

Xi Jinping in Command: Solving the Principal–Agent Problem in CCP–PLA Relations?

Chien-wen Kou^{*}

Abstract

The PLA has been a key player in Chinese elite politics since 1949. However, a series of developments over the last four years has prompted China watchers to re-evaluate Party–military relations. This paper argues that CCP–PLA relations in the Xi Jinping era are characterized by the centralization of power in a single civilian individual. This centralization is reflected by events such as a new emphasis on the CMC chairman responsibility system, the establishment of new coordination bodies under the top leader, radical reforms to the military command structure, the promotion of Xi’s public image as the top leader, and large-scale personnel reshuffles during which Xi’s trustees have gradually come to occupy key military posts while his rivals have been removed. For Xi, these measures are an antidote to the principal–agent problem in CCP–PLA relations caused by both information asymmetry and the discrepant interests of civilian leaders and the top brass of the PLA.

Keywords: People’s Liberation Army (PLA); Xi Jinping; Chinese civil–military relations; Chinese domestic politics

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has been a key player in Chinese elite politics since 1949. Its relationship with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has evolved from “dual-role elites” to “professional soldiers under the command of the CCP.”¹ However, a series of recent events has encouraged China watchers to re-evaluate relations between the Party and the military in the Xi Jinping 习近平 era.

This paper argues that the centralization of power in a single civilian individual has set the basic tone of CCP–PLA relations under Xi’s administration, although the principle that the Party commands the gun remains unchanged. Several phenomena are indicative of this trend: the new emphasis on the Central Military Commission (CMC) chairman responsibility system (*junwei zhuxi fuzezhi* 军委主席负责制), the establishment of new coordination bodies under

* National Chengchi University, Taiwan. Email: cwkou@nccu.edu.tw.

1 Kou 2011, 1–10.

the direct leadership of the top leader, radical reforms of the military command structure, the promotion of Xi's public image as the commander-in-chief, and large-scale personnel reshuffles during which Xi's trustees are placed in key military posts as his rivals are removed.² Xi has attempted to use these measures to combat the principal-agent problem in CCP-PLA relations that stems from both information asymmetry and the discrepant interests of civilian leaders and the top brass of the PLA.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section addresses the evolution of the CMC's institutional reorganization after 1978 and the recent emphasis on the CMC chairman responsibility system. The second section discusses Xi's efforts to strengthen his role as commander-in-chief through institution and image building. The third section presents an analysis of Xi's anti-corruption campaign in the Chinese armed forces. The last section of this paper outlines recent military personnel changes at the deputy military region (MR) level (*fu dajunqu ji* 副大军区级) and above. In the PLA, military grades (*junzhi jibie* 军职级别), which are based on an officer's post, are more important than military ranks (*junxian* 军衔).³ Accordingly, the analysis of military personnel changes in this paper focuses on officer posts or grades.

The New Emphasis on the CMC Chairman Responsibility System

The CCP CMC, the top decision-making body of the PLA, has undergone two structural reorganizations since 1978.⁴ In September 1982, the 12th National Congress of the CCP abolished the CMC Standing Committee (*junwei changweihui* 军委常委会) and in its place installed the CMC Standing Meeting (*junwei changwei huiyi* 军委常委会议), which consists of a secretary-general and several deputy secretaries-general, to deal with the daily work of the committee. The division of labour is split among the minister of defence, chief of general staff, director of the general political department and director of the general logistics department, who are appointed as CMC deputy secretaries-general or ordinary members.

The CMC chairman responsibility system was established in 1982 by the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In contrast to the emphasis on collective leadership by Party committees of all levels, decision making in the CMC is based on a single-head system in which the top leader has the final say. This system functioned normally when Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, a civilian leader with military exploits, held the CMC chairmanship.

2 Owing to the nature of the Chinese party-state, this paper describes a leader as the "top leader" if he or she holds the posts of CCP general secretary and CMC chairman.

3 Allen and Corbett 2004, 257.

4 For the functions of the CMC, see Shambaugh 2002, 119. For organizational innovations of the CMC, please refer to "Dang zhihui qiang: zhongyang junwei de yanxi biange" (The Party commands the gun: the course of change and development of the Central Military Commission), *Wangyi xinwen*, n.d., <http://war.news.163.com/09/0917/16/5JE5PVRC00011232.html>. Assessed 12 April 2016.

The CMC chairman responsibility system, however, runs up against the typical problems with civilian control of the military when a civilian CMC chairman possesses no military background. The lack of personal military experience and supervision/coordination mechanisms means that the chairman has to rely heavily on a few professional military officers who actually run the PLA from their positions as CMC vice-chairmen.⁵ The chairman's de facto decision-making power is further weakened if these officers have political ambitions or become corrupt.

The removal in 1992 of the “Yang family generals,” Yang Shangkun 杨尚昆 and Yang Baibing 杨白冰, exposed the difficulties that come with civilian control over the PLA and led to a further structural reorganization of the CMC in the post-reform era. Yang Baibing, a former CMC secretary-general and director of the General Political Department, was a close military associate of Deng Xiaoping and made an important contribution to his political victory against conservative leaders in early 1992. However, the potential threat of military intervention, signaled by Yang's famous political slogan, “the PLA escorts reform and opening” (*jiefangjun wei gaige kaifang baojia huhang* 解放军为改革开放保驾护航), would have been a problem for CMC chairman Jiang Zemin 江泽民 if Deng had died or become incapacitated. Deng thus decided to eliminate the possibility of military invention for Jiang. In October 1992, the 14th National Party Congress abolished the posts of CMC secretary-general and deputy secretaries-general. Instead, two ageing senior officers, Liu Huaqing 刘华清 and Zhang Zhen 张震, were appointed as CMC vice-chairmen at the same time to prevent the excessive expansion of power of any single military officer.⁶ The two presided over CMC standing meetings in order to assist Jiang with daily military affairs. Yang Baibing gained a seat in the CCP Politburo in 1992 but was deprived of all prior military posts. A number of PLA generals close to Yang were reassigned to less important command posts.⁷

The downfalls of Xu Caihou 徐才厚 and Guo Boxiong 郭伯雄 in 2014 and 2015 demonstrate the persistence of the “civilian control problem.” In September 1999, Guo and Xu gained CMC membership when they were appointed executive deputy chief of the General Staff Department and executive deputy director of the General Political Department, respectively. Their appointments were nominally in preparation for the periodic generational replacement of the CMC leadership, but they were also a political move by Jiang to prolong his influence over the PLA after stepping down from his position as CCP general secretary. In

5 The PLA has direct access to the top leader but there are no mechanisms analogous to the Office of the Secretary of Defense or the National Security Council in the United States to exercise effective civilian control over the PLA on the top leader's behalf. Accordingly, the PLA has a lot of room in which to operate. Lampton 2014, 185–190.

