

Xi Jinping Tightens Grip over the Party and the PLA

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All set to take over reins of governmental power in China, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the all-powerful Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has declared to launch a steadfast and resolute fight against corruption while attempting to “keep power restricted within the cage of regulation.” While delivering an address at the plenary meeting of the CCP’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), in Beijing on January 22, 2013, Xi ordered enhanced restraint and supervision on the use of power. The new Chinese leadership appears to be laying the foundation of propagating the idea of setting up a disciplinary, prevention and guarantee mechanism to ensure that activities involving corruption can be curbed at the initial level, and ultimately be eliminated from China.

Xi is spearheading efforts to fortify anti-corruption legislation and intra-party regulations, which would be instrumental in ascertaining that national organs exercise their power within the prescribed boundary of laws. Given that corruption as an issue is all pervasive within Chinese society as a whole, Xi has accepted that rooting out corruption would be a “long-term, complicated and arduous task”. This comes at a time when decibel levels within China are rising in favour of bringing about elemental changes to the socio-political and economic apparatus. The mainstream cadres and party members have been given a clean chit by the higher echelons of the party, along with issuing a simultaneous caveat that cadres at various levels should bear in mind that no one will be allowed to enjoy absolute power outside the rule of law. However, that corruption still

prevails at the deeper soil levels has been accepted by the Chinese leadership.¹ The new headship aims to address the issue of corruption comprehensively by coalescing punishment with prevention, while emphasising upon prevention.

The writing on the wall at the CCDI meeting lucidly declared that in order to consolidate his control over every organ of the state apparatus, Xi Jinping is likely to push forth the agenda of clean governance wherein the usage of penalties shall not necessarily be relaxed.

In his speech that was heavy with party jargon and platitudes, Xi Jinping averred, “No exception will be made when it comes to party disciplines and law... no matter who is involved.” According to figures announced by China, 4,698 county-level cadres or higher-level cadres have been punished by the CCP’s discipline watchdogs and additionally, nearly 73,000 people have been punished for corruption or dereliction of duty in 2012. According to the publication, *Qiushi*, an organ of the Central Committee of the CCP, Xi has stressed that all party organs and members should strictly enforce party discipline, abide by its Constitution, and implement the party’s theories, line, principles and policies.

Xi Jinping’s first speech as Party General Secretary to the Politburo emphasised “the need to uphold and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics as the focus, priority... and make sure the 18th CCP National Congress guidelines become a powerful ideological weapon”. Xi asserted that “the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the latest achievement in applying Marxism in China. In contemporary China, to uphold the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics is to truly uphold Marxism”. He listed “combating corruption” and “preventing degeneration” as priority tasks.²

In order to conquer localism, any policy that has been introduced by the Central Committee will not be discounted. In this reference, implementation of the “eight-point” bureaucracy and formalism-fighting guidelines, introduced during the December 2012 meeting of the Political Bureau of the CCP’s Central Committee, should be considered as the “first step” in the party’s efforts to perk up functioning. In what apparently appear to be obligatory steps ultimately leading to Xi’s consolidation of power, efforts at enhancing supervision of chief leaders, implementation of democratic centralism, and improving the mechanism of publicising governing activities to prevent abuse of power are being given credence. However, the real debate revolves

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around whether restriction of power should be implemented by limiting the government's interference in the market, enforcement of law, distribution of resources and the freedom of speech — issues that the Chinese government is very perturbed to address. Notwithstanding the process to ferret out and penalise offending officials in China, the most significant challenge for Xi Jinping would be charting out a specific path for implementation of anti-corruption measures. However, what comes out clearly is that by means of reprimanding, Xi has chosen to walk down the populist road in order to define his image in the coming future, especially at a time when a series of scandals and revelations have cast a shadow of doubt and distrust on China's leadership.³

Interestingly, Xi, who is still in the midst of the process of acquiring control of the country's levers of power, has signalled an important break from the past when he stated recently that the CCP "should be able to put up with sharp criticism." It can be stated as a fact that the message does not clearly spell out as to what exactly did Xi mean.⁴ Historian Zhang Lifan's views cited on the Sina Weibo social networking site, in response to the official *Xinhua* news report on Xi's remarks stated, "Is it possible [for the Communist Party] to tolerate sharp criticism? The experiences of the history are worth noting."

