

The PLA reforms: Tightening control over the military

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The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been the army of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the end of the 1920s, long before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in October 1949. The reorganisation of Chinese armed forces, announced last year, is the largest that has been undertaken since 1950. How will the reforms affect the relationship between the Party and the Army? Cui Lianjie, vice president of the Nanjing College of Political Science, summarises the situation well: "Reforming is not changing direction, transforming is not changing colour" (改革不是改向, 变革不是变色, *gaige bushi gaixiang, biange bushi bianse*).⁸ The Party's authority over the army does not seem to be in question. On the contrary, the calls to uphold the "rule by law" within the army and the establishment of new governance institutions within the armed forces in fact gives the Party even greater control over the PLA.

Reforming the army to preserve the system

The decision to reform the PLA was announced at the Third Plenum of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP in November 2013. The Party presented the reform as having been prompted by the international and domestic environment, as well as by internal failures within the army. Major General Xiao Dongsong says that President Xi Jinping emphasised that China is faced with "three unprecedented situations" (三个前所未有, *sange qiansuo weiyou*) as well as "three dangers" (三个危险, *sange weixian*).⁹ China is closer than ever before to being the centre of the world stage; it is closer to achieving its goals; and it now has the ability and the self-confidence to achieve its objectives. At the same time, China must deal with the danger of aggression, subversion, and division, the danger that its steady economic development may not last, and the danger of interrupting the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics.¹⁰

Xiao says that to address these risks and achieve the goal of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", Xi Jinping needs to build a strong army. To do so, Xi must tackle two problems within the army: the lack of ideology and the existence of corruption. The Central Military Commission (CMC) published an "Opinion on Deepening the Reform

of National Defence and the Armed Forces" on 1 January 2016, which said that the military must follow the "guiding ideology" of the Party.¹¹ Moreover, as Professor Zhang Xueli of the National University of Defence Technology phrases it, the CMC says it is important to "further consolidate and develop the PLA specifically high level of political dominance, to achieve the objective of a strong army, providing protection to the system (制度, *zhidu*) and the institution (体制, *tizhi*, i.e. the Party)".¹²

The all-powerful CMC and the three new control bodies

The army reform programme was designed within the CMC's Leading Small Group for Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces (hereafter, LSG).¹³ This group was established in March 2014 and is chaired by Xi Jinping himself. Xiao Dongsong says that in coming up with the reform measures, the LSG organised workshops and debates (more than 860 within 690 military research units), heard from 900 active and retired military officers and experts and surveyed more than 2,000 servicemen from local brigades and units.¹⁴

"The establishment of new governance institutions gives the Party even greater control over the PLA"

One of the main outcomes of the reform process is that the CMC has taken over the responsibilities of the four PLA General Departments

(the General Staff Department, the General Political Department, the General Logistics Department, and the General Armaments Department). The assignments previously held by the general departments have been split up between 15 new CMC departments, commissions, and offices. Four of these new departments retain the titles of the old ones; these departments have kept the same leaders, but they have lost a significant part of their prerogatives and autonomy. The shift in power means that the CMC now has direct control over the five new Theatre Commands (which replace the seven old Military Regions) and over the five services (the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Rocket Force, and the Strategic Support Force).¹⁵

The CMC's strengthened control over the armed forces is further ensured by three new bodies: the Commission for Discipline Inspection (军委纪委, *junwei jiwwei*), the Politics and Law Commission (军委政法委, *junwei zhengfawei*), and the Audit Office (军委审计署, *junwei shenjishu*).

⁸ Cui Lianjie, "The Reform is to Better Preserve the Party's Absolute Leadership over the Army" (改革是要更好坚持党对军队的绝对领导, *gaige shi yao genghao jianchi dang dui jundui de jue dui lingdao*), *PLA Daily*, 28 December 2015.