6 In October 1992, Deng instructed Zhang to enter the CMC in order to assist Jiang. Zhang's mission was to adjust the PLA leadership at all levels in order to ensure that the whole of the PLA was under the control of officers loyal to the CCP's Party line, principles and policies. Liu 2014.

7 Two well-known examples are He Qizong and Zhou Wenyuan. For more discussion on the removal of the “Yang family generals” after the 14th Party Congress in 1992, see Kou 2010, 177.

mid-2004, both Guo and Xu supported Jiang when the top brass of both the CCP and the PLA were in dispute over whether Jiang should turn over the CMC chairmanship to Hu Jintao 胡锦涛.⁸ In September 2004, Jiang reluctantly resigned from the CMC chairmanship while Xu became a CMC vice-chairman.

Guo and Xu were the most important PLA leaders throughout the Hu era. In terms of the division of their responsibilities, Guo was in charge of military construction and military command while Xu took care of political work as well as personnel evaluations and assignments.⁹ Their deep involvement in the taking of bribes in exchange for promotions and in a reported plot to replace Xi severely damaged efforts to instil military professionalism in the PLA and even endangered the political stability of the regime. The scandal also proved that their collaboration had essentially reduced their superior, Hu Jintao, to a mere figurehead.¹⁰ Owing to the key role Guo and Xu played in personnel arrangements and their involvement in corrupt activities, many military officers may have obtained their assignments via bribes or other irregular means. For example, Zhang Musheng 张木生, a princeling and close friend of retired political commissar of the General Logistics Department, Liu Yuan 刘源, revealed to the media that Guo had accepted bribes in relation to personnel appointments and had also embezzled military funds.¹¹

The “civilian control problem” is indeed a principal–agent problem caused by information asymmetry and the discrepant interests of civilian leaders and senior officers. The main feature of a principal–agent problem is that once a principal delegates authority to an agent, it then becomes difficult to control the agent because (1) the agent is often better acquainted with his own intentions and the quality of his own performance, and (2) the agent and the principal may have divergent interests. Accordingly, the agent may be motivated to act against the interests of the principal.¹²

In this sense, CCP top leaders in charge of the PLA face a typical principal–agent problem. Unlike their predecessors from the revolutionary generation such as Mao Zedong 毛泽东 and Deng Xiaoping, China’s post-revolutionary generation leaders such as Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping lack any military exploits and experience. Asymmetry of information occurs when these leaders, all unfamiliar with military affairs, take on the CMC chairmanship but their subordinates are all senior professional military experts. A discrepancy in

8 For an analysis of displays of loyalty to Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao among CCP and PLA leaders from July 2014 to August 2014, see Kou 2010, 223–231.

9 Wang, Shuo 2015.

10 Ye 2015; “Shaojiang: Xu Caihou junzhong maiguan, jiakong junwei lingdaoren” (Major general reveals: Xu Caihou takes bribes in exchange for promotions in the military, reducing the leader of the Central Military Commission to a mere figurehead), *Wenhui wang*, 9 March 2015, <http://news.wenweipo.com/2015/03/09/IN1503090051.htm>. Accessed 12 April 2016.

11 “Zhang Musheng zai pao mengliao junzhong haiyou dalaohu” (Zhang Musheng discloses more big corrupt tigers in the PLA), *Dongfang ribao*, 22 October 2014, http://orientaldaily.on.cc/cnt/china_world/20141022/00182_001.html. Accessed 12 April 2016.

12 For more discussion of agency theory, see, e.g., Kiser 1999 and Miller 2005.

interests occurs when the interests of some officers in key posts, such as Yang Baibing, Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, deviate from those of the top civilian leaders, particularly regarding power consolidation and national security. The principal–agent problem has been exacerbated by the absence of effective institutional monitoring and the CCP top leaders’ lack of sanctioning instruments. This explains why the civilian control problem was such a serious issue for Jiang and Hu but not for Deng.

It was under these conditions that Xi began to centralize power in the CMC chairman as the commander-in-chief of the PLA. In late October 2014, Chinese military media began referring to the implementation of the CMC chairman responsibility system as part of their promotion of the All-PLA Conference on Political Work (*quanjun zhengzhi gongzuo huiyi* 全军政治工作会议) held in Gutian 古田 from 30 October to 2 November. Since then, the term has appeared in more than 100 military political-work articles.¹³ A commentary in the *Jiefang jun bao* 解放军报 (*PLA Daily*) summarized the CMC chairman responsibility system as follows:

1. The principle of the absolute leadership of the CCP over the PLA is the foundation of CCP–PLA relations.
2. The core of this principle is that the armed forces of the PRC are under the unified leadership and command of the CMC chairman.
3. All significant issues of national defence and military building must be planned and decided by the CMC, which is led by its chairman.
4. The PLA must carry out the accurate and effective implementation of the orders of the CMC chairman.
5. The CMC chairman responsibility system shall provide supervision and inspection mechanisms to ensure the completion of the above mission.¹⁴

Two core characteristics of the CMC chairman responsibility system are notable from the above points. First, the CCP continues to assume subjective civilian control over the PLA under the command of the top leader. Second, in order to achieve effective civilian control, institution building is required to enhance coordination among different bureaucratic systems on national security and to reinforce the top leader’s oversight of the PLA. This recent renewed emphasis on the system both defines the relationship between the top leader and the top brass of the PLA and provides this definition with a legal foundation.

Institution Building and Image Moulding to Strengthen Xi’s Role

Emphasizing the CMC chairman responsibility system is only part of Xi’s plan to rebuild CCP–PLA relations. Both institution building and the moulding of his

¹³ Mulvenon 2015, 1.

