

Military Themes from the 2013 National People's Congress

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The first plenary session of the 12th National People's Congress, convened in March 2013, was attended by a large delegation of Chinese military deputies, who put forward legislative proposals, listened to government speeches, and met to discuss national military and security issues. This article highlights key military themes from the congress sessions, in particular the role of the PLA in Central Military Commission Chairman Xi Jinping's vision of the "China dream" and Xi's three-part "instructions" to the PLA for the coming year.

Introduction

The Chinese military invaded the 12th National People's Congress in force, bringing a delegation of 268 deputies from the active-duty forces and the People's Armed Police.¹ Among the demographic highlights, 29.1 percent of the deputies were "grassroots officers and specialized technology cadres," 10.8 percent were female (half the sky?), 18 were ethnic minorities, 51 were re-elected deputies from previous NPCs, 248 had university or higher education credentials, and the average age was 53.1 years old.² The delegation was officially formed on 3 March, with Central Military Commission Vice-Chairman Fan Chenlong as the head of delegation and CMC Vice-Chairman Xi Qiliang and General Political Department Director Zhang Yang serving as deputy heads.³

The military deputies met in their own plenary session on 7 March, studying Premier Wen Jiabao's government work report and discussing ideas related to defense and national security development.⁴ This first military plenary session was chaired by Xu Qiliang, and was attended by all members of the Central Military Commission as well as leading cadres from the four general departments.⁵ After each CMC member was given an opportunity to find increasingly elaborate superlatives to describe the report and its insights,⁶ the delegates highlighted two relevant military-related passages from the government work report,⁷ one summarizing the previous year's achievements and the other calling out objectives for the coming year:

New progress was made in strengthening national defense and the armed forces. Major achievements were made in the revolution in military affairs with Chinese characteristics. The armed forces made coordinated and all-around progress in becoming more revolutionary, modernized and procedure-based. They deepened their military preparedness, greatly enhanced their ability to carry out their historic mission in the new stage in the new century, and accomplished a number of urgent, difficult, and hazardous tasks.⁸

We should accelerate modernization of national defense and the armed

forces so as to strengthen China's defense and military capabilities. We should resolutely uphold China's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity and ensure its peaceful development.⁹

Interestingly, top leaders from civilian organizations, including the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), the Ministry of Finance (MOF) and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MHRSS) also attended, and "listened to the opinions and suggestions given by the PLA deputies."¹⁰

The PLA delegation held its second plenary session on 9 March, reviewing the legislative proposals from the 11th National People's Congress and receiving briefings on the content of legislative proposals by 15 military deputies.¹¹ Zhang Yang chaired the session.¹² Among the 11th NPC proposals under review were:

- The Law of the People's Republic of China on the People's Armed Police Force (formulated in 2009), which provides explicit legal basis for the People's Armed Police Force to carry out security tasks.
- The National Defense Mobilization Law of the People's Republic of China, which was formulated in 2010 and fills in the gap in the field of China's national defense mobilization.
- The Reserve Officers Law of the People's Republic of China, which was revised in 2010 and provides more legal support for the construction of national defense reserve force.
- The Servicemen's Insurance Law of the People's Republic of China, which was formulated in 2011.
- The Military Service Law was revised in 2012, which adjusted the basic system of military service.
- The Measures of the Chinese People's Liberation Army on Selecting Deputies to the National People's Congress and Various Levels of People's Congress above County Level, which was revised in 2012 and guaranteed rights for participating in national political activities and democratic elections by law.¹³

A number of military laws were submitted to the 12th National People's Congress and its standing committee for deliberation, including a revised Law on the Protection of Military Installations¹⁴ and a proposed revision to the Civil Air Defense law.¹⁵ In addition, PLA delegates offered public opinions on topics ranging from "strengthening construction and sovereignty protection in the South China Sea"¹⁶ to establishment of a "national oceanic commission," to the proper size of the defense budget.¹⁷

