

# And Then There Were Seven: The New, Slimmed-Down Central Military Commission

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In October 2017 at the first plenary session of the 19<sup>th</sup> Central Committee, Chinese state media announced the lineup of the new Central Military Commission (CMC). While a smaller CMC had been rumored in the weeks prior, the new configuration shattered previous paradigms of military leadership. Not only was the number of members reduced from 11 to 7, but there was a wholesale change in the assignment of seats by office, reflecting the tectonic changes from the PLA's massive reorganization discussed in *CLM* 49. This article examines the transition, analyzes the individuals chosen and the logic for their selection, and assesses the implications for party-Army relations.

## From 11 to 7: A New CMC for a Reorganized PLA

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The prescribed makeup of the CMC, as promulgated in the PRC Constitution, is flexibly vague. According to Article 93,

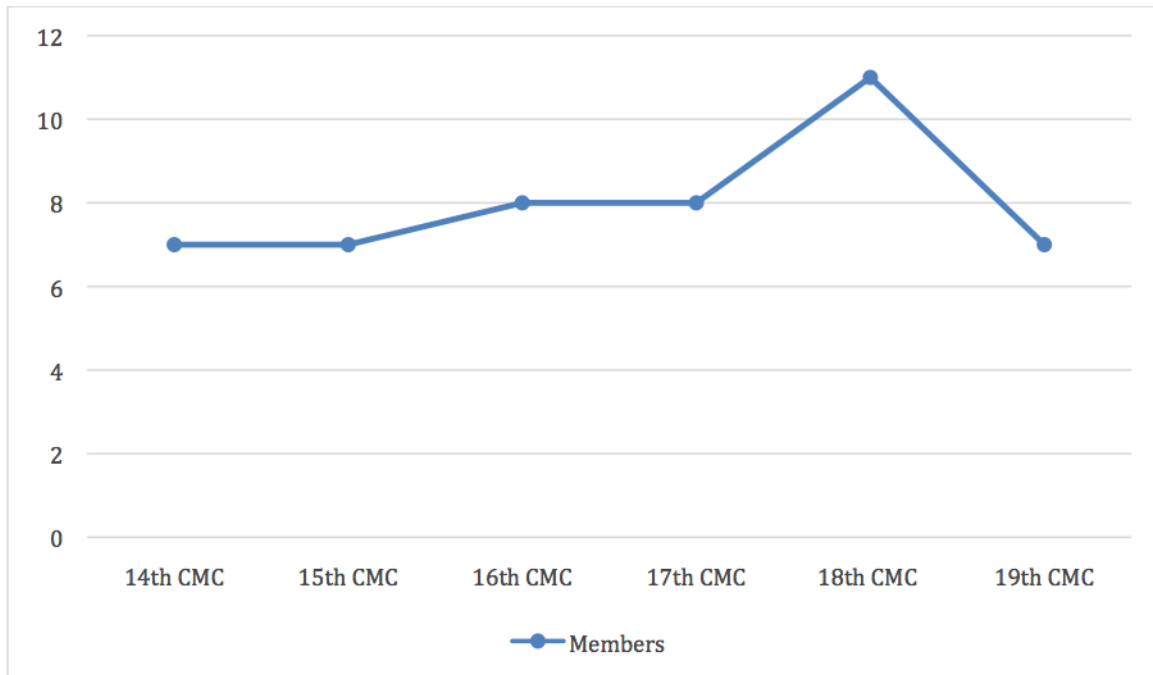
The Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China directs the armed forces of the country. The Central Military Commission is composed of the following: Chairman; Vice-Chairmen; and Members. The Chairman of the Central Military Commission has overall responsibility for the commission. The term of office of the Central Military Commission is the same as that of the National People's Congress.<sup>2</sup>

The constitution does not specify the number of "members," nor does it specify the ex officio positions those members need to hold within the military. Frankly, the ambiguity of the language could even be flexible enough to accommodate previously unseen configurations, such as "co-chairman" or a single vice-chairman. As a result, the "drop" from eleven to seven members does not by itself have any institutional significance, particularly when compared with Xi Jinping's counter-norm move to eliminate the two-term rule in the constitution. Indeed, Chart A below shows that the 11 members of the

18th Central Military Commission was an historical outlier, and that the CMC since the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre was consistently smaller.

