



# **Control and Decisionmaking in Xi Jinping's Military**

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## Summary

Over the past decade, Xi Jinping centralized control over the military through more than just reshuffling the People's Armed Forces. Just as importantly, he stripped away control over the Party gun from other parts of the Chinese Communist Party. In doing this, the primary potential disrupting factor in control of and decisionmaking in the military is internal. As such, Xi now relies on three different elements to exercise control and implement decisionmaking at lower levels.

Firstly, Xi directly involves himself in some military issues that he sees as high priority. However, his involvement is not necessarily permanent. Military affairs only take up a small fraction of Xi's time and he cannot simultaneously control the entire military by himself.

This leads to the utilization of a second form of control and decisionmaking. Xi built and maintains a network of trusted agents; individuals that he knows well enough to reliably act as his eyes, ears, mouth, and hands. These are not just individuals that Xi views exclusively as politically trustworthy but must fall under the category of "double expert"; individuals who have strong political and military credentials. Although we can identify a handful of such trusted agents, it is impossible to know exactly who is and is not a trusted agent.

Even with trusted agents in place, these individuals cannot be everywhere at once, and even the most trustworthy individuals cannot be entirely trusted. Thus, Xi continues to rely on the CCP's Party committee system as the primary means of control and decisionmaking. In a way, these act as a "trusted agent in aggregate" and are the most prevalent decisionmaking bodies in the People's Armed Forces. Even if an organization has an individual that Xi trusts leading it, the organization's Party committee is officially the decisionmaking body that interprets Xi's guidance, applies that guidance within their organization, and disseminates that guidance to subordinate entities.

The levels of authority each organization has is virtually impossible to determine. On paper, they can have vast amounts of autonomy and authority. Officially, how much authority subordinate entities have is up to the discretion of the up-echelon Party committee and eventually Xi. Inherently, because Xi cannot provide precise guidance to every single part of the People's Armed Forces, his guidance must be broad and left to the interpretation of lower echelons. However, the presence of skip-echelon and pushing down of senior officers can pressure units relying on high-level centralized decisionmaking.

Despite this extensive structure, there are still possible gaps in decisionmaking and areas where the current structure is likely inadequate. There is no evidence that the CCP currently has a robust decisionmaking and control mechanism for joint nuclear operations, operations beyond the theater command system, and military intelligence. The operational decisionmaking structure for counterspace operations appears to be confused.

In response to these findings, I recommend that the United States commit greater resources to further understanding how the intricacies of the CCP military decisionmaking mechanism works in a practical sense, better educate our forces on how this system works, and invest in ways to improve our own military decisionmaking processes and survivability. If we implement these changes, we have the opportunity to substantively deter the CCP from using force against the United States and its allies.

## How Xi Centralized Control Over the Military

Structurally, Xi Jinping's efforts to reinforce his ability to exercise direct control over the People's Armed Forces, an umbrella term that includes the People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Armed Police (PAP), and militia, fall under two categories. Firstly, he reduced the number of bureaucratic layers between himself as CMC chairman and the individual PLA soldier. Secondly, Xi removed several civilian actors that historically had direct or indirect influence over the military.

Previous studies already explored the first category. Xi broke up the PLA's four general departments, reduced the number of command layers between the CMC and tactical formations, and codified the Central Military Commission (CMC) chairman responsibility system with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Constitution all helped strengthen Xi's grip on the military.<sup>1</sup> However, there are several structural changes that Xi made that deliberately removed civilian actors from the People's Armed Forces' chain of command that are not as commonly recognized or understood as ways of centralizing control.

Xi's removal of external actors who could either influence decisions related to the People's Armed Forces or directly control military forces is arguably the most direct means of Xi consolidating structural control over the military. Upon Xi's ascendance to power in November 2012, there were multiple actors outside of the military system that were involved in the People's Armed Forces. Not only did these actors have the ability to directly control or influence the military, but they also complicated the decisionmaking process. The changes enacted in subsequent years did away with most of these external actors.

One of Xi's first moves to consolidate control over the People's Armed Forces was to remove local CCP officials from the command structure of PLA reserve units. Prior to 2016, regional party secretaries frequently served as "first commissars" of PLA reserve units within the Provincial Military District (PMD) system. In this capacity, CCP officials at the prefecture and provincial level acted as a "first among equals" over a reserve unit's military commander and political commissar. The civilian CCP official, in this capacity, also led party committee meetings for local PLA reserve units and thus could exercise substantial influence over what these reserve units did.<sup>2</sup> In other words, local CCP officials had a limited capacity to control their own guns. Given that Xi served in this capacity for a Fujian PMD reserve anti-aircraft artillery division while he was the Fujian provincial party committee deputy secretary, he almost certainly is cognizant about how one might abuse this system for self-gain.<sup>3</sup>

As part of Xi's widespread reform of the PLA, the creation of the National Defense Mobilization Department (NDMD) and Theater Command system provided a more streamlined means of controlling the PMDs and subordinate reserve units. Under the new system, the NDMD administers the various

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<sup>1</sup> People's Republic of China, "China's Constitution of 1982 with Amendments Through 2004", August 26, 2001, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/China\\_2004.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/China_2004.pdf?lang=en).