¹⁴ “Gongzuo zhidu yao jinyibu yanqilai shiqilai” (The working system should be made rigid and effective), *Zhongguo junwang*, 28 January 2015, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2015/0128/c78779-26464541.html>. Accessed 12 April 2016.

public image have also played a role in strengthening the office of the top leader and Xi's personal power. In the past three years, Xi has chaired two newly established decision-making bodies to ensure that the PLA executes his decisions: the CCP Central National Security Commission (*zhonggong zhongyang guojia anquan weiyuanhui* 中共中央国家安全委员会, NSC hereafter) and the Leading Group for Deepening National Defence and Military Reform of the CMC (*zhongyang junwei shenhua guofang he jundui gaige lingdao xiaozu* 中央军委深化国防和军队改革领导小组, Leading Group for Military Reform hereafter). The two bodies are responsible for overall national security and military reform, respectively.

Inspired by Jiang Zemin's visit to the US National Security Council while in Washington, DC, in 1997, the third plenum of the 18th CCP Central Committee (CC) decided to establish the NSC in November 2013. In January 2014, the CCP Politburo appointed Xi as head of the NSC. The NSC is responsible for decision making, deliberation and coordination on national security affairs.¹⁵ It is in charge of "making overall plans and coordinating major issues and major work concerning national security."¹⁶

For Xi, the establishment of the NSC is urgently needed to strengthen the unified leadership of state security work for two main reasons.¹⁷ First, China now faces increasingly complicated national security problems owing to the combination of internal and external threats as well as traditional and non-traditional security issues. Second, the CCP needs to alleviate the problem of the lack of cross-bureaucratic system coordination in national security affairs. This institutional drawback has resulted in the PLA's high degree of autonomy and its tendency to act without consultation with other bureaucratic systems, particularly the foreign affairs system.¹⁸

The NSC aims to incorporate China's current security apparatus into a single entity under the direct command of the CCP general secretary. In order to carry out its functions of communication, deliberation, coordination and supervision, the NSC includes a number of bureaucratic sectors relevant to internal and external security. The freedom of the PLA to act has therefore been reduced.

As a policy formulation and implementation body tasked with military reform, the Leading Group for Military Reform is another instance of institution

15 For more discussion of the NSC, see Lampton 2015; Hu 2016; You, Ji 2016.

16 "Yanjiu jue ding zhongyang guojia anquan weiyuanhui shezhi, shenyi guanche zhixing zhongyang baxiang guiding qingkuang baogao" (Report on the decision to establish the Central National Security Commission after researching, discussing and thoroughly implementing the condition report on the eight central regulations), *Renmin wang*, 25 January 2014, A1, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2014-01/25/nw.D110000renmrb_20140125_2-01.htm; Zhu 2014.

17 "Guanyu 'zhonggong zhongyang guanyu quanmian shenhua gaige ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding' de shuoming" (Explanatory notes for the "Decision of the CCP Central Committee on some major issues concerning comprehensively deepening reforms"), Xinhuanet, 15 November 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-11/15/c_118164294.htm. Accessed 12 April 2016; Gong 2015.

18 Lampton uses the mid-air collision between a US navy EP-3 and a PLA navy J-8 in 2003 and the test of stealth aircraft before Hu's meeting with the US defense secretary Robert Gates in 2011 as two examples that show the misinformation problem encountered by civilian leaders and officials. See Lampton 2014, 175–76, 189.

building. In November 2013, the CCP called for wide-ranging military reforms to enable the PLA to wage joint operations. In March 2014, the Leading Group for Military Reform convened its first meeting. Xi stressed that “deepening national defence and military reform should start with CCP and CMC policies that integrate ideology with action, insisting on reforms that use a strong army as an objective.”¹⁹

In July 2015, at their third meeting, the Leading Group for Military Reform passed the “General plan proposal for deepening national defence and military reform” (*shenhua guofang yu jundui gaige zongti fang’an jianyi* 深化国防与军队改革总体方案建议) and submitted the proposal to the CMC Standing Meeting and the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP. In October, the CMC Standing Meeting passed the “Implementation plan for administration and command structure reform” (*lingdao zhihui tizhi gaige fang’an* 领导指挥体制改革方案).²⁰ Large-scale military reform has been implemented step by step ever since, including:

- Xi’s announcement of a cut of 300,000 PLA troops in his pre-military parade speech on 3 September 2015;
- the creation of a separate Ground Force Command, the formation of the Strategic Support Force, and the renaming of the Second Artillery Force to the Rocket Force on 31 December 2015;
- the reorganization of the four PLA general headquarters (staff, politics, logistics and armaments) into 15 new organs under the CMC on 11 January 2016;
- the regrouping of the seven MR Commands into the five new Theatre Commands on 1 February 2016.

Aiming to enhance military modernization and professionalism, the above reforms reshape the military command chain and step up checks and balances within the PLA. This new institutional design gives the CMC more instruments with which to supervise other military units, thereby tightening Xi’s grip on the PLA. Before the military reforms of 2016, the CMC exercised command and control over the seven MRs and other units at the same level through the four general headquarters. The general headquarters enjoyed substantial autonomy but the CMC had inadequate supervision mechanisms at its disposal.

The CMC has taken charge of the overall administration of the armed forces in the wake of these reforms. The 15 new CMC organs are under the direct command of the CMC and have lost the status of “headquarter and chief organ” (*zongbu lingdao jiguan* 总部领导机关) that the dissolved general headquarters had previously enjoyed.²¹ Xi has declared that “decision-making, enforcement and supervision powers should be separated and distributed in a manner that

19 “Xi Jinping: yi qiangjun mubiao yinling guofang he jundui gaige” (Xi Jinping: the goal of a strong military guides the reform of national defence and the armed forces), Xinhuanet, 15 March 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-03/15/c_119785243.htm. Accessed 12 April 2016.

20 Cao et al. 2015.

21 Wu 2015.

ensures they serve as checks and balances on each other but also run in parallel.”²² A new military discipline inspection committee has been established under the CMC and disciplinary inspection teams will be sent to other military units. The CMC also has an audit office, a political and legal affairs commission, and military courts and procuratorates. These units were formerly directed by the General Political Department or the General Logistics Department.

