

Xi Jinping Has a Cool New Nickname:

“Commander-in-Chief”

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On 20 April 2016, Xi Jinping formally inspected the Central Military Commission’s joint battle command center (军委联合作战指挥中心), broadcast on national television. His visit was notable for many reasons, including the public glimpse of the command center itself, Xi’s decision to wear the new camouflage uniform, and most strikingly, the commentary’s description of Xi using the new nomenclature “commander-in-chief” (总指挥). This article analyzes this interesting change in vocabulary and assesses its implications for party-military relations.

Goodbye “Daddy Xi,” Hello “Commander-in-Chief”!

On 20 April 2016, Xi Jinping formally inspected the Central Military Commission’s (CMC) joint battle command center (军委联合作战指挥中心). The event was broadcast on national television,¹ and he was accompanied by all members of the CMC,² signifying the importance of the event. His visit was notable for many reasons, including the public glimpse of the command center itself, Xi’s decision to wear the PLA’s new digital camouflage uniform instead of his usual green tunic, and most strikingly, the commentary’s description of Xi using the new nomenclature “commander-in-chief of the CMC Joint Operations Center” (军委联指总指挥). The latter announcement produced a bow wave of foreign press coverage, propelled by an unusual break in the standard atmosphere of military secrecy and the insatiable prurience of Pekingologists eager to ascribe significance to subtle terminological distinctions.³ This article piles on by analyzing this interesting change in vocabulary, and assesses its implications for party-military relations.

Xi’s visit to the command center began predictably enough, with him greeting on-site personnel and observing them working at their duty stations.⁴ It was striking that he wore a green military uniform for the occasion, rather than his usual black or green *zhongshanzhuang*. The uniform itself modeled the PLA’s new digital camouflage pattern, though without any rank insignia. While some observers asserted that this was the first time he had worn a military uniform, official Chinese media clarified that this was “the first time a Chinese president had inspected a top military body in a combat uniform and the second time Xi had appeared in public in such a uniform.”⁵ Retired PLA major general Xu Guangyu insisted the uniform matched the “battle commander” context of the venue and the meeting:

Xi’s camouflage military suit showed that he is top commander of the PLA’s supreme joint battle command body, which was set up to meet today’s modern warfare demands, and is capable of commanding land,

navy and air forces, as well as other special troops like the Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force. It [was a meeting for battle commanders] as other CMC members and senior officials participating were all wearing the camouflage uniform.⁶

In a separate article, *China Daily* averred that Xi had in fact worn “a camouflage uniform for the first time in January 2014 when he inspected a border defense regiment in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region,” but did not provide an explanation for why he initially wore the uniform in 2014 in such an obscure context, or why he had not worn it again during the intervening 26 months.⁷

Things veered sharply away from the normal inspection script, however, when Xi “sat down at the seat for ‘commander-in-chief’” (总指挥), listened to a report by the CMC Joint Operations Command Center about the current situation, and received briefings from the commanders of each of the newly established north, south, east, west, and central theater commands via video links.⁸ The word “seat” is a bit of an understatement, as the accompanying video shows Xi on a raised throne-like dais facing the entire room of military officers. PRC official media immediately trumpeted Xi’s new title of “commander-in-chief,” which was explicitly added to his traditional three titles of CCP general-secretary, PRC state president, and chairman of the Central Military Commission. One Xinhua article muddies the issue by referring to him as “commander-in-chief of China’s armed forces,”⁹ but all of the other sources are consistent.