<sup>2</sup> "科普：军队中的“第一政委”和“政委”有什么区别？谁的级别高" [Science: What Is The Difference Between The "First Political Commissar" And The Political Commissar"? Whose Level Is High], 欢乐说娱 [Huanle Shuoye], May 10, 2018, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/DHC5GQ1R0529IHA8.html>.

<sup>3</sup> 新华网, [Xinhuanet], "习近平同志简历" [Comrade Xi Jinping Resume], 新华网 [Xinhuanet], October 25, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/25/c\\_1121856289.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/25/c_1121856289.htm).

PMDs while the Theater Commands provide operational control.<sup>4</sup> Even if the local civilian authorities wanted to use PLA reserve units for disaster response, the relevant theater command must assume a joint command of those forces.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Xi realigned the PAP under the full control over the CMC through the “Decision of the Central Committee on Adjusting the Leadership and Command System of the People’s Armed Police” in January 2018.<sup>6</sup> Prior to this “Decision”, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) oversaw the PAP to include operations, budget, size, and composition.<sup>7</sup> Local MPS officials also retained a “first commissar” position in local PAP detachments through late-2017.<sup>8</sup> This dynamic provided local CCP officials with similar levels of control over local PAP detachments when compared to PLA reserve forces.

Determining if Xi had ulterior motives for removing local CCP officials from the PLA reserve force and PAP chain of command would be extremely difficult. However, this move inherently stripped local CCP officials of control over military and paramilitary forces and consolidated control over those forces within the CMC and thus Xi himself.

Xi also removed civilian CCP members from People’s Armed Forces inspection delegations early in his tenure as CCP General Secretary. Xi Jinping’s accompanying delegation at PLA and PAP units from 2012 to 2015 consisted of several civilian CCP members to include Politburo members Wang Huning and Li Zhanshu.<sup>9</sup> Hu Jintao’s delegations also consisted of senior civilian CCP members to include at least one Politburo member.<sup>10</sup> However, Xi Jinping’s visits after 2015 do away with this trend in that Xi’s entire visiting delegation consists of military officers.<sup>11</sup>

We can likely rule out active distrust for the reason behind Xi’s decision to remove civilian CCP officials from military visits. Wang Huning and Li Zhanshu accompanied Xi to most military unit visits from 2012 through 2015. Both individuals served on the Politburo of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee at the time of

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<sup>4</sup> 张军胜, 刘国顺, [Zhang Junsheng, Liu Guoshun], “全国省军区系统转隶中央军委国防动员部” [National Provincial Military Region System Transfer Central Military Commission National Defense Ministry], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], February 17, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/sydbt/2016-02/17/content\\_6916134.htm](http://www.81.cn/sydbt/2016-02/17/content_6916134.htm).

<sup>5</sup> 薛志亮, 沈凡, [Xue Zhiang, Shen Fan], “从一次抢险看动员要素构成” [Mobilization Elements From A Rescue], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], August 6, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2020-08/06/content\\_267774.htm](http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2020-08/06/content_267774.htm).

<sup>6</sup> 徐平, [Xu Ping], “历史发现：武警有过哪些体制调整？” [History Discovery: What Institutional Adjustments Have Ever Been Armed?], 中国军网综合 [China Army Network Comprehensive], January 4, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/wj/2018-01/04/content\\_7894833.htm](http://www.81.cn/wj/2018-01/04/content_7894833.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Joel Wuthnow, China’s Other Army: The People’s Armed Police in an Era of Reform, April 2019, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/82/China%20SP%2014%20Final%20for%20Web.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> 雅安市人民政府办公室, [Ya'an Municipal People's Government Office], “马宏副市长出席武警雅安支队 2017 年夏秋季退役士兵欢送大会” [Marhong Deputy Mayor Attends Armed Police Ya'an Detachment 2017 Summer Autumn Retired Soldier], 市公安局 [Municipal Public Security Bureau], September 6, 2017, <http://www.yaan.gov.cn/gongkai/show/20170906161834-755237-00-000.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “Xi Jinping Military Visit Tracker”, China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 1, 2022, available upon request.

<sup>10</sup> 解放军报, [Liberation Army News], “胡锦涛视察济南军区强调不放松军事斗争准备” [Hu Jintao Inspected Jinan Military Region To Emphasize Not To Relax Military Struggle Preparation], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], October 22, 2009, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2009-10-22/0926571027.html>.

<sup>11</sup> “Xi Jinping Military Visit Tracker”, China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 1, 2022, available upon request.

these visits and ascended to the Politburo Standing Committee of the 19<sup>th</sup> Central Committee. Given this ascendance and Li Zhanshu's potential connection to Xi during their time in Hebei, it seems reasonable that Xi does not actively distrust either individual.