Xi has also increased his public profile as the commander-in-chief of the Chinese armed forces. This was first evident in his frequent visits to military units. Between December 2012 and March 2016, he made 21 public inspection visits to PLA and PAP units – one visit every 1.9 months on average. He has inspected the Nanjing MR (or the Eastern Theatre Command) four times, and paid visits to the navy, the air force, the Lanzhou MR, the Chengdu MR (or the Western Theatre Command) and the PAP three times each (see Table 1). He has been much more active than Hu Jintao in this respect. From December 2002 to December 2004, Hu visited PLA and PAP units only three times, partially because Jiang Zemin still held the CMC chairmanship until September 2004.²³ During his inspection tours, Xi usually holds a meeting with the officers of the PLA and PAP units he visits, partakes in a group photograph, and interacts with ordinary servicemen in grassroots level units, for instance by chatting with soldiers and joining them for a meal in the dining hall.²⁴ On 20 April 2016, under his new title as “commander in chief” and donning PLA battle uniform, Xi paid an inspection visit to the CMC joint battle command centre. Such displays are typical of his efforts to mould his image.²⁵

A further example of Xi’s efforts at institution building is the directive, issued by the CMC, that well-known quotations of the five former and incumbent CMC leaders, from Mao Zedong to Xi, must be displayed in Party committee meeting rooms of all levels throughout the armed forces. Xi’s inscription is to “work hard to build up a people’s army which obeys the Party’s commands, can fight and win, and boasts a fine style of work” (*nuli jianshe yizhi tingdang zhihui neng*

22 “Xi urges breakthroughs in military structural reform,” *Renmin wang*, 27 November 2015, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/1127/c90000-8982492.html>. Accessed 12 April 2016.

23 The author calculated the frequency. The source of Hu’s public activities is from “Hu Jintao huodong baodao ji: kaocha anguan” (Collection of reports on Hu Jintao’s activities: inspection visits), *Renmin wang*, n.d., <http://people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/2152/2901/index.html>. Accessed 12 April 2016.

24 For a further description of Xi’s behaviour, see “Zouxiang qiangjun xingjun de shidai qiangyin: yi Xi Jinping tongzhi wei zongshuji de dangzhongyang tuijin guofang he jundui jianshe jishi” (Sounding the strong voice of a strong and vitalized military: the Party central committee promotes the reform of national defence and the armed forces with comrade Xi Jinping as general secretary), *Renmin wang*, 28 December 2013, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2013-12/28/nw.D110000_renrmr_20131228_3-01.htm. Accessed 12 April 2016.

25 “Xi Jinping’s new title announced: the ‘commander-in-chief of the Central Military Commission joint battle command center,’” *Renmin wang*, 21 April 2016, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0421/c90000-9047469.html>. Accessed 5 September 2016.

Table 1: Xi's Public Inspection Visits to PLA and PAP Units

Date	Number of visits	Military units at the full MR level
December 2012	1	• Navy, Guangzhou MR
January 2013	1	• PAP
February 2013	1	• Air force, Lanzhou MR
April 2013	1	• Navy
May 2013	1	• Chengdu MR
August 2013	1	• Navy, Shenyang MR
November 2013	1	• Jinan MR
January 2014	1	• Beijing MR
April 2014	2	• PAP • Air force
May 2014	1	• PAP, Lanzhou MR
July 2014	1	• Nanjing MR
December 2014	2	• Nanjing MR • Guangzhou MR
January 2015	1	• Chengdu MR, Second Artillery Force
February 2015	1	• Lanzhou MR, air force
May 2015	1	• Nanjing MR
July 2015	1	• Shenyang MR
January 2016	1	• Western Theatre Command (former Chengdu MR)
February 2016	1	• Eastern Theatre Command (former Nanjing MR)
March 2016	1	• National Defence University

Source:

“Xi Jinping huodong baodao ji: kaocha gangan” (Collection of reports on Xi Jinping’s activities: inspection visits), *Renmin wang*, n. d., <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64192/105996/352004/index1.html>. Accessed 12 April 2016.

Notes:

Calculated and tabulated by the author. The seven MRs were regrouped to the five theatre commands after January 2016.

dashengzhang zuofeng youliang de renmin jundui 努力建设一支听党指挥能打胜仗作风优良的人民军队).²⁶

In addition, the *Jiefang jun bao* frequently declares the PLA’s loyalty and obedience to Xi. This cultivates a favourable political atmosphere for Xi by reinforcing the idea that the Chinese armed forces are firmly under his leadership. “Displays of loyalty” (*biaotai xiaozhong* 表态效忠) are an old trick in Chinese elite politics whereby political elites declare their political stance in support of the Party central leadership in order to demonstrate the unity of the Party during or after crucial political events.²⁷ The collective expression of support for Xi and his military reforms from dozens of senior generals in March and April 2014 is one recent example.²⁸ Further illustration of this came following the CCP’s

26 “Quanjun huiyishi tongyi xuangua wuwei lingxiu tici zhishi” (Instructions that five leaders’ well-known quotations are to be hung in the meeting rooms of all levels of the armed forces), *Jiangnan wanbao*, 17 March 2014, http://news.gmw.cn/newspaper/2014-03/17/content_3026290.htm. Accessed 12 April 2016.

27 For a recent study on this phenomenon, see Shih 2008.

28 “Jiefangjun jiangling miji fasheng ting Xi Jinping, huo wei dadongzuo pudian” (PLA generals intensively express their support for Xi Jinping, probably in preparation for major moves), *Wenhui wang*, 20 April 2014, <http://news.wenweipo.com/2014/04/20/IN1404200033.htm>. Accessed 12 April 2016.

decision to use Party disciplinary measures and take legal action against Guo in 2015 – the Party committees of the four PLA general headquarters and all MR level units declared their support for the decision.²⁹ Military vows commonly contain the promise “to resolutely listen to the directions of the Party central leadership, the CMC and Chairman Xi” (*jianjue tingcong dangzhongyang, zhongyang junwei he Xi zhuxi zhihui* 坚决听从党中央、中央军委和习主席指挥) and “maintain a high degree of unity with the Party central leadership, the CMC, and Chairman Xi” (*yu dangzhongyang, zhongyangjunwei he Xi zhuxi baochi gaodu yizhi* 与党中央、中央军委和习主席保持高度一致) in thought, politics and deeds.