⁹ Huang Kunlun (ed.), "Using the spirit of President Xi's important speech to converge energy for a strong army reform" (用习主席重要讲话精神汇聚改革强军正能量, *yong xizhu xi zhongyao jianghua jingshen huiju gaige qiangjun zheng nengliang*), *PLA Daily*, 4 January 2016 (hereafter, Huang (ed.), "President Xi's important speech"). This article is a report of a meeting organised by the *PLA Daily* between scholars from the National Defence University, the China Academy of Military Science, and the National University of Defence Technology, and officers from the PLA Rocket Force. Xiao Dongsong is the director of the Department of Marxism studies at the National Defence University (NDU).

¹⁰ Huang (ed.), "President Xi's important speech".

¹¹ "Central Military Commission Opinion on Deepening the Reform of National Defence and the Armed Forces" (中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见, *zhongyang junwei guanyu shenhua guofang he jundui gaige de yijian*), Central Military Commission, 1 January 2016.

¹² Huang (ed.), "President Xi's important speech".

¹³ In Chinese: 中央军委深化国防和军队改革领导小组, *zhongyang junwei shenhua guofang he jundui gegai lingdao xiaozu*.

¹⁴ Huang (ed.), "President Xi's important speech".

¹⁵ On the new theatre commands and services, see Cristina Garafola's article in this issue.

Xiao Dongsong explains that these three bodies will act as a decision-making authority (决策权, *juecequan*), an executive authority (执行权, *zhixingquan*), and a supervision authority (监督权, *jianduquan*).¹⁶ This will help to implement and uphold the Party's control over the army, and especially to fight the "expanding phenomenon of corruption".

The CMC's Commission for Discipline Inspection (CDI) is a replica of the Central CDI, which is under the supervision of the Politburo Standing Committee and is the organisation leading Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign. The CMC CDI was previously part of the PLA's General Political Department (GPD), but it is now an autonomous commission directly under the supervision of the CMC. It is headed by Du Jincai, former vice-director of the GPD. Following the civilian CDI's organisational model, the new military CDI is represented at every level of the army. The mission of the CMC CDI is to fight against corruption and to help promote the Party's ideology within the army.

The CMC CDI was established in December 2015, and it got to work right away. During the Spring Festival in February 2016, it released its strategy of "open inquiries and secret investigation" (明查暗访, *mingcha anfang*). Under this strategy, the CDI has provided phone numbers that anyone can call to report behaviour that does not comply with Party law, and specifically, behaviour that conforms to the "four undesirable working styles" (四风, *sifeng*): formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism, and extravagance.¹⁷ The CDI provided some examples of these "undesirable working styles", such as using public funds for banquets, travel, or entertainment, organising luxurious and extravagant ceremonies, receiving illegal gifts, or using army vehicles for personal use.¹⁸

The CMC Politics and Law Commission (PLC) is analogous to the Central Politics and Law Commission (under Politburo supervision), which is China's core institution for the supervision and control of state-run public security, justice, and judiciary organs, from central to local levels. Until December 2015, out of the 11 members of the Central PLC, only two were from the PLA: the vice-director of the GPD and head of the army's discipline inspection body, and the commander of the People's Armed Police. Within the PLA, the Military Procurator General and the President of the Military Court were also part of the Central PLC. But from now on, the CMC PLC is in charge of the military judicial courts and procuratorates at every hierarchical level, with the brief of ensuring "legal proceedings" within

the army.¹⁹ The new president of the CMC PLC is the former Military Procurator General, Li Xiaofeng.²⁰

The CMC Audit Office is headed by the former president of the PLA Logistics Academy, Guo Chunfu. It is mainly responsible for the financial audit of the army, but also for reforming and improving the audit system within the armed forces, in accordance with the Party's guidance.²¹

Ruling the army by the law

Official Chinese sources repeatedly refer to the Maoist idea of "the Party's absolute leadership over the army" (党对军队的绝对领导, *dang dui jundui de juegui lingdao*), which illustrates the continuity in Party-PLA relations.²² Along with this traditional way of referring to Party-PLA relations, a new major trend is the extensive use of judicial wording in Chinese sources. The constraining of the military by Party rules and institutions is more and more frequently presented in legal terms.

