

“Comrade, Where’s My Military Car?” Xi Jinping’s Throwback Mass-Line Campaign to Curb PLA Corruption

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Since the 18th Party Congress in late 2012, CMC Chairman and CCP supremo Xi Jinping has sought to aggressively confront PLA corruption using classic Mao-era methods, including “mass-line educational campaigns” designed to “rectify work style” through criticism and self-criticism. These organizational techniques, combined with discipline inspections and control of the personnel promotion system, allow Xi to quickly place his stamp upon the PLA, though they will not likely root out the deep structural causes of military corruption in the system.

Introduction

Arguably the most important issue in party-military relations under new supremo Xi Jinping is the latter’s committed attack on the endemic corruption within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). This corruption takes many forms, ranging from the illegal sale of military property and assets by officers in the General Logistics Department (GLD) to the reportedly widespread practice of bribes and gifts in the personnel promotion system. While there have been a number of high-profile arrests in the recent years, most notably GLD Deputy Director Gu Junshan (see *CLM* 34), prosecution and punishment of military personnel has been neither systematic nor consistent with the alleged scope and scale of the phenomenon.

At the strategic ideological level, Xi’s attention to military corruption is clearly expressed in the first and the third element of his promulgated “important thinking on the goal of military strengthening under the new situation” (新形势下的强军目标重要思想): “build the people’s army that obeys the party’s orders [听党指挥], is able to fight victorious battles [能打胜仗], and keeps a good work style [作风优良].”¹ Wang Shibin’s *Liberation Army Daily* piece sums up the propaganda coverage on the latter when he insists that the PLA fight the “four evil practices” (“formalism [形式主义], bureaucracy [官僚主义], hedonism [享乐主义], and extravagance [奢靡之风]).”² Finally, the General Political Department in its 1 August Army Day editorial calls for the PLA to “resolutely eliminate...hedonist and extravagant practices,” and “effectively solve the prominent problems that have evoked strong resentments among the troops”³

The CMC’s “10 Regulations”

Operationally, the anti-corruption campaign has been fleshed out in the “Central Military Commission’s 10 Regulations on Strengthening Work Style Construction” (中央军委加强自身作风建设十项规定), published in December 2012.⁴ This order is the

military equivalent of the Central Committee's "eight rules"

(十八届中央政治局关于改进工作作风、密切联系群众的八项规定), published around the same time.

Among the rules, the following seem most relevant to the campaign:

- Rule 2: Reduce the size, frequency and length of meetings; reduce the length of speeches at those meetings ("meeting wind"); and scale back the extravagance of the venues, accommodations, and meals.
- Rule 3: Reduce participation in extraneous activities, including celebrations, commemorations, seminars, premieres, awards, unveilings, and other activities; do not send congratulatory letters, telegrams, inscriptions.
- Rule 4: Streamline documents, telegrams, publications, presentations, policies, and regulations; reduce the type and length of internal presentations and publications.
- Rule 5: Reduce the number of unit visits and tours, reduce the size of entourages, use public transport, and do not accept gifts from local officials.
- Rule 6: Reduce the number of security personnel and hangers-on, and reduce the use of police escorts with lights and sirens.
- Rule 9: Reduce the extravagance of receptions by not hanging slogan banners or bunting, building visitor stands, ordering honor guards, laying red carpets, buying flowers, or arranging theatrical performances, dinners, drinks, guest houses, or gifts.
- Rule 10: CMC comrades should strictly adhere to standards for housing and transport, manage the activities of family members, refuse gifts, make personnel decisions on the merits, not use influence on behalf of others, avoid currying favors with officials, and not interfere with the legal management of budgets, contracts, or military assets.

The other rules either repeated the goals of the overall campaigns or called for efficiencies in internal paper flows.