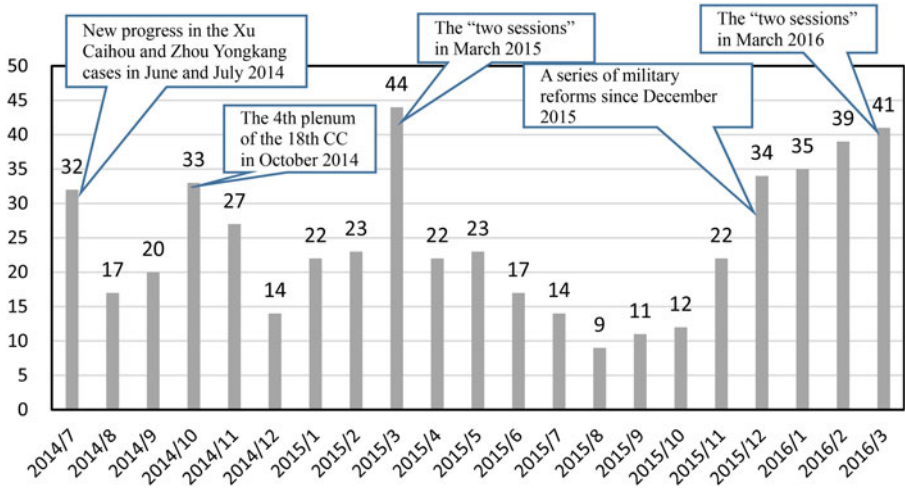
One final illustration of the moulding of Xi’s image appears in the *Jiefang jun bao*’s frequent responses to Xi’s views. An analysis of the *Jiefang jun bao*’s front page news reports between July 2014 to March 2016 found that the official military newspaper frequently echoes Xi’s standpoints and instructions – 23 times per month on average (see Figure 1). These articles explicitly mention Chairman Xi and the PLA’s implementation of his policies. The magnitude of this phenomenon reaches its peak during major political events. The first of these peaks appeared in July 2014, owing to new progress in the cases of Xu Caihou and Zhou Yongkang 周永康. Xu was expelled from the CCP on 30 June and it was publicly announced that Zhou was under investigation for suspected “serious disciplinary violations” on 29 July. The second and third peaks in pro-Xi propaganda occurred when important meetings were held, such as the CC plenary meeting and “two sessions” – the annual meetings of the National People’s Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. The fourth peak occurred when Xi began to execute his military reforms from December 2015 to the present. This phenomenon shows that Xi’s viewpoints have become a focus of political doctrine in the PLA propaganda system.

Anti-Corruption Campaign: Fighting Enemies While Fighting Corruption

Personnel reshuffles are a direct means for top leaders to counteract the problems of information asymmetry and discrepant interests. In the past three years, Xi has toppled a number of corrupt senior officers and close associates of his rivals, and he has implemented huge reshuffles of the remaining generals. This section focuses on Xi’s anti-corruption campaign, leaving the analysis of personnel transfers and promotions to the following section. From November 2012 to March 2016, 60 military and police officers at the deputy army level (*fujunji* 副军级) and above were dismissed as a result of a graft probe or a proven violation of

29 “Quanjun he wujing budui guanbing biaooshi, jianjue yonghu dangzhongyang de zhengque jue ding” (Officers and soldiers of the military and the PAP express their resolute support for the correct decisions of the Party central committee), *Jiefang jun bao*, 1 August 2015, http://www.81.cn/jfjmap/content/2015-08/01/content_118887.htm. Accessed 12 April 2016.

Figure 1: **Echoes of Xi’s Standpoints and Instructions in the *Jiefang jun bao***



Source:
Jiefang jun bao.

Notes:
Calculated by the author.

discipline. With the exception of one officer without name and rank level, the remaining 59 officers, including two full generals, five lieutenant generals, 47 major generals and five senior colonels, all had their misconduct confirmed in the official media. Cases of misconduct that have been reported by the overseas media but lack official confirmation are not considered here.

The general direction of the campaign can be summed up in the following points. First, a main objective of the campaign is evidently to remove any officers who were close to Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, although fighting corruption is also a goal. Twenty-two of the fallen military tigers had connections to either of the two, having usually served as a secretary or subordinate or having risen from units under their political influence. Qin Tian 秦天, son of former minister of defence, Qin Jiwei 秦基伟, and now deputy commander of the PAP, has explicitly mentioned how the corruption of Xu, Guo and their followers has damaged military morale.³⁰

For example, all of the fallen tigers in active service at the deputy MR level reportedly had direct or indirect connections to Xu and Guo. It is worth noting that most of these news reports appeared in Chinese official media in Hong Kong and Beijing. Vice-minister of the General Logistics Department, Gu Junshan 谷俊山, one of the most corrupt military officers, was protected by Xu and

30 Ma 2015.

Guo.³¹ Xu Caihou's former secretary, Zhang Gongxian 张贡献, was also under investigation.³² He was relieved of his post as the director of the Political Department of the Jinan MR in April 2014 and has not appeared in the media since. Deputy commander of the Chengdu MR, Yang Jinshan 杨金山, was reportedly involved in the Xu case.³³ Deputy political commissar of the Lanzhou MR, Fan Changmi 范长秘, Guo's former secretary, was investigated in December 2014. Vice-minister of the General Logistics Department, Liu Zheng 刘铮, reportedly gave Xu a large sum of money.³⁴ Deputy political commissar of the Second Artillery Force, Yu Daqing 于大清, was Xu's subordinate in the General Political Department.³⁵ Deputy political commissar of the Second Artillery Force, Zhang Dongshui 张东水, was put under investigation owing to his involvement in the Yu Daqing case; he reportedly bribed Xu and Guo in exchange for a promotion.³⁶ Coming from Henan province, former deputy political commissar of the Guangzhou MR, Wang Yufa 王玉发, the only deputy MR-level retired officer under arrest, shares native home ties (*tongxiang guanxi* 同乡关系) with Yang Jinshan and Gu Junshan.³⁷

Second, the military logistics system and the political commissar system have been hardest hit by the anti-corruption strikes.³⁸ Fifteen fallen military tigers had headed the logistics departments of an army-level unit or above, 20 were appointed as commissars at the same levels, and another three had both kinds of work experience. Many of them were associated with Xu and Guo.