After listening to the situation reports from personnel at the central and then theater command level, Xi made a speech of his own. The themes of his speech fall into two broad categories. The first addressed the emerging development of the joint battle command system itself, which is clearly a top priority of the PLA’s reorganization.¹⁰ Xi called on the audience to build a joint battle command system “with Chinese characteristics,” the standard code-phrase for not slavishly copying foreign examples like the U.S. Joint Staff at the expense of China’s own unique “conditions.”¹¹ He exhorted them to build a “professional and efficient” system¹² that “meets the needs of fighting and winning an informatized war.”¹³ Specifically Xi highlighted that one of the goals of the recent reforms was to “strengthen the capabilities of the CMC Joint Command Headquarters” itself, which he had apparently appointed himself to command.¹⁴ Small wonder he also exhorted the military personnel of this joint battle command system to be “absolutely loyal” to the CCP, which he coincidentally also leads.¹⁵

The second theme concerned the characteristics and expectations for the joint battle command system’s personnel. Xi told them to “regard their positions at the headquarters as their combat positions on the battlefield,” doing their part to “resolutely safeguard the country’s sovereignty, security, and development interests.”¹⁶ He called for officers to have “a clear sense of crisis,” honing their “ability for informatized warfare.”¹⁷ Xi promised “special measures” to train personnel for joint operations, as well as acceleration of “the development and deployment of advanced military technologies.”¹⁸ In particular, he called for this training to implement “the military strategies under the

new situation” and focus on the “core key functions of studying and commanding wars.”¹⁹

Conclusion and Implications

Outside observers offered a wide range of opinions about the significance of Xi Jinping’s new title of “commander-in-chief.” Liang Guoliang notes the choice of official Xinhua translation, comparing the new title to the U.S. president’s position as the “commander-in-chief” of the country’s armed forces.²⁰ Xu Guangyu contrasts it with his CMC chairmanship, insisting that the “CMC is responsible for the PLA’s management and defense building, while the joint battle command center focuses on combat and relevant strategies.”²¹ In addition, the linking of the new title to the venue of the joint battle command center suggest that it is a wartime command role, whereas his title of CMC chairman represents his CCP-derived “political” leadership of the military in peacetime. You Ji calls the title a “symbol of ultimate command and control of the armed forces,”²² while others go further and insist that it shows Xi “is not only the political and administrative leader of China but also its overall military commander.”²³ Some analysts provided the evidence-free assertion that the move showed Xi had “built up a level of personal authority over troops on par with late leaders such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping,” while others saw the move primarily as a denigration of the circumscribed authority of Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin over the PLA during their tenures.²⁴

Some observers instead focused on the message to the outside world; namely that “Xi was not only the top administrative leader of the world’s biggest army, but also the chief commander of the fighting force.”²⁵ Some even went so far as to say that “his appearance in military fatigues may also be a display of strength aimed at China’s rivals.”²⁶ Others focused on the implications of the title for PLA modernization. The BBC opined that the title showed “China is modernizing its armed forces fast, and Xi Jinping is at the center of that change.”²⁷ Zhang Lifan, a noted political historian, takes a comparative view, arguing that “by reforming the old military command and serving as commander-in-chief, he was discarding the old Soviet-style structure and emulating the U.S. model of joint command for faster execution of decision.”²⁸ Michael Raska agrees, positing that “this long, funky title is part of accelerating reforms at the operational level.”²⁹ Andrei Chang, however, cautioned against overemphasizing the military aspect of the announcement, insisting that Xi’s new title remains “more political than military” and doesn’t imply “he will take charge of the day-to-day running of the PLA.”³⁰ Instead Chang asserts the visit was designed “to show off his muscle to his potential enemies and show that he is tough and in charge.”³¹ Dennis Wilder also points to the broader party-military dynamic as well as leadership concerns about social stability, arguing

By donning both military fatigues and a new title, Xi may be sending a signal to the military that he intends to exercise closer control than other leaders have done in the past . . . Xi’s move is therefore also a signal to the wider society and his rivals within the regime that he can and will use force to counter domestic challenges.³²

In the end, however, I think Xi's decision to wear a military uniform actually signals the weakness and dysfunction of the Chinese system, rather than its strength. In more mature and resilient political systems, such as the United States or countries in Western Europe, the civilian political leadership does not feel compelled to don the garb of their professional armed forces, primarily because of their confidence in the mechanisms of civilian control of the military and the popular legitimacy of their governments but also because it would be perceived as an insult to the professional officer corps. By contrast, the adoption of military uniforms by political leaders is common in shallow, tinpot dictatorships where their tenuous, personalized grasp on power lacks institutional or popular legitimacy. In some cases, such as Libya under Gaddafi or his fictional representation as Admiral General Aladeen in *The Dictator*, the leader even feels compelled to design outlandish, garish uniforms for himself with unearned medals and ranks in a spasm of overcompensation. In this case, Xi went with the more understated choice of camouflage with no rank insignia, but it still prompts the same question: if you need to announce that you are appointing yourself "commander-in-chief," are you really?

