

The Chinese Military Under Xi: Loyal and Ready to Achieve the History Mission?

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KERRY BROWN, APR 20 2018

The Chinese military has always been a crucial factor in the power of the Communist Party. Under Xi Jinping, this has intensified. His leadership is an ambitious one. This can be seen in the way he and his fellow leaders aim to deliver the centenary goals of the Party and the State by 2021 and 2049 respectively, envisaging a powerful strong country, and one that will never again be victimised or oppressed by others (this is the current Beijing official narrative) (Xi, 2017). Having the hard power means to ensure this happens is crucial. For this reason, China under Xi has enforced complete political loyalty from the armed forces. In return, it has given them resources and a core part of the national rejuvenation narrative unprecedented in post-1978 history.

Formally founded as the Red Army in 1927 during one of the low points in the Party's fortunes, it was Mao Zedong's personal achievement to link the armed wing of the Communists closely to the political programme of the movement from which it had grown. After coming to power in 1949, the People's Liberation Army (PLA – as it had, by then, been renamed) served as the principal source of Mao's own control until the day of his death in 1976, restoring order after the opening anarchy of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, and remaining loyal to him despite the straying of figures like his erstwhile chosen successor and then traitor Marshal Lin Biao in the early 1970s (Li, 2009).

Even after the Mao period, the succeeding Deng Xiaoping's leadership kept close tags on the military and made sure it was the referee of last resort. It was two battalions of crack troops in 1989 who quelled the student uprising that year, under the veteran Paramount Leader. By 1997, however, his successor Jiang Zemin started to slim space in society and political influence of the Party down, stripping the military of its powers to run commercial outfits, removing some of the corrosion of its authority through anti-corruption campaigns and reducing its potential non-military influence. The deal made then in return for this, which has largely been honoured over the intervening years, is that the PLA gets good funding, with double digit increases each year after 1998, allowing it to become an increasingly professionalised, modernised outfit (Brook, p105-150). Under the Hu Jintao, Jiang's successor, there were no further structural reforms, but simply an era of surface consolidation. In this period, the main issue was of the PLA's authority being eroded by the same problems of corruption, thanks to the phenomenal economic growth, that afflicted the rest of society, including the Party itself. 2002 to 2012 was an era in many ways of great good fortune for China, but also of complacency. It is this complacency that Xi's China is now addressing, readying the country for the moment of national rejuvenation in 2021 when the Party celebrates its hundredth year in existence.

To understand where the PLA stands under Xi, it is good to get some statistics to contextualise things. In 2018, according to Global Fire Power (2018), an authoritative ranking of army power across the world, the PLA stands as the world's largest force in terms of manpower, third in terms of sheer firepower (after the US and Russia), and, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (2016) runner up (albeit it very distant) only against the USA up to the end of 2016 in terms of expenditure. Since the 1980s, it has become increasingly well equipped, with something like 84 per cent of the vehicles, missiles and other paraphernalia displayed during the parades to mark the seventieth anniversary of the ending of the Second World War in 2015 in Beijing assessed to have never been seen before (Xinhua, 2015). Almost overnight, China now has, for the first time in its history, a decent naval presence (with more vessels than the US, despite big differences still in terms of technical capacity) and some ability to make its own airplanes. Gone are the days when it was almost wholly dependent on importing

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good quality technical equipment from Russia or other more advanced suppliers. These statistics alone show why the PLA has a global importance. It is large, has potentially great powers, and has an ability to operate and reach into the wider world, at least in terms of hard power.

All of this means that up to the Xi era the PLA capitalised on its professionalisation by trying to gain a more focused area of specific relevance which it claimed some level of autonomy and legitimacy from. It figured, for example, as one of the key stakeholders in any discussions over such core issues as Taiwan, the South and East China Sea issues, and other matters where China needed the appearance of potential power projection to promote and assert its interests (Jakoson and Knox, 2010). Despite this refocussing and specialisation, the PLA under Xi is characterised by two remarkable attributes, that place it apart from, for instance, the very influential Soviet Army's role prior to the collapse of the USSR in 1991, circumscribing its powers and ambitions. The first is that despite the PLA's attempts to claim more autonomy in the Hu era (for instance over Taiwan policy), control over it by the Party by 2018 has never looked more assured, particularly after the anti-corruption disciplining and ideological cleansing campaigns since 2013, meaning it is now hard to see how it could exist as a cohesive, autonomous actor in its own right. The second is that despite all the expenditure, training and deployment of resources, the PLA since 1979 has never had combat experience. The implication of these two issues will now be discussed in more detail.

