/27/content\\_7227801.htm](http://www.81.cn/jwzb/2016-08/27/content_7227801.htm).

<sup>164</sup> See James Mulvenon, “Hotel Gutian: We Haven’t Had That Spirit Here Since 1929,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 46, 19 March 2015, accessed at: <http://www.hoover.org/research/hotel-gutian-we-havent-had-spirit-here-1929>.

<sup>165</sup> Xinhua, 27 September 2016.

<sup>166</sup> Mei Changwei, “Party Secretary thematic meeting for all major military units, Central Military Commission organs and departments convenes in Beijing, Fan Changlong, Xu Qiliang attend and speak,” Xinhua, 10 October 2016.

<sup>167</sup> Staff Commentator, accessed at: [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-10/11/content\\_7294646.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-10/11/content_7294646.htm).

<sup>168</sup> Minnie Chan, “Chinese military’s anti-graft drive targets mid-level officers to root out disgraced leaders’ influence,” *South China Morning Post*, 11 October 2016, accessed at:

*Times* reported on 16 October that a group of disgruntled PLA veterans sought to capitalize on the campaign by leading a protest in Beijing outside the meeting building, complaining that during the decade of Guo and Xu's command their concerns were ignored.<sup>169</sup>

A week later, the CCP unveiled a slick anti-corruption documentary entitled *Always on the Road* (永远在路上).<sup>170</sup> The official English translation, "The Corruption Fight Is Always Underway," provides more obvious context. Showing greater discipline and parsimony than the usual CCTV-1 serial with dozens or hundreds of episodes, this eight-part film, co-produced with the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), featured over a dozen indicted officials.<sup>171</sup> State media promised "tearful confessions and juicy details,"<sup>172</sup> and described the purpose of the show as a "cautionary tale." The Zhou Yongkang, Guo Boxiong, and Xu Caihou cases were discussed, including the use of rare still photos of both Guo and Xu, but neither man was interviewed.

The Guo-Xu campaign naturally appeared in the propaganda surrounding the Sixth Plenary session of the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in late October.<sup>173</sup> The CMC Standing Committee held a meeting on 3 November devoted to studying the spirit of the Sixth Plenum, and one of the major themes was to "comprehensively and thoroughly eliminate the bad influence of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou."<sup>174</sup> An 8 November article elaborated on the campaign's main thrusts, asserting that the arrest and conviction of both men, who by their actions had "poisoned the red gene," had "eliminated the major hidden political danger for the party and the armed forces."<sup>175</sup> Yet the article was also more circumspect, claiming that "the broad ranks of officers and men more and more intensely sensed that had we not comprehensively and thoroughly eliminated the baneful influence exerted by Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, the unwritten rules that they set will be concealed, and their set of style and histrionics will continue, and this will affect the deepening

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<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2026986/chinese-militarys-anti-graft-drive-targets-mid-level>.

<sup>169</sup> "Veterans sent home with high officials' promises after protests in Beijing," *Global Times*, 16 October 2016, accessed at: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1011657.shtml>.

<sup>170</sup> Zhang Yan, "Public gets look at heart of graft," *China Daily Online*, 18 October 2016, accessed at: [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-10/19/content\\_27102369.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-10/19/content_27102369.htm). See also Li Haoran, "It is necessary to always maintain the intrinsic political quality of being immune from corruption," *People's Daily*, 19 October 2016, p. 5.

<sup>171</sup> "Senior Party Officials Indicted For Corruption Appear in New TV Show" (see endnote 1).

<sup>172</sup> "Public gets look at heart of graft."

<sup>173</sup> "All Army and Armed Police units rapidly whip up upsurge on study and implementation of Sixth Plenary Session of 18th CPC Central Committee, broad ranks of officers and men express one after another that they will unswervingly advance efforts to comprehensively administer party with strict discipline, and unremittingly struggle for construction of world first-class armed forces," *Xinhua*, 30 October 2016.

<sup>174</sup> Wang Yushan, "The Central Military Commission holds its executive meeting to study and implement the spirit of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee," *Xinhua*, 3 November 2016.

<sup>175</sup> "Writing epochal chapter on political army building—Looking back at Gutian All-Army Political Work Conference on second anniversary of its convening (Part two of three)," *Xinhua*, 8 November 2016.

and smooth implementation of reforms and affect the process of the strengthening and development of the armed forces.” As a result, the rank and file needed to redouble their efforts to “thoroughly clean up the effects of baneful influence in work guidance, format of thinking, habitual practice, repertoire pattern, style and histrionics.” To wit, “party committees and organs at the regiment or above level in the whole army worked around major issues of right or wrong, such as using authority for official affairs and exploiting power, pursuing actual accomplishments, chasing after fame and fortune, criterion of combat power and other assessment standards, enforcement of the rule of law, and the habit of the rule by people; extensively carried out discussions and discrimination; educated and guided party members-cum-cadres to deeply dig into the roots of ideological ailment; and cleaned up the ideological dense fog.” Complete success appears to be elusive, however, as 2016 ended with yet more questions, aptly summarized in the title of a 22 December commentary in *Liberation Army Daily*: “What does true loyalty mean?”<sup>176</sup>

Viewed in its entirety, we are left with a campaign whose goal is to eradicate the type of behavior and thinking and mindset associated with Guo and Xu, but is not aimed at a Cultural Revolution–style witchhunt to find quotas of unindicted co-conspirators of the two disgraced officials. This is strange on many levels, not the least of which is that the specific crimes *required* such co-conspirators, as Xu and Guo were certainly not bribing themselves or solely each other. Instead, the leadership was likely putting down a marker that could be used retroactively to summarize the crimes of future victims of the anti-corruption campaign. Indeed, over the time period of the campaign, there was a steady drumbeat of public arrests, including Wang Jianping (deputy chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department),<sup>177</sup> Tian Xiusi (former PLA Air Force political commissar), Zhang Ming (deputy chief of staff, Jinan MR),<sup>178</sup> MG Liao Xijun (younger brother of Liao Xilong),<sup>179</sup> MG Zhu Xinjian (secretary to Li Jinai),<sup>180</sup> and then finally Li Jinai and Liao Xilong themselves.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Staff Commentator, accessed at: [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-12/22/content\\_7418445.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-12/22/content_7418445.htm).

<sup>177</sup> Zhang Zhihao, “Defense Ministry confirms general under investigation,” *China Daily Online*, 29 December 2016, accessed at: [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-12/29/content\\_27816178.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-12/29/content_27816178.htm).

<sup>178</sup> Choi Chi-Yuk, “Crackdown On PLA corruption targets former regional commander,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 September 2016, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2011910/crackdown-pla-corruption-targets-former-regional>.

<sup>179</sup> Minnie Chan and Choi Chi-Yuk, “PLA general held after 37m yuan seized, but takedown hints at revenge plot against prominent brother,” *South China Morning Post*, 28 May 2016, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1956865/pla-general-held-after-37m-yuan-seized-takedown-hints>.

<sup>180</sup> Minnie Chan and Choi Chi-Yuk, “Two more of China’s former top commanders taken away for corruption investigation: military sources,” *South China Morning Post*, 5 August 2016, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1999535/two-more-chinas-former-top-commanders-taken-away>.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*