



PUNE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE



**Three Political Reforms of the
Chinese People's Liberation Army under Xi Jinping:
An Explanation**

November 2024

**By
Anushka Saxena**





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1. Introduction

Since 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping has initiated the most sweeping set of reforms in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). From above-the-neck reforms revolving around theaterisation and reorganisation of the Central Military Commission (CMC), to below-the-neck and quality control reforms revolving around building of a new Rocket Force and collectivisation of national defence universities, the PLA has witnessed an extensive shake-up which aims to turn it into a "world class fighting force" by the time it achieves the centenary of the PRC's founding in 2049.

As established, the PLA is the armed force of the party, pledging its allegiance to the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of China (CPC), which has full control over political power. This is unlike the armed forces of liberal democracies, which are largely apolitical and non-partisan, and pledge their allegiance to the law of the land. Although this communist doctrine instructs the party to utilise the PLA's position for seizing and retaining state power, as Hu Jintao's example demonstrates, the PLA's support is essential to stay in power. Like the ruling civilian elite in China, most PLA officers are party members, which allows them to have representations in the CPC central committee and its politburo. The PLA also has a military political work system for CPC control of the gun. This system includes a dual-command system, where a commander and a political commissar co-command a unit, a supporting political staff in major unit headquarters, and a party standing committee for making decisions for each major unit. Because of a host of political and geopolitical insecurities, under Xi Jinping, the PLA has come to occupy an important national security position, especially as the party's army. But at the same time, Xi's military reforms have attempted to exercise what Samuel Huntington refers to as "objective control," which enables the PLA to make strides in warfighting capabilities and perfecting its functional and technical expertise without political bureaucratism.

Literary corpus on the subject discussed in great depth each and every aspect of Xi's military reform, but perhaps the singular reform that receives the least attention is that of political discipline. And even though discipline and loyalty to the Communist Party of China has always been a pillar of governance across political entities, organisational, educational, and corruption-related reforms lie at the base of the new PLA under Xi, and subsequently govern technical aspects such as military prowess, defence technological innovation, and combat readiness.

In this regard, **this paper shall attempt to address these three fundamentals of political reforms of the PLA – organisational, educational, and corruption-related reforms – with an aim to decipher the nature of the party's command over the gun under Xi.** While organisational political reforms will broadly focus on aspects such as theaterisation, the dissolution of the four general departments of the PLA (which, as analysts describe, became their own "fiefdoms"), and the incorporation of new institutional mandates in areas such as emerging warfare domains, educational reforms will discuss the increasing formalisation of the concept of "national defence mobilisation campaign." Corruption-related reforms will focus on anti-graft measures adopted by the CPC in the PLA in the past few years, and their key target areas – rooting

out equipment procurement and contract bidding related corruption, “purifying” the social and family circles of cadres, and so on. ***It is important to note that this paper does not delve into the details of the reforms themselves, but attempts to provide a reasoning and explanation for the issuance of reform mandates.***

2. A Brief Account of Party-PLA Relations

The PLA is the army of the CPC. It was first formed on August 1, 1927, after the CPC regrouped post its conflict with the nationalist Kuomintang forces over the establishment of a government in China. In 1938, Mao, in his published book, “The Problems of War and Strategy,”¹ stated: “Our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party.” With this context in mind, for years, the PLA continued to be a tool of the CPC to incite or curb violence as required, and it may be argued that the PLA was not the first source Mao relied on to crack down on leftists he believed were a threat to his leadership during his infamous cultural revolution.

In fact, Mao Zedong's orders to the youth to raise arms against these leftist intellectuals led to the inception of ‘Red Guards’ in 1966. Red Guards, whose origin was in a grouping formed at the Tsinghua University middle school, gradually came to comprise students and university scholars who protested against their teachers, artists, and even family members associated with “intellectual fields.”² Mao also did not leave any stone unturned in expressing his support to them. At his famous speech in Tiananmen square on August 18, 1966, he stated that his “official endorsement” was with the Red Guards’ acts of violence.³ Over time, such rebels got out of Mao's hand, as intense factionalism from within the community led to internal fighting, and threatened Mao's position in power.

Hence, Mao was forced to initiate his “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside” movement beginning 1967, to send over 16 million youths to mountainous or agricultural rural areas to work as labourers.⁴ Xi Jinping, China's President and CPC General Secretary today, was one such sent-down youth. And this is when Mao also realised that to curb the rebellious and violent tendencies of Red Guard movements, he must rely on the PLA. In his instructions for “re-education” of the youths, he also ordered the PLA to fight with movements in provinces such as Sichuan, Anhui, Hebei and Hunan

¹ Marxists.org. (n.d.) 9. *The People's Army*. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch09.htm>

² Pan, Yihong. (2009) *From Red Guards to Thinking Individuals: China's Youth in the Cultural Revolution*. Association for Asian Studies. <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/aaa/archives/from-red-guards-to-thinking-individuals-chinas-youth-in-the-cultural-revolution/>

³ Carter, James. (August 2023) *Mao's Cultural Revolution Turns Deadly*. China Media Project. <https://thechinaproject.com/2023/08/16/maos-cultural-revolution-turns-deadly/>

⁴ Weiye, Wu & Hong, Fan. (n.d.) *The Rise And Fall Of The “Up To The Mountains And Down To The Countryside” Movement: A Historical Review*. Rozenberg Quarterly: The Magazine. <https://rozenbergquarterly.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-up-to-the-mountains-and-down-to-the-countryside-movement-a-historical-review/>

and effectively establish a military dictatorship till 1971.⁵ Mao left the PLA mighty powerful and dictatorial.