Military Themes from the 12th NPC

*Overall Tifa: "Building People's Armed Forces Capable of Carrying Out Orders From CPC; Fighting, Winning Wars; Demonstrating Fine Style of Work"*¹⁸

In his speeches and presentations to the military delegates to the NPC, Xi Jinping outlined a set of "instructions" to the PLA, telling them that the "the party's goal of

strengthening the military under the new situation” required “building a military force of the people that obeys the party’s command, is able to fight victorious battles, and has a good style.” This three-part mantra is now the operative slogan for the PLA in the Xi period. He went on to elaborate the relationship of the pieces of this ideological triptych to one another:

Obeying the party’s command is the soul, which determines the political direction of force building; being able to fight victorious battles is the core, which represents the fundamental function of the armed forces and the fundamental direction of force building; having a good style is the guarantee, which concerns the character, the cardinal principle, and the inherent qualities of our armed forces.

In order to place these ideas in context, Xi compared them with previous *tifa*, though making sure to describe Mao, Deng, Jiang, and Hu’s slogans as “thinking” (*sixiang*; 思想), which is at the top of the ideological pyramid, especially when compared with his mere “instructions” (*biaoshi*; 指示).¹⁹

Chairman Mao led the formulation of a general guideline for building an excellent modernized revolutionary army. Chairman Deng came up with the general principle of building a strong modernized, regularized, revolutionary army. Chairman Jiang set forth the “five phrase” general requirement of “being up-to-standard politically, being powerful militarily, having a good style, having a strict sense of discipline, and providing potent support.” Chairman Hu summed up our military’s fine tradition of obeying the party’s command, serving the people, being brave and skillful in fighting.²⁰

Xi spent a significant amount of time describing Hu Jintao’s contributions, a politically deft move so soon after the leadership transition:

Comrade Hu Jintao scientifically determined the historical position of our military’s building, accurately grasped the characteristics of national defense and armed forces building at the current stage, coordinated economic development and national defense building from the high plane of the overall interest of the national security and development strategy, came up with a series of new thoughts, new viewpoints, and new theses that are closely correlated, shaped the party’s thinking on national defense and armed forces building under the new situation, that is, Hu Jintao’s thinking on national defense and armed forces building. This important military guiding theory scientifically answers the important question of promoting the scientific development of national defense and armed forces building and comprehensively performing our military’s historical missions at the new stage in the new century under the historical condition marked by the world’s great development, great transformation, great adjustment and by our nation’s comprehensive building of a well-off

society, and thus opened up a new realm of innovative development in our party's military guiding theory. Hu Jintao's thinking on national defense and armed forces building, as an important component part of the scientific development concept, is the concrete implementation and unfolding of the scientific development concept in the military domain, is the extension and development of Mao Zedong's military thinking, Deng Xiaoping's thinking on armed forces building in the new period, and Jiang Zemin's thinking on national defense and armed forces building, is the scientific guideline for pushing forward national defense and armed forces building under the new situation.²¹

At the same time, it would be a mistake to see this pro forma nod to Hu Jintao as anything more than a formalistic declaration, or *biaotai*, since Xi is moving quickly to put his own unique stamp on the PLA.

In addition to the three-part "instruction," Xi offered other predictable guidance to the military, calling on them to (1) "resolutely defend the state's sovereignty, security, and develop interests; (2) firmly protect the security of the people's lives and property; and (3) struggle for realizing the dreams of building a strong nation and a strong army."²² To this end, Xi reiterated that it is necessary to "coordinate economic development and national defense building," with the goal of "enriching the nation and strengthening the military," both of which are usually viewed as code phrases for balanced economic and military development.²³ In a related message, he emphasized his predecessor's call for "civil-military integration," which is designed to promote a two-way, dual-use relationship between economic modernization and military modernization.²⁴

Theme: The PLA's Role in the "China Dream"

