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Xi Jinping as the New “*Tianxia*”¹ of PRC: Implications of His Power Consolidation



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Introduction

On March 17, 2018, taking over his second term, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged his allegiance to the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to safeguard the Constitution’s authority and fulfil legal obligations. As Xi vowed: “[I pledge to] be loyal to the country and the people, be committed and honest in my duty, accept the people’s supervision and work for a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful.”² This was the first time for a Chinese President to take a public oath on taking office, however, more symbolic to showcase the significance of the Constitution which was amended to include “Xi Jinping’s Thought.”³ With the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the most characteristic feature of Chinese politics is the rise of the “cult personality of Xi Jinping,” which entails a pertinent query on “Xi Jinping’s consolidation of power.”

Since 2012, the most noticeable trend under the leadership of Xi Jinping has been the continuing consolidation of power. Xi has significantly

Key Points

1. The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China shaped the trajectory of China’s political system as characterised by the rise of Xi Jinping as the supreme leader.
2. Unlike his predecessors, Xi has consolidated his power to that of “all-powerful cult of personality” as witnessed under Mao Zedong.
3. Taking a departure from the past, Xi has strengthened his political clout by bypassing the institutional norms and building his loyalists.
4. The Party under Xi Jinping is more personalised than being collective.
5. The PLA is closely associated with Xi Jinping’s personality and his ideology – Xi commands the gun both politically and militarily.

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increased his authority which has conferred him an official title of “*lingxiu* 领袖”⁴ (Leader). With the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping was re-elected the General Secretary of the CPC and appointed Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the CPC. With the first session of the 13th National People’s Congress (NPC) in March 2018, Xi assumed his presidency for the second term as well as Chairman of the CMC of the PRC. In addition to the incumbency, Xi solidified his grip on power by enshrining his “Thought,” abolishing the presidential term limits and incorporating a powerful new government agency called the National Supervisory Commission into China’s Constitution. Xi’s such actions represented a significant departure from the old practice, and most importantly suggesting his indefinite rule after 2022.

To suggest, 19th Party Congress had two significant implications: first, it acted as the test case to Xi Jinping’s consolidation of power and, second, it provided a trajectory to assess China’s future political transition. Given this context, the present paper reflects on changing nature of China’s politics and military under the rule of Xi Jinping. Does this exemplify that China is retreating back to its “One-Man Rule”? Is Xi Jinping the new “*Tianxia*” of PRC?

Xi as the “*Be-all and End-all*”

Xi and the Party

China is a one-party state with the CPC acting as the seat of power. However, the party leadership is divided into two coalitions, namely: elitist which comprises the princelings and populist which comprises the Tuanpais⁵—making it a system of “one-party, two coalitions.” This collective leadership framework was enforced to put an end to “one-male rule” as practised under Mao Zedong. As noted, the seat of power flexed between these two units: Jiang Zemin (Princeling), Hu Jintao (Tuanpai) and Xi Jinping (Princeling)—maintaining the checks and balances to avert monopoly by any one faction. However, with escalation in Xi’s “cult of personality” given Xi’s declaration of an indefinite term the query entails: Will China’s Sixth Generation of Leadership Conform to the “Elite/Populist” Switch Tradition?

What makes it so? In consolidating his power, one of the primary challenges for Xi was selection of the five Politburo Standing Committee Member. Xi’s central objective aim was to strengthen his own power by creating his loyalists and elevate his political stature that will bypass the institutional norms. As evident from the 19th Party Congress, Xi succeeded given none of the six politburo members are Xi’s heir apparent and, furthermore, with enshrinement of “Xi Jinping Thought” to the Constitution, Xi has written new rules to China’s old political structure. To justify, Xi has also added more levers to his power than Mao, as evident from his surging portfolio outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Xi Jinping’s Portfolio⁶

S. No.	Organisation	Designation	Tenure since
1.	Central Committee of the CPC	General Secretary	November 2012
2.	Presidency of the PRC	President	March 2013
3.	Central Military Commission of the CPC	Chairman	November 2012
4.	Central Military Commission of the PRC	Chairman	March 2013
5.	Central National Security Commission	Chairman	November 2013
6.	Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms	Leader	November 2013
7.	Central Leading Group for Foreign Affairs	Leader	March 2013
8.	Central Leading Group for Taiwan Affairs	Leader	November 2012
9.	Central Leading Group for Financial and Economic Work	Leader	March 2013
10.	Central Leading Group for Internet Security and Informatisation	Leader	February 2014
11.	Central Leading Group for Deepening Reforms of National Defence and the Military	Leader	March 2014
12.	Joint Battle Command of the People’s Liberation Army	Commander-in-Chief	April 2016
13.	Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development	Chairman	January 2017

How did Xi manage to climb this ladder towards absolute leadership? One of the key tools used was the flagship “anti-corruption” campaign to catch the “tigers” and the “flies” of both civil and military. Under this policy, over 300,000 party members have been jailed and a third of military officers purged and thousands were forced down the path of “assisted suicide.”⁷ What is interesting to note is that all the convicted have been from factions not aligned with Xi—ruling out the scope of challenge to his authority.