Deng Xiaoping, who took charge of the Central Military Commission, the CPC's top decision making body on matters of military and security, after Mao, learned a great deal from the successes of the PLA under Mao, and believed that his leadership of the CMC is enough for him to exercise complete control over the country. He never assumed the roles of Chinese President or CPC General-Secretary, and yet had the authority to, as Mao said, "command the gun." He also learned from the failures of the PLA under Mao, and concluded that it had turned into a "bloated, lax and undisciplined" force.

Deng's era is hence best associated not just with the reform and opening up of the Chinese economy in 1978, but also as the era when the reforms of the PLA began. His dictum on modernising the military comprised three pillars—mechanisation, informatisation and intelligentisation. Deng initiated the reforms that Xi Jinping has carried out and revolutionised in a sweeping manner since 2015⁶—cutting down the size of the ground forces, creating a 'Military region' structure with specialised branches serving in an interoperable manner under their command, and encouraging self-study and rectification to become a combat-ready force. Deng also merged various academic institutes dedicated to military study into a single National Defence University in 1985, in a bid to enable the study of military strategy and doctrine. Most importantly, Deng hoped to amend the distancing of the PLA from the masses due to the power the force usurped, and hence implemented curbs on their expenditures vis-à-vis living headquarters and special transportation.

His demobilisation campaigns and decisions to cut down military privileges led to obvious tensions in party-PLA relations, causing as many as 40 corps-level commanders to resign, and request respite from political intervention in the PLA.⁷ Nonetheless, Deng carried on with his reforms. How successful he was in creating a more disciplined or loyal force, is debatable, considering his loyalists went on to dominate affairs in the PLA even after his successor, Jiang Zemin, took over the CMC (this was the case at least till 1992). But at the same time, during the hour of need in 1989, when Deng ordered the PLA to implement martial law and crackdown on student protests in Tiananmen square, now famous officers such as Xu Qinxian (then-commander of the 38th group army) refused to follow his orders. Many such instances of insubordination are documented by Andrew Nathan in his 2001 compilation, 'The Tiananmen Papers'.⁸ "I'd rather be beheaded than be a criminal in the eyes of history," he told Yang Jisheng, a historian.

⁵ Phillips, Tom. (May 2016) *The Cultural Revolution: all you need to know about China's political convulsion*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/11/the-cultural-revolution-50-years-on-all-you-need-to-know-about-chinas-political-convulsion>

⁶ National Foreign Assessment Center, Central Intelligence Agency. (July 2000) *Defense Modernization in China: An Intelligence Assessment*. https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000408272.pdf

⁷ Dreyer, June Teufel. (1988) *Deng Xiaoping And Modernization Of the Chinese Military*. Armed Forces and Society: Sage Publications. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45304980>

⁸ Nathan, Andrew J. (January 2001) *The Tiananmen Papers*. Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/tiananmen-square-papers-andrew-nathan>

When Jiang Zemin took over from Deng Xiaoping as both General Secretary and the CMC Chairman, he was the first such leader with virtually no fighting experience side by side with contemporary PLA commanders. His approach to the PLA hence revolved around putting loyalists in power, and becoming “one of their own” through power rather than merit. Beginning in 1992, Jiang Zemin began promoting personnel such as Chi Haotian,⁹ who had cultivated close relations with Jiang under Deng’s leadership. He was not only assigned to the post of Minister of National Defence, he was also declared vice-chairman of the CMC (the second-highest in command authority after the Chairman/General-Secretary), alongside Zhang Wannian, another Jiang loyalist handed the charge of “internal affairs” of the country and CMC VC. The push for political loyalty over technocratism in the PLA coincided with Jiang’s ideology of focusing on economic modernisation and private sector participation through the ‘Three Represents’, since for the first time in many years, China did not face the internal and external threats of war (as articulated by Jiang in his report to the 16th Party Congress).¹⁰

However, this is not to say that there were no meritorious achievements of the PLA under his command. His leadership made room for the publication of the first and second White Papers on the Taiwan question and the PLA’s role in Chinese security interests over the island,¹¹ and his decision to convert the defence acquisition arm of the PLA (COSTIND – Commission of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense) into a state-run ‘SCOSTIND’ made the process of equipment and weapons procurement into a civil-military collaborative. The PLA was hence required to engage in contracts with SCOSTIND to meet its requirements.¹²

Jiang usurped much power in the CMC, leading him to stay on as Chairman for two more years even after Hu Jintao, his successor, took over the posts of CPC General Secretary and Chinese President. In his meeting with US Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Condoleezza Rice, in July 2004, he suggested that he is “handing over more and more power” to Hu Jintao, making the case that he was still very much in charge of affairs.¹³

Hu Jintao’s command over corruption in the PLA dwindled after he assumed the post of CMC Chair in 2004. Even though the PLA expressed support for Hu in his efficient handling of the SARS epidemic in 2003-04 and the death of 70 personnel in a mysterious submarine incident in 2003 (the Ming 361 incident),¹⁴ they were still conflicted by the

⁹ Chopan, Alex. (August 2010) *A Table for Two: Jiang Zemin and the PLA*. Journal of Contemporary China. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10670560220129630>

¹⁰ Hartnett, Daniel M. (September 2013) *China’s 2012 Defense White Paper: Panel Discussion Report*. CNA China Studies. https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/ccp-2013-u-005876-final.pdf

¹¹ Saxena, Anushka. (October 2022) *Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taipei: Implications for the US-China-Taiwan Equation*. Institute of Chinese Studies. <https://www.icsin.org/uploads/2022/10/20/5e39107c0fbb20f106173691c1ef11ae.pdf>

¹² Chopan, Alex. (August 2010) *A Table for Two: Jiang Zemin and the PLA*. Journal of Contemporary China. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10670560220129630>

¹³ Zhiyue, Bo. (March 2005) *China’s Central Military Commission Under Hu Jintao*. RUSI. <https://rusi.org/publication/china%E2%80%99s-central-military-commission-under-hu-jintao>

¹⁴ BBC News. (May 2003) *China sub deaths ‘must rouse Navy’*. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2999533.stm>

existence of two centres of power vis-à-vis Hu and Jiang.¹⁵ Even after Hu established a technocratic leadership over the PLA by infusing the element of scientific and technological progress in military modernisation, the remnants of Jiang's overarching authority, combined with increasing laxity and corruption in the PLA, continued to mar Hu's tenure.