Third, although the scale of Xi's military anti-corruption campaign is unprecedented, there appears to be a certain moderation in his efforts. There is no princeling among the fallen tigers, indicating an area of restraint in his campaign. Furthermore, 65 per cent of the corrupt active service officers are at the deputy army level, while 61 per cent of the corrupt retired officers are at the full army level (see Table 2). Together, these phenomena reveal that Xi's tiger hunt hit

- 31 "China ex-general Gu Junshan sentenced over corruption," *BBC News*, 10 August 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-33852753>. Accessed 12 April 2016; "Junren Liu Yuan de sichang teshu zhanyi" (Soldier Liu Yuan's four special battles), *Sohu xinwen*, 23 December 2015, <http://news.sohu.com/20151223/n432368189.shtml>. Accessed 12 April 2016.
- 32 "Gangmei: Xu Caihou dami Zhang Gongxian zhengshi bei chezhi" (Hong Kong media reports: Xu Caihou's senior secretary Zhang Gongxian confirmed dismissed from office), *Dagong wang*, 24 July 2014, <http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/focus/2014-07/2624193.html>. Accessed 12 April 2016.
- 33 "Yang Jinshan bei kaichu dangji yi she xu caihou an" (Yang Jinshan deprived of Party membership and may be involved in the Xu Caihou case), *Wenhui wang*, 24 October 2014, <http://news.wenweipo.com/2014/10/25/IN1410250005.htm>. Accessed 12 April 2016.
- 34 "Chuan zhongjiang Liu Zheng she Xu an beichaojia" (Lieutenant general Liu Zheng reportedly involved in Xu case, house searched), *Xingdao ribao*, 11 November 2014, <http://news.singtao.ca/toronto/2014-11-11/world1415693829d5321907.html>. Accessed 12 April 2016.
- 35 "16 zhi junlaohu shangyan 'hao tongshi,' 'hao qian ren'" (16 military tigers are good colleagues and good predecessors), *Dagong wang*, 15 January 2015, <http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/focus/2015-01/2888917.html>. Accessed 12 April 2016.
- 36 You, An 2015; Wang, Heyan 2015.
- 37 Zhou 2015.
- 38 "Beijing junqu lianqinbu yuan buzhang Dong Mingxiang bei diaocha" (Former head of Logistics Department of Beijing Military Region Dong Mingxiang investigated), *Caixin wang*, 13 April 2015, <http://china.caixin.com/2015-04-13/100799532.html>. Accessed 12 April 2016; Yue 2015.

Table 2: **Fallen Military Tigers in the Xi Era**

Grade level	Active service	Retired	Total
Deputy army level	24	6	30
Full army level	7	14	21
Deputy MR level	6	1	7
Full MR level	0	0	0
CMC level	0	2	2
Total	37	23	60

Source:

Various Chinese official newspapers.

Notes:

A brief biographical list of corrupt ranking officers was compiled in March 2016. Calculated and tabulated by the author.

retired officers harder than active service officers – unless they were the followers of Xi’s rivals. Most importantly, no officers at the full MR and the CMC levels fell as far. As Major General Yang Chunchang 杨春长, one of Xu’s former staff members, stated in a media interview, the sale of military ranks and posts was a widespread phenomenon when Guo and Xu were in charge. He alleged that Xu solicited bribes of 20 million yuan for the post of an MR commander.³⁹ It is then reasonable to believe that some officers bribed Guo and Xu in exchange for their promotions to the full MR and CMC levels. If they eventually retire with grace, it will be clear that Xi’s tiger hunt has been gentle on the military top brass.

Personnel Rotation and Promotion: Seeking Political Trust

Large-scale personnel adjustments have been a large feature of the transformation of CCP–PLA relations in the Xi era. This paper contends that this policy is an attempt by Xi to prevent senior officers from forming discrepant interests. Frequent rotations increase the difficulty of devising a plot against him as officers are moved out of familiar units and thereby out of the personal networks in which they may have become entrenched. Certain promotions may even contribute to an increase in the number of Xi’s followers in the PLA.

In late October and early November 2012, less than one month before Xi became CMC chairman at the 18th Party Congress, the PLA top brass underwent dramatic personnel changes, including two CMC chairmen, the heads of the four PLA general headquarters, the commanders of the air force and the Second Artillery Force, as well as 11 full MR-level officers.⁴⁰ The purpose of this unusual move was to remove all uncertainty about the composition of the new CMC leadership after the fall of Bo Xilai 薄熙来. A large number of ranking officers have been laterally transferred or promoted since. After tracing the career paths of 175 active service PLA and PAP officers at the deputy MR level and

39 *Wenhui wang*, 9 March 2015. His accusation has not been confirmed by any official source.

40 “Jiefangjun 22 wei gaoji jiangling lüxin” (22 PLA senior generals assume their new offices), *Xinjing bao*, 22 November 2012, A14, http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2012-11/22/content_391843.htm?div=-1. Accessed 12 April 2016.

Table 3: The Assignments of Senior Officers in the Xi Era

		CMC level	Full MR level	Deputy MR level
Oct 2012 and before	Lateral transfer	0	7.7% (4)	10.4% (26)
	Promotion	18.2% (2)	48.1% (25)	38.2% (95)
Oct 2012–Aug 2015	Lateral transfer	9.1% (1)	9.6% (5)	18.9% (47)
	Promotion	72.7% (7)	34.6% (18)	32.5% (81)
Total		100.0% (11)	100.0% (52)	100.0% (249)

Source:

Zhonggong zhengzhi jingying ziliaoku, <http://cped.nccu.edu.tw/>, and Chinese official newspapers.

