

Xi Jinping and the Central Military Commission:

Bridesmaid or Bride?

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In the runup to the 18th Party Congress, speculation has been rife about the promotion schedule for purported heir apparent Xi Jinping. After he was not promoted to the vice-chairmanship of the Central Military Commission (CMC) at the Fourth Plenum of the 17th Party Congress in the fall of 2009, some analysts opined that his ascension was in jeopardy, since it was not following the exact pattern of his predecessor. But his appointment to the post at the Fifth Plenum has refocused attention on Hu Jintao's intentions to give up the CMC chairmanship at the 18th Congress. This article examines Xi Jinping's leadership run, and assesses the implications of the current situation for party-military relations.

Xi Jinping and the Road to the CMC

Prior to the Fourth Plenum of the 17th Party Congress in fall 2009, Xi Jinping had been serving as vice president of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Secretariat, making him the odds-on heir apparent to Hu Jintao when the latter retires his posts at the 18th Party Congress in 2012. As I explored in *CLM* 30 ("The Best Laid Plans: Xi Jinping and the CMC Vice-Chairmanship that Didn't Happen"), Xi was expected to be appointed vice-chair of the CMC at the Fourth Plenum, but it did not happen. His failure to be promoted potentially dealt a blow to the prevailing theory of leadership succession, which predicted that Xi would follow the pattern of promotion of Hu Jintao before the 16th Party Congress en route to assuming the trifecta of state, party, and military leadership positions at the 18th Party Congress in 2012.

To review, I explored in *CLM* 5 the process by which Jiang Zemin retained his chairmanship of the Central Military Commission at the 16th Party Congress meeting in 2002, while handing over the CCP general secretaryship and later the state presidency to Hu Jintao.¹ The negative repercussions of this move were highlighted in *CLM* 7, which documented an internal party dissatisfaction with "two centers" of leadership,² and *CLM* 8, which tracked Hu and Jiang's jockeying for power and influence during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Ming 361 crises.³ Throughout these events, Jiang clearly drew inspiration from Deng Xiaoping's precedents, beginning with his initial partial retirement. Recall that at the 13th Party Congress in 1987, confident of his preeminence in the system, Deng retired from all formal positions save one, the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission. His logic at the time was clear. Deng retained his position for two years, relinquishing his party CMC chairmanship at the Fifth

Plenary Session of the 13th Central Committee in November 1989 and his state CMC chairmanship at the Third Plenary Session of the Seventh National People's Congress in March 1990.⁴ Jiang used a similar rationale in 2002, citing the “complicated and ever-changing international situation” and the “heavy tasks of national defense and army building” as the reasons why the Central Committee “decided” that Jiang should retain chairmanship of the CMC until the Fourth Plenum of the 16th Congress in fall 2004.⁵

For outside observers, Xi's failure to make the step to the CMC at the Fourth Plenum was ascribed to a variety of factors, including (1) factional politics between Hu's “China Youth League faction,” Xi's “princelings group,” and perhaps even Jiang Zemin's allies;⁶ (2) a desire by the leadership to not be “distracted” from the important party-building work at the plenum;⁷ (3) the rise of more mature and sophisticated mechanisms for leadership succession involving “checks and balances” and reducing the need for a single “strongman”;⁸ or (4) Hu Jintao's intention to retain the CMC chairmanship after the 18th Congress in 2012 as Jiang and Deng had done before him.⁹

First Steps: Xi Jinping and the 17th Congress Fifth Plenum

Xi Jinping was finally appointed vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission at the conclusion of the four-day Fifth Plenum in October 2010.¹⁰ While the move itself was not a surprise, the announcement of Xi's promotion was accompanied by highly detailed biographical information, revealing previously unknown military service and *ex officio* connections to the PLA. In stark contrast to Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, both of whom were assessed to have weak ties to the PLA because of their lack of military service, Xi was a military officer in active service when he worked as a secretary at the General Office of the Central Military Commission from 1979 to 1982. Willy Lam asserts that Xi was actually a *mishu* to then-Defense Minister Geng Biao. While a minor position in terms of authority, Xi's job would have given him an excellent vantage point to view the workings of the PLA at the highest level, as well as the more mundane, day-to-day experience of serving as a low-level officer in the military. Both of these must be considered important formative experiences that will color Xi's future performance as CMC vice-chairman and eventually CMC chairman, if he gets to the final step.

Conclusion: Path to 2012?

Why was Xi Jinping appointed as CMC at the Fifth Plenum, and what does his elevation mean for the leadership transition at the 18th Congress in 2012 and for party-military relations in general?