This is not to say, however, that PLA modernisation did not progress in Hu's tenure. He did well to instruct the PLA regularly to follow his dictum of creating a "harmonious society,"¹⁶ and invest in combat preparedness training. In a way, his emphasis on preparing in near-combat conditions, articulated in the PLA's January 2008 Outline for Military Training and Exercising (OMTE),¹⁷ laid the foundation for preparedness work today. He also articulated a doctrine called New Historic Missions for the PLA, and this led to increasing prioritisation of military operations other than war (MOOTW), including information-age modes of warfighting. Under him, the PLA therefore set the goal of becoming "an armed force compatible with local wars under the conditions of informationization."¹⁸ This gave an impetus to the PLA's non-warfare military endeavours, such as enabling informatisation and intelligentisation of personnel and weapons systems, conducting grey-zone operations in cyberspace, and counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden.

However, as the paper suggests ahead, the Xi Jinping era takes discipline and combat training up several notches, especially by implementing political loyalty to the T. Xi, who served as vice-president under Hu's second tenure, learned from the failures of Hu in being unable to discipline the PLA, and its reform vision. Xi's start to China's leadership is, in fact, characterised by an anti-corruption probe against the two VCs of the CMC under Hu – Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou.¹⁹

3. Organisational Reforms of the PLA under Xi

When looking at political control of the Party over the PLA and how it is defined and deliberated, key watchwords come into play. Watchwords is a term coined and popularised by David Bandurski of the China Media Project since 2012,²⁰ but the CPC prefers the term *tifa* (提法). A reading of these words, phrases, and concepts in the context of the PLA narrates the importance of reforms.

¹⁵ Saunders, Phillip C. & Kiselycznyk, Michael. (August 2010) *Civil-Military Relations in China: Assessing the PLA's Role in Elite Politics*. China Strategic Perspectives (2): Institute for National Strategic Studies. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-2.pdf>

¹⁶ CCTV International. (March 2007) *President Hu urges intensive training of armed forces*. <https://www.cctv.com/english/20070313/100389.shtml>

¹⁷ Mulvenon, James. (January 2009) *Chairman Hu and the PLA's "New Historic Missions"*. China Leadership Monitor (27): Hoover Institution. <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM27JM.pdf>

¹⁸ The National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan. (2020) *NIDS China Security Report 2021: China's Military Strategy in the New Era*. https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/chinareport/pdf/china_report_EN_web_2021_A01.pdf

¹⁹ Mulvenon, James. (n.d.) *So Crooked They Have to Screw Their Pants On Part 3: The Guo Boxiong Edition*. Hoover Institution. <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm48jm.pdf>

²⁰ Bandurski, David. (September 2012) *Watchwords: the Life of the Party*. China Media Project. <https://chinamediaproject.org/2012/09/10/watchwords-the-life-of-the-party/>

The first is the imperative of *zhongguo meng* or *zhongguo minzu weida fuxing*, which is the 'China dream' or 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. Among the various pillars of the China dream, a strong and politically loyal PLA is supreme. This is because a strong army will best be able to tackle the "two big situations" – another *tifa* – faced by the CPC, and these situations refer to the states of internal insecurity and external flux. As Xi believes, a strong army can deal with those who are spreading erroneous views about the CPC's legitimacy. Any force that can make the CPC feel powerless has to be put in line by the army. These erroneous forces even include those who argue that the PLA should be depoliticised.

Another important aspect is the harm institutional autonomy has caused to the PLA. Even though objective control is emphasised, the CPC cannot allow officials of the PLA to have deep interpersonal connections with businessmen, political elite, and rich relatives that can lead to greed and corruption. It damages the efficiency of the armed forces, and it is a lesson Xi has drawn from the tenure of Hu Jintao, who is largely considered a leader with much less power over the PLA and CMC than any other.

In this regard, the organisational reform to dissolve the CMC general departments remains key. Before reforms, four general departments of the CMC were in charge of various aspects in the PLA. These were the General Political, the General Logistics, the General Armament, and the General Staff Departments. But it was soon uncovered that the highest officials of these departments had deep corrupt networks, and one aspect of the reform was to dissolve and break these departments down to many other smaller units, to clear the air around oversight. The CMC general departments are now broken down into 15 departments (部), commissions (委员会) and offices (办公室/署/局), including the CMC General Office.²¹ The CMC-GO, too, is an exercise in re-centralizing power, with the director of the office acting as Xi Jinping's "eyes and ears," and ensuring implementation of central directives at the level of the 15 sub-units.²²

In this regard, Xi also has dual personal imperatives to these reforms. The first is that these reforms are Xi's legacy and his stamp on the success of the PLA and reform of the country's security apparatus. This is also why, in addition to being chairman of the CMC, he also chairs the "CMC Leading Small Group for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform" since 2014. Under his tenure, a great emphasis has also been laid on the Chairman Responsibility System (CRS) of the Central Military Commission. In Xi's own words, "*the chairman responsibility system of the Military Commission is the fundamental system and fundamental implementation form for upholding the party's absolute leadership over the people's army.*"²³

Second is that the controls imposed as part of these reforms by Xi may reflect his insecurities vis-à-vis party-PLA contestation. While the PLA may be the Party's army, it remains necessary to continue inculcating the values of party loyalty in each generation

²¹ Wuthnow, Joel. (May 2017) *The CMC General Office: Recentralizing Power in the PLA*. China Brief 17(7): Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/program/cmc-general-office-recentralizing-power-pla/>

²² Ibid.

