Solving What Principal-Agent Problem?
Reassessing Military Reforms and Party-Military Relations in China

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Abstract

This study examines the military reforms implemented under Xi Jinping's leadership and their impact on the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA). By applying key insights from principal-agent theory to the Chinese context, this study seeks to shed new light on the motivations, processes, and outcomes of these reforms. It argues that two institutional problems in China's party-military relations had persisted and motivated successive reform efforts: excessive delegation of authority and insufficient oversight. Xi's recent reforms have primarily addressed the issue of excessive delegation, driving massive organizational restructuring intended to enhance military effectiveness. However, progress has been limited in strengthening the Party's oversight of the military. This study posits that these uneven reform outcomes stem from Xi's desire to exert more personalized control over the military. The growing personalization of party-military relations is likely to have signicant implications for the PLA's combat readiness and Chinese elite politics.

1. Introduction

As Xi Jinping became the new leader of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2012, nobody would have imagined that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would be transformed in the next 10 years into what it finds itself. As a consequence of military reforms commonly characterized as unprecedented in the history of People's Republic of China (PRC), almost everything appears to have changed: the powerful general departments were dismantled; the long-surviving military region system replaced by theater commands; anti-corruption campaign put the two vice-chairmen of Central Military Commission (CMC) into despair.

A prevailing consensus among analysts is that the driving force behind the recent military reforms has been General Secretary Xi Jinping's strong desire to transform the military. Specifically, Xi has publicly articulated two concrete goals for military reforms: enhancing the PLA's combat capabilities and ensuring its allegiance to the CCP.

In terms of strengthening and modernizing the PLA's warfighting capacity, Xi's progress to date has been impressive. The military has streamlined wartime command and control of operational forces, introduced new service-level organizations such as the Strategic Support Force (restructured in 2024) to manage and deploy

emerging technologies in new operational domains like cyberspace and outer space. The PLA has also reorganized its conventional and nuclear missile forces into a separate service known as the PLA Rocket Force and established a centralized logistics command.[1]

However, in contrast to the significant restructuring aimed at enhancing the PLA's warfighting capacity, few systemic changes of comparable depth and scope have been made to reinforce the military's subordination to the CCP. For instance, the Party committee and political commissar systems, which are the key institutions that uphold the Party's "absolute control" over the PLA, have largely remained unchanged. The stated goal of strengthening the link between the state and the military, emphasized in the context of revamping the Party's coordinating capacity, has not borne any visible results. This unevenness in reform outcomes is puzzling, given the sheer magnitude and the political rhetoric of the reform effort and, more importantly, the chaotic state in which the PLA found itself when Xi assumed office. This raises important questions: why has the PLA reform under Xi resulted in such disparate outcomes? Furthermore, how can we comprehend Xi's motives for the reforms and assess their processes and outcomes?

This study aims to shed new light on the impact of military reforms on China's party-military relations by exploring potential answers to these questions.[2] Most current analyses of the relationship between recent PLA reforms and party-military relations have emphasized Xi's efforts to strengthen his personal grip over the military. These efforts include campaigns to refocus attention on the CMC Chairman Responsibility System and placing trusted associates in key military positions.[3] However, it is crucial to distinguish between actions that have systemic implications for the CCP's control over the military and those that do not, both conceptually and empirically. For instance, as discussed further below, the renewed emphasis on the Chairman Responsibility System may be considered as a rhetorical move[4] that does not necessarily enhance the Party's institutional authority over the PLA. In this context, the study argues that military reforms under Xi have led to what can be termed as the *personalization* of key civilian control mechanisms, ultimately compromising – rather than strengthening – Party's control of the military.

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[1] For a recent assessment of the reform accomplishments, see Char 2024.
[2] It is worth mentioning that we use this term as distinct from civil-military relations. Civil-military relations is a very broad concept, encompassing the entire range of relationships between the military and civilian society at every level. Although the party-army relations have been and continue to be the most important link in civil-military relations in China, this does not mean that they are conceptually and substantively identical. For a further discussion, see Scobell 2006, 28-33.
[3] Kou 2017; Char and Bitzinger 2017.
[4] The term has appeared in more than 100 military political work documents following the so-called New Gutian Conference. On the significance of this new emphasis, see Mulvenon 2015.