A possible explanation for Xi removing two Politburo members from the typical military inspection delegation may be that he simply wants to remove non-military actors from the picture to prevent confusion about who can be involved in military decisionmaking. While Article 24 of the CCP Constitution suggests that the Central Committee, and thus Politburo Standing Committee, has a cursory line of authority over the PLA, the consistent presence of civilian Politburo and Central Committee members at military unit inspections prior to 2015 suggests they likely had some hands-on involvement in the military.<sup>12</sup> This might have resulted in a confused management over the People's Armed Forces.

### **What Xi Controls Directly**

The structural and cultural changes that Xi imposed on the PLA opened the way to him becoming more directly involved in the military. However, the extent to which Xi has exercised this right as opposed to delegating authorities to trusted agents remains somewhat of a mystery. What we can glean about Xi's direct involvement is largely anecdotal and based on a very limited number of datapoints.

For example, authors of the 2022 Training Mobilization Order include the the term "I order" (我命令), a very personalized reference that otherwise only appears in the first training mobilization order that Xi issued in 2018.<sup>13 14</sup> The training mobilization orders in 2019, 2020, and 2021 are clearly less personalized and while the PLA almost certainly issued those orders on behalf of Xi, they do not read as the verbal order issued by Xi in 2018 and the most recent 2022 order.

This is all to reinforce the inherent difficulty in determining what military issues Xi personally involves himself in and what he delegates to other actors such as the CMC vice chairman. By cataloging Xi's major interactions with the military since his ascendance to the position of CMC chairman in late 2012, Xi likely involved himself in the decisionmaking of the following efforts:

- Defining PLA reform milestones and objectives
- Transforming the Southern Theater Command into a modern joint operations command organization
- Modernizing the PLA Army (PLAA) and Navy (PLAN)

This approach is potentially flawed in that Xi himself may not decide or even influence his travel and meeting agenda. Other individuals that Xi trusts could determine where he needs to be for military issues, in which case, these findings are entirely irrelevant. However, Xi's military meeting agenda is one

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<sup>12</sup> 中国共产党, [Communist Party of China], "中国共产党章程" [Chinese Communist Party], 中国共产党 [Communist Party Of China], October 24, 2017, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/GB/136058/427510/428086/428087/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> 李萌, [Li Meng], "习近平签署中央军委 2022 年 1 号命令 向全军发布开训动员令" [Xi Jinping Signed The Central Military Commission No. 1 Command To Issue A Training To The Whole Army], 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency], January 4, 2022, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-01/04/content\\_5666366.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-01/04/content_5666366.htm).

<sup>14</sup> 蔡琳琳, [Cai Linlin], "军委举行 2018 年开训动员大会习近平发布训令" [The Military Commission Held The 2018 Announcement Mobilization Conference Xi Jinping Release Order], 新华网 [Xinhuanet], January 3, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-01/03/c\\_129782295.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-01/03/c_129782295.htm).

of the few consistently observable instances and thus we must press with this approach under the assumption that Xi does in fact dictate his own travel and meeting appearances.

Not surprisingly, Xi demonstrated an active interest in the military reform efforts he initiated. As the title of *Saunders et al's* 2019 publication "Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA" suggests, Xi Jinping led the PLA and the People's Armed Forces on the largest reform effort in decades. However, Xi's initiation of a reform effort does not necessitate his active involvement throughout the reform process. That being said, Xi's military engagements reveal what appears to be an active effort to understand the state of the People's Armed Forces upon his ascendance in 2012 and subsequent efforts to guide the CMC through all three stages of the reform process.

Between December 2012 and December 2014, Xi visited the headquarters of six out of the seven now-defunct PLA military regions. Although PRC press does not explicitly tie these visits to the subsequent reform campaign, these trips likely were Xi's effort to survey forces to understand what he wanted to change. He subsequently attended CMC reform meetings in November 2015, December 2016, February 2017, and November 2018.<sup>15</sup> These meetings align against the beginning of the reform process as well as the PLA's three reform stages of "above the neck", "below the neck", and "policy changes" respectively.<sup>16</sup>

Xi likely was also involved in the creation of a modern PLA joint organization and policy system. As of 2022, he has only visited one joint theater command since the system came into being in 2016: the Southern Theater Command (STC).<sup>17</sup> Xi also visited the STC Army Headquarters in April 2017 and has made the greatest number of visits to units within the STC area of responsibility. This not only suggests that the STC acted as the leading edge of the PLA's effort to establish a joint command mechanism, but also that Xi has focused his attention in ensuring the success of this effort.

Xi's visits between late 2012 and 2021 also demonstrate a bias in which he seems to involve himself in the affairs of some PLA services more than others. Out of the 67 events cataloged, eight visits were PLAA-centric, and seven visits were PLAN-centric. In that same time, Xi only conducted four PLA Air Force (PLAAF), three PAP, two PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), and one PLA Rocket Force (PLARF)-centric visit. The remaining events were either CMC-related meetings, or visits to multiple units in the field.<sup>18</sup>

Whether these events accurately reflect Xi's greater direct involvement in PLAA and PLAN issues is up for debate. However, if it does reflect direct interest, the reasoning behind Xi's interest is unclear. On the one hand, Xi may be genuinely interested in these parts of the PLA. Alternatively, Xi may feel that the PLAA and PLAN require greater direct oversight compared to the other services. Regardless, Xi's particular emphasis on visiting PLAA and PLAN units demonstrates a probable direct interest in these two services.