### Chart 1

*Central Military Commission Membership Levels, 1992–Present*



Instead, the much more interesting dynamic is the change in the military positions of those officers appointed to the CMC, driven most persuasively by the actual top-level organization of the PLA rather than political considerations. Appendix A delineates the titles of every member of the CMC since the 14th Party Congress in 1992. The 14th through 16th CMC memberships clearly reflect the dominance of the General Department system, with the traditional dual vice-chairmen honchoing operational and political issues, respectively, a minister of defense handling external military relations, and the heads of the four General Departments rounding out the group. The 17th and 18th CMCs in retrospect now appear to be transitional configurations for the Xi Jinping reorganization, with the configuration from the 14th through 16th CMCs supplemented by the commanders of the respective armed service branches to inject more jointness into the national command structure. The 19th CMC, by contrast, reflects the “demotion” of the General Departments to departments under the CMC, the “demotion” of the armed service branches to “train and equip” organizations, and the heightened political significance of the anti-corruption investigation. As a result, the 19th CMC includes Chairman Xi, the traditional dual vice-chairmen (Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia),<sup>3</sup> a minister of defense (Wei Fenghe) overseeing a supposedly expanded scope of responsibilities, the directors (Li Zuocheng and Miao Hua) of the two most powerful CMC departments (Joint Staff and Political Work), and the head of the PLA Commission for Discipline Inspection (Zhang Shengmin).<sup>4</sup> At 67 years of age, Xu and Zhang are the oldest of the seven members, suggesting that Xi followed the party’s unwritten “seven

up, eight down” rule, which means leaders aged up to 67 can stay on for another term while those 68 or older must retire.<sup>5</sup>

## So Who Are These FNGs?<sup>6</sup>

### *Vice-Chairman Xu Qiliang (许其亮)*

Xu Qiliang, like many prominent military leaders over the years, hails from Shandong Province. Born in 1950, he joined the Air Force at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, when it was a powerful political entity under Marshal Lin Biao’s son, Lin Ligu. After three years of schooling, which was notable in a time when most technical schools were closed and “experts” were suspect, Xu became an aviator. For the next 30 years he systematically worked his way through increasingly senior Air Force command positions, with predictable stops along the way at National Defense University from 1986 to 1988. Xu’s career intersected with that of Xi Jinping when Xu became commander of the PLAAF’s Eighth Corps, based in Fuzhou, in late 1989, while Xi became the city’s party head in 1990.<sup>7</sup> After serving as PLAAF chief of staff in the mid-to late 1990s, Xu finally made the transition to the military region level, promoted to deputy commander of the Shenyang Military Region and then commander of the Shenyang MR Air Force. He then made the leap to Beijing, posted first as a deputy chief of the General Staff, then commander of the PLAAF and a member of the Central Military Commission. In 2012, he was elevated to be a vice-chairman of the CMC as well as a deputy director of the Leading Group for Deepening Reform in National Defense. He is currently one of two PLA officers on the Politburo and the first non-ground officer to be vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission.

### *Vice-Chairman Zhang Youxia (张又侠)*

Zhang Youxia was born in Weinan City, Shaanxi Province, in 1950. His father was Zhang Zongxun, who commanded the Northeast Army Corps in the late 1940s, when Xi Jinping’s father, Xi Zhongxun, who also hailed from Weinan, was its political commissar.<sup>8</sup> One PLA officer describes Zhang and Xi as “sworn brothers” because of their mutual experience of suffering through their father’s purges during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>9</sup> Zhang joined the PLA in December 1968 and joined the CCP in May 1969.<sup>10</sup> Little is known about his early years in the PLA, except that he worked his way through the 14th Group Army to eventually command the 40<sup>th</sup> Division. He did two tours during the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979–84) and is described as having performed with “meritorious service.” From 1994 to 2005, Zhang was deputy commander and then commander of the 13<sup>th</sup> Group Army.<sup>11</sup> In 2005, Zhang moved to the military region level, posted first as deputy commander of the Beijing MR and then commander of the Shenyang MR. In 2012, he was elevated to the Central Military Commission and appointed director of the General Armaments Department, overseeing military research, development, and acquisition.