In doing so, this study employs the principal-agent theory (PAT) [5] to provide a theoretically informed and coherent interpretation of the reform's multifaceted elements and seemingly disparate outcomes. While some previous studies have suggested the potential value of applying PAT to the Chinese context, no explicit attempt, to the best of our knowledge, has been made to explore its theoretical implications for studying civil-military interactions in China.[6] While the primary aim is to gain a better understanding of the ongoing reforms and their underlying dynamics, this study also seeks to evaluate the potential usefulness of PAT as an alternative framework for investigating issues related to the Chinese military. In essence, the study demonstrates that PAT and its civil-military applications can be effectively extended to China, enabling identification of both general and specific institutional challenges confronting the CCP's control of the PLA, and producing key observable expectations for the party leadership's responses to such challenges.

This study makes two significant contributions to the literature. Firstly, it addresses a gap created by the predominant focus on improving operational effectiveness as the main driver behind the reforms. While numerous studies have underscored the centrality of "integrated joint operations" as a key reform agenda and framed the reforms accordingly, comparatively little attention has been paid to another critical objective: revitalizing the Party's control over the military. Moreover, even fewer have evaluated the reforms' outcomes from this perspective. Given that demands for joint operational capability predated Xi Jinping's leadership, focusing solely on operational motivations leaves several crucial aspects of the latest reforms unexplored, including their timing and the specific institutional steps taken. This study attempts to fill this void.

Secondly, from a theoretical perspective, this analysis aims to complement existing accounts of the determinants of military effectiveness by offering new insights into the roles of political leaders in managing military affairs. The literature has gradually shifted its focus from regime types to the forms of civil-military relations that may influence the efficiency of resource allocation[7], the quality of strategic assessment[8], or battlefield responsiveness[9] in identifying the sources of military effectiveness. This study seeks to further this discussion, particularly by exploring how the institutional structure of civil-military relations incentivizes political leaders to initiate and implement major military reforms aimed at enhancing military effectiveness.

This article is structured as follows. The next two sections draw on the principal-agent theory to investigate

[5] The "theory" here is understood as a family of models with a related perspective, rather than as a single encompassing theory with a specific set of assumptions and conclusions.
[6] Cheng 2017; Saunders and Wuthnow 2016; Kou 2017.
[7] Talmadge 2010; Rosen 1995.
[8] Brooks 2008.
[9] Mukherjee 2017.

key problems and potential solutions associated with civilian control of the military, both in theory and in the Chinese context. The third and fourth sections clarify the main drivers and examine the processes of the PLA reform under Xi's leadership, with a particular focus on Party-military relations. Finally, we re-assess the outcome of the reform in terms of China's system of civilian control in the fifth section. The conclusion summarizes our argument and findings.

2. The Civil-Military Challenge in the Theoretical Context: The Principal-Agent Theory

Regardless of the type of government, political leaders face a significant challenge of ensuring that their military is capable enough to carry out their commands but remains obedient to their authority.[10] This challenge can be considered as a specific instance of the broader issue of agency, as addressed by the Principal-Agent Theory (PAT): how can principals ensure that their agents comply with their orders, particularly when the agents possess weapons and, therefore, hold greater coercive power? Additionally, the agents may have preferences that differ from those of their political superiors. This particular situation gives rise to two main categories of problems: the problem of delegation and the problem of control. In the context of civil-military relations, the delegation problem pertains to determining the extent of authority and resources that should be entrusted to the armed forces without endangering the stability of the regime or the state's economy. The control problem involves monitoring and sanctioning military agents to ensure that they fulfil their duties and do not exploit their powers beyond the principal's wishes.

Focusing on the extent of delegation and the control mechanisms employed by civilian leaders in civil-military relations is particularly useful for understanding the dynamics in a subset of autocracies and advanced democracies in which traditional problems, such as coups or military intervention in sovereign power, are not significant. When the norm of civilian primacy is entrenched, the day-to-day practice of civil-military relations involves delegating – or withholding – authority for certain tasks and monitoring the delegated authority. As Brooks stresses, "civilian control fully considered requires more than compliance with civilian orders and the absence of a military veto" and that it "requires civil-military relations operate in a positive manner by promoting civilian preferences and political goals."[11]

It should be noted that the prevalence of civilian primacy as the norm in civil-military relations does not

[10] Feaver 1996, 149.
[11] Brooks 2020, 26. Undoubtedly, a theoretical focus on delegation and monitoring is not unrelated to the question of military compliance, as different patterns of delegation and monitoring can influence the incentives for the military to comply with civilian direction.

diminish the significance of the delegation and control question. As noted by Peter Feaver, this issue is complex because both the civilian leader and military agents share the goal of ensuring security for the state, yet they may have differing opinions on how best to achieve it and at what cost.[12] Therefore, understanding delegation and monitoring problems is essential when examining the incentives that motivate civilian leaders to drive institutional changes in civil-military relations, especially when their political authority remains unchallenged.