PLA License Plates

In late April 2013, the PLA announced that it was replacing its vehicle license plate system, in order to "crack down on the creation, sale and use of counterfeit military vehicle plates and root out loopholes in military vehicle management, so as to maintain social harmony, stability and the reputation of the military."⁵ Abuse of military plates had become endemic, which is not surprising given the benefits of driving a vehicle with military plates on China's helter-skelter roadways. Under the previous system, cars with PLA plates were "exempted from paying vehicle and vessel tax and highway tolls" as well as from "inspection and parking regulations."⁶ As a result of these privileges, "the confiscated vehicles had evaded tax of up to 1 billion yuan (\$162 million) a year."⁷ Just as Chinese netizens had begun posting pictures of officials wearing impossibly expensive Rolexes, some weibo users had started uploading photos of limousines and other obviously non-military vehicles adorned with military plates, and the "human flesh search engines" were beginning to connect the cars to their illicit owners. In response, PLA officials declared that they were going to fix the problem, and explicitly argued that the new policy is about more than just replacing license plates. According to Xinhua, "it is intended to reduce abuses of power and the neglect of duty, as well as improve public

trust in the military and maintain social harmony. The military must tackle corruption on wheels before it can improve its ability to safeguard the country.”⁸

It must be noted that this was not the first time the PLA sought to curb misuse of their vehicle tags, which had been ritually abused since the go-go days of PLA, Inc. in the 1980s, but the tag system itself had not been inventoried and rectified since 2004.⁹ Under the new rules, new plates would be reissued, but also entire categories of vehicle would be banned from hanging the plates at all, including “luxury cars, private vehicles, local government vehicles and vehicles for local officials who hold concurrent positions in the PLA or the armed police forces.”¹⁰ The regulations even went so far as to call out specific parameters (any car with an engine larger than 3.0 liters and priced over RMB450,000 or \$72,990), as well as specific brands (Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Lincoln, Cadillac, Volkswagen Phaeton, Bentley, Jaguar, Porsche) and SUVs, including Land Rovers, the Porsche Cayenne, and the Audi Q7).¹¹ The tags themselves reportedly employ six anti-counterfeit technologies, including optical anti-counterfeit and fluorescent anti-counterfeit mechanisms, to prevent the misuse of license plates. In addition, “anti-counterfeit electronic technologies are also being used at toll booths to spot vehicles with fake military license plates.”¹² Finally, the PLA is explicitly calling on the public to help enforce the regulations, encouraging Internet users to “supervise the use of the plates and expose their misuse.”¹³ Almost immediately, the PLA began to reap what it sowed. Within days of the terminal date for the old system, a photo circulating on Sina Weibo showed a black Audi Q7 SUV in Guangzhou bearing military license plates. The blogger who posted the picture expressed his (possibly feigned) outrage:

“The driver was a 20-something-year-old guy wearing military uniform. They made such a dramatic announcement [of the ban], but in the end it is all just talk!”

The *South China Morning Post* also reported that “photos of at least two Volkswagen Touareg SUVs in Beijing caught flouting the new rule were circulating on the blogosphere the following week. The starting price for a Touareg—including tax—ranges between 645,000 yuan for a basic model and 1.1 million yuan for one with more advanced specifications.”¹⁴

The July 2013 Central Military Commission “Democratic Life” Meeting

Perhaps to make sure that senior PLA officials had “skin in the game,” the CMC held a “democratic life” meeting on the mass line education campaign from 7–8 July 2013.¹⁵ As reported in *Liberation Army Daily*, CMC officials prepared for the meeting by studying “important expositions on upholding the mass line made by Comrades Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao” and studying General Political Department compilations on the entire army’s implementation of the spirit of the party Central Committee’s “eight rules” and implementation of the CMC’s “10 regulations.” The CMC General Office also prepared views and suggestions from the four general departments and various major units regarding the CMC’s improvement of its work style.¹⁶ Acknowledging that any rectification of work style must be “top-down” and “must begin

with the CMC,”¹⁷ PLA leaders then spent the remaining time engaging in vigorous criticism and self-criticism in the spirit of

‘looking in the mirror, straightening their attire, taking a bath, and treating their ailments,’ courageously going under the knives themselves, courageously cutting away their own carrion, and courageously undergoing painful treatments, so as to achieve concrete results in resolving problems and spurring work.¹⁸

To make the lesson stick, Xi also ordered PLA and PAP leaders at the regimental level and above to live and train as common soldiers at the company level at least for 15 days at least every one to five years (depending on rank) in a recent “mass line” campaign to promote morality and improve work methods.¹⁹

Conclusion

“The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.”