Notes:

A biographical list of the 175 generals was compiled and last updated by the author in August 2015. The list excludes those who have retired, died in office or been dismissed from office prior to this date. Some officers received more than one assignment. The CMC leadership arrangement began in October 2012, one month before the 18th Party Congress. CMC vice-chairmen are politically more important than CMC members but have the same grade levels. The assignment is coded as a lateral transfer if a CMC member was appointed as CMC vice-chairman.

above at the time of August 2015, this paper has found that 51.4 per cent of the 249 deputy MR-level assignments and 44.2 per cent of the 52 full MR-level assignments occurred between October 2012 and August 2015 (see Table 3). Reshuffles of senior officers have often occurred between regions, departments and services.⁴¹

Specifically, 104 deputy MR-level officers were reassigned and 15 full MR-level officers were reshuffled in this period; 81 officers were promoted to the deputy MR level and 18 officers to the full MR level. A small proportion of them even received two new assignments. These generals include eight full MR-level officers and 35 deputy MR-level officers. The eight full MR-level generals are Yi Xiaoguang 乙晓光, Song Puxuan 宋普选, Liu Lei 刘雷, Miao Hua 苗华, Yu Zhongfu 于忠福, Wang Ning 王宁, Gao Jin 高津 and Zhang Shibo 张仕波. With the exception of Zhang Shibo, these officers were born between 1954 and 1959 and are thereby eligible in terms of age to compete for a seat on the CMC in the 19th Party Congress in 2017.

This pattern differs from that during the first three years after Hu's inauguration as CMC chairman and is marked by a relatively low proportion of assignments. Table 4 summarizes the career paths of the 91 officers who have held a full MR- or CMC-level post between 2002 and 2012. Only 24.8 per cent of full MR-level personnel assignments occurred between September 2004 and September 2007. Another 18.4 per cent occurred between October 2007 and September 2012.

Personnel adjustments at the full MR level also reflect the crucial role of political trust in CCP–PLA relations. Before Xi became the crown prince in 2007, he had spent 22 years in Fujian, Zhejiang and Shanghai, and had developed close connections with ranking officers serving in the Nanjing MR. When he began to assert his control over the PLA, ranking officers' Nanjing MR experience served as the basis of political trust in Xi's military personnel arrangements. For example, among the 35 active service officers at the full MR level in

41 Li 2015, 8.

Table 4: **The Assignments of Senior Officers in the Hu Era**

		CMC level	Full MR level
Sept 2002 and before	Lateral transfer	15.0% (3)	10.1% (11)
	Promotion	5.0% (1)	30.3% (33)
Oct 2002–Aug 2004	Lateral transfer	15.0% (3)	3.7% (4)
	Promotion	10.0% (2)	12.8% (14)
Sept 2004–Sept 2007	Lateral transfer	20.50% (4)	3.7% (4)
	Promotion	15.0% (3)	21.1% (23)
Oct 2007–Sept 2012	Lateral transfer	15.0% (3)	2.8% (3)
	Promotion	5.0% (1)	15.6% (17)
Total		100.0% (20)	100.1% (109)

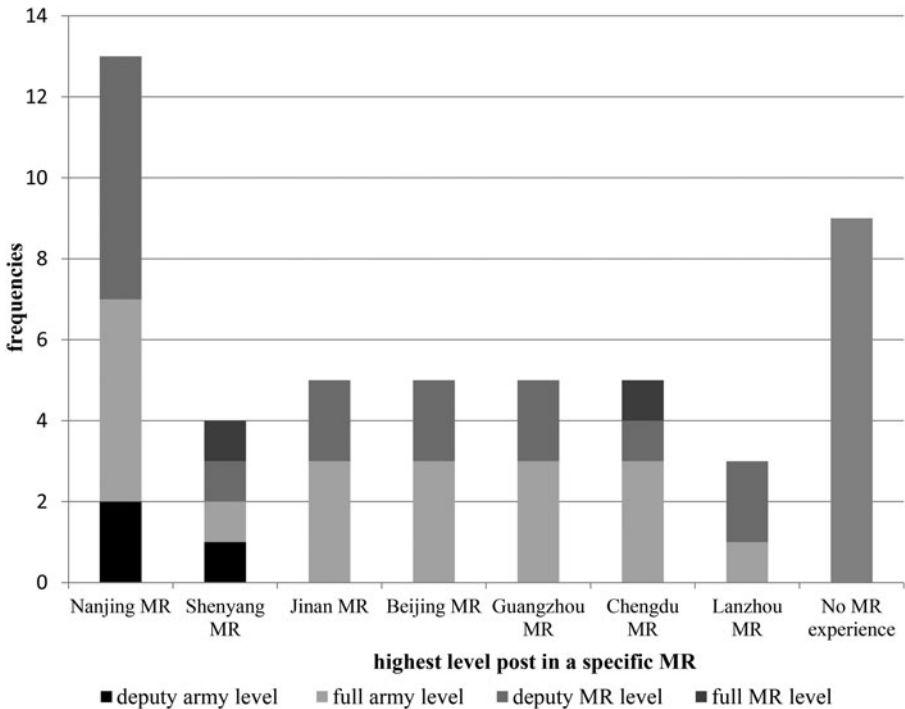
Source:

Same as for Table 3.

Notes:

A biographical list of the 91 full MR and CMC-level officers in the Hu era has been compiled by the author. The deputy MR-level assignments are not discussed because of the lack of assignment records for all deputy MR-level officers. Hu Jintao became the CMC chairman in September 2004.

Figure 2: **The MR Working Experience of the Full MR-Level Officers**



Source:

Same as for Table 3.

Notes:

Some officers have served in two or even three different MRs during their military careers. Statistics were last updated in August 2015.

Table 5: The Promotion Year of the Younger Generation Deputy MR-Level Officers

Year of Promotion	Year of Birth		
	1958–1959	1960–1962	1963–1965
Oct 2012 and before	1	1	2
Nov 2012–Nov 2015	16	6	2
Dec 2015 and after	5	2	2

Source:

Same as Table 3.

August 2015, 13 officers had held a post at the deputy army level or above in the Nanjing MR while no more than five had served in any other single MR (Figure 2). This provides strong evidence of the rise of Nanjing MR affiliates. The nine officers without any MR experience were either from the navy, the air force, the Second Artillery Force, or the PAP.