This is testified in the prosecution of China’s two highest-ranking officials, Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang—who were Xi’s main political rivals. To note, Bo Xilai, former party chief of Chongqing and a member of China’s politburo was taken down shortly before he was expected to be appointed to the influential Politburo Standing Committee of the 18th Party Congress. While Zhou Yongkang, the erstwhile oil czar, former security chief and member of China’s politburo was expelled under the pretext of forming a “clique” with Bo that threatened the CPC of factionalism. Justifying the crackdown of factional politics, Xi stated: “Party members should make party rules their priority, and the party is adopting ‘zero tolerance’ toward cliques and factions within it.”⁸ This further clarifies Xi’s determination to avert all forms of challenges to his political authority.

Adding to this commitment, the 13th NPC in March

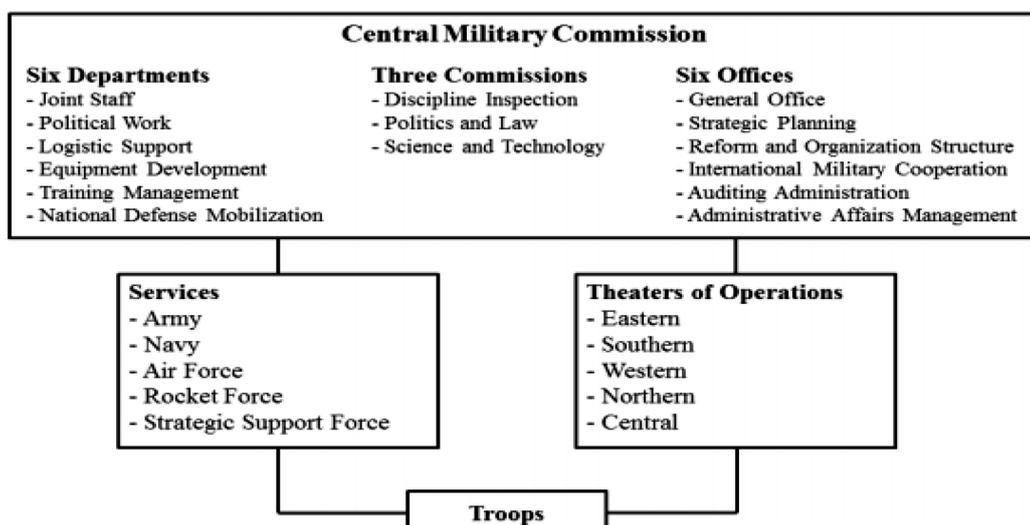
2018 established the anti-corruption watchdog called the National Supervision Commission (NSC)—a powerful new government agency which now ranks above the judiciary in China’s newly amended constitution. This significant step forward by Xi is a calibrated measure to centralise his authority under the veil of institutionalising the anti-corruption campaign. Such form of governmentality is not just limited to the party members but is also focused on managers of state-owned companies and institutions, including schools, universities, hospitals and cultural institutions. The aim is to enforce ideological control by building loyalty towards Party and, more specifically, towards Xi. These shifts in Chinese polity suggest that under Xi’s leadership, China’s Party system has become a “one-man’s Party.”

Xi and the PLA

In adhering to Mao Zedong’s dictum that “political power grows from the barrel of the gun,” Xi has transcended his “clout” from political to the military domain. Particularly, the military has been a key forum in which Xi has strengthened both his personal power and his new administration’s authority.

In centralising his authority over the Chinese military, Xi has centralised the decision-making system by empowering the stature of CMC to the highest civil-military authority under his chairmanship. With this structural reform, CMC now directly commands

Figure 1: PLA Leadership Structure under the Command of Xi Jinping



the military services and theatres of operations instead of exercising its leadership role through four general departments (staff, political affairs, logistics, and armaments). In this process, in January 2016, People's Liberation Army's (PLA) four general departments were abolished and their functions were spread across 15 new agencies—consisting of six departments, three commissions and six offices, as noted in Figure 1.