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<sup>15</sup> "Xi Jinping Military Visit Tracker", China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 1, 2022, available upon request.

<sup>16</sup> Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, "Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA- Assessing Chinese Military Reforms", 2019, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/Chairman-Xi/Chairman-Xi.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> "Xi Jinping Military Visit Tracker", China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 1, 2022, available upon request.

<sup>18</sup> "Xi Jinping Military Visit Tracker", China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 1, 2022, available upon request.

Although not reflected in Xi's attendance of military events, PRC press coverage about Xi's interest in the wellbeing of retired military personnel also suggests that Xi may directly involve himself in veteran affairs issues. Official PRC media consistently references that Xi self-identifies as a "demobilized military cadre" (军转干部), a reference to Xi's early career transition from the CMC General Office to Hebei province.<sup>19</sup> As with most other issues, it is difficult to ascertain the reasoning behind Xi's decision to emphasize veteran work. One possible reason is that placating retired PLA military personnel reduces the potential for internal unrest, given that military veterans have historically been a source of protests in China.<sup>20</sup>

### **Building a Network of Trusted Agents**

Xi Jinping ultimately cannot exercise simultaneous control or even perfectly maintain situational awareness over the entire People's Armed Forces. Even for the issues over which Xi appears to exercise direct control or influence over, other individuals and organizations must eventually interpret Xi's overarching guidance and execute his intent. Xi thus must maintain a control structure that can reasonably interpret and execute his intent. The first means of maintaining control and situational awareness is an informal network of trusted agents in the military.

Xi almost certainly relies on a network of trusted agents within the PLA to oversee issues that he cannot or does not want to personally manage. This judgement relies on the assumption that Xi will leverage his authority as CMC Chairman to approve promotions of all general and flag level officers. A handful of publicly available datapoints also suggest that Xi may have indeed installed trusted agents, but there is insufficient evidence at present to suggest that Xi has engaged in a widespread deployment of trusted agents that he knows from before his time as CMC chairman.

One of the most discussed means through which Xi ensures loyalty and political reliability across the CCP is the installing of trusted agents.<sup>21</sup> It is true that Xi installed several individuals into senior positions across the PLA with whom he has longstanding ties. Typically, we flag individuals who have family connections to Xi or with whom Xi has previously worked in the past as personal allies. One clear example of this is Xi's appointment of his long-time aide Zhong Shaojun to the CMC General Office as a deputy director.<sup>22</sup>

However, publicly available information rarely captures such personal connections. Besides Zhong, there are only a few other military officials that public reports cite as "Xi allies", namely CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia and PLAN Political Commissar Qin Shengxiang. Due to the rarity of such connections being

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<sup>19</sup> 王萌萌, [Wang Mengmeng], "以习近平同志为核心的党中央关心退役军人工作纪实" [Party Central Committee Of Comrade Xi Jinping Cares For The Documentary], 新华网 [Xinhuanet], July 25, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-07/25/c\\_1124799562.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-07/25/c_1124799562.htm).

<sup>20</sup> Associated Press, "China sentences military veterans for protesting", Associated Press, April 19, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/b71f4727f7fc41e2b4aff99c933025a6>.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Kang Lim, Ben Blanchard, "China combat veteran, close ally of Xi, to get promotion – sources, Reuters, October 17, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-congress-military-idINKBN1CM0U2>.

<sup>22</sup> 陈宝成, [Chen Baocheng], "官方证实钟绍军任中央军委办公厅主任" [Official Confirmed That Zhong Shaojun Was Director Of The Office Of The Central Military Commission], 财新数据通 [Finish Data], September 19, 2018, <https://database.caixin.com/2018-09-19/101328280.html>.

made public, using this type of connection as a trust indicator to determine the full extent of Xi's personal network in the military. Thus, while Xi does appear to have placed some close allies and individuals with whom he has a longstanding relationship with, we cannot realistically know how many current PLA leaders have such connections.

Indeed, it appears that Xi is happy to delegate some issues to military trusted agents. For example, despite Xi's attendance of an "All Army Equipment Meeting" in December 2014, CMC Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia has taken over leading all subsequent equipment and logistics meetings as recently as late-2021.<sup>23 24</sup>

Another potential category of trusted agents in the military are individuals who served in the same region and timeframe as Xi. Namely, other works frequently look to officers that served in Fujian, Zhejiang, or Shanghai based units while Xi served in those areas.<sup>25</sup> This "early career overlap with Xi" argument typically looks at individual datapoint, such as Admiral Miao Hua and General Wang Ning, who both served in the Fujian-based 31st Group Army at the same time Xi worked in Fujian. The major potential flaw with this indicator is that it assumes geographic and temporal overlap is a reasonable indicator that two individuals know each other and that limited professional work together would create trust.