²³ Chenglong, Jiang. (August 2022) *Party's absolute leadership of military further ensured*. China Daily. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202208/02/WS62e858ada310fd2b29e6f9b0.html>

of military cadres to maintain party control. If Xi's goal is to avoid the creation of a dictatorial military as under Mao, or a military that may not respond in times of crises, as under Deng in 1989, his reforms would have to reflect the control of the party-state. In this regard, Xi has rigorously emphasised political work in the PLA under his leadership, including by mandating study sessions in the security apparatus as a whole to imbibe Xi Thought doctrines, and other relevant speeches he makes with regard to the functioning of the military.²⁴

Xi also exercises great control over the kind of war the new theater command structure in the PLA is required to prepare for. A white paper discussed China's current military strategy ("Military Strategic Guideline of Active Defence Under the New Situation")²⁵, and articulated that the Strategy requires the PLA to prepare to fight "informationized local wars, highlighting maritime military struggle and maritime Planned Management System." On a broader level, military theorists characterise the nature of the PLA's war mandate as "preparing to win high-intensity, short-duration, localised wars."²⁶

Finally, a major motivator of organisational reforms in the PLA is geopolitical in nature. The second of the two big situations, discussed above, is external flux, which is that China's geopolitical environment is becoming increasingly complex, stern, and hostile. Geopolitical rivalries are revealing just how much China's adversaries have revolutionized defence technologies, and China cannot be left behind. As Civil-Military Integration theorist Huo Guangming stated in 2014, "From the state's perspective, the global revolution in military affairs continually promotes upgrades in high-tech weaponry, and the core of military competition is changing toward Science and Technology" (quoted from NDU Press's '*Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*').²⁷ Most recently, as both the US and China are engaged in intense competition to achieve self-sufficiency, the latter has become a target of sanctions and curbs on critical technological imports from the former. Hence, China is having to focus on attracting talent in scientific and technological fields, because of its perception that the US and the West have placed a "stranglehold"²⁸ on its scientific advancement.

To better achieve the goal of 'technocratising' the PLA's combat efforts, military theorists under Xi have introduced the concept of Multi-Domain Integrated Joint Operations (MDIJO; 体化联合作战) into the everyday lingo of preparing forces. The *Science of Military Strategy*, published by the Military Strategy Studies Department of the PLA Academy of

²⁴ The Economist. (November 2023) *Xi Jinping is obsessed with political loyalty in the PLA*.

<https://www.economist.com/special-report/2023/11/06/xi-jinping-is-obsessed-with-political-loyalty-in-the-pla>

²⁵ The State Council, The People's Republic of China. (2015) *China's Military Strategy (full text)*.

https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm

²⁶ Chawla, A.K. (2022) *China's Strategy of 'Informationised and Intelligent' Warfare*. SP's Naval Forces.

<https://www.spsnavalforces.com/story/?id=802&h=Chinaandrsquo;s-Strategy-of-andlsquo;Informationised-and-Intelligentandrsquo;-Warfare>

²⁷ Saunders, Phillip C. et al. (2019) *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*.

National Defense University Press: Washington D.C.

<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/Chairman-Xi/Chairman-Xi.pdf>

²⁸ Allen, Gregory C. (May 2023) *China's New Strategy for Waging the Microchip Tech War*. CSIS.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-new-strategy-waging-microchip-tech-war>

Military Science in 2013, explains the pillars of MDIJO.²⁹ The primary goal of the PLA should be to be able to achieve victory in “localised wars under conditions of informatization.” This shall require a two-fold effort – first from the services and support arms of the PLA, who will be required to fuse their operational expertise and platforms to the highest possible degree (i.e., preparing a “joint combat force”), and the second, in the creation of a “*seamlessly linked up networked military information system*.” The former constitutes the material basis on which operational strengths can be complementarised and the hierarchies and boundaries of support arms and services can be transcended. The latter constitutes the safe and reliable informational supporting link for all operational and tactical elements to have a common awareness of battlefield postures.

Theater commands are the prime example of an organisational reform implemented under Xi for the purpose of implementing MDIJO. There is one whole military within what the PLA refers to as theater commands, and in war, theatres are mobilised, not navies or armies. Forces attached with each theater are required to be seamlessly linked up with a battle-link or a communication network, which also means that in peacetime, their work should be directed towards practising interoperability, use of Information and Communication Technologies, and co-living with personnel from forces beyond one's own. Hence, theater commanders become the single-point source of both praise and blame in the top leadership's assessment of jointness in a theater.

Leadership changes in theaters hence become ways in which Xi implements his central authority and reform vision. If we analyse the case study of the recent surreptitious replacement of Southern Theater Commander General Wang Xiubin, with General Wu Yanan taking charge,³⁰ a key reason to explain this could be to place someone in charge who can enable MDIJO in the STC. While the erstwhile commander's background was largely army based and it could have made assimilating with a largely naval theater difficult, Wu Yanan, the new leader, is someone who has worked closely with party bosses via the Central Theater, and as a commanding authority in the joint staff department of the CMC. These experiences dictate that Wu's focus is not just going to be creating a combat-ready theater capable of shooing away rival vessels in the South China Sea, but also a disciplined theater that has interoperable weapons systems, forces, and personnel skills.³¹

4. The Case of the SSF

Many such examples, as discussed above, speak to the highly demure nature of PLA and its standing vis-à-vis the party, as a result of Xi's wide-sweeping organisational reforms. None of these central mandates, however, are without room for manoeuvre, and the