At present, notable Nanjing MR affiliates include Miao Hua (director of the CMC Political Work Department), Wang Ning (commander of the PAP), Wei Liang 魏亮 (political commissar of the Southern Theatre Command), and Han Weiguo 韩卫国 (commander of the Ground Force). They all served at least 20 years in the Nanjing MR and now hold a full MR-level command post. Han was the only officer to have gained a grade promotion when the ten commanders and commissars of the five new theatre commands were appointed in early 2016.

In addition, Xi has promoted a number of younger-generation officers to high-level command posts. For example, Yi Xiaoguang (commander of the Central Theatre Command), Han Weiguo, Liu Lei (political commissar of the army), Yu Zhongfu (political commissar of the air force) and Gao Jin (commander of the Strategic Support Force), all born in or after 1956, are qualified in age to serve at the full MR-grade level for at least another five years. They all advanced to their current level during the Xi era after a very short period at the deputy MR level – less than three years. In addition, 37 deputy MR-level officers, born in or after 1958, are able to serve for another five years or longer (Table 5). Nine were promoted to their current level after the military reforms in December 2015 and another 24 advanced to the same level between November 2012 and November 2015. The youngest officer at this level is deputy commander and chief of staff of the Southern Theatre Command, Chang Dingqiu 常丁球, born in 1965.

Conclusion

In his classic book on civilian control over the military, Samuel P. Huntington identifies two forms of civilian control that can defend against military intervention: objective civilian control, in which the military is removed far away from civilian politics by way of enhancing military professionalism, and subjective civilian control, in which the military is deeply co-opted into the ruling group

in order to maximize the latter's power in its relations with the former.⁴² Owing to the CCP's insistence on the principle of the Party commanding the gun, CCP–PLA relations are evidently a form of subjective civilian control. However, subjective civilian control fails to solve the principal–agent problem in relations between the Party and the military when post-revolutionary era civilian leaders take the helm, as the downfalls of Yang Baibing, Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong have shown. Top civilian leaders lack the necessary military experience and means to exercise substantial civilian control.

This paper contends that Xi's solution to the principal–agent problem consists of four elements. The first is to set a new legal definition of the relationship between Xi and senior professional officers through a renewed emphasis on the CMC chairman responsibility system. The second element is institutional innovation, by strengthening the CMC chairman's direct control over the military and creating internal checks and balances within the PLA. Xi thus has in his possession more instruments to monitor the performance and loyalty of officers. The promotion of Xi's public image as the commander-in-chief constitutes the third element. Lastly, by way of his anti-corruption campaigns and large-scale and frequent personnel adjustments, Xi has swept away his rivals, assigned his trustees to key command posts, and reduced the likelihood of collective disobedience. In agency theory, the selection of agents, monitoring and sanctions may mitigate the control problem.⁴³ As this paper demonstrates, Xi has employed all three of these strategies.

These recent developments can shed some light on the nature of CCP–PLA relations in the near future. After the reshaping of the military command structure, Xi will leave his successors with more institutional instruments to deal with the civilian control problem and better cross-bureaucratic system coordination mechanisms for national security and military affairs. This is a positive development for Party–military relations in Chinese domestic politics. However, the centralization of power in a single civilian leader may also have negative impacts. Lacking sufficient military experience, time and energy, Xi will still have to rely heavily on the advice of trusted senior officers when making decisions on security and military affairs. In other words, the principal–agent problem may reoccur in a new form in the future. Furthermore, Xi has taken personal control of decision making in a very wide range of policy fields. If Xi, according to his preferences, is preoccupied by issues in some fields but ignores others, this leadership style may intensify his problems.⁴⁴ Third, if he succeeds, Xi's solid control over the PLA may reduce the space for the manipulation of hawk–dove strategies and thus weaken China's bargaining power in international security disputes. In credible commitment models, the interests of the principal

42 Huntington 1985[1957], 80–85.

43 Kiser 1999, 147–48.

44 "Chairman of everything: Xi Jinping's leadership," *The Economist*, 2 April 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21695923-his-exercise-power-home-xi-jinping-often-ruthless-there-are-limits-his>. Accessed 12 April 2016; Beech 2016.

create a problem for the agent that can only be solved when the agent chooses not to be accountable to the principal.⁴⁵ If all PLA senior officers were agents fully responsive to Xi, then paradoxically their value to Xi in an international security conflict would be diminished.

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Biographical note

Chien-wen Kou is a distinguished professor in the department of political science and the Graduate Institute of East Asian Studies at National Chengchi University. He currently serves as the acting director of the Institute of International Relations in the university and will serve as president of the Taiwanese Political Science Association from 2017 to 2018. His major research interests include Chinese politics, political elites and comparative communist studies. His major articles have been published in *The China Quarterly*, *China Journal*, *Issues & Studies* and major academic journals in Taiwan. He is the author (co-author) of *Zhonggong jingying zhengzhi de yanbian: zhiduhua yu quanli zhuan yi, 1978–2010* (*The Evolution of Chinese Elite Politics: Institutionalization and Power Transfer, 1978–2010*) (2010) and *Miaozhun shiba da: zhonggong diwudai lingdao jingying* (*Aiming at the 18th Party Congress: the Leading Elites of the Fifth Generation in the CCP*) (2012), and a co-editor of *Elites and Governance in China* (2013), *Choosing China’s Leaders* (2014) and several other books in Chinese.

摘要: 自 1949 年以后, 解放军一直是中国政治中的重要行为者。在过去四年中, 一连串的最新发展刺激外界观察家重新评估习近平时代的党军关系。本文主张, 习近平时代党军关系的最重要特征是权力集中在单一文职领导人身上, 具体现象包括重新强调军委主席负责制、在最高领导人领导之下建立新的跨部门协调机制、大规模改革军事指挥系统、积极塑造习近平为三军统帅的公共形象, 以及大规模人事调动。在人事调动的过程中, 习近平的亲信逐渐担任重要军职, 而政敌则逐渐被移除。对习近平来说, 这些

45 Miller 2005, 218–220. Curtis LeMay, the chief-of-staff of the US air force during the Cuban Missile Crisis, played the role of the unresponsive agent – a creditable advocator of the use of nuclear weapons.

做法都是解决最高领导人和高级将领之间，因信息不对称和利益不一致而引起的委托代理问题。

关键词：解放军；习近平；中国军民关系；中国国内政治

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