2.1. Problem of Delegation

Delegation occurs because principals have limitations in their abilities and attention. In hierarchical civil-military relations, civilian leaders delegate authority over certain aspects of security policy to military organizations, creating the problem of agency; the organizations may fail to carry out civilian authorities' requests or shirk their responsibilities. Central to this problem is the presence of information asymmetry. When the principal delegates, the agent has an opportunity to acquire unobserved information before choosing an action that affects the principal's payoffs[13]. One potential solution to address these conditions is to select the agent whose preferences are closest to hers ("the ally principle"). However, information asymmetry hinders the principal's ability to choose the best agent, a problem known in the literature as the "hidden knowledge" problem.

In the context of civil-military relations, the decision about which agent will be granted authority is shaped by the civilian leaders' preferences. Recall the political leaders' fundamental challenge of seeking protection from regime and state enemies (military effectiveness) while maintaining political control over their destiny (military subordination).[14] However, the scarcity of information makes it challenging to determine which decisions should be delegated to agents without conflicting with these two goals. Therefore, the key question is whether civilian leaders can establish boundaries for decision-making that avoid conflict and ensure that the military is working in accordance with their goals. As Welch noted, "the government's ability to alter the armed forces' responsibilities is the best measure of the strength and extent of civilian control."[15]

[12] For this reason, PAT's general assumption of divergent preferences between the principal and the agent should be treated with special care when applying to the civil-military context. Unlike economic relationships in which the principal and the agent have a different set of incentives regarding the agent's basic work and thus agents would plausibly produce no work if they could get away with it, this rarely makes sense in the civil-military setting.
[13] Note that this is just one major type of delegation models. In another main class of models, it is the agent who moves before the boss. See Bendor, Glazer and Hammond 2001, 240-5.
[14] Feaver 2003.
[15] Welch 2005.

In most political systems, the military is granted significant authority and resources to address foreign threats. The extent and scope of military autonomy and resources in defense policy are regulated by various factors, including the structure of civilian institutions, the external security environment and the state of the domestic economy.[16] Civilian leaders, constrained or empowered by these factors, increase or reduce the scope of delegated authority based on their assessment of military performance. Military agents in turn seek to influence the principal's decision-making process. For example, the military can hypothesize future threats requiring greater response and resource allocation, which can influence the level of military spending.

Another critical issue related to the degree of delegation, especially in authoritarian contexts, is defining and setting the boundary for the military's political roles. One relevant aspect is determining whether and to what extent the military is involved in internal coercive missions, particularly those aimed at repressing mass protests. While most dictatorships rely on police and specialized internal security agents for everyday repression, in regimes that come to power after prolonged civil wars, the military may assume control over or replace existing coercive institutions.[17] In situations where threats to the regime take the form of mass, organized, and violent opposition, the military may be the only force capable of defeating such threats. However, heavy reliance on the military for domestic security can harm its combat effectiveness[18] and complicate the leadership's control over it[19], leading political leaders to scale back military involvement in proportion to the level of domestic opposition.

2.2. Problem of Control

The central premise of PAT is that political control over the military does not end with the delegation decision. Instead, the key to ensuring civilian control of the military lies in establishing and enforcing effective monitoring mechanisms. However, once again, information asymmetries between civilian leaders and the military present a fundamental challenge. The military's expertise in managing violence provides them with an advantage over civilians in areas such as tactics and logistics, particularly as operations near combat. Furthermore, this challenge is exacerbated by the unreliability of performance indicators, a common issue in PAT but particularly acute in the civil-military context. The military can "train and rehearse, but the essence of combat – wielding force against a determined enemy – cannot be simulated reliably."[20]

[16] The principal-agent approach, as shall be discussed below, does not rule out such nonmaterial incentives as bureaucratic autonomy and moral commitments.
[17] Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Narang and Talmadge 2018.
[18] Talmadge 2015.
[19] Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 158-9; Svolik 2012, 123-5.
[20] Feaver 2003, 70-1.