²⁹ China Aerospace Studies Institute. (January 2022) *In Their Own Words: 2020 Science of Military Strategy*. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2913216/in-their-own-words-2020-science-of-military-strategy/>

³⁰ Southcn.com. (July 2024) 黄坤明走访慰问驻粤部队官兵. https://ld.southcn.com/node_a763e64957/a9198c5223.shtml

³¹ Saxena, Anushka. (August 2024) *The continuing churn in the Chinese military*. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-continuing-churn-in-the-chinese-military/article68573930.ece>

inefficiency of reform implementation in any domain can then invite a central mandate to augur a new reform. A most recent example of such a manoeuvre came in the form of the latest restructuring of the PLA Strategic Support Force, a support arm created under the direct leadership of the CMC to complement the combat capabilities of the theaters. The reorganisation, unveiled on April 19, 2024, has broken up the SSF, formed only eight years ago, into an Aerospace Force, a Cyberspace Force and a new Information Support Force (ISF). At a ceremony marking the launch of the ISF, Xi said that the new force would take on responsibility for shaping the PLA's network-centric operations,³² with a goal of building a "world-class army" in an era in which information-related security is key to modern combat capabilities.

The SSF brought together several specialised branches of the General Staff Department (GSD) of the Communist Party Central Military Commission (CMC), including the Third Department, which handled espionage and technical reconnaissance in cyberspace, the Informatization Department, which worked on information systems security, and the Aerospace Reconnaissance Bureau.³³ These units had suffered from overspecialisation within their respective organisational silos, which in turn meant there was virtually no interchange of resources. That was the motivation for creating the SSF as a joint force encompassing specialists from the space, cyberspace, and information domains under a single commander with authority to mobilise resources jointly. Now, it seems that the SSF suffered from similar problems as the GSD did, leading to the decision to divide the branch into three constituent parts under the direct control of the CMC, which Xi personally chairs.

Further, with the restructuring of domains previously under the command of the SSF into specialised forces under the direct control of the CMC, it is evident that the country's highest military decision-making body wishes to keep a close eye on potential graft in equipment procurement and management. The restructuring will simplify the chain of accountability by removing the SSF commander as a mediator. The evident goal is to ensure that nothing interferes with the preparedness of the military's space, cyberspace, and information warfare units to avoid presenting vulnerabilities that competent potential foes like the U.S. might exploit to handicap the PLA in "informatization-led" warfare. It thus made symbolic sense for Gen. Li Wei, the newly appointed political commissar of the ISF, to address the launch ceremony for the force instead of its commander, Lt. Gen. Bi Yi.³⁴

Hence, political and geopolitical reasons, such as the need to create a disciplined and loyal force, assert leadership legacy, and meet the growing security challenges posed by the world to China today, continue to explain the PLA and its ever-continuing reforms

³² Global Times. (April 2024) *PLA Information Support Force significant in promoting high-quality development of Chinese military and winning modern warfare: commentary*. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202404/1310942.shtml>

³³ Li, Nan & Clarke, Ryan. (August 2021) *THE NEW STRATEGIC SUPPORT FORCE OF THE CHINESE MILITARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY*. EAI Background Brief No. 1606: National University Singapore. <https://research.nus.edu.sg/eai/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/07/EAIBB-No.-1606-PLASSF-and-Regional-Security-2.pdf>

³⁴ Saxena, Anushka. (May 2024) *Xi Jinping's vision of war seen in creation of 'Information Force'*. Nikkei Asia. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Xi-Jinping-s-vision-of-war-seen-in-creation-of-Information-Force>

under Xi. In a subsequent section, the paper will lay a more detailed focus on corruption as a marker of political loyalty, and Xi's intertwining of his anti-corruption campaign with his reform vision.

5. Educational Reforms

The PLA constitutes the largest standing army in the world, with over 2 million personnel in the forces. Naturally, the complexity of the large force has created various challenges for talent management since Deng Xiaoping assumed leadership. Under Xi, the talent and self-correction components of force management have become critical to the PLA's agenda of becoming a world class force. Various ills, however, are plaguing the problem of personnel management in the PLA:

1. The first is the non-existence of the right talent in the PLA to implement the technology and efficiency-related requirements of the reform vision. The expectations from the personnel of a joint fighting force, as highlighted in a *PLA Daily* commentary³⁵ authored by Hao Changqing of military unit 66325, are fourfold. In terms of strategic vision, they should have comprehensive foresight and judgement; in terms of organisation and management, they should have the ability to overall plan and coordinate; in terms of military literacy, they should have the ability to command and control joint operations; in terms of decision-making, they should have the ability to respond to emergencies and risks (Hao Changqing for the *PLA Daily*). These parameters are well integrated in the talent assessment process across theater commands. However, with the training mandates differing across theaters, soldiers are seldom found incompetent on various such parameters. This is illustratable through details of some exercises conducted by the WTC in the past few years. For example, a Xinjiang Military District (MD) anti-aircraft artillery unit conducted a live-fire exercise in Tianshan Mountains, in August 2018, with an aim to refine its troops' integrated combat capabilities.³⁶ These capabilities include firepower strikes under complex weather conditions, aerial space situational awareness, command & control (C2). Step one of the exercise was for troops to organise basic air defence reconnaissance, establish communication hubs, and conduct firepower strikes from the moment they occupied their positions. Step two was the introduction of a 'surprise element, where the simulation of a randomly ascended enemy aircraft was organised, and it manoeuvred unpredictably and flew between medium and low altitude ranges, launching attacks on various anti-aircraft positions. Acting as a test of the interplay between C2 and ground-based air defence units, it required ground commanders to take decisive firepower shots between altitudes. **During the evaluation stage at the end, damage assessment revealed that many anti-aircraft positions were in flames, which meant a failure on the surprise attack test.**