Apart from strengthening his grip over the CCP, Xi Jinping has signalled that as the newly appointed Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), he would waste no time in asserting and thereby cementing his control over the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Soon after assuming this new position, Xi took the first major decision of promoting Wei Fenghe to the rank of full general status. Belonging to the Shandong Province, Lieutenant General Wei Fenghe is a member of the Central Military Commission and Commander-in-Chief of the PLA's Second Artillery Corps—China's strategic missile force. The Second Artillery Corps is China's strategic force under the direct command and control of the CMC, and forms the core of China's strategic deterrence. China is among the largest land-based missile force in the world comprising both ballistic and cruise missiles spanning 38 operational missile units spread across the country.

Moreover, speedy modernisation of the Second Artillery Corps has turned out to be a viable operational deterrent for the PLA. This is reflected in that with

the introduction of the latest conventionally-armed ballistic missiles and CJ-10 Ground Launch Cruise Missiles (GLCM), the Second Artillery Corps does not get limited to being a nuclear missile force alone. Given that Wei became a member of the CMC a day following which China's 18th Party Congress drew to a close, it was expected that he would be elevated to the highest rank, since, going by the regulations of the PLA, all members of the CMC must necessarily be generals. General Wei's promotion was much anticipated also because he had served as Chief of Staff of the Corps between 2006 and 2010, and was closely involved in intercontinental ballistic missile testing during late 1980s.

With the order signed by Xi Jinping soon after taking over China's political and military reigns, the announcement was made by the Vice Chairman of the CCP's Central Military Commission, Fan Changlong, and attended by other CMC members namely Chang Wanquan, Fang Fenghui, Zhang Yang, Zhao Keshi, Zhang Youxia, Wu Shengli and Ma Xiaotian, according to the official *Xinhua* news agency. It is widely speculated that Xi Jinping is gradually demonstrating his firm control over China's political and military corridors. Xi is a "princeling" son of Xi Zhongxun, revolutionary leader and former vice-premier, during the time of the Cultural Revolution. Owing to his political capital, his association with the PLA and having witnessed military diplomacy up close, it is being considered far and wide that Xi will constitute to be a much stronger military and political head than his immediate predecessors.

While speaking at an enlarged meeting of the CMC on November 16, 2012, Xi Jinping stressed the need to "take ideological and political building as the top priority in army building" and ensure the Party's firm grip over the troops ideologically, politically and organizationally". He reiterated the importance of "the Party's absolute leadership over the armed forces" and announced the criteria for promotions in the PLA by stating, "the military must promote and appoint cadres based on their political performance and guarantee that 'guns' are always controlled by reliable people with loyalty to the Party."⁵

In fact, in comparison, both Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin had struggled to coagulate their authority in the backdrop of the lasting influence of their respective predecessors. It is apposite to argue that in comparison to the tenures of Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, Xi Jinping's ascension has not faced as much factionalism especially since neither Hu nor Jiang had the benefit of as much support at least during the beginning of their respective terms. In order to find success in the processes of weeding out corruption and instituting military reforms, Xi will undeniably need political support in the aforementioned

context. Besides, Xi is also the youngest leader in the past few decades to take over command of China's 2.3 million strong armed forces and Wei's elevation can be considered as a symbolic transition that marks the beginning of Xi's tight grip on political and military power in China. It can be stated that timely promotion of senior military officers to significant positions is an effectual way by means of which a civilian party head tends to secure his control over the PLA, as it persistently works towards narrowing the military gap with the West, especially the US.

By virtue of the above discussed policy pronouncements and narrative, Xi Jinping, the first among equals on the seven-man Standing Committee of the Politburo that runs China, is speculated to be in favour of reform, however, the rest of the Standing Committee is stacked with hard line political conservatives who will likely resist any potential call for change.

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Notes

1. Monika Chansoria, "Xi takes on Corruption," *The Sunday Guardian*, January 26, 2013.
2. Jayadeva Ranade, "China's 18th Party Congress: Trends and Analysis," *Issue Brief*, Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi.
3. Chansoria, n. 1.
4. Mark Mackinnon, "China's leader Xi Jinping says he welcomes criticism; critics aren't so sure," *The Globe and Mail*, February 8, 2013.
5. Ranade, n. 2.