

Oh Fang, Where Art Thou? Xi Jinping and the PLA's 90th Anniversary

James Mulvenon

As the Chinese Communist Party heads into the 19th Party Congress in October, Xi Jinping's speech commemorating the 90th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army was notable both for what he said and what he did not say. This article dissects the speech and assesses implications for party-military relations, Xi's relationship with the military, and the upcoming leadership shuffle at the 19th Congress.

The Key Themes of Xi Jinping's 90th PLA Anniversary Speech

On 1 August at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, Xi Jinping delivered a speech commemorating the 90th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army.¹ It is an annual tradition for the paramount leader to make formal remarks on Army Day, though this year's speech was an important political roadsign preceding the leadership clambake at Beidaihe and the opening of the 19th Party Congress in October. Xi's speech also came two days after China held a massive military parade involving more than 12,000 service personnel at the Zhurihe military training base in north China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.²

Xi's speech began by emphasizing the "six great forces" that marked the history of the PLA: (1) the Chinese Communist Party's leadership of the military; (2) the Marxist ideals and convictions of the troops; (3) reform and innovation from the revolutionary period to the present; (4) the fighting spirit of the military, beginning in the 1927 Nanchang Uprising and progressing through the civil war, Korean War, the 1979 border war with Vietnam, and all of the sovereignty struggles of the present day; (5) the revolutionary discipline of the force; and (6) army-people unity.³ After this historical throat-clearing, he focused on the party's goal of building a strong military under "the new situation," which he briefly summarized as having three core elements:

- Building a people's army which obeys the party's command (建设一支听党指挥), can fight and win battles (能打胜仗), and has excellent work style (作风优良)
- Creating a new military strategic command (新军事战略指导)
- Developing new military strategies and guidelines (军事战略方针)

In terms of party-military relations, Xi again harkened back to the All-Army Political Work Conference that he chaired at Gutian in November 2014. As was described in *CLM* 46, that meeting was attended by the top 420 senior military leaders of the PLA, and provided Xi an opportunity to explicitly link the political loyalty of the military to his ongoing anti-corruption campaign.⁴ The unspoken message was that the corruption investigations of disgraced CMC Vice-Chairmen Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong had provided Xi with more than enough leverage over all of the leaders in the room, and any

perceived disloyalty on their part to the CCP or to Xi personally would likely result in the investigation of their own finances and their families. Xi's repeated mention of Gutian in the 90th anniversary speech was likely a dog whistle of this same threat, particularly as the leadership prepares for the jockeying and struggles in the runup to the 19th Party Congress. The speech's second major theme centered on the PLA's massive military reorganization, under way since late 2015. Xi's description in the speech of the transformation matches earlier pronouncements, suggesting no major changes in course. He emphasized the much larger role of the Central Military Commission, which "takes charge of the centralized and unified administration of the military," while the theater commands "focus on combat operations," and the various military services pursue their own modernization. The third core concept in the speech addressed "new strategic guidelines" for the PLA, placing greater emphasis on "actual combat," innovation, "systems building," "intensity and high efficiency," as well as "military-civilian fusion." Taken together all of these changes over the last five years were awkwardly listed as the "four remoldings" (重塑): "remolding of political ecology" (政治生态重塑), the "remolding of organizational form" (组织形态重塑), the "remolding of the system of military strength" (力量体系重塑), and the "remolding of workstyle and image" (作风形象重塑).

The red meat of the speech outlined the "six necessary" requirements for "pushing forward the cause of the strong army" (推进强军事业). Not surprisingly the first and most important was the Chinese Communist Party's "absolute leadership" over the army. While many of the slogans were familiar, Xi dramatically closed this section by calling for no "wavering" (动摇), no "hesitation" (迟疑), and no "ambiguity" (含糊). These three "no's" were subsequently repeated in the political commentaries following the speech.⁵ The second necessary requirement was to implement the party's theories on military command (军事指导理论), repeating the earlier focus on the PLA's massive reorganization, and "building a strong army in the new period" (新时期的强军思想). Third, Xi called for focus on war preparation and combat readiness to win every battle, which can only be achieved through "realistic combat training." Specifically, Xi exhorted the PLA to prepare to "resolutely safeguard" (坚决维护) the Chinese Communist Party leadership (中国共产党领导), the socialist system (社会主义制度) more broadly, national sovereignty, security and development interests (国家主权、安全、发展利益), and finally regional and world peace (地区和世界和平), in that order.