Augmenting Xi's centralised control, in 2017 the amendment to the CPC Constitution clarified that the "chairperson of the CMC assumes overall responsibility for the work of the commission and that the CMC is responsible for Party work and political work in the armed forces."¹⁰ Thereby, Xi's chairmanship of the PLA under CMC provides the spine that backs his political authority in the Party.

In gaining the military foothold, Xi has cemented his power over the army by adopting several approaches and political tactics. Of which, most noted are: purging military personnel under corruption allegations, as almost 13,000 military officers have been punished over the past five years¹¹; toppling top generals under the anti-corruption campaign, of which, the most noted are: the first high-profile targets were Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong—the two former vice-generals under China's CMC and the latest being General Fang Fenghui¹²—former chief of joint staff of Guangzhou Military Area Command, and General Zhang Yang¹³—former head of CMC's political work department, have been expelled and stripped of their party membership and military ranks on charges of corruption¹⁴; downsizing the troops from 2.3 million to that of 2 million¹⁵; transforming the seven Military Regions to that of five Theatre Commands; bringing the civilian-oriented frontier defence troops from the People's Armed Police (PAP) under the military command¹⁶; integrating China's Coast Guard into the CMC chain of command,¹⁷ and rapidly promoting "young guards" over old in the Chinese military.¹⁸ These steps forward resulted into Xi taking absolute control of the armed forces—building a new joint command and control structure with nodes at the CMC controlled by Xi.

Xi Jinping's controlled attitude towards the Chinese military can be understood in a two-way process: First, this power apparatus reflects Xi's leaning towards Mao's dictum that the "gun must never be allowed to command the Party." For Xi, the PLA should only focus on the improvement of its combat capability—the "only and fundamental" benchmark of the military.¹⁹ And second, owing to his Chinese Dream, Xi's only ambition rests on building an army that could "fight and win wars" to realise the "strong military dream." China's military missions aimed at two central goals—first, by 2035 PLA's modernisation to be "basically completed" and second, by the mid-twenty-first century (2050) PLA to be "fully transformed into world-class forces."²⁰

What is noteworthy is that Xi Jinping's ability to push through the reforms is indicative of his strong authority over the PLA, unlike his recent predecessors. That is to argue, it is Xi's Party that commands "the barrel of the gun."

Implications

Such concentration of power reflects that Xi has more levers of power than Mao Zedong. However, such a transition signifies two key implications:

First, a decisive departure from Deng Xiaoping's normative framework of "collective leadership" system based on consensus building, power-sharing and a mechanism for orderly successions. Unlike his predecessors, Xi, by consolidating his power, has dismissed the political precedence that Deng had set to maintain orderly power transitions as evident in lifting up the presidential term limits. This has further narrowed down the scope of any form of democratic reforms in China, rather leading towards a one-man rule.

Secondly, PLA's actions are distinctively defined by the guidance of Xi Jinping and in concert to the Party leadership. That is, PLA cannot exercise any form of self-motivated actions, therefore leaving no scope for the PLA to dismiss or overrule Xi's command. To say so, as on November 3, 2017, CMC issued a circular which categorically stated that: "the army should be absolutely loyal, honest and reliable to Xi," and, most

touchingly, asserted that “the army should follow Xi’s command, answer to his order, and never worry him.” In addition, the revised Constitution specifically emphasises the “implementation of Xi Jinping’s thinking” on strengthening the military—further qualifying that the final decision-making authority lies with Xi Jinping.

Conclusion

Xi is rewriting the rule book by reviving the old custom of “One-man rule” in China. Owing to the horrors of the past as witnessed under the rule of Mao Zedong, Xi’s amassing of power has raised significant concerns. This mainly pertains to oppression under a one-man dictatorship.