Before analyzing each of the three parts of Xi's instructions, it is first necessary to place them in ideological context. The most important internal and external theme of all of Xi's speeches at the NPC is his call for the achievement of the "China dream," which is a part-historical, part-aspirational vision and mission statement for the "great revival" of the Chinese state and its people.²⁵ In his speech to PLA delegates, Xi made it clear that the military had a central role to play in the realization of the "China dream." According to a General Political Department circular disseminated later to the troops analyzing Xi's comments,

it is necessary to deeply understand the important status and role of national defense and armed forces building in the fulfillment of the "China dream", fully and clearly realize the opportunity and the challenges that our country's security and development is facing, keep a stronger sense of mission and responsibility for more quickly pushing forward the process of national defense and military modernization, provide strong power guarantee for the fulfillment of the "China dream" by doing down-to-earth work, stepping up efforts, and quickening progress.²⁶

Indeed, given internal and external threats to China's rise, the PLA must "provide a powerful guarantee for realizing the 'Chinese dream'," primarily by opposing "hegemonism and power politics" and promoting "global peace and stability."²⁸ To this end, the "China dream" becomes "a grand blueprint for armed forces building under the new historical conditions."²⁹

Instruction, Part One: Army Loyalty

The first part of Xi's instruction reiterates the historic call for the PLA to be "absolutely loyal" to the party,³⁰ and to "maintain their purity and reliability."³¹ This is certainly not a new theme, but a hardy perennial whose renewed importance is symbolized in its position as the "prime directive" in the instruction. The military propaganda apparatus has sought to distinguish Xi's guidance on this issue from prior leaders, arguing:

Comrades Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Hu Jintao altogether made a series of important expositions on persisting with absolute leadership of the party over the military. In the new historical conditions, Chairman Xi is keeping an eye on realizing the mighty dream of a strong country and a strong military, requiring the military to resolutely obey the party's command, and giving this prominence by raising it to the heights of being the soul of a strong military.³²

The PLA's propaganda apparatus asserts that this goal is threatened by three campaigns by "antagonistic forces," including "de-party-ization" (*jundui feidanghua*; 军队非党化), "de-politicization" (*feizhengzhihua*; 非政治化) and "military nationalization" (*jundui guojiahua*; 军队国家化).³³ In response, Xi calls for the military to adhere to "three absolutes": absolute loyalty, absolute purity, and absolute reliability.³⁴ Xi defines "absolute loyalty" as "resolutely obeying the party's command." "Absolute purity" requires the military to "resolutely resist the corrosive influence of various kinds of erroneous thinking and decadent culture," even in the face of "cultural infiltration," presumably from hostile foreign forces.³⁵ Finally, "absolute reliability" calls on the PLA to "resolutely execute the orders of the Party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Xi in any situation at any time, never waver in the face of difficulties, and stand steady in the face of the cardinal questions of right and wrong."³⁶

Instruction, Part Two: "Being Able to Fight and Win"

The second panel of Xi's ideological triptych calls for the PLA to not only "fight" but "win" wars, which has been a standard mantra since the Jiang era in military guidance. The key difference is perhaps the emphasis on "full military readiness" rather than the traditional focus on longer-term defense mobilization and defensive action.³⁷ According to Xi:

It is necessary to tightly grasp the key to military strengthening, that is, being able to fight and win battles. Strengthen the notion of being ready to fight as service personnel, being ready to command the troops to fight, and training the troops for fighting, firmly establish the combat power standard

as the sole and fundamental standard, direct force building and military readiness according to the war fighting requirement, *guarantee that the forces can take action instantly at the first call and are able to fight and win battles for sure* [emphasis added].³⁸

Xi's call for high levels of military readiness is particularly relevant to the current security situation, especially given the potential for rapid escalation of the current crises in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and the North Korean border.

