

Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 605
JANUARY 2023



CCP's 20th Congress: Xi's Return and Implications for the People's Liberation Army

Amrita Jash

Abstract

The quinquennial National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is typically the venue for political leadership changes and any restructuring of the country's military apparatus. However, the 20th CCP Congress in October 2022 saw Chinese President Xi Jinping consolidate his control over the state and military. This brief seeks to understand what Xi's third term as CCP chief and Central Military Commission chair will mean for the Chinese armed forces.

At the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), held on 16-22 October 2022, President Xi Jinping began a third term as general secretary of the CCP and chair of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Days later, on 8 November, Xi, as commander-in-chief, inspected the Joint Operations Command Centre of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and issued his first set of instructions for the PLA: to thoroughly study, publicise, and implement the guiding principles of the 20th CCP Congress, and take concrete actions to modernise national defence and the military further; and to implement the CCP's thinking on strengthening the military for the new era, follow military strategy for the new era, and adhere to combat effectiveness as the sole criterion.¹ These categorical instructions highlight the two key expectations from the PLA—complete 'loyalty' to the CCP and fulfilling the party's goal of building a 'strong military in the new era'.

With an increased emphasis on political work for the armed forces, Xi's focus has been on ensuring the PLA's loyalty to the CCP and, more specifically, towards him as commander. For instance, in 2015, an editorial in the *People's Liberation Army Daily* stated that the PLA should “accomplish resolutely responding to the call sent out by Chairman Xi, resolutely executing the requirements put forth by Chairman Xi, and resolutely completing the tasks bestowed upon them by Chairman Xi.”²

Since first coming to power, Xi prepared the trajectory to and secured his position in the run-up to the 20th CCP Congress by following Mao Zedong's dictum that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun”, and by enforcing a greater degree of personalised command over the PLA.

Xi's Consolidation of Power

Since coming to power in 2012, Xi has strengthening his control over the PLA by enforcing the ‘CMC chairman responsibility system’^a as a central element of military reforms. Although the system has been in place since 1982, Xi enshrined it into the CCP’s constitution at the 19th CCP Congress, stipulating that the CMC chair will provide “overall direction” for the commission’s work, will command the military, and make decisions on the major issues regarding national defence and the armed forces.³ Xi centralised this control in a systemic manner. First came the gradual accumulation of power by taking over as chair of the CMC in November 2012, as president of China in March 2013, as the first-ever commander-in-chief of the Joint Battle Command of the PLA in April 2016, and as chairperson of the newly formed Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development in January 2017.

Next, Xi’s personalised control over the PLA was further accentuated by recentralising power under the CMC, as the four general departments (staff, political affairs, logistics and armaments) and seven military regions^b had too much authority and autonomy to run PLA affairs. In 2015, Xi overhauled the structure of the military by abolishing the four general departments and replacing them with 15 new agencies, which included seven departments, three commissions, and five offices.^c Furthermore, in 2017, the CCP’s constitution was amended to clarify that the “chairperson of the CMC assumes overall responsibility for the work of the commission and that the CMC is responsible for Party activity and political work in the armed forces.”⁴

-
- a In the past, the system was somewhat defined as the ‘CMC vice-chairman responsibility system’ since, especially under Hu Jintao, senior military leaders such as former deputy CMC chairs Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, largely making the position of CMC chair that of nominal commander-in-chief. Xi Jinping has recentralised control of the CMC by enforcing the ‘CMC chairman responsibility system’.
- b Shenyang military region (Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang), Beijing military region (Hebei, Shanxi, and Inner Mongolia), Lanzhou military region (Gansu, Shaanxi, Xinjiang), Jinan military region (Shandong and Henan), Nanjing military region (Zhejiang, Anhui, Fujian, and Jiangxi), Guangzhou military region (Guangdong, Guangxi, Hunan, Hubei, and Hainan), and Chengdu military region (Yunnan, Xizang, Guizhou, and Sichuan).
- c The seven departments are the CMC General Office, Joint Staff Department, Political Work Department, Logistic Support Department, Equipment Development Department, Training and Administrative Department, and the National Defense Mobilization Department. The three commissions are the Discipline Inspection Commission, Politics and Law Commission, and Science and Technology Commission. The five offices are the Office for Strategic Planning, Office for Reform and Organizational Structure, Office for International Military Cooperation, Audit Office, and Agency for Offices Administration.