The increasing framing of political control in legal terms has been characteristic of Xi Jinping's ruling style since he came to power in 2012.²³ The Third Plenum of the CCP 18th Congress in November 2013 confirmed this policy of "ruling the country by the law" (依法治国, *yifa zhiguo*), in the sense of exercising power through a strict legal framework with which every administration and individual must comply. The expansion of the "rule by law", however, does not imply a concomitant rise of the "rule of law" in China. The legal framework in question is the Party law, which aims above

'ruling the army by the law' is the best way to address the lack of ideology within the military"

all to safeguard the CCP. This is as true for the PLA as for civilian institutions, and all three of the new control bodies serve to enforce Party law.

Xiao Dongsong explains that being strict in "ruling the army by the law" (依法治军, *yifa zhijun*) is the best way to address the lack of "ideology", "ideals and beliefs", and "sense of law and discipline" within the military. He says that servicemen must now work and behave in compliance with the "law and the system", instead of relying on past habits, previous

16 Huang (ed.), "President Xi's important speech".

17 Xi Jinping called for the rejection of formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism, and extravagance at his formal election as president in March 2013, and his Mass Line campaign launched in June 2013 was intended to be a "thorough cleanup" of these "undesirable working styles" within the CCP. See "China's new leader rejects 'hedonism and extravagance'", *CBS News*, 17 March 2013, available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/chinas-new-leader-rejects-hedonism-and-extravagance/>; "Xi: Upcoming CCP campaign a 'thorough cleanup' of undesirable practices", *Xinhuanet*, 18 June 2013, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-06/18/c_132465115.htm.

18 "CMC CDI deploys its multidisciplinary inquiry process for the period of the Spring festival", 军委纪委对春节期间明查暗访工作作出部署, *PLA Daily*, 2 February 2016.

19 "Exclusive decoding of the reorganisation of the CMC, why setting up 15 Departments? What are their functions?" (独家解读军委机关调整组建 15部门为何组建?有何功能? *dujia jiedu junwei jiguan tiaozheng zujian, 15 bumen weihe zujian? You he gongneng?*), *CCTV.com*, 11 January 2016, available at http://news.china.com.cn/2016-01/11/content_37550650.htm (hereafter, *CCTV.com*, "Exclusive decoding of the reorganisation of the CMC").

20 Jiang Ziwen and Yue Huairang, "Former Military Procuratorate inspector, Lieutenant General Li Xiaofeng, appointed Secretary of the newly established CMC CPL" (军事检察院原检察长李晓峰中将任新建中央军委政法委书记, *junshi jianchayuan yuan jianchazhang Li Xiaofeng zhongjiang ren zujian zhongyang junwei zhengfa wei shuji*), *The Paper*, 16 January 2016, available at http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1417771. Jiang Ziwen and Yue Huairang are both journalists for *The Paper*, a website created in 2014 by Shanghai's *Oriental Morning Post*.

21 *CCTV.com*, "Exclusive decoding of the reorganisation of the CMC".

22 For example, the slogan appears 14 times in Cui Lianjie's article, "The Reform is to Better Preserve the Party's Absolute Leadership over the Army", *PLA Daily*, 28 December 2015.

23 On the relationship between politics and law in the early years of the Xi Jinping era, see *China Analysis: Law and Power in Xi's China*, ECFR, December 2013, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china_analysis_law_and_power_in_xis_china.

experience, and executive orders. Xiao believes that to solve the problem of corruption, the “problem of ideology” must first be solved. This problem will also be addressed through the upgrading of the PLA’s training system, something that Xi Jinping emphasised during the Third Plenum.²⁴

The PLA reform programme is aimed not only at improving and modernising the armed forces’ operational capabilities, but also at upholding the Party ideology and supporting its leadership, embodied by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping. The main innovation in the relationship between the Party and the PLA is the “judicialisation” of armed forces governance, which allows a tighter control of the Party over the army. The outcome of reform is summed up by Dai Xu, who quotes another Maoist slogan: “the Party commands the gun” (党指挥枪, *dang zhihui qiang*).²⁵

²⁴ Huang (ed.), “President Xi’s important speech”.

²⁵ Dai Xu is the vice-director of the Institute for Strategy at the National University of Defence. Huang (ed.), “President Xi’s important speech”.