

## The Cult of Xi and the Rise of the CMC Chairman Responsibility System

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Analyst coverage of the recent 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress has emphasized the “cult of Xi” and the lack of a designated successor among the new civilian leadership team, as well as the ideological and normative content of the Central Committee work report delivered by party chief Xi Jinping. Mostly overlooked were the parallel developments on the military side of the ledger, especially a dramatic new emphasis on the so-called “chairman responsibility system” and the personalization of Xi’s command over the People’s Liberation Army. This article examines the core congress documents and speeches related to the military and assesses their implications for party-military relations.

### Xi, the PLA, and the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress

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 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>1</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>6</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

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“are self-aware of being loyal to the core, supporting the core, and safeguarding the core.”<sup>7</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>8</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>9</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>10</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>11</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>12</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 armed forces are in charge of army building.”<sup>13</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>14</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>15</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>16</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>17</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>18</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>19</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>20</sup> In terms of military-related issues, the Constitution was amended to include the following 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 excellent conduct; ensure that the People's Liberation Army accomplishes its missions and tasks in the new era.<sup>21</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>22</sup> Right on cue, at the new Central Committee's First Plenum on 25 October, Xi Jinping was re-elected CMC chairman.<sup>23</sup>

## The Rise of the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System”

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, *lingxiu*), 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>24</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>25</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>26</sup>

Before the party congress, Xi himself had been sporadically 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>27</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>28</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>29</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>30</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 so-called “CMC chairman responsibility system” (军委主席负责制, hereafter referred to as CRS). As I documented previously in *China Leadership Monitor*, 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>31</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>32</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>33</sup> PLA personnel are also encouraged to develop a “commander in chief mentality.”<sup>34</sup> Once the decision has been made, the chairman conducts “concentrated unified leadership” and “efficient command” of the entire military.<sup>35</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>36</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>37</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 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>38</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>39</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>40</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>41</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 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>42</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>43</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>44</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 not prevail [because] fundamentally the CMC chairman responsibility system played the role of a "secret weapon."<sup>45</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>46</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>47</sup>

## Conclusion and Implications

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>48</sup>

The same analyst notes that the consolidation of the four general departments into a “super CMC” (see *CLM* 49<sup>49</sup>) 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 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.”

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## Notes

<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.

<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,

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Carries Forward Strengthening and Rejuvenating the Army: Record of Actual Events Number Two,” *Xinhua*, 30 August 2017.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> “Full Text of Report Delivered by Xi Jinping at 19th CPC National Congress,” *Xinhua*, 18 October 2017.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> “Fan Changlong, Xu Qiliang Attend Discussions of PLA Delegation to the 19th Party Congress,” *Xinhua*, 18 October 2017.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</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>19</sup> “PLA Builds Strong Army in New Era,” *Xinhua*, 15 November 2017.

<sup>20</sup> “Full Text Of Resolution On Amendment To CPC Constitution,” *China Daily*, 24 October 2017.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</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>23</sup> “Xi Jinping Named Chairman of CPC Central Military Commission,” *Xinhua*, 25 October 2017.

<sup>24</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>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</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>32</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>33</sup> Staff Commentator, “The Work System Must Be Made Stricter and More Realistic—Discussion Three on Putting Great Efforts Into Strengthening the Building of the Various Levels of Party Committee Leading Groups,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 28 January 2015, p.1.



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<sup>34</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>35</sup> “The Work System Must Be Made Stricter and More Realistic.”

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>38</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>39</sup> “CMC Issues Opinions on Comprehensively Implementing CMC Chairman Responsibility System,” *Xinhua*, 5 November 2017.

<sup>40</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>41</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> “CMC Chairman Accountability System and China's Diplomacy,” *Kanwa Asian Defense Review*, 1 April 2017, No. 150, pp.32-35.

<sup>49</sup> James Mulvenon, “China’s “Goldwater-Nichols”? The Long-Awaited PLA Reorganization Has Finally Arrived,” *China Leadership Monitor* 49, 1 March 2016, accessed at: <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm49jm.pdf>

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*