### *General Wei Fenghe (魏凤和), Defense Minister*

Wei Fenghe is China’s new defense minister, replacing Chang Wanquan. Born in 1954 in Chiping County, Shandong Province, Wei joined the PLA in 1970 and became a CCP

member in 1972.<sup>12</sup> He spent his entire career in the Second Artillery, now the PLA Rocket Force. In 1975, Wei studied rocket engineering at a missile school under the Commission for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (COSTIND).<sup>13</sup> He went on to train as a strategic missile commander at the Second Artillery Corps' college in Wuhan. Wei worked his way up through the ranks at the 53rd Base and then serving as deputy chief of staff, chief of staff, and finally commander of the force. He has the distinction of becoming the youngest deputy chief of the former General Staff Department, at age 56, in 2010. In 2012, he joined the CMC as an ex officio member, and was reinstated in 2017 without portfolio but with the expectation that he would become minister of defense at the National People's Congress in early 2018. Wei is now the first non-ground force officer to serve as Minister of Defense.

*General Li Zuocheng (李作成), Director, CMC Joint Staff Department*

Born in 1953 in Anhua County, Hunan Province, Li has enjoyed a typical Army career, promoted to command the 41st Group Army, and then serving as deputy commander, deputy chief of staff, and then commander of the Chengdu Military Region. In 2016, he assumed command of the newly formed Army Headquarters, and one year later became director of the new CMC Joint Staff Department (formerly General Staff Department). This latter position was sufficiently senior to merit elevation to the CMC in 2017. According to a reputable Hong Kong media source, Li is "a decorated hero of the [1979] Sino-Vietnamese war and a veteran leader of disaster relief campaigns."<sup>14</sup> In Vietnam, he was awarded a "first-class merit," and his combat company won a collective order of merit.<sup>15</sup> When Li was promoted to division commander in 1994, his combat unit was awarded a second-class merit for their part in a flood-relief mission in Guangxi.<sup>16</sup> In 1998, when he was 41<sup>st</sup> Group Army commander, he was a key leader in the two-month effort to respond to flooding across 24 provinces.<sup>17</sup>

*Admiral Miao Hua (苗华), Director, CMC Political Work Department*

Miao Hua was born in 1955 in Fuzhou City, Fujian Province. He has been a career political officer, beginning on the Army side in the 31st and 12th Group Armies, and then moving to the military region level as the director of the Lanzhou MR Political Department and then deputy political commissar of the Lanzhou MR itself. In 2012, Miao was posted to the CCP Central Discipline Inspection Commission during the height of the first years of Xi's anti-corruption campaign. He moved over to the Navy as headquarters political commissar in 2014 and was promoted to admiral in 2015. Miao assumed the directorship of the new CMC Political Work Department in 2017, and was elevated to the CMC. Miao's reported connection to Xi Jinping was during his service as head of the Fujian-based 31<sup>st</sup> Group Army political department between 1999 and 2005, which overlapped with Xi Jinping's tenure in the province.<sup>18</sup>

*Lieutenant General Zhang Shengmin (张升民), Director, CMC Discipline Inspection Commission*

Born in 1958 in Shaanxi Province, Zhang is youngest member of the CMC. Also a career political officer, he served as the director of the Second Artillery Political Department, and then political commissar of the Second Artillery Force Command Academy.<sup>19</sup> In

2010, Zhang led reconstruction work following the 2010 Yushu earthquake in Qinghai Province.<sup>20</sup> According to CCTV, his unit helped to build emergency living quarters for the monks at the Changgu Monastery (禅古寺), the largest Kagyu Tibetan Buddhist temple in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.<sup>21</sup> Zhang then moved quickly from political commissar of the CMC Logistics Supply Department to the secretary of the PLA Discipline Inspection Commission, where he oversees the sensitive anti-corruption investigation within the military. Zhang is well-known for his award-winning calligraphy.

