

The Yuan Stops Here: Xi Jinping and the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System”

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The Xi Jinping era has been marked by a greater degree of personalized command, sometimes veering toward cult of personality, than any leadership period since the death of Mao Zedong. In late 2014, the Chinese military media began referring to the implementation of the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” (军委主席负责制), contrasting it with prior periods of the “CMC Vice-Chairman Responsibility System.” This article examines the limited open-source material available on this new concept, contextualizes it within the larger political campaigns within the PLA on absolute loyalty to the CCP and anti-corruption, and assesses its implications for Xi’s larger political and strategic agendas.

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The term “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” first appeared in Chinese military media in late October 2014¹ as part of the propaganda runup to the November 2014 Gutian Conference (see *CLM* 46), and has appeared in more than 100 military political work articles since then. It is described as one of the “four winds” of political work in the PLA, falling under the fourth wind, commonly translated as “enforce inner-party life and strengthen party organizational struggle.”² The most comprehensive explication of the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” is contained in an unsigned *Liberation Army Daily* staff commentator article published in January 2015, which carries more authoritative weight than an editorial signed by an identified author.³ The article begins with a ringing endorsement of the importance of the absolute leadership of the party over the military, which will not surprise anyone who followed the content of the Gutian Conference. Rather than continue these platitudes, however, the article switches into an operational mode, describing party control of the military not as an “abstract principle” but a series of “fundamental systems.”⁴ The “core” of this system is the “highest leadership authority and command authority of the units belonging to the party Central Committee and the Central Military Commission,” led by the chairman.⁵ The article implies that the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” has historical depth, “established by the constitution,” and credits it with “achieving a long period of peace and stability for the party and the state.”⁶ Yes, the PRC Constitution does explicitly

outline the structure of the Central Military Commission and the role of the CMC chairman, and does contain explicit language to the effect that “the Central Military Commission puts into practice the Chairman Responsibility System”

(中央军委委员会实行主席负责制).⁷ Yet longtime observers of PRC party-military relations can be forgiven for asking why this supposedly historically based “system” is being explicitly discussed now, especially if it has been such a linchpin of “peace and stability” for so long.⁸

So what is the real meaning behind the appearance of the so-called “CMC Chairman Responsibility System”? *The current evidence strongly suggests that this concept is another piece of Xi Jinping’s ongoing effort to consolidate his leadership power, with specific focus on consolidating his actual control over the PLA during a period of both aggressive modernization and political turmoil caused by the anti-corruption campaign.* One clue is the explicitly positive contrast of the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” with his predecessors’ reliance on the so-called “CMC Vice-Chairman Responsibility System,” implying that Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin in particular were figureheads at the mercy of the professional military officers who actually ran the PLA from their position as CMC vice-chairmen.⁹ This narrative also tracks closely with the early presentation of Xi Jinping as more experienced in military affairs than his predecessors, as evidenced by his oft-cited stint as a uniformed military aide to Minister of Defense Geng Biao in the 1970s and his parallel military positions during his various civilian positions from 1983 to 2007.¹⁰ All of these messages combined are meant to convey a clear sense of Xi Jinping firmly in charge of the strategic direction of the PLA and deeply involved in its day-to-day affairs.

What are the features of the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” as described in the recent military media? First, the buck stops at the chairman’s desk, as ultimately “all significant issues in national defense and Army building [are] planned and decided by the CMC chairman.”¹¹ PLA personnel are also encouraged to develop a “commander in chief mentality.”¹² Once the decision has been made, the chairman conducts “concentrated unified leadership” and “efficient command” of the entire military.¹³ As a result, the PLA is more likely to carry out the “comprehensive, accurate, timely and effective implementation of the resolute intent and strategic directives of the CMC chairman.”¹⁴ If for some reason the implementation is delayed or obstructed, the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” provides for “supervision” and “inspection” mechanisms to identify the source of resistance to the chairman’s instructions and break the logjam.¹⁵

Assessment

The appearance of the phrase “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” in the military propaganda *tifa* is the latest in a series of messages designed to portray Xi Jinping as the strongest Chinese leader since Chairman Mao. The shift to personalization of authority at the expense of the previous emphasis on collective leadership is clearly on display at the conclusion of the January 2015 editorial extolling Xi’s military leadership, instructing all PLA personnel that

they must resolutely protect the authority of the party Central Committee, the CMC, and Chairman Xi [Jinping], as they resolutely heed the command of the party Central Committee, the CMC, and Chairman Xi, and as they accomplish resolutely responding to the call sent out by Chairman Xi, resolutely executing the requirements put forth by Chairman Xi, and resolutely completing the tasks bestowed upon them by Chairman Xi.

Since the January editorial, the phrase has begun to appear in some of the military region papers, though only in the context of political work and party control of the military. It is significant that the discussion of the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” has not extended into discussions of non-political military affairs, such as command and control of wartime forces, doctrine and planning, or even promotions, as one sees in a megalomaniacal cult of personality state like North Korea. The closest the Chinese propaganda apparatus comes to talking about the role of the CMC chairman outside of the realm of political control is a brief discussion about “efficient” command, but certainly nothing that implies Xi would be intruding into the professional military domain.¹⁶ At the same time, the personalized rhetoric about the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System” is yet another useful reminder that Xi Jinping has staked everything on current political campaigns against corruption, given that the flip side of responsibility is accountability. If the campaign should fail to achieve the desired results, Xi’s reputation as a leader could suffer, and he will not have the luxury of “collective leadership” to share the blame.

Notes

¹ Zhong Xia and Liu Peijun, “‘Strong Military’ Thinking Pilots Through Magnificent Journey,” *China Military Online*, 27 October 2014.

² “General Political Department Publishes ‘Guiding Opinion on Deepening the ‘Four Winds’ Campaign to Fix, Consolidate and Expand Mass Line Education and Practice Activities,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 24 November 2014.

³ Staff Commentator, “The Work System Must Be Made Stricter and More Realistic—Discussion Three on Putting Great Efforts Into Strengthening the Building of the Various Levels of Party Committee Leading Groups,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 28 January 2015, p.1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://baike.baidu.com/view/9353.htm>

⁸ “The Work System Must Be Made Stricter and More Realistic.”

⁹ “Who is responsible on the Central Military Commission?” *Ming Pao*, 29 January 2015.

¹⁰ “Xi Jinping: Vice-Chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission,” 19 October 2010, accessed at http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2010-10/19/content_4201736.htm.

¹¹ “The Work System Must Be Made Stricter and More Realistic.”

¹² Li Chunguo and Liu Peijun, “Nanjing Military Region Holds 4th Plenary (Enlarged) Meeting of Its 12th CPC Committee to Sum Up 2014 Work, Arrange 2015 Tasks, Emphasizing the Need to Clearly See the Situation and the Tasks, Firmly Keep in Mind the Missions and the Important Responsibility, Build a Strong Force for Performing Heavy Tasks for Military Strengthening,” *Renmin Qianxian*, 1 January 2015.

¹³ “The Work System Must Be Made Stricter and More Realistic.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “China Must Adhere to the Leadership of the Armed Forces under the Command of the Central Military Commission Chairman,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 29 January 2015.