Xi's Consolidation of Power

Third, apart from the organisational restructuring of the armed forces, Xi entrenched his authority over the PLA by purging military personnel accused of corruption. For instance, he expelled Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, both former vice-chairs of the CMC; General Fang Fenghui, the former chief of joint staff of the Guangzhou Military Area Command; and General Zhang Yang, the former head of the CMC's Political Work Department.

Fourth, Xi centralised his authority by taking steps such as downsizing troops (from 2.3 million to two million); transforming the seven military regions into five theatre commands,^d bringing the civilian-oriented frontier defence troops under military command from the People's Armed Police; integrating China's coast guard into the CMC chain of command; and rapidly promoting young guards⁵ over senior officers in the Chinese military.⁶

Lastly, Xi has solidified his overall status and enforced loyalty towards himself based on two political formulations—the 'Two Safeguards' and 'Two Establishes'. The Two Safeguards, introduced in 2018, state that the CCP must "safeguard General Secretary Xi Jinping's position as the core of the CCP Central Committee and the core of the whole Party" and "safeguard the CCP Central Committee's authority and centralized, unified leadership".⁷ The Two Establishes entail the party's measures that has "established Comrade Xi Jinping's status as the core of the CCP Central Committee and the core of the whole Party" and "established the guiding role of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era".⁸

With these steps, Xi has gained complete control of the armed forces, and his ability to push reforms demonstrates his power over the PLA and the CCP.

^d The Eastern Theatre Command, Western Theatre Command, Southern Theatre Command, Northern Theatre Command, and Central Theatre Command.

Composition of the 20th Central Military Commission

The new CMC leadership was formally announced at the first plenary session of the 20th Central Committee of the CCP on 23 October 2022.⁹ Xi's command over the PLA is evident in the composition of the newly formed seven-member CMC (see Table 1).

**Table 1:
Central Military Commission
Leadership**

Name	CMC Appointment (Order of Rank)	Service
Xi Jinping	Chair	-
Zhang Youxia	Vice Chair	PLA Army
He Weidong	Vice Chair	PLA Army
Li Shangfu	Member <i>Likely to be the next Minister of National Defense¹⁰</i>	PLA Strategic Support Force
Liu Zhenli	Member <i>Chief of the Joint Staff Department of the CMC</i>	PLA Army
Miao Hua	Member <i>Director of Political Work of the CMC</i>	PLA Navy
Zhang Shengmin	Member <i>Head of Discipline and Inspection of the CMC</i>	PLA Rocket Force

In a departure from past formulations, the new CMC lineup illustrates four major patterns in Xi's appointment choices.¹¹

First, the PLA Army has the most representation among the five services. Unlike the vice chairs of the 19th CMC (one from the PLA Air Force and the other from the PLA Army), both current vice chairs are from the PLA Army. While the PLA Strategic Support Force, PLA Navy, and PLA Rocket Force are represented in the present CMC, the PLA Air Force has no representation.

Composition of the 20th Central Military Commission

Second, the revised CMC highlights two essential exceptions: appointed military professionals have experience in areas such as military equipment and defence science and technology (both Zhang Youxia and Li Shangfu have served as directors of the CMC's Equipment Development Department); and despite their lack of military experience, Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin climbed up the ranks as political commissars.

Third, the dependability factor based on personal, political, and familial ties to Xi. The selection of 72-year-old General Zhang Youxia as vice chair, despite the CCP's unofficial retirement age of 68, is evidence of Xi's desire to reward his loyalists. This is also noted in Xi's balance between the 'old' and 'new'. Although he has retained three members from the 19th CMC (Miao, Zhang Youxia, and Zhang Shengmin), the new additions (He Weidong, Li Shangfu, and Liu Zhenli) have a strong 'loyalty' connection as well. Notably, vice chair He has no prior experience in the CMC, nor was he a member of the CCP's Central Committee.