Notes

¹ Li Xuanliang and Li Yun, "Xi Jinping Inspects CMC Joint Operations Command Center on the Morning of 20 April," Xinhua, 20 April 2016; "President Xi Visits Joint Battle Command Center," Xinhua, 20 April 2016.

² CMC Vice-Chairs Fan Changlong and Xu Qiliang, as well as other CMC members Chang Wanquan, Fang Fenghui, Zhang Yang, Zhao Keshi, Zhang Youxia, Wu Shengli, Ma Xiaotian, Wei Fenghe.

³ "China's Xi Jinping Takes Commander in Chief Military Title," BBCnews, 21 April 2016; Austin Ramzy, "China's President, Xi Jinping, Gains a New Title: Commander in Chief," *New York Times*, 21 April 2016; "Xi Jinping Named as 'Commander in Chief' by Chinese State Media," *Guardian*, 21 April 2016; Jeremy Page, "China's Xi Adds 'Commander-in-Chief' to His Titles," *Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 2016; Ankit Panda, "Xi Jinping Has a New Title: Commander-in-Chief of the People's Liberation Army," *TheDiplomat.com*, 22 April 2016; Kayleigh Lewis, "Chinese President Xi Jinping Named as Military's 'Commander-in-Chief'," *Independent*, 23 April 2016; Eric Baculinao, "China's President Xi's New Role: Military Commander-in-Chief," NBC News, 21 April 2016; Ed Adamczyk, "Chinese President Xi Jinping Takes Title of Commander in Chief," UPI.com, 21 April 2016.

⁴ "Xi Jinping Inspects CMC Joint Operations Command Center on the Morning of 20 April" (see endnote 1).

⁵ "President Xi urges stronger military," *China Daily*, 21 April 2016.

⁶ Minnie Chan, "China's President Xi Steps Out with a New Military Title—And the Uniform to Match," *South China Morning Post*, 21 April 2016.

⁷ "President Xi urges stronger military."

⁸ "Xi Jinping Inspects CMC Joint Operations Command Center on the Morning of 20 April."

⁹ "Xi Brings Strength, Integrity to Chinese Armed Forces," Xinhua, 30 July 2016.

¹⁰ "Xi Stresses Joint Battle Command for Military Reform," Xinhua, 21 April 2016.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “President Xi urges stronger military.”

¹³ “Xi Stresses Joint Battle Command for Military Reform.”

¹⁴ “President Xi urges stronger military.”

¹⁵ “Xi Stresses Joint Battle Command for Military Reform.”

¹⁶ “President Xi urges stronger military.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Xi Stresses Joint Battle Command for Military Reform.”

²⁰ “China’s President Xi Steps Out with a New Military Title—And the Uniform to Match.”

²¹ Ibid.

²² Austin Ramzy, “China’s President, Xi Jinping, Gains a New Title: Commander in Chief,” *New York Times*, 21 April 2016.

²³ Eric Baculinao, “China’s President Xi’s New Role: Military Commander-in-Chief,” *NBC News*, 21 April 2016;

²⁴ “China’s President Xi Steps Out with a New Military Title—And the Uniform to Match.”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “China’s Xi Jinping Takes Commander in Chief Military Title,” *BBCnews*, 21 April 2016;

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “China’s President Xi’s New Role: Military Commander-in-Chief.”

²⁹ “China’s President, Xi Jinping, Gains a New Title: Commander in Chief.”

³⁰ “China’s President Xi’s New Role: Military Commander-in-Chief.”

³¹ Ibid.

³² Andrew Nathan and Tai Ming Cheung, “Xi Jinping’s New Military Position: A ChinaFile Conversation,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 May 2016.