Nevertheless, we can look at the 57 officers that Xi promoted to full general or admiral since he became CMC chairman. 17 out of the 57 officers had the potential to overlap with Xi in either Fujian, Zhejiang, or Shanghai. 7 of the 17 individuals served in the Fujian-based 31st Group Army at the same time Xi was in Fujian. There is insufficient career information for the current PLAN Commander, Admiral Dong Jun, to determine whether he overlapped with Xi.<sup>26</sup>

One would need to compare this data with 3-star promotions prior to Xi to make it useful. It is possible that the 31st Group Army, as a premier Army unit expected to lead the charge in a Taiwan invasion scenario, might have higher promotion rates.<sup>27</sup> In short, it does appear that in disproportionately large number of PLA and PAP three-star officers promoted by Xi served in eastern China at the same time as Xi, but additional work is required to determine whether this is unique to Xi's tenure as CMC chairman or if there are other variables at play.

A third category of potential trusted agents are individuals who likely had sustained interactions with Xi after he became CMC chairman. This category is slightly more reliable than the previous "early career overlap" argument because it looks to individuals who we know had personal contact with Xi. The best window into who might have regular contact with Xi are individuals that accompany him on military

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<sup>23</sup> "Xi Jinping Military Visit Tracker", China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 1, 2022, available upon request.

<sup>24</sup> 杨鹤, [Yang He], "习近平对全军装备工作会议作出重要指示" [Xi Jinping Made An Important Indication Of The Entire Military Equipment Work Meeting], 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency], October 26, 2021, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-10/26/content\\_5645018.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-10/26/content_5645018.htm).

<sup>25</sup> Arthur S. Ding, Jagannath P. Panda, "Chinese Politics and Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping", Routledge, November 24, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> "General Officer Catalog", China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 1, 2022, available upon request.

<sup>27</sup> 陈俊松, [Chen Junsong], "别了! 18个集团军" [Do Not! 18 Group Army], 新华社解放军分社 [Xinhua News Agency Liberation Army Branch], April 28, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2017-04/28/c\\_1120887341.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2017-04/28/c_1120887341.htm).

visits. Two examples of such individuals are CMC Strategic Planning Office Director Major General Shen Fangwu and PLAN Discipline Inspection Committee Secretary Vice Admiral Liu Xunyan.

Shen previously served as a CMC General Office deputy director and accompanied Xi on virtually every military unit visit through 2019. Liu served as Political Work Department Security Bureau director until January 2016 and accompanied Xi on most military unit visits until he received a promotion in 2016.<sup>28</sup> After several years working around Xi, both individuals received promotions to extremely coveted and sensitive positions. Although there is no way to determine with certainty that Xi deliberately promoted these two individuals and others like them to place trusted agents in key positions, it is certainly a possibility.

It is possible that there are multiple confounding variables at play. One potential problem is that positions near Xi may already be closely controlled to ensure only the most competent individuals fill those positions. Another potential issue is that these positions may inherently act as gateways to further promotion. Nevertheless, we can at least ascertain that these individuals have some direct contact with Xi before receiving a promotion.

It should be abundantly clear at this point that determining who might qualify as a trusted agent of Xi is extremely difficult. In most cases, a military officer's connection to Xi is circumstantial at best. However, there are still a handful of known or likely examples of Xi promoting individuals he knows into key positions.

Despite this difficulty in determining how many officers are trusted agents of Xi, the system inherently allows for Xi to easily place such trusted agents wherever he wants. According to the PRC's Active Military Officer Service Law Article 12 Section 1, the CMC Chairman officially appoints and removes all active-duty officers at the division grade and above.<sup>29</sup> During Xi's tenure as CMC Chairman, the PLA and PAP promoted several hundred PLA and PAP officers to the one-star general rank and above. The number of officers that the PLA promoted to the division grade almost certainly numbers in the thousands.

As such, Xi had the sole authority to approve or disapprove all general and flag promotions in the People's Armed Forces from 2013 onward. Of course, it would be impractical for Xi himself to scrutinize every single officer up for promotion at the division grade and higher. Xi almost certainly offloads some of this work to individuals he trusts, such as CMC Political Work Department Director Admiral Miao Hua, who is officially in charge of personnel management in the PLA. However, it is a safe assumption that Xi has a direct say in the promotion of full generals and admirals. Xi may also exercise his authority and apply direct scrutiny on lower-level positions at the theater and even corps level.

The officers that Xi promotes to these senior positions must have the right political ideology and operational track record. Indeed, differentiating these two buckets, especially at the general and flag level, is an artifact of a Western military mindset. In the People's Armed Forces, operational proficiency

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<sup>28</sup> "Xi Jinping Military Visit Tracker", China Aerospace Studies Institute, January 1, 2022, available upon request.