Fourth, operational experience and battlefield preparation were critical factors in Xi's decision-making. Zhang Youxia is one of the few senior military leaders in the PLA who served as a company commander during the Sino-Vietnam conflict in 1979. Liu, an army commander since 2021, also has combat experience from border battles between China and Vietnam in the 1980s. Additionally, He demonstrated operational preparedness as the former commander of the Eastern Theatre Command (which oversees Taiwan and the East China Sea), is said to have planned military exercises around Taiwan in response to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit there in August 2022,¹² and has experience in the Western Theatre Command (which oversees China's operational borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Myanmar) as a commander.

“Xi's command over the PLA is evident in the composition of the newly formed seven-member Central Military Commission.”

Xi's Agenda for the PLA: Goals and Expectations

On 24 October 2022, at his first military meeting following the 20th CCP Congress, Xi explicitly highlighted the PLA's 'urgent duties' by stating that members of the armed forces must uphold the main theme of the congress; carefully read the report to the congress and the new party constitution; research the thoughts, perspectives, strategies, and measures included in those documents; and align their minds and deeds with those of the CCP.¹³ In acting upon Xi's directives, the CMC issued a guideline on 6 November on the "study, publicity, and implementation of the guiding principles" of the congress in the military.¹⁴ The instructions specifically centred on the PLA's efforts towards¹⁵ comprehensively strengthening party-building in the armed forces, fully implementing the system of ultimate responsibility resting with the chairperson of the CMC, stepping up military training and war preparedness in a comprehensive way, and advancing innovation of defence-related science and technology.

Given these objectives, Xi expects the PLA to devote its energy to improving combat readiness, enhancing its capability to fight and win, and effectively fulfilling its missions and tasks over the next five years.¹⁶ The aim is to "build a modern socialist country in all respects and advance the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts,"¹⁷ as underscored in Xi's report to the 20th CCP Congress. In this regard, the PLA has three main goals—achieve the centenary goals^e by 2027, modernise by 2035, and completely transform into a world-class force by the mid-21st century.¹⁸ At the October military meeting, Xi stressed that the PLA's central mission is to achieve these goals in the "coming five years" and that it "must spare no effort to meet these goals by 2027."¹⁹

In an overall assessment of the 20th CCP Congress, the success of the PLA can be mapped from its evolution, with Xi noting that it has "become a much more modern and capable fighting force, and the Chinese path to building a strong military is growing ever broader."²⁰ The major achievement is overhauling the command structure as part of the broader transformation into a joint force.

e To accelerate the integrated development of mechanisation, informatisation, and intelligentisation of the PLA.

Xi's Agenda for the PLA: Goals and Expectations

However, with threats mainly perceived in “external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade, and exert maximum pressure on China,” Xi anticipates the challenges ahead for the PLA to be rooted in the security environment, where “strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges are concurrent, and uncertainties and unforeseen factors are rising” compounded by “black swan” and “gray rhino” events.²¹ As such, over the next five years, the PLA will be engaged in combatting internal tensions if members of the armed forces fail to follow the party line and from “external attempts” (which the 20th CCP Congress report predicts “may escalate at any time”).²² While it is not officially stated what China—and Xi—perceive as ‘external attempts’, educated assumptions indicate that the PLA’s contingencies on this front will prominently include Taiwan, the India-China boundary dispute, the East China Sea dispute with Japan, the South China Sea, and tensions with the US.

“Xi expects the PLA to devote its energy to improving combat readiness, enhancing its capability to fight and win, and effectively fulfilling its missions and tasks over the next five years.”

Conclusion

The 20th CCP Congress has set a new precedent in China's political and military history with Xi's third term. After consolidating his power over the previous two terms, Xi can now push the PLA to be 'combat ready' in protecting China's core interests, be determined in fulfilling the centenary goals of building a modern military by 2027, and have unwavering loyalty towards him and the CCP.

Xi's ambition to build a modern socialist country and advance the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will hold significant implications for the country and the world. However, only time will tell how aggressive and assertive the PLA will be in fulfilling the set targets and securing Beijing's core and national interests. As such, the possibility of a far more coercive China cannot be ruled out in Xi's third term. [ORF](#)

Amrita Jash is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations at the Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE) in Manipal, India.