Even though Xi Jinping and the senior CMC leaders are avowed atheists, they would no doubt grudgingly recognize the wisdom of that aphorism, if only because they have been down this road before with little to show for it. The PLA has conducted many anti-corruption campaigns over the years, and failed each time to root out the structural causes of malfeasance. That is not to say that the phenomenon has stayed constant over time. PLA corruption before divestiture of PLA, Inc. in 1998 was much more naked and unashamed, and the highly contentious removal of the military from formal commercial business simply drove the activity further underground and narrowed its scope to assets (e.g., land, equipment, promotions) that were directly within reach of officers and their dependents. This fight is just as difficult but for different reasons, including the growing confidence and institutional power of the military, the lack of credible independent legal institutions, but most important, the lack of any moral high ground for the CCP to demand such purity from their military vanguard. Xi and the other central leaders have been able to sate the public desire thus far by letting the public expose corrupt local officials, but it is not at all clear how you prevent the gangrene from spreading from the extremities to the brain. Yet, as the prospect of conflict against advanced adversaries becomes more and more real, the institution can no longer afford to countenance the corrosive effect of corruption upon its professionalism and esprit de corps. To fight and die together, troops must believe that they are brothers and sisters, united by common bonds and motivated by a single purpose, not riven by conflicts of interest and the amoral promises of financial gain. While outside observers make assertions about Xi Jinping’s priorities for the economy or foreign policy, his true test is this fight against party and military corruption, because continued metastasis of this cancer will render all other governance goals and achievements impossible.

Notes

¹ Fan Changlong, “Strive to Build the People’s Army That Obeys the Party’s Orders, Is Able to Fight Victorious Battles, Keeps a Good Style—Study and Implement the Chairman Xi’s Important Thinking on the Party’s Strong Army Goal Under the New Situation,” *Qiushi*, 1 August 2013, No.15.

² Wang Shibin, “The CMC Holds a Thematic Democratic-Life Meeting, Examines Implementation of the Central Committee’s Rules and the CMC’s Rules on Work-Style Building by Making Comparisons, and Studies and Proposes Measures for Further Stepping Up Work-Style Building,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 9 July 2013, p.1.

³ “March Forward With Giant Strides Along the Course of Fulfilling the Goal of Strengthening the Military Forces,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 1 August 2013, p.1.

⁴ The CMC circular on the “10 regulations” can be found here: “On Strengthening One’s Own Work Style,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 22 December 2013.

⁵ “Military Starts License Plate Revamp To Curb Misuse,” Xinhua, 28 April 2013.

⁶ Wu Peng and Liu Zhengmao, “Misuse of License Plates Must Stop,” *China Daily*, 2 May 2013.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ “China Voice: New Military Plates Part of Anti-Corruption Drive,” Xinhua, 28 April 2013.

⁹ “Military Starts License Plate Revamp To Curb Misuse,” Xinhua, 28 April 2013.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Wu Peng and Liu Zhengmao, “Misuse of License Plates Must Stop,” *China Daily*, 2 May 2013.

¹³ “China Voice: New Military Plates Part of Anti-Corruption Drive,” Xinhua, 28 April 2013.

¹⁴ Ernest Kao, “Vehicles Bearing Military Plates Spotted After Ban,” *South China Morning Post*, 2 May 2013.

¹⁵ Wang Shibin, “The CMC Holds a Thematic Democratic-Life Meeting, Examines Implementation of the Central Committee’s Rules and the CMC’s Rules on Work-Style Building by Making Comparisons, and Studies and Proposes Measures for Further Stepping Up Work-Style Building,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 9 July 2013, p.1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ “PLA General Political Department Issue Circular on Seriously Implementing Xi Jinping’s Important Instruction on Cadres Going Down to Companies and Performing Duties As Enlisted Personnel,” Xinhua, 22 July 2013.