³⁵ Changqing, Hao. (January 2024) 锻造高素质联合作战参谋人才. Ministry of National Defense, People's Republic of China. <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/16278842.html>

³⁶ People's Liberation Army Daily. (August 2018) 跨昼夜锤炼防空对抗硬功. People.cn. <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0829/c1011-30257525.html>

2. Given that combat preparedness and personnel growth are key to creating a world class force, they cannot be burdened with administrative tasks. But the personnel in the PLA too cannot escape the clutches of reading, memorising and summarising documents, organising inspections from higher-ups, arranging documents on a shelf, and so on. These are ills that doctrine refers to as 'five excesses' (五多; too many seminars, too many training sessions, too much memorisation, too many forms, and too many material requests). In the past few months, there has been an explosion of commentaries pertaining to how various group armies are circumventing the five excesses, so that they can focus on combat preparations.³⁷
3. Another factor here is that in the PLA, one of the key 'below-the-neck' reforms involves the cutting down of ground forces and some non-essential personnel. The intended number for this demobilisation has been around 3,00,000. Now, new regulations are indicating that the PLA may perhaps not be ready to demobilise forces, because the biggest challenge they face is resettlement and veteran affairs.³⁸ In this regard, local governments are now being instructed to better manage such affairs, and share in the financial burden of resettlement. With the Chinese economy slowing and local off-the-book debt rising, this is likely to be both a bane and boon—a bane for the poorer, more indebted provinces, and a boon for provincial officials who may have something to show for successful resettlement, since the system rewards local leaders that can innovate around central directives and earn praise.
4. Finally, there is a question of maintaining loyalty to the party. Over generations, new cadres coming into the PLA have been selected through exams and trained by officers who may not have been part of China's historic struggles and military campaigns, such as the civil war against the KMT, the conflict against Japanese imperialists, the Cultural Revolution, or the Tiananmen square incident. And so, party loyalty is not a natural symptom but rather a created feature in the PLA. Often, party loyalty is equated under Xi with the "purity" of military cadres, and purity is best assessed through the lens of corruption. Although the concept of battling with graft and corruption in the PLA is now new, in recent months, it has become a popular phenomenon to discuss the need for fighting "illnesses within." Examples of the expulsion of the last two Chinese defence ministers Li Shangfu and Wei Fenghe since August 2023, as well as other expulsions from leaderships of the Rocket Force, the Navy and the Air Force, have revealed fault lines in loyalty and discipline of leading cadres.

In this regard, Xi has initiated educational reforms to both ensure the upskilling of cadres in the PLA, and to implement political loyalty to the CPC. This began with the reorganisation of the professional military educational structure in 2015-16, as 43

³⁷ Lingyan, Fu. (August 2024) 铲除“五多”滋生的土壤和条件. People's Liberation Army Daily. http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16330570.html

³⁸ Saxena, Anushka. (August 2024) New Regulations Seek to Address Chinese Military Veterans' Concerns. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/new-regulations-seek-to-address-chinese-military-veterans-concerns/>

institutes were created of the original 77 in the professional military education system (several of which were combined to form the National Defence University (NDU) and National University of Defence Technology). Further, as a comprehensive US National Defense University publication explains,³⁹ for disciplines including computer science, information technology, and aeronautical studies, curriculum modifications were implemented with the goal of emphasising practical skills. NDU also launched a dedicated joint operations track for its senior commanders' course and developed a new joint operations training course for mid-level officers.

Defence education as a campaign has also become really vital. Under Xi Jinping, transitioning China from a “big country in education” to an “educational power in the New Era” (新时代教育强国) is a crucial agenda item.⁴⁰ Naturally, as the party's army, the PLA is also subject to the Chinese Communist Party's educational endeavours, which largely focus on cultivating love for the party, realising the goal of comprehensive national security and development, and building ideological consensus on ideas such as ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’, ‘Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’, ‘patriotism’, and ‘technological revolution’.

There are two significant components of such campaigns—organising the National Defence Education/Awareness Month, and conducting study sessions of Xi Jinping's speeches or conclusions of important military work conferences by the PLA cadres. The month of September marks the National Defence Education month in China, and six types of activities are expected to be organized as part of the festivities⁴¹:

- Conducting grassroots propaganda activities;
- Organising red education activities on important dates (such as the Victory Day of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression on September 3, the September 18th Incident, and Martyrs' Day on September 30);
- Implementing national defence education activities in schools, combining theme-based party and youth league days, class meetings, and study and practice activities;
- Opening military camps to the public;
- Conducting mass propaganda and education activities, including speeches on “Loving Our National Defense,” national defence knowledge competitions, essays, national defence sports events, defence competitions, defence science exhibitions, military chess tournaments, and public screenings of “National Defense in My Eyes”; and
- Organising online propaganda and education activities.