## Policy Themes for the CMC in 2018

The new Central Military Commission confronts an array of internal and external challenges, as described in authoritative statements in Chinese military media:

### *November 2017 Liberation Army Daily Commentary*

The first post-Congress commentary makes a forceful, historically determinist argument that “Chairman Xi becoming the core of the party’s Central Committee and the core of the entire party was the choice of history.”<sup>22</sup> As a result, the entire military is exhorted to implement fully the “chairman responsibility system,” described in more detail in *CLM* 55 and *CLM* 47.<sup>23</sup> The same commentary also repeated the related theme of opposing factionalism by not being “a two-faced person” (两面人).<sup>24</sup> Finally, the source pulled a hoary chestnut out of the fire and called upon the rank and file to “resolutely resist the ‘non-party-ization’ and the ‘non-politicization’ of the armed forces and [resist] the ‘nationalization of the armed forces’ and other such erroneous political views.”<sup>25</sup>

### *1 January Liberation Army Daily New Year’s Editorial*<sup>26</sup>

This annual summary of the past year always includes the major propaganda themes and a policy blueprint for the coming year. The editorial begins by celebrating the establishment of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想), and then moves to describe the accomplishments of the PLA in 2017:

- followed the guidance of the party’s strong army goal in the new era [新时代的强军], energetically strengthen ideological and political building, solidly cast the ideological foundation for safeguarding the core and obeying orders [维护核心、听从指挥]
- took pains to fulfill all the reform tasks, consolidate and expand the achievements of the leadership and command system reform, accomplish the revolutionary remolding of the organizational structure and the power system
- comprehensively carried out the strategy of technology-driven army strengthening, quickened the development of national defense-oriented science and technology and the development of weaponry and equipment, made a series of major breakthroughs in crucial technologies
- persistently straightened out the style of behavior, rigorously enforced discipline, strictly conducted rules-based management, effectively improved the political ecosystem of the military forces, continuously raised the rule-of-law standard of national defense and armed forces building

- deeply pushed forward the work of force training and war readiness, firmly established the combat power standard, markedly raised the level of realistic training
- strengthened the top-level design, promoted the fulfillment of major projects, brought civil-military integrated development onto the fast track
- remarkably fulfilled the major tasks of maritime rights defense, counter-terrorist and stability maintaining actions, and international peacekeeping, effectively safeguarded the national sovereignty, security, and development interests, manifested the brand-new demeanor of People's Army in front of the world.

But the best is yet to come! In 2018, the PLA plans to push the following priorities:

- Promoting “Xi Jinping Army Strengthening Thought” [习近平强军思想] as the “military chapter” [军事篇] of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”
- Implementing the strategic requirements of the Chinese nation's great revival, the fulfillment of the “two centenary” [两个一百年] endeavor objectives and the fulfillment of the Chinese Dream [中国梦]
- Attaining the 2020 objectives of national defense and armed forces building, including
- Carry out “strict rules-based force management” [which sounds like coded language for anti-corruption]
- Deepen reforms in an unswerving way for military management, improve and develop the socialist military system with Chinese characteristics
- Strengthen party building in the armed forces, resolutely safeguard and implement the CMC chairman responsibility system. guarantee that all military forces will maintain high-degree ideological, political, behavioral alignment with the party central leadership, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Xi and will resolutely obey orders issued by the party central leadership, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Xi.