However, for Xi, his power capital too comes with strings attached. If not on the surface, but Xi’s continuous tendency to concentrate power in his own hands reflects his inherent paranoia over being insecure. Owing to this personal insecurity, Xi is faced with a greater threat of deception. This is well-witnessed in his rigorous efforts to build his own loyalists and constant emphasis on being loyal to him

Notes

1. *Tianxia* is the Chinese term that literally means “Sky beneath” but more idiomatically translated as “all under heaven.”
2. “Chinese President takes oath of allegiance to Constitution for the first time,” *China Daily*, March 17, 2018, at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201803/17/WS5aac8619a3106e7dcc1423d7.html>
3. The PRC enacted its first Constitution in 1954. The current Constitution was adopted in 1982 and amended in 1988, 1993, 1999, 2004 and 2018.
4. “人民领袖” “The People’s ‘Leader’ Xi Jinping Gets A New Propaganda Title,” *The Sinocism China Newsletter*, February 12, 2018, at <https://nb.sinocism.com/p/-the-peoples-leader-xi-jinping>.
5. Princelings are those who come from families of either veteran revolutionaries or high-ranking officials, while *Tuanpai* are those who are associated with the Communist Youth League (CYL).
6. Cited in Amrita Jash (2018), “Having Consolidated his Power, the Buck Stops at Xi’s Desk,” *CLAWS Focus*, No. 1949, November 29, 2018, at <http://www.claws.in/1949/having-consolidated-his-power-the-buck-stops-at-xi%E2%80%99s-desk-amrita-jash.html>
7. “What Chinese President Xi Jinping’s consolidation of power means for India and the world,” *Hindustan Times*, October 28, 2017, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/what-chinese-president-xi-jinping-s-consolidation-of-power-means-for-india-and-the-world/story-hvD5hJDYKxtzKqPqDSGz7I.html>
8. “Disgraced officials Zhou Yongkang and Bo Xilai formed ‘clique’ to challenge leaders: state media,” *South China Morning Post*, January 15, 2015, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1679889/disgraced-officials-zhou-and-bo-formed-clique-challenge-leaders-says>
9. Cited in Cheng Li (2016), “Promoting ‘Young Guards’: The Recent High Turnover in the PLA Leadership (Part II: Expansion and Escalation),” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 49, p. 6, at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Promoting-Young-Guards-The-Recent-High-Turnover-in-the-PLA-Leadership-Part-II-Expansion-and-Escalation.pdf>
10. Zhang Zhihao (2017), “Military pledges total loyalty to Xi,” *China Daily*, November 6, 2017, at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-11/06/content_34171130.htm

both in party and well as military.

In addition, this fear psychosis comes with the fear of deliverance under his leadership. Moreover, with the increasing slowdown of the Chinese economy, the challenge for Xi lies in not failing to deliver his commitments of a strong China. That is, if Xi falters, this then will automatically translate into dissatisfaction over Xi’s leadership, both loss of power as well as the reputation that he has built so far. Here, a correlation can be drawn from the past wherein, Mao’s ambitions Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution brought severe challenges to his “all-powerful” authority.

In order to quell the risks that emanate from these insecurities, Xi is constantly seeking to pull out all the stops to exhibit that everything is under “his control.” However, this is much in theory so far, as in practice Xi’s power consolidation does not guarantee him an “all-weather” leadership under his indefinite term. To say so, a key question remains: Can today’s China afford to have a “One-Man Rule”?

... Implications of His Power Consolidation

11. "Two senior Chinese generals stripped of rank and party membership over corruption claims," *South China Morning Post*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2168823/two-senior-chinese-generals-stripped-rank-and-party-membership>
12. "Former Chinese military chief of staff expelled from CPC," *Xinhuanet*, October 16, 2018, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-10/16/c_137536740.htm
13. To note, General Zhang Yang committed suicide on November 23, 2017 during a corruption probe. See, "Top Chinese general in graft probe commits suicide in Beijing," *South China Morning Post*, November 28, 2017, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2121892/disgraced-chinese-general-commits-suicide>
14. "Two senior Chinese generals stripped of rank and party membership over corruption claims," *South China Morning Post*, October 16, 2018, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2168823/two-senior-chinese-generals-stripped-rank-and-party-membership>
15. The strength of PLA was 4.5 million till 1980, which was resized to 3 million in 1985 and later to 2.3 million.
16. "Armed police to be commanded by CPC Central Committee, CMC," *Xinhuanet*, December 27, 2017, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/27/c_136855602.htm
17. "Chinese Coast Guard to be under the command of armed police from July 1," *Xinhuanet*, June 28, 2018, at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/28/c_137287657.htm
18. "China's rising military stars take centre-stage as annual promotions pass over old guard," *South China Morning Post*, August 24, 2018, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2160997/chinas-rising-military-stars-take-centre-stage-annual>
19. "Xi Jinping and his era (V)," *News Ghana*, November 18, 2017, at <https://www.newsghana.com.gh/xi-jinping-and-his-era-v/>
20. Xi Jinping (2017), "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017, p. 48.

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