Civilian leaders, of course, have a range of tools at their disposal to tackle the challenge of monitoring military activities. The most straightforward method of monitoring involves restricting the scope of delegation, which means limiting military autonomy in areas such as personnel and financial management, as well as prescribing specific behaviors to mitigate informational problems. Another, more subtle approach entails revising the criteria for selecting and promoting agents. A more intrusive form of monitoring involves the use of third-party watchdogs to observe the agents and raise an "alarm" when they misbehave.[21] This type of reporting serves as an institutional check. Institutional checks can either take an indirect path by leveraging interservice rivalry or a more assertive form of installing a separate agent with the power to not only raise an alarm but also punish and adjust behavior as necessary.[22]

However, each mechanism has associated costs that principals must consider, making the monitoring decisions complex. For example, revising screening and promotion schemes may not be sufficient for identifying the most reliable agents, particularly because civilian leaders are restricted to a finite pool of senior military officer relative to other sectors of the bureaucracy. Similarly, interservice rivalry can provide valuable information to principals but at the cost of potential interoperability issues.[23] Additionally, empowering a separate agent with veto power to block military actions has the drawback of potentially reducing military effectiveness, and could even result in collusion between the veto agent and military personnel, leading to adverse outcomes.

Moreover, monitoring costs can significantly increase when considering post-monitoring issues, particularly regarding whether and how to punish agents for shirking their duties. Penalizing military personnel is particularly challenging, given the military's exclusive control over coercive power. Even when there exists a normative basis for civilian authorities to punish the military, it remains uncertain whether they will exercise this authority, partially due to the ambiguous nature of military behavior itself (e.g., what constitutes excessive behaviors in combat?). Even in some clear cases of military misconduct, exposing and punishing the offenders can be costly since it may damage the civilian government's legitimacy.[24]

In summary, applying the principal-agent framework to civil-military relations suggests that the delegation

[21] McCubbins and Schuwarts 1984.
[22] Institutional checks are an essential component of the civil-military literature, particularly as they relate to what Huntington referred to as "subjective control." These checks play a crucial role in preserving military subordination to political authorities, especially in ethnically divided states.
[23] Many studies suggest that "coup-proofing" efforts, particularly those intended to foster divisions within the armed forces, necessarily reduce military effectiveness. Belkin and Schofer 2005; Quinlivan 1999. As Reiter notes, however, only certain coup-proofing tactics weaken military effectiveness, and leaders facing high level of external threat have incentives to choose among them. Reiter 2020.
[24] Wang and Dickson 2022.

decision does not mark the end of political control. Civilians retain mechanisms to guide the military and address the inherent challenges associated with delegation. However, this process is iterative and dynamic, requiring civilians to continuously reassess circumstances and adjust their monitoring strategies in response to shifts in the external environment, such as the emergence or decline of state threats.

3. The Civil-Military Challenge in the Chinese Context: What are the Problems?

What does the fundamental civil-military challenge – balancing the military's responsibility to protect the state with the necessity of preventing military overreach – reveal about the evolution of party-military relations in China? This section seeks to examine the key elements and challenges inherent in the delegation and control in China's party-military relations, which have served as driving forces for military reform.

3.1. Structure of Delegation – Too Many Responsibilities

The CCP-PLA relationship is founded on a clear and straightforward authority structure, whereby the PLA operates as a party-army, tasked with executing any duties assigned by the Party leadership. Primarily supported by the overlapping identities of military officers, who are also party members, this formal arrangement allows the CCP to delegate significant responsibilities to the military without fear of a coup or the military pursuing interests contrary to the Party's objectives. Indeed, the PLA, serving as an "administrative arm" of the party, has been entrusted with a broad range of political, economic, and social tasks that go well beyond military functions.[25] However, the multiple and sometimes conflicting roles assigned to the PLA – including its designated identities as a "fighting force," "production force" and "(political) work force" – have been the subject of ongoing debate, highlighting the challenges associated with such extensive delegation.

First, the Party leadership has delegated substantial authority to the military in formulating and executing military strategy. China's military strategy, referred to as "the strategic guideline" in Chinese terminology, is drafted and adopted by the CMC, a formal party organization responsible for guiding all aspects of military affairs. However, except for the chairman of the body, all other members typically represent the leadership of the PLA. Specifically, military strategy had been drafted by the leadership of the general staff department and

[25] This term comes from Odom 1978.

adopted at an enlarged meeting of the CMC, attended by other senior military officers.[26] Consequently, the PLA holds comprehensive authority in matters related to strategy, including planning, training, and operations. This situation is comparable only to the Soviet case, where strategic decision-making is dominated by the General Staff, and there is no parallel civilian party apparatus for expertise in military affairs.[27]

Second, the PLA has been involved in a wide array of economic tasks. This involvement originated during the revolutionary period and continued, with varying levels of intensity, after the establishment of the communist regime and until the end of the Maoist period.[28] However, following the start of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, the nature of this engagement was radically transformed. Previous accounts have extensively documented that in the early years of the reform era, Deng and other reformers granted the PLA significant autonomy in managing its own economic affairs, including engaging in various commercial activities.[29] Initially justified as a means to compensate for limited defense budgets, the military was essentially tasked with contributing to national economic development.