Instruction, Part Three: "Fine Work Style" (AKA Anti-Corruption)

Perhaps the most interesting and consequential of the triplet is Xi's invocation of a "fine work style," which is a code phrase for the current anti-corruption campaign within the military and the party in general. Xi rightly views corruption as an existential crisis for the Chinese leadership, and is keenly aware of the damage that corruption has wreaked upon the party and military's reputation. In his speech to the entire congress, Xi declared "we must resolutely reject formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism and extravagance, and resolutely fight against corruption and other misconduct in all manifestations."³⁹ Moreover, he points out the practical concern that "the forces should uphold frugality and oppose extravagance and waste, so as to make full use of military spending."⁴⁰ The prescribed antidote, however, is long on moral exhortation and short on carrots and sticks, and is eerily reminiscent of the Confucian campaigns during the Hu Jintao period:

Persist in doing hard work in difficult conditions, oppose waste and extravagance, firmly keep to the idea about practicing frugality, diligently and frugally do everything, prevent extravagant, wasteful, overspending practice. Persist in seeking truth and being pragmatic, opposing formalistic practice, tell the truth, submit reports about true facts, strive to produce actual effects. Persist in being upright and incorrupt, oppose the misbehavior of seeking private gain through power, appropriately use the power of managing and use money and materials.

In execution, Xi calls for the system to cleanse itself from the top down:

Leading organs in the armed forces should take the lead in straightening out their behavior before requiring subordinates to do the same, strict demands should be first set for officers before the same demands be set for rank-and-file personnel. Superiors should guide subordinates through their decent words and deeds, and should truly direct rectifications.⁴¹

Thus, we are introduced to Xi's notion of "tigers" and "flies," which is the current slang for high-ranking and low-ranking malfeasance, respectively.⁴² Recalling *CLM* 37 and the Gu Junshan case, Xi does give some hint of the main target, warning to "never let off anyone and anything related to corruption cases, never allow corrupt officers to hide in the armed forces, especially in military logistics."⁴³

Conclusion

CLM 40 asserted that Xi Jinping's rapid elevation to CMC chairman could be partially explained by his revolutionary heritage, his prior experience as a uniformed *mishu* to Defense Minister Geng Biao, and his deep familial and personal connections to senior PLA princelings, all of which gave him a greater affinity for the Chinese military than his predecessor, Hu Jintao. Extrapolating from these advantages, it was possible that Xi would get off to a fast start in his leadership of the military, quickly putting his stamp on the institution and making deep, meaningful changes. While the 12th National People's Congress is still an early signpost in the Xi era, the new leader appears to be building on previous themes but adding distinguishing features of his own, especially with respect to anti-corruption.

Notes

¹ Chen Xiaojing, "PLA Produces Through Elections 268 National People's Congress Deputies With the Structure of Deputies Further Optimized," *Liberation Army Daily*, 1 March 2013, p.1.

² *Ibid.*

³ An Puzhong and Yin Hang, "PLA Delegation to First Session of 12th NPC Formed," *Liberation Army Daily*, 4 March 2013.

⁴ An Puzhong and Yin Hang, "PLA Delegation Holds First Plenary Session," *Liberation Army Daily*, 8 March 2013.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Cao Zhi and Li Xuanliang, "PLA Delegates Talk About Accelerating the Modernization of National Defense and the Armed Forces and Fulfilling Various Tasks Given by the Party and the People When Reviewing the Government Work Report," *Liberation Army Daily*, 6 March 2013.

⁷ Li Jianwen and Ma Yuezhou, "Government Work Report Stresses Building Consolidated National Defense and Powerful Armed Forces," *Liberation Army Daily*, 6 March 2013.

⁸ "Full Text: Report on the Work of the Government," *Xinhua*, 18 March 2013.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ An Puzhong and Yin Hang, "PLA Delegation Holds First Plenary Session."

¹¹ An Puzhong and Yin Hang, "PLA Delegation To NPC Holds 2nd Plenary Session," *Liberation Army Daily*, 11 March 2013.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Chen Chuangdong and Chen Xiaojing, "Military Legislation Makes Remarkable Achievements During Term of Office of 11th Standing Committee of NPC," *Liberation Army Daily*, 11 March 2013.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ "PLA Deputies to NPC Call for Revision of Civil Air Defense Law," *Liberation Army Daily*, 13 March 2013.