For the first, command over the PLA by civilians in the Party's political elites is now complete. This has been a long running process and is associated with other moves to modernise governance and institutionalisation. The last PLA general to sit in the full Standing Committee, the pinnacle of power in contemporary China, was in the 1990s. Since then, there have been usually only two generals on the fuller, larger politburo – something continued after the 19th Party Congress in October 2017. In addition to this, the Central Military Commission, the body of about 12 individuals with oversight and ultimate command over the PLA, is chaired by the Party Secretary, a civilian. Since 2012, this has been Xi. As Mao envisaged, power might come from the barrel of a gun, but it is one in the hands of a cadre, not a soldier (Mao, 1938). And under Xi, the division between these two has never been more clearly delineated. Despite worries about the political nature of the Xi leadership and its all-encompassing nature, this restriction and honing down of PLA power at least is a good thing for the wider world. The chances of a military putsch, or military adventurism in China arising from a PLA flexing its muscles, have declined significantly. There is at least no doubt where the power is now.

A great part of this clarification of roles has been facilitated by the anti-corruption struggle. Since 2013, systematically and comprehensively, military figures right to the very top of the command chain have been disciplined, and in some cases removed (Buckley and Myers, 2017). Xu Caihou, a former vice-chair of the Central Military Commission and Politburo member, was one of the most prominent, indicted for corruption before his death by cancer in 2015. According to one estimate, 100 high level officials have been purged, and 13,000 military personnel disciplined over this period up to 2017. At the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, 87 per cent of the PLA attendees were first timers – marking a complete sweeping out of the older generation (Ni, 2017).

As a result, the PLA has never seemed more obedient, with Xi wearing military fatigues while inspecting troops in Inner Mongolia in late 2017 to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the foundation of the autonomous region there and labelling himself 'commander in chief.' (China Daily, 2017) The fact that uniquely amongst the current leaders he had served in the PLA as secretary to a senior leader, Geng Biao, in the early 1980s before moving to a civilian career has assisted in this process. The status of his wife, the singer Peng Liyuan, holding the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, albeit in the PLA Dance and Performance Troupe, also helped.

On the second issue of combat experience, things are more problematic for the PLA's definition of its overall role. Weak, isolated and poor the China of Mao Zedong may have been, but the PLA had plenty of combat experience for its troops, fighting in the Korean War of 1950 to 1953, the war with India on the border in 1962, the clash with the USSR in 1969, and the final spat with Vietnam in 1979 in the very early part of Deng's era. The PLA, as mentioned above, was even called into to restore domestic order in the mid-point of the Cultural Revolution from 1966. It's status in society could not have been higher. After the Mao period, however, despite the country growing wealthier by the day, and more globally prominent, its military have barely seen a day of external conflict. Their position in society as increasingly servants of the Party rather than privileged partners is shown by the wholesale personnel changes that

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have happened under the anti-corruption campaign, referred to above – all mandated by civilian leaders.

This lack of any combat experience of any real extent since the Mao era has two dimensions. It means that we have the anomaly of an army better equipped, better funded and better trained than ever before, but with absolutely no experience to feel confident it can handle real battle situations in the outside world. It also means that this lack had eroded its necessary role in Chinese society and political order, simply because Chinese people and leaders might understand their army as a symbolic resource but have no real idea of how it actually looks as an entity that fights. The psychological impact this lack of combat experience might have in terms of confidence levels in the PLA, as it faces the outside world, and its own people is hard to measure precisely. But it must be there. It is an extraordinary fact that Russia, France and the UK, Australia, New Zealand and even Sweden, let alone the US, have more actual combat experience beyond their borders than China.

Perhaps the PLA's hard assets, from its vast new navy to its weaponry, simply figures as a symbolic asset – something that China as a great nation feels it needs to have, without having any intention of using it. It might be that under Xi the focus of China's strategic attention is in a wholly different space – the virtual world, where it is able to operate free of boundaries, impacting on the interests of others but not at least risking physical attacks on itself. China has indeed been accused of being amongst the most active and successful at cyber-attacks, even if these have so far tended to figure in commercial rather than political espionage (Inkster, 2016). The fact that China is seen as having this capacity, and its amorphousness, certainly weighs on people's minds, giving Chinese power now an aura which is hard to escape. Its capacity here might be overstated – but it might not. These are the sorts of spaces for doubt and second-guessing by its potential competitors like the US or Japan or others which it can benefit from and manipulate – without physically firing a single shot. The irony under Xi is that while the world looks at its military physical kit, there is a good argument that the real battles of the future will be in the virtual world, something Chinese leaders have already appreciated and where they have made significant investments.

Under Xi, the PLA has one great advantage despite the issues mentioned above: it does have a very clear role in the national story of rejuvenation and empowerment that the President has been promoting since 2012-13 when he was appointed leader. He and his fellow leaders have tied it to the Party's history mission to achieve this great nation status for the country. It is an irrevocable and inseparable part of that whole story, a military force that was there from the start of the Communist's rule over China and will be there for as long into the future as the People's Republic remains under monopolising Party rule. Disciplined, well resourced, with a clear function, every PLA member now knows at least one thing clearly: their fate rises, or falls, according to that of the Party. The two are tied together as never before. This is one of the great acts of clarification of the Xi era. And as long as Xi, and the Party, look strong, the PLA will be just fine.

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