³⁹ Saunders, Phillip C. et al. (2019) *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*. National Defense University Press: Washington D.C.
<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/Chairman-Xi/Chairman-Xi.pdf>

⁴⁰ Qiushi Magazine Editorial Department. (September 2023) 新时代加快建设教育强国的根本遵循.
http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2023-09/15/c_1129862400.htm

⁴¹ Xinhua. (September 2023) 中共中央宣传部等印发‘关于组织开展2023年“全民国防教育月”活动的通知’.
http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16250224.html

The purpose of implementing such activities in schools is to ensure the next generation of cadres has inbuilt virtues of loyalty and awareness of military work. Hence, a major focus of national defence education activities has been to target citizens and inculcate in them a sense of love and respect for the armed forces in specific, and an “overall national security concept” (总体国家安全观) in general. To achieve this, just after the 19th CPC Congress, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) issued a Notice announcing a list of primary and secondary “national defence education demonstration schools” (中小学国防教育示范学校).⁴² In December 2017, this started out with the recognition of 618 schools country-wide that were to act as “demonstration zones” for “national defence education.” This meant that students at these schools were required to engage in “immersive national defence education”⁴³ in the form of party-polity education, ideological education, visits to military bases, and through special reports on military-civilian co-construction. This has been undertaken to achieve the three-fold enhancement of students’ national defence awareness, sense of national self-esteem, and sense of self-confidence. It was announced in February 2024 that the MoE and the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission have expanded the list of such nationwide demonstration schools to 2,687.⁴⁴

To implement the “spirit” of various instructions issued by Xi Jinping on maintaining loyalty and discipline in the PLA, cadres conduct study sessions and educational campaigns internally. Most recently, for example, in June 2024, the CMC organised its Political Work Conference. Soon after, all five theaters, various group armies, and individual brigades/air force and naval units organised a study session to “understand and implement the Conference’s spirit”. The limited success of these sessions, in addition to imbibing values discussed at such work conferences, comes from the challenges they highlight in military preparedness. For example, during the Southern Theater Command (STC)’s study session for the June 2024 CPWC,⁴⁵ it was revealed that a joint training exercise was recently conducted between the theater’s various naval units, and the results were dismal. More specifically, during this exercise, some political officers were found to be highly inefficient in fulfilling their wartime mobilisation duties.

Finally, to combat ills such as the ‘five excesses’, doctrine is being determined by military theorists. The fine line between learning more and doing more (as Xi instructed PLA cadres to do in February 2024),⁴⁶ and ending up compromising on combat preparedness work, is blurred, creating challenges most prominently for grassroots soldiers who are saddled with administrative tasks. While some bases in the military are attempting to

⁴² Notice of the Ministry of Education, People’s Republic of China. (January 2018) 教育部关于公布2017年中小学国防教育示范学校名单的通知.

http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A17/moe_1061/s3289/201802/t20180201_326312.html

⁴³ The People’s Government of Guangzhou Municipality. (September 2023) 白云区新增两所“全国国防教育示范学校”. https://www.gz.gov.cn/xw/zwlbgqdt/byq/content/post_9212118.html

⁴⁴ Ministry of National Defense, People’s Republic of China. (February 2023) 教育部 中央军委政治工作部印发通知 认定公布中小学国防教育示范学校. <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/jwzzgzb/16199910.html>

⁴⁵ People’s Liberation Army Daily. (June 2024) 南部战区海军某部坚持领导带头学习中央军委政治工作会议精神. http://www.81.cn/zq_208553/16321027.html

⁴⁶ Study Times. (February 2024) 年轻干部基层挂职要做到“五多”. CPC News. <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2024/0226/c117092-40183303.html>

implement guidelines on division of labour, it remains to be seen how effective these are in curbing the 'five excesses'.

6. Corruption and Political Loyalty

As discussed above, political loyalty is often measured through the lens of purity vis-à-vis the lack of corruption among PLA cadres. Xi Jinping's legacy and reform vision are both based on anti-corruption. And in the past year, a churn has taken hold in the PLA, which has brought to light the extent of military corruption and the need for rectification. This churn is particularly marked because of the sudden removal of National Defence Minister Li Shangfu in August 2023, as well as the many purges of leaders in the PLA Rocket Force (most prominent being the cases of former Rocket Force political commissar Xu Zhongbo and commander Li Yuchao),⁴⁷ the Air Force, Navy, and the Strategic Support Force (former SSF commander Ju Qiansheng, too, has been suspected of corruption).⁴⁸ Zhang Zhenzhong, former Deputy Chief of both the PLARF and the CMC Joint Staff Department, has previously already been under probe for corruption by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and its audit office.

Xi's "circle theory" is at the centre of the anti-corruption sentiment in the PLA.⁴⁹ It makes the case that all cadres, especially military cadres, live in an environment where interpersonal interactions are unavoidable. However, these interactions must be principled and regulated.

With new cases of corruption emerging in the PLA and the CMC, military commentators have begun to issue new recommendations on how cadres must act. A commentary, titled "Purify your Social Circle, Life Circle, and Friend Circle," gained a lot of traction in the context of recent purges. As per the commentary authored by Chen Qinghua of the Reform and Establishment Office of the Central Military Commission in the September 22, 2024 edition of the *PLA Daily*,⁵⁰

"Leaders at all levels should always uphold discipline and regulations, work diligently, engage in honest interactions, control their own actions, avoid engaging in activities they shouldn't, and be cautious about their associations. They should firmly reject utilitarian, pragmatic, and materialistic interactions, and be vigilant against relatives and friends' 'chit-chat,' 'schoolmates' 'catching up,' and neighbors' 'networking.' They should truly be politically astute, knowledgeable about military affairs, clean in economics, and upright in their personal lives" (Chen Qinghua for the *PLA Daily*).

⁴⁷ Taipei Times. (July 2024) *PLA Rocket Force official investigated for corruption: media*. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2024/07/20/2003821082>

⁴⁸ Saxena, Anushka. (May 2024) *Xi Jinping's vision of war seen in creation of 'Information Force'*. Nikkei Asia. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Xi-Jinping-s-vision-of-war-seen-in-creation-of-Information-Force>

⁴⁹ Study China. (August 2018) 习近平的“圈子”论. People.cn. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0822/c1001-27501393.html>

⁵⁰ Qinghua, Chen. (September 2023) 净化社交圈生活圈朋友圈. People's Liberation Army Daily. http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-09-22&paperNumber=02&articleid=915841

The foundation of these recommendations is a 'Code of Conduct for Social Interactions of Military Leading Cadres' issued by the Political Work Department and the Discipline Inspection Commission of the CMC in June 2024. Even though the text of the Code isn't publicly available as per the author's best knowledge, *People's Daily* reported that the standards set therein govern military cadres' interactions in eight spheres:⁵¹

- Interactions between military leading cadres and local party and government organs and their personnel;
- Interactions with enterprises (institutions) and their relevant personnel;
- Interactions with social organization's;
- Interactions with news media, theoretical research and academic exchange institutions and their personnel;
- Interactions with ethnic and religious organizations and religious believers;
- Interactions with various foreign organization's, institutions, and personnel; and
- Interactions with family and friends, as well as virtual interactions on internet social platforms.