<sup>29</sup> 毛志文, [Mao Zhiwen], "中华人民共和国现役军官法" [People's Republic Of China Active Military Officer Law], 国家信访局门户网站 [National Letter And Tour Office], January 16, 2014, [http://www.81.cn/zggfs/2014-01/16/content\\_5737753\\_2.htm](http://www.81.cn/zggfs/2014-01/16/content_5737753_2.htm).

and political awareness are increasingly intermingled the more senior one becomes. The PLA's propaganda slogan of "double expert" perfectly encapsulates this philosophy that the divide between military and political work is disappearing.<sup>30</sup>

This blurring of lines can be seen today in some of the PLA's senior most generals. For example, PLA National Defense University's political commissar General Zheng He previously served as the University's commandant. Similarly, Western Theater Command's political commissar General Li Fengbiao is a career airborne officer who previously served as the PLASSF Commander.

### **Party Committees as a Formal Control Mechanism**

Even if Xi has an extensive network of trusted agents across the People's Armed Forces, they still cannot provide total coverage over the entire force. The formal party committee system that exists across all CCP organizations is the ultimate guarantor of Xi's effective control over the entire military. In the most simplified sense, party committees act as Xi Jinping signal amplifiers. They interpret up-echelon guidance about what Xi Jinping wants, translates that into actionable information at their level, and then disseminate guidance down to subordinate lower echelons. Understanding the party committee system sets the foundation for understanding the PLA's decision-making processes both in peacetime and wartime.<sup>31</sup>

Every level in the PLA has some form of leading party organization. Although each type of Party organization has a different name, we can broadly refer to them all as party committees. Each Party organization is responsible to the next higher-level Party organization and, ultimately, to the CCP's Central Committee through the CMC.

Group leadership and decisionmaking is the core of the party committee system and thus the core of the PLA's decisionmaking system. The Party committee secretary, deputy secretary, and standing committee members are equal in position to regular committee members.<sup>32</sup> However, there are differing levels of responsibility. The Party committee secretary and deputy secretary oversee the implementation of the decision and the standing committee is responsible for reporting up to the party congress at the relevant level. In peacetime, the standing committee of the party committee presides over making daily decisions for unit affairs.

In many ways, the Party committee structure creates a "trusted agent" in the aggregate. Instead of having a single individual whom Xi trusts, a collective group of individuals who are promoted based on both political and military affairs traits are responsible for unit control and oversight.

Specifically, military Party committees are responsible for the following:

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<sup>30</sup> 王妍洁, 鞠英杰, 张新凯, [Wang Yizhen, Yan Yingjie, Zhang Xinkai], "争做“两个行家里手” | 从“纸上谈兵”到“双脚落地”" [Strive To Be "Two Hipster Hands" | From "Talking" To "Feet"], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], November 18, 2021, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/power/2021-11/18/content\\_4899060.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/power/2021-11/18/content_4899060.htm).

<sup>31</sup> Roderick Lee, Marcus Clay, Eli Tirk, "The Role of CCP Apparatuses in the People's Liberation Army", SOS International LLC Center for Intelligence Research and Analysis, Forthcoming.

<sup>32</sup> 中国共产党, [Communist Party of China], "中国共产党章程" [Chinese Communist Party], 中国共产党 [Communist Party Of China], October 24, 2017, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/GB/136058/427510/428086/428087/index.html>.

- Establishing and overseeing Party organizations in subordinate units and organizations
- Educating CCP members
- Interpreting and implementing higher-level Party committee decisions and guidance
- Reporting the unit's work to the higher-level Party committee
- Make decisions on operational and military works issues

Although requiring collective group decisionmaking on all these issues may sound ineffective and slow, the CCP likely believes in the “advantages” of the party committee’s leading role in warfighting, because it is conducive to the “vertical penetration of grassroots units” while simultaneously “horizontal linkages of different operational systems of systems.”<sup>33</sup> Under rapidly changing informatized conditions, the PLA values the advantages party committee system provides because it facilitates “pushing decision-making activities vertically down to the grassroots” and can also foster “horizontal linkages of different operational system of systems.”

### **Transitioning into Crises and Wartime**

Most of a Party committee’s functions are relatively “high-level” in nature and do not involve the Party committee needing to approve every action made within a unit. If a Party committee has done its job properly, it will have clearly defined overarching guidance, a division of labor, and emergency procedures before a crisis or conflict begins. Thus, it should have very little involvement in lower-level decisions that it has delegated out to different parts of a unit.

For example, a good Party committee will outline what a PLAN vessel in the South China Sea can and cannot do while shadowing a U.S. Navy vessel that is conducting a freedom of navigation operation, who on the PLAN vessel is responsible for what, and what procedures must be followed should something happen outside the scope of the plan. If all of this is done, the PLAN vessel should be able to operate on its own with very little additional guidance from its up-echelon unit’s Party committee. This same dynamic should apply in a wartime environment, wherein Party committees provide overarching guidance, and individuals within a unit, namely the commander and political commissar, execute that guidance within their respective work types.

But inevitably, there are unique demands in a crisis or during wartime that drive the existence of two modified forms of the Party committee system that come into play: temporary party committees (临时党委) and wartime party committees (战时党委). Although the CCP does stand up both temporary and wartime party committees in the present day under limited circumstances, they will be prolific within a crisis or wartime PLA structure.