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Table 1*Xi Jinping's Interlocking Political and Military Postings, 1983–2007*

<i>Years</i>	<i>Political Position</i>	<i>Military Position</i>
1983–85	First secretary, Zhengding County, Hebei Province party committee	First political commissar and first secretary of the Party committee of People's Armed Forces Department of Zhengding County, Hebei Province
1988–90	Secretary of the CPC Ningde Prefectural Committee, Fujian Province	First secretary of the Party committee of Ningde Sub-Military Area Command
1990–93	Secretary of the CPC Fuzhou Municipal Committee and chairman of the Standing Committee of the Fuzhou Municipal People's Congress	First secretary of the Party committee of Fuzhou Sub-Military Area Command
1995–96	Deputy secretary of the CPC Fujian Provincial Committee, secretary of the CPC Fuzhou Municipal Committee and chairman of the Standing Committee of the Fuzhou Municipal People's Congress	First secretary of the Party committee of Fuzhou Sub-Military Area Command
1996–99	Deputy secretary of the CPC Fujian Provincial Committee	First political commissar of the anti-aircraft artillery reserve division of Fujian Provincial Military Area Command
1999–2000	Deputy secretary of the CPC Fujian Provincial Committee and acting governor of Fujian Province	Vice director of commission for national defense mobilization of Nanjing Military Area Command, director of Fujian provincial commission for national defense mobilization, first political commissar of anti-aircraft artillery reserve division of Fujian Provincial Military Area Command
2000–02	Deputy secretary of the CPC Fujian Provincial Committee and governor of Fujian Province	Vice director of commission for national defense mobilization of Nanjing Military Area Command, director of Fujian provincial commission for national defense mobilization, first political commissar of anti-aircraft artillery reserve division of Fujian Provincial Military Area Command
2002	Deputy secretary of the CPC Zhejiang Provincial Committee and acting governor of Zhejiang Province	Vice director of commission for national defense mobilization of Nanjing Military Area Command, director of Zhejiang provincial commission for national defense mobilization
2002–03	Secretary of the CPC Zhejiang Provincial Committee and acting governor of Zhejiang Province	First secretary of the Party committee of Zhejiang Provincial Military Area Command, vice director of commission for national defense mobilization of Nanjing Military Area Command, director of Zhejiang provincial commission for national defense mobilization
2003–07	Secretary of the CPC Zhejiang Provincial Committee and chairman of the Standing Committee of the Zhejiang Provincial People's Congress	First secretary of the Party committee of Zhejiang Provincial Military Area Command
2007	Secretary of the CPC Shanghai Municipal Committee	First secretary of the Party committee of Shanghai Garrison

SOURCE: "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.

Right on schedule, some analysts have already overinterpreted the announcement, extrapolating well beyond the available facts.¹¹ Willy Lam prematurely speculated that the promotion “renders beyond doubt . . . the Fifth-Generation cadre’s status as heir-apparent to President and General Secretary Hu Jintao,” which ignores the tragic fate of so many previous “heir apparents” (Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, Hua Guofeng, Hu Yaobang, just to name a few) in the Chinese political system. More tenuously, Lam asserted that Xi’s appointment “could also augment the military establishment’s already formidable clout in foreign policy and other arenas,” since the move “will likely result in the PLA playing a more active role in national policy.” This grandiose conclusion was based on the fact that Xi spent three years in the late 1970s working as a minor functionary in the CMC General Office. Lam also quoted a Xi speech to local Zhejiang officials in 2007 about pooling civilian and military resources for defense mobilization, which was a standard speech theme for the occasion, as proof that “the PLA’s share of the nation’s economy and other resources will be augmented under Xi’s watch.”

Hyperbole aside, the data do support a range of more modest conclusions. Politically, Xi’s promotion does confirm that he is on track to be Hu Jintao’s heir in 2012, although two years is a long time in politics and a range of events could occur to derail his promotion. The “traditions” and “norms” emerging in the mechanisms for leadership succession bode well for his advancement, as do the significant lead times for the scripted requirements for preparation of the 18th Congress. At the very least, the events of the Fifth Plenum silence those analysts who speculated that Xi might be thrown overboard in favor of this or that factional candidate. At the same time, Xi’s promotion to CMC vice-chairman tells us nothing about whether Hu Jintao will give up the CMC chairmanship at the 18th Congress, or retain it for a decent interval as Jiang and Deng did. If anything, the “delay” in Xi’s appointment suggests the latter.

In terms of party-military relations, the newly revealed information about Xi’s background suggests that he may be an attractive leadership candidate for the military, since he actually has experience in their ranks and familiarity with military work at the highest level of the system. At the same time, familiarity sometimes breeds contempt, and the PLA may have gotten quite comfortable dealing with neophyte civilian leaders who did not have the experience or expertise to meddle in defense affairs. Barring any evidence of Xi’s actual attitudes about the PLA or its work, therefore, it is too soon to assess the implications of Xi’s appointment for the future of party-military relations.

Notes

¹ <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/6448>

² <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/6272>

³ <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/7569>

⁴ <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/article/6448>

⁵ “China Publishes Jiang Zemin’s Letter of Resignation,” Xinhua News Agency, 19 September 2004.

⁶ The factional argument, not surprisingly, is offered by Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “Xi Jinping Climbs the China Party Ladder,” *Asia Sentinel*, 25 September 2009.

⁷ “China party scholar hints at Xi Jinping promotion,” Reuters, 22 September 2009.

⁸ John Garnaut, “Chinese puzzle: who is Hu’s heir?” *The Age*, 21 September 2009.

⁹ See “China’s Xi Not Named to Party Military Commission,” *Bloomberg*, 19 September 2009.

¹⁰ “Xi Jinping appointed vice-chairman of Central Military Commission,” Xinhua, 18 October 2010, accessed at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-10/18/c_13563001.htm.

¹¹ Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “PLA Gains Clout: Xi Jinping Elevated to CMC Vice-Chairman,” *China Brief*, Vol. 10, Issue 21, 22 October 2010.