The ultimate goal of these actions is increased war readiness:

In the new year, we should constantly focus on force training and war readiness. An army is set up for getting ready to fight battles. All parts of work must be persistently oriented to fighting and focused on winning. We should keep a stronger sense of crisis, adhere to the bottom line thinking, firmly establish the combat power standard, effectively remedy defects and weaknesses, launch a thorough investigation and rectification of prominent problems in war readiness and actual fighting. Efforts should be made to further unfold the mass training and skill competition activities, and bring about an upsurge of combat-realistic training in the whole PLA. Down-to-earth work should be done to make good preparations for military struggle in all strategic directions and comprehensively enhance the winning capabilities in the new era.<sup>27</sup>

One of the main mechanisms for implementing these policy priorities are three revised PLA regulations and six CMC inspection teams sent down to monitor implementation of the Chairman Responsibility System.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion and Implications

While the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress and the 2018 National People's Congress has introduced the slate of the new PLA leadership for the next five years, none of these officers should feel complacent, especially given the intensity of the current anti-corruption investigation. According to Xinhua

since the 18th National Congress [in 2012], more than 100 PLA officers at or above the corps-level, including two former CMC vice chairmen, have been investigated and punished . . . This is even greater than the number of army generals who died in the battlefield during revolutionary times.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the military media in late 2017 and early 2018 was filled with vitriolic articles describing the confessions and suicides of senior military personnel caught with their hands in the cookie jar. A November 2017 commentary on former CMC Political Work Department director Zhang Yang's suicide linked him to the "pernicious influence of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou,"<sup>30</sup> echoing the themes of *CLM* 52.<sup>31</sup> A January 2018 article vividly laid out the crimes of former CMC Joint Staff Department director Fang Fenghui, describing how he offered and accepted enormous bribes.<sup>32</sup> In both cases, very senior, powerful officers were suddenly cashiered, and their families placed in jeopardy. Given that the fall of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou yielded incriminating information on large numbers of officers involved in the seemingly ubiquitous "pay for promotion" culture of the PLA, this suggests that the current CMC members are at least vulnerable to investigation and arrest if they get crosswise with Xi Jinping or don't support him as enthusiastically as a potential replacement. Sleep with one eye open, comrades.

## Appendix A. Membership Composition of CMC, 1992–present

<i>14<sup>th</sup> CMC</i>	<i>15<sup>th</sup> CMC</i>	<i>16<sup>th</sup> CMC</i>	<i>17<sup>th</sup> CMC</i>	<i>18<sup>th</sup> CMC</i>	<i>19<sup>th</sup> CMC</i>
Chairman	Chairman	Chairman	Chairman	Chairman	Chairman
Vice-Chairman	Vice-Chairman	Vice-Chairman	Vice-Chairman	Vice-Chairman	Vice-Chairman
Vice-Chairman, Minister of Defense	Vice-Chairman, Minister of Defense	Vice-Chairman	Vice-Chairman	Vice-Chairman	Vice-Chairman
Director, General Staff Dept	Director, General Staff Dept	Vice-Chairman, Minister of Defense	Vice-Chairman	Minister of Defense	Minister of Defense
Director, General Political Dept	Director, General Political Dept	Director, General Staff Dept	Minister of Defense	Director, General Staff Dept	Director, CMC Joint Staff Dept
Director, General Logistics Dept	Director, General Logistics Dept	Director, General Political Dept	Director, General Staff Dept	Director, General Political Dept	Director, CMC Political Work Dept
Director, General Armaments Dept	Director, General Armaments Dept	Director, General Logistics Dept	Director, General Political Dept	Director, General Logistics Dept	Secretary, CMC Commission for Discipline Inspection
		Director, General Armaments Dept	Director, General Logistics Dept	Director, General Armaments Dept	
			Director, General Armaments Dept	Commander, Air Force	
			Commander, Air Force	Commander, Navy	
			Commander, Navy	Commander, Rocket Forces	
			Commander, Rocket Forces		



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> James Mulvenon, “China’s ‘Goldwater-Nichols’? The Long-Awaited PLA Reorganization Has Finally Arrived,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 49, Winter 2016, accessed at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-goldwater-nichols-long-awaited-pla-reorganization-has-finally-arrived>.

<sup>2</sup> “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China,” accessed at: <http://en.people.cn/constitution/constitution.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Liu Zhen, “What Changes at The Top Mean for China’s Military,” *South China Morning Post*, 26 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2116856/what-changes-top-mean-chinas-military>.