However, this paper makes the case that the purges and replacements in the PLA, the CMC, and the MoD cannot be construed as a sign that Xi Jinping's authority is weakening. The Chinese party-state works in a manner that conceals skeletons in the closets of those at the highest echelons, especially considering many of their backgrounds are padded with either money or political support from the Politburo.

In Li Shangfu's case, too, it was a given that his proximity to Xi Jinping, in addition to his background as a technocrat who could infuse vitality in Xi's reform vision, was the reason for his promotion to the post of Minister of National Defence. However, Li's purge is likely to have been a result of two simple but powerful factors in combination, which can explain almost the entire churn in the PLA-enduring bribery and corruption to pad one's own status or of one's relatives, and prevailing inefficiency in implementing the reform vision and directives. Any purge on account of these factors does not, to me, signify weakening authority, but rather a sense of comfort in one's authority, that one can get away with the criticism of a loyalist's appointment and their ultimate failure.

Xi Jinping's position can hence be understood here—he has the comfortable authority to dissolve the SSF, purge even proximate corrupt officials, and move on to more significant goals. Some analysts may also explain why Li Shangfu had to go, using the idea of 'factionalism'—that factions do continue to exist, and restrict Xi's powers. It is likely that some quarters may have definitively expressed dissatisfaction at Li's appointment as Defence Minister so easily, which can be a reason why the story of corruption in the Equipment Development Department broke within the CPC. But these non-ossified factions alone are not strong enough to command purge or removal. With the downfall of Li and Qin Gang (former Chinese Foreign Minister), the current state of play appears to be one in which factional struggles are intensifying, albeit without challenging Xi's position. In this struggle, rivals at lower levels are competing for power and policy

⁵¹ People's Daily Online. (June 2023) '军队领导干部社会交往行为规范'.
<http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0619/c1001-40017120.html>

relevance and currying favour with the all-powerful leader, while undercutting their opposition.⁵²

Xi has great control over both promotions and punishments, in this regard. Qin Gang was apparently involved in an affair scandal with a Chinese journalist based in the US, which is a form of straying away from party ideals in its own right. He, too, disappeared from the scene around the same time as Li Shangfu did. But his exit was rather ceremonious. Just before the Third Plenum of 2024, the Politburo meeting that expelled Qin Gang referred to him in its report as “comrade.” In fact, it stated that he resigned his position due to ill-health.⁵³ Hence, overall, Xi’s willingness to sacrifice Li and Qin can be seen as a sign of confidence in his position, and the expendable nature of cadres at such a ministerial level. If, however, senior officials and close confidants, such as CMC vice-chairmen Zhang Youxia or He Weidong, are sacrificed, then there’s likely a deeper crisis at hand, because it will signal that nobody’s position is secure.

7. Conclusion

However, while Xi’s position may be secure, the fault lines in the reform vision are evident from the continuation of deep-rooted corruption and inefficiency, as well as the persistent churn in leadership of the Chinese security apparatus. Xi’s control over political loyalty in the military, and its transformation into a “world class force,” has not guaranteed the success of such goals, and the length and breadth of discipline inspection via the CCDIs of the CMC and the CPC have not guaranteed the curbing of ailments such as corruption.

As evident from the examples of Li Shangfu and Qin Gang, there was both graft and an affair-related scandal taking place under Xi’s nose even in a highly surveilled environment, and yet their backgrounds slipped past another one of Xi’s proximate confidants, Ding Xuexiang. At the time both Li and Qin were appointed to their high-level positions, Ding was Director of both the CPC general office and the Party General Secretary’s office, posts that are conventionally considered as held by the CPC’s Chief of Staff, and Xi’s personal secretary, respectively. Could it be the reason why Ding had to vacate both offices in 2023 to make way for Cai Qi’s directorship?⁵⁴ It cannot be said with certainty, especially since he is a close aide and continues to be a part of the 7-member strong Politburo. But one thing is indeed certain—that under Xi, the PLA has turned into a more war-oriented and capable force, which also indicates that its manoeuvres will become more aggressive and dangerous—something that neighbouring governments, observers, and strategists must take into account while articulating policy.

⁵² Kewalramani, Manoj & Saxena, Anushka. (October 2023) *What China’s missing officials tell us about its politics*. MoneyControl. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/opinion/what-chinas-missing-officials-tell-us-about-its-politics-11473511.html>

⁵³ Indo-Pacific Studies Programme, the Takshashila Institution. (July 2024) *Looking Ahead to China’s 2024 Third Plenum*. <https://takshashila.org.in/research/third-plenum-chinese-economy-2024>

⁵⁴ Zheng, William. (June 2024) *China reveals Ding Xuexiang as head of Communist Party science and technology body*. South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3268226/chinas-ding-xuexiang-revealed-head-party-science-and-technology-body>

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<https://www.icsin.org/uploads/2022/10/20/5e39107c0fbb20f106173691c1ef11ae.pdf>
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About the Author

Anushka Saxena is a Staff Research Analyst (China) with the Indo-Pacific Studies Programme at the Takshashila Institution in Bengaluru, India.



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