Xi Jinping's fourth necessary requirement for a strong army involved the specific features of army-building itself. He divided this into four categories. Again, the first was political work (政治建军), especially embracing the "spirit of the all-Army political work conference in Gutian (古田全军政治工作会议精神). The second was national defense and military reforms (改革强军), which he darkly warned confronted "institutional obstacles" (体制性障碍), "structural contradictions" (结构性矛盾), and "policy problems" (政策性问题). The third was science and technology (科技兴军), which demanded that the PLA seize the "strategic crux of independent innovation" (自主创新的战略基点) and accelerate "strategic, cutting-edge, and paradigm shifting technological development" (战略性、前沿性、颠覆性技术发展). Finally, Xi argued that army-building must be based on the rule of law (依法治军), defined as implementing a system of "military rule-of-law with Chinese

characteristics” (中国特色军事法治体系) to speed up the “fundamental change of the methods of governing the army” (治军方式根本性转变).

The fifth requirement for a strong army in Xi’s speech centered on the achievement of military-civilian fusion (军民融合) and building a national strategic system for “military-civilian integration” (军民一体化). Military-civilian fusion is the more advanced version of the military-civilian integration, and Xi declared the need for a “national strategy” for coordinated development of economic construction and national defense construction. Finally, Xi called for the military to perform its historic role of serving the people and being the people’s army. Specifically, he ordered the military to continue to support local economic and social construction (地方经济社会建设) and perform the “emergency dangerous tasks” (急难险重任务) of disaster relief.

Conclusion and Implications

Xi Jinping’s speech on the 90th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army was notable for its mixture of traditional and new themes, building on the confident grandeur of the massive military parade two days earlier in Inner Mongolia. Standard tropes about the absolute loyalty of the PLA to the Chinese Communist Party were interspersed with intense focus on military command reorganization and military-civilian fusion in the economy. The PLA press predictably showered praise on the text, with official state media careful to refer to “Comrade Xi Jinping as the core”⁶ of the leadership.

But there were some curious dogs that did not bark. Nowhere in Xi’s speech did he mention his Central Military Commission predecessors Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin, which is especially interesting on the eve of the Beidaihe meeting, where living elders like Hu and Jiang rub shoulders with the current leadership. When Hu Jintao spoke at the army’s 80th anniversary in 2007, by contrast, he repeatedly praised the leadership skills of three former leaders, specifically calling out the legacy of “Mao Zedong’s military thought,” “Deng Xiaoping’s thought on army building in the new period” and “Jiang Zemin’s thought on national defense and army building.” General Political Department documents during the Hu era often mentioned the importance of “Hu Jintao’s thought on national defense and army building.” In Xi’s speech, however, he did not even make the standard passing reference to these historical concepts.

Xi’s speech also did not foretell the fate of General Fang Fenghui, the senior operational commander of the PLA as chief of the CMC Joint Staff Department, who was replaced in late August with no announcement of his transfer or retirement.⁷ Fang had until recently enjoyed a high profile, meeting with U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Joseph Dunford on 15 August and accompanying Xi Jinping for his meeting with President Trump at Mar-a-Lago in April. A Reuters article cited three sources saying Fang was being questioned for “economic problems,” which is an official euphemism for corruption. Asked by reporters about his status, Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman Ren Guoqiang said that he was “not aware” of whether Fang had been given another position, strongly implying that he had already been thrown down the fiery Orwellian memory hole. At first glance, the move against Fang, cast against the backdrop of the imminent 19th Party

Congress, appears to be another powerful warning shot across the bow of the PLA, once again “killing one to warn one hundred” (杀一儆百). The message was surely not lost on Xi’s civilian colleagues either, though the need to resort to political purge always raises the counter-intuitive specter of projecting weakness not strength. To be sure, the military officers promoted next month at the Congress will know their positions are tenuous and subject to the whim of the “core.”

Notes

¹ “Xi Jinping: Speech at rally celebrating 90th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army,” Xinhua, 1 August 2017.

² “China Focus: ‘Be ready to win wars,’ China’s Xi orders reshaped PLA,” Xinhua, 1 August 2017.

³ Commentator, “Historical meritorious deeds cast with patriotism – First commentary on important speech by Chairman Xi Jinping at meeting to mark 90th founding anniversary of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army,” *People’s Daily*, 2 August 2017, p. 2.

⁴ James Mulvenon, “Hotel Gutian: We Haven’t Had That Spirit Here Since 1929,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 46, Winter 2015, accessed at <http://www.hoover.org/research/hotel-gutian-we-havent-had-spirit-here-1929>.

⁵ “China Focus: ‘Be ready to win wars.’”

⁶ Commentator, “The great strength for the march toward victory—Second commentary on Chairman Xi Jinping’s important speech at the 90th anniversary of the founding of the PLA,” *People’s Daily*, 3 August 2017, p. 1.

⁷ Benjamin Kang Lim and Ben Blanchard, “Senior Chinese military officer questioned over suspected graft: Sources,” Reuters, 4 September 2017.