In peacetime, the PLA’s party committee system is stable due to units and organizations have well defined party committees and standing party committees. In wartime, the PLA will inevitably create numerous ad hoc formations based on operational requirements. This can range from the well-known joint landing group that the PLA will stand up during a Taiwan invasion scenario to a small navy escort formation consisting of two frigates. Since both aforementioned ad hoc formations are at least a

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<sup>33</sup> Roderick Lee, Marcus Clay, Eli Tirk, “The Role of CCP Apparatuses in the People’s Liberation Army”, SOS International LLC Center for Intelligence Research and Analysis, Forthcoming.

regiment-level command, the CCP Military Party Committee Work Regulation stipulates that both formations must form temporary party committees.

Notionally, a wartime ad hoc formation's temporary party committee will consist of the formation's senior command and political officer, department directors, and sometimes the senior officers from subordinate groupings. But due to the ad hoc nature of these committees, there appears to be greater flexibility in terms of committee membership and who acts as secretary.

A similar party committee construct that likely will be prevalent in wartime is the wartime party committee. In most cases, wartime party committees are temporary or ad hoc in nature, implying that most wartime party committees are also temporary party committees. The only apparent difference between discussions of regular party committee and a wartime party committee responsibility is the emphasis on clarifying authorities and the division of labor. In one example, a wartime party committee within a training environment clarifies the immediate temporary authorities of frontline combat commanders and personnel. Extrapolating from this responsibility, wartime party committees may place broad emphasis on defining which decisionmaking methods should be used under a wide range of combat situations.

As an example of a temporary wartime party committee implementation, within the context of a notional PLA military campaign, a wartime party committee likely has the following tasks. The committee is first expected to determine the overall concept and resolution for the campaign. Using that overarching concept and desired end state, the campaign command and support staff will draft a campaign plan and supporting plans. Within the plans, the campaign staff will define the division of labor, authorities, and command relationships. The campaign wartime party committee will then approve a plan. At this point, the campaign committee's roll becomes one of monitoring and only intervening when there is a major change in circumstances.

If a Party committee decision is needed, but the full party committee or standing party committee cannot meet due to time or geographic constraints, the PLA has several options to temporarily bypass the party committee decisionmaking process. One option is that the leader on scene can make an emergency decision on the spot and address the consequences of that decision at the party committee level after the emergency is over. Another option that is more applicable for situations where party committees are disaggregated across different locations is a "remote" committee meeting wherein participants essentially call in and hold a virtual session of sorts.

### **Authority of Trusted Agents and Party Committees**

Although each level of the PLA inherent must have some level of autonomy to make their own decisions, we cannot realistically gauge the amount of autonomy or authority any given trusted agent or Party committee in the PLA has. On paper, the People's Armed Forces are supposed to have a great amount of flexibility and autonomy in how they go about performing their assigned tasks. PLA textbooks and media articles highlight how units and thus Party committees across the PLA are supposed to innovate and adapt based on local conditions. Frequently, these articles discuss how a unit developed a new training

method, tactic, or maintenance process. PLA press will also openly publish officer recommendations about current deficiencies in the PLA and how one should go about resolving these deficiencies.<sup>34</sup>

However, real world events suggest that such freedom in decisionmaking frequently does not exist. One PLA Navy officer who attended the Rim of the Pacific exercise in 2016 lamented that the PLA's "nanny command style" was inadequate for modern operations.<sup>35</sup> An example of such "nanny command style" is the PLA's tendency to push down senior officers to relatively small tactical formations. This problem was prevalent enough that the PLAN eventually issued guidance that single-ship formations could not have a senior officer embarked onboard to allow the ship's own commanding officer and political commissar to perform their job.

The PLA even places value on ensuring that even if they grant amount of autonomy in decisionmaking to lower echelons, the theater commands and CMC retain the ability to "skip echelon" command tactical formations.<sup>36</sup> This is not just an academic concept that the PLA discusses, but also something implemented in the real world today. It appears that all theater command joint operations command centers have live video feeds from virtually every weapons platform operating within the area of responsibility. For example, in the STC joint operations command center, there are video feeds from PLAN vessels patrolling the South China Sea as well as military facilities across the region.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, while the PLA appears to academically acknowledge the need to grant their warfighters some level of decisionmaking and autonomy, the system also gravitates towards a highly centralized command and control structure.

### **Gaps in the System**

Despite the extensive control infrastructure that Xi put in place within the People's Armed Forces, there are some gaps where the PLA appears to have either a confused or insufficient decisionmaking structure in place to adequately execute operations in that domain. Such gaps may be an artifact of publicly available information, but they may also reflect true gaps in the PLA's decisionmaking structure. The three areas where the public record shows a lack of a sufficient decisionmaking structure is joint nuclear operations, operations beyond the theater command system, and military intelligence.