<sup>4</sup> Minnie Chan, “Xi Jinping Rolls Out Leaner Top Line Up for China’s Military Machine,” *South China Morning Post*, 26 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2117004/xi-jinping-rolls-out-leaner-top-line-chinas-military>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Most biographical data in this section is taken from *China Vitae*, accessible at: <http://chinavitae.com>.

<sup>7</sup> Minnie Chan, “General Xu Qiliang: How a Chinese air force top gun shot to the top of military,” *South China Morning Post*, 25 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2116939/general-xu-qiliang-how-chinese-air-force-top-gun-shot>.

<sup>8</sup> Minnie Chan, “General Zhang Youxia: Xi Jinping’s ‘sworn brother’ now his deputy on China’s top military body,” *South China Morning Post*, 25 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2116936/general-zhang-youxia-xi-jinpings-sworn-brother-now-his>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “Zhang Youxia—Member of Political Bureau of CPC Central Committee,” *China Daily*, 26 October 2017, accessed at: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-10/26/content\\_33723562.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-10/26/content_33723562.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Minnie Chan, “‘Reticent’ General Wei Fenghe could be China’s new defence minister, sources say,” *South China Morning Post*, 24 February 2018, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2134555/reticent-general-rockets-ranks-central-military>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Minnie Chan, “Xi Jinping rolls out leaner top line-up for China’s military machine,” *South China Morning Post*, 26 October 2017, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2117004/xi-jinping-rolls-out-leaner-top-line-chinas-military>.

<sup>15</sup> Minnie Chan, “War hero tipped as Xi Jinping’s choice for key role in world’s biggest army,” *South China Morning Post*, 17 August 2017, accessed at:

<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2106947/war-hero-tipped-xi-jinpings-choice-key-role-worlds>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Bo Zhiyue, “The Rise of the 31st Army in Chinese Politics,” *The Diplomat*, 30 December 2014, accessed at: <https://thediplomat.com/2014/12/the-rise-of-the-31st-army-in-chinese-politics/>.

<sup>19</sup> “履历不凡 新晋上将两年三履新 曾是‘打虎干将’刘源继任者,” *CCTV*, 3 November 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Staff Commentator, “Give prominence to safeguarding resolutely the core, this fundamental political requirement: Part 2 in a discussion on earnestly implementing the ‘Opinion on comprehensively deepening the implementation of the Central Military Commission Chairman’s Responsibility System’,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 7 November 2017, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> See James Mulvenon, “The Cult of Xi and the Rise of the CMC Chairman Responsibility System,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 55 (January 2018), accessed at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/cult-xi-and-rise-cmc-chairman-responsibility-system>; and James Mulvenon, “The Yuan Stops Here: Xi Jinping and the ‘CMC Chairman Responsibility System’,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 47 (July 2015), accessed at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/yuan-stops-here-xi-jinping-and-cmc-chairman-responsibility-system>.

<sup>24</sup> “Give prominence to safeguarding resolutely the core, this fundamental political requirement: Part 2,” p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “Comprehensively implement Xi Jinping Army Strengthening Thought, vigorously push forward the Army Strengthening cause in the new era—A message on the New Year’s Day,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 1 January 2018, pp. 1,3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “CMC launches inspection into implementation of Chairman Responsibility System,” Xinhua, 30 March 2018, accessed at <http://www.ecns.cn/2018/03-30/297592.shtml>.

<sup>29</sup> “Profile: Xi Jinping and his Era,” Xinhua, 17 November 2017, accessed at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/17/c\\_136758372.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/17/c_136758372.htm).

<sup>30</sup> Staff commentator, “Always on the road of tenaciously and persistently advancing in-depth the anticorruption struggle,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 29 November 2017, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> James Mulvenon, “‘Scraping Poison Off the Bone’: An Examination of the Campaign to ‘Eliminate the Baneful Influence of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou’,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 52 (February 2017), accessed at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/scraping-poison-bone-examination-campaign-eliminate-baneful-influence-guo-boxiong-and-xu>.

<sup>32</sup> Staff Commentator, “Resolutely rally around the CPC Central Committee’s correct decision,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 10 January 2018, p. 1.