- 1 “Xi Focus: Xi Inspects CMC Joint Operations Command Center, Stressing Troop Training, Combat Preparedness,” *Xinhuanet*, November 8, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20221108/9c3ee201f1b146dda91f5f2d89e6f4cf/c.html>.
- 2 James Mulvenon, “The Yuan Stops Here: Xi Jinping and the “CMC Chairman Responsibility System””, *China Leadership Monitor* 47 (2015): 48–47, <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm47jm.pdf>
- 3 “The CMC Chairperson Responsibility System,” *China.org.cn*, November 5, 2021, http://www.china.org.cn/english/china_key_words/2021-11/05/content_77853425.html.
- 4 Zhihao Zhang, “Military Pledges Total Loyalty to Xi,” *China Daily*, November 6, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-11/06/content_34171130.htm.
- 5 Cheng Li, “Promoting “Young Guards”: The Recent High Turnover in the PLA Leadership (Part I: Purges and Reshuffles),” *China Leadership Monitor* 48 (2015), www.hoover.org/research/promoting-young-guards-recent-high-turnover-pla-leadership-part-i-purges-and-reshuffles; Cheng Li, “Promoting “Young Guards”: The Recent High Turnover in the PLA Leadership (Part II: Expansion and Escalation),” *China Leadership Monitor* 49 (2016), <https://www.hoover.org/research/promoting-young-guards-recent-high-turnover-pla-leadership-part-ii-expansion-and-escalation>; Cheng Li, “Promoting “Young Guards”: The Recent High Turnover in the PLA Leadership (Part III: Personal and Political),” *China Leadership Monitor* 50 (2016), <https://www.hoover.org/research/promoting-young-guards-recent-high-turnover-pla-leadership-part-iii-personal-and-political>.
- 6 Amrita Jash, “Xi Jinping as the New “*Tianxia*” of PRC: Implications of His Power Consolidation,” Centre for Land Warfare Studies, Issue Brief, no. 159 (December 2018): 4.
- 7 U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2022 Report to Congress: One Hundred Seventieth Congress, Second Session*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2022, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/2022_Annual_Report_to_Congress.pdf
- 8 U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2022 Report to Congress*
- 9 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, *Communique of the First Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China*, October 23, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791365.html
- 10 Sonny Lo Shiu Hing, “China’s New Central Military Commission,” *Macau Business*, November 12, 2022, <https://www.macaubusiness.com/opinion-chinas-new-central-military-commission/>

- 11 “How Did the 20th Party Congress Impact China’s Military?,” CSIS, October 25, 2022, <https://chinapower.csis.org/20th-party-congress-china-military-pla-cmc/#outcomes-20th-party-congress>; Lyle J. Morris, “What China’s New Central Military Commission Tells Us About Xi’s Military Strategy,” Asia Society Policy Institute, October 27, 2022, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/what-chinas-new-central-military-commission-tells-us-about-xis-military-strategy>; Suyash Desai, “The 20th Central Military Commission appointments – What to make of it?,” Observer Research Foundation, November 8, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-20th-central-military-commission-appointments/>
- 12 Sutirtho Patranobis, “Xi Jinping promotes 3 generals with LAC experience to top PLA posts,” *Hindustan Times*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/xi-jinping-promotes-3-generals-with-lac-experience-to-top-pla-posts-101666582212532.html>
- 13 Zhuo Chen, “Xi Urges Military to Focus on its Centenary Goals,” *China Military Online*, October 25, 2022, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2022-10/25/content_10194757.htm.
- 14 “China Issues Guideline to Promote Guiding Principles of Key Party Congress in Military,” *People’s Daily Online*, November 7, 2022, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/1107/c90000-10168147.html>.
- 15 “China Issues Guideline to Promote Guiding Principles of Key Party Congress in Military”
- 16 “Xi Focus: Xi Inspects CMC Joint Operations Command Center, Stressing Troop Training, Combat Preparedness”
- 17 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, *Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, (Beijing: 2022) https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html.
- 18 Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2022), 32, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/1/2022-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>
- 19 Chen, “Xi Urges Military to Focus on its Centenary Goals”
- 20 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, *Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*
- 21 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, *Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*
- 22 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, *Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*



Ideas . Forums . Leadership . Impact

20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org