¹⁶ Yin Hang, "PLA Deputy To NPC Suggests Strengthening Construction and Sovereignty Protection Efforts in South China Sea," *Liberation Army Daily*, 7 March 2013.

¹⁷ Luo Zheng, "Suits Economic Development and Conforms to National Defense Needs—Chen Zhou, Armed Forces National People's Congress Deputy and Research Fellow at Military Strategic Research Department of Academy of Military Sciences, on 2013 National Defense Budget," *Liberation Army Daily*, 6 March 2013, p. 5.

¹⁸ "Soldiers Should Have the 'Spirit of Tigers, Wolves'," *Liberation Army Daily*, 21 March 2013.

¹⁹ Commentator, "Deeply Study and Implement Hu Jintao's Thinking on National Defense and Military Construction, Study and Implement Chairman Xi's Important Comments at the PLA Delegate Plenary Conference," *Liberation Army Daily*, 21 March 2013.

²⁰ Commentator, "Firmly Adhere to the Party's Goal of Strengthening the Military Under the New Situation—First Talk on Studying and Implementing Chairman Xi's Important Speech at the Plenary Meeting of the PLA Delegation to the NPC Session," *Liberation Army Daily*, 19 March 2013.

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- ²¹ Commentator, “Deeply Study and Implement Hu Jintao’s Thinking on National Defense and Military Construction.”
- ²² Editorial, “Courageously Advance in the Direction of Reaching the Objective of Building a Great and Strong Army—Warmly Congratulate the Closing of the First Session of the 12th National People’s Congress and the First Session of the 12th Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 18 March 2013.
- ²³ Cao Zhi, Li Xuanliang, “Xi Jinping Attends the Plenary Meeting of the PLA Delegation to the First Session of the 12th NPC, Emphasizes Firmly Grasping the Party’s Goal of Military Strengthening Under the New Situation, Striving to Build a Military Force of the People That Obeys the Party’s Orders, Is Able to Win Battles, and Has a Good Style; Fan Changlong Presides Over the Meeting; Xu Qiliang, Chang Wanquan, Fang Fenghui, Zhang Yang, Zhao Keshi, Zhang Youxia, Wu Shengli, Ma Xiaotian, Wei Fenghe Attend the Meeting,” *Xinhua*, 11 March 2013.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Commentator, “Firmly Adhere to the Party’s Goal of Strengthening the Military Under the New Situation.”
- ²⁶ “PLA General Political Department Issues a Circular, Requiring All PLA and Armed Police Units Seriously Study and Implement Chairman Xi’s Important Speech at the Plenary Meeting of the PLA Delegation to the First Session of the 12th NPC,” *Xinhua*, 12 March 2013.
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- ²⁸ Peng Yining, “Realizing the ‘China Dream’,” *China Daily Online*, 5 March 2013.
- ²⁹ Zhu Fuxi, “Deeply Implement the Spirit of the 18th CPC National Congress and Chairman Xi’s Decisions and Directives, Promote the Development of All-around Force Building in This Military Region From a New Starting Point,” *Zhanqi Bao*, January 2013, p.1.
- ³⁰ “Xi Urges Armed Forces’ Loyalty, Discipline,” *Xinhua*, 11 March 2013.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² “Firmly Remembering to Resolutely Obey the Party’s Command is the Soul of a Strong Military,” *Qiushi*, 1 February 2013.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ “Xi Urges Armed Forces’ Loyalty, Discipline,” *Xinhua*, 11 March 2013.
- ³⁸ Cao Zhi, Li Xuanliang, “Xi Jinping Attends the Plenary Meeting of the PLA Delegation to the First Session of the 12th NPC.”
- ³⁹ “President Xi Pledges Resolute Fight Against Corruption,” *Xinhua*, 17 March 2013.
- ⁴⁰ PLA General Logistics Department, “Consolidate the Foundation for Military Strengthening, Promote the Development of Military Logistics Building,” *Qiushi*, 18 March 2013, No. 6.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*