The PLA's heavily publicized rapid development of nuclear launch systems and supporting infrastructure has not been accompanied by the development of an organizational entity that can conduct peacetime decisionmaking on joint nuclear operations. There is no equivalent to the U.S. Strategic Command and with the growing emergence of the PLAN, PLAAF, and PLASSF as nuclear players, the PLARF can no longer act as a stand-in for a functional nuclear operations command. Just as how the PLA stood up functional commands to oversee activities in the information domain and logistics, the PLA would likely need to stand up a nuclear operations command to oversee nuclear deterrence and counterattack

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<sup>34</sup> 汪晓勇, [Wang Xiaoyong], "'环太平洋—2016"演习启示" ["RIMPAC 2016" Exercise Revelation], 人民海军 [People's Navy], September 19, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> 肖天亮, 楼耀亮, 亢武超, 蔡仁照, [Xiao Tianliang, Lou Yaoliang, Kang Wuchao, Cai Renzhao], "战略学" [Science of Military Strategy], 国防大学出版社 [National Defense University Press], August 1, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> CCTV-7, "军事报道 20180810" [Military Report 20180810], CCTV-7 [Military Report 20180810], August 10, 2018.

operations. Even if Xi has unilateral release authority and the PLA puts in place the technical infrastructure to automatically translate that release authority into launch authority for tactical units, there still must be a decisionmaking system to create and maintain such a system.

The second area where the PLA appears to lack a sufficient decisionmaking system is for operations that fall outside of the scope of the theater command system. Although the reach of the theater commands continues to grow geographically, it does not appear to cover global operations. As the PLA continues to conduct peacetime operations and plan for wartime operations to occur further from China's mainland, the current theater command system will eventually reach a limit. This is not to say that it is impossible for the current theater command system to oversee global operations, but rather that it is not optimal.

A third functional area where the PLA has either obscured or not fully developed a decisionmaking system is in the realm of military intelligence. Despite the growing emphasis on strategic early warning and intelligence as integral forms of operational support in the PLA, intelligence functions still appear to be disaggregated across multiple organizations.<sup>38</sup> The CMC consolidated most high-end technical intelligence capabilities within the PLASSF, but human intelligence, tactical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, as well as analysis fall under other various parts of the PLA. Conceivably, the CMC Joint Staff Department's (JSD) Intelligence Bureau could act as a coordinating mechanism with a JSD deputy chief of staff as the leading individual, but such a mechanism does not lend itself to the increasingly high volumes of intelligence that the PLA is almost certainly gathering.

Lastly, although the PLA's creation of the PLASSF as unified command that oversees much of the PLA's information and space operations, the operational decisionmaking structure for counterspace capabilities appears somewhat confused. Both the PLASSF's Aerospace Systems Department and Network Systems Department likely possess counterspace capabilities and may even operate identical ground-based counterspace electronic warfare systems. How or if the PLASSF will deconflict these capabilities are unclear.

## **Recommendations**

Based on this discussion, I have three recommendations to consider as we seek to deter and if necessary, defeat PRC aggression. First, we need to dedicate more resources to understand the PRC's military decisionmaking apparatus from Xi Jinping down to the individual PLAA infantry squad. The United States seeks to maintain a decisionmaking advantage against its adversaries and create multiple decisionmaking dilemmas for our adversaries. The only way to know whether we have an advantage, how large that advantage is, and how to put our adversary at a disadvantage is to understand how their system works. We cannot know if we are ahead if we do not know where they are.

Second, we should further empower our professional military education institutions across the Department of Defense such that they can better educate U.S., allied, and partner nation forces on how the People's Armed Forces decisionmaking system works. This is not only to help military officers and defense officials inform how they should develop their own set of decisions, but also to make them internally aware of how wide or small the military decisionmaking gap is.

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<sup>38</sup> 肖天亮, 楼耀亮, 亢武超, 蔡仁照, [Xiao Tianliang, Lou Yaoliang, Kang Wuchao, Cai Renzhao], "战略学" [Science of Military Strategy], 国防大学出版社 [National Defense University Press], August 1, 2020.

Third, we must invest in maintain an edge in decisionmaking. The CCP has a system that prefers and gravitates towards centralized military decisionmaking. However, such a system that is prone to becoming overwhelmed and for seniors to reach down and interfere. Automation can alleviate some bandwidth issues, but it is not a panacea. The CCP also has a system designed to atrophy and degrade in a controlled fashion. In a worst-case scenario, a PLA unit will still have a Party committee in the field that is supposed to be able to make its own decisions in the absence of up-echelon guidance. We need to build and maintain a system that will be more agile than the CCP's during the onset of the conflict, but also one that will degrade more gracefully than theirs over time. Such a system cannot be reliant on technology alone and must truly allow our warfighters to make the smart decisions that we know they can make without up-echelon interference.

Parts of the PLA have told us openly that at one point, they perceived the United States as having a decisionmaking advantage in the military realm. They saw the autonomy and trust that we place upon even junior officers and enlisted. When comparing that system with their own, they concluded that the PLA was not ready. The PLA told us that they felt deterred, and we must continue to leverage that dynamic.