Thirdly, the Party leadership has delegated various political tasks to the military in handling societal challenges. Although not solely focused on coercive roles, the PLA has consistently played a crucial part in the party-state's coercive capacity throughout its history.[30] Apart from the deadly use of force during the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, more recent examples include the events in Tibet in March 2008 when a PLA infantry unit provided security support to police and the People's Armed Police (PAP) forces.[31] While it would be an overstatement to suggest that the PLA has routinely engaged in controlling domestic unrest, the Party leadership has consistently emphasized that the PLA is the CCP's ultimate insurance policy for maintaining public order.

In sum, beyond its military functions, the PLA has been tasked with a broad array of economic and political responsibilities. A major issue with these extensive duties is the challenge of effective monitoring. Furthermore, assigning multiple tasks to the military may intensify control problems at a more fundamental level. The severity of these problems depends on how essential non-militay missions are for regime stability and whether there are viable alternative agents. For instance, the more crucial the military's roles for the Party's governance,

[26] Fravel 2019, 28-9.
[27] Rice 1987.
[28] Joffe 1995.
[29] Bickford 1994, 2006; Cheung 2001; Mulvenon 2001.
[30] A key non-coercive role traditionally undertaken by the PLA is the dissemination and performance of party propaganda during political campaigns.
[31] Blasko 2010.

the harder it becomes for leaders to address any misuse of delegated authority.[32] Therefore, a critical challenge for Party leaders is to delineate clear boundaries for the military's roles, which will minimize the costs associated with maintaining control.

However, once established, adjusting the scope of delegation to changing circumstances can be difficult. A prime example is the PLA's involvement in the civilian economy, which has been closely linked to the question of how much state resources should be allocated to the military. Despite its increasingly negative impact on both the Party's economic governance and military discipline, the PLA's participation in China's civilian economy persisted until the late 1990s, with some components continuing until Xi assumed power. One of the most significant consequences is military corruption. James Mulvenon notes that the PLA corruption since 1978, driven by financial motives, is a clear indication of the Party's diminishing control over the military. This new form of corruption involved "external contacts," where military members collaborated with civilians to engage in large-scale illicit activities.[33] It was against this backdrop that the Party leadership under Jiang Zemin undertook a far-reaching divestiture process to remove the PLA from many sectors of the economy. However, it is important to recognize that this move was made possible due to a rapid increase in defense budget, which undermined the rationale behind the original delegation.[34]

3.2. Structure of Control – Too Little Oversight

The PAT literature claims that political control is more important than the problem of delegation. China's system of civilian control involves several monitoring measures designed to address information asymmetry. The accession policy, which mandates that only party members can hold senior military positions and requires their absolute loyalty to the Party, is just one of these measures. However, since party membership is a common trait, it is challenging to define and measure political loyalty accurately. Despite the Party leadership's efforts

[32] An excellent example of this can be found in the extensive intervention by the PLA in local governance during the Cultural Revolution, which subsequently posed a significant challenge for party leaders when attempting to disentangle the military from politics. MacFarquhar 2008; Teiwes 2009.

[33] Mulvenon 1998. For a more cautious assessment of the corrosive effect on the organization's internal functioning, see Li 1999, 315-6. For our purposes, it will suffice to note that there was a growing fear on the the party leadership about the increasing scale and depth of corrupted behaviors. See Jiang 2004, 176-8.

[34] The growth of China's military budget, although remarkable in absolute size, has been capped within a certain limit – around 1.5 to 2 % of annual GDP growth, suggesting the existence of implicit contract on an appropriate level of budget allocation. For a discussion, see Liff and Erickson 2015. However, maintaining this equilibrium is increasingly challenging as the PLA demands more resources for further military modernization, while economic slowdown puts more pressure the Party-state. The challenge thus is to maintain the overall level of resource allocation while advocating for the effective use of the resources.

to standardize the PLA's appointment and promotion process[35], recent studies on promotion practices within the PLA show that in the absence of external monitoring, "the process for appointing military officers is a particularly opaque one, with the concentration of power over personnel selections remaining within the PLA."[36]

In addition, the general unreliability of performance indicators in civil-military relationships, as noted earlier, contributes to the opacity and flexibility of personnel decisions within the PLA.[37] While the pervasive patronage system within the PLA may have provided an alternative mechanism to bridge the information gap *within* the military, it cannot strengthen the Party's control of the military or even possibly undermine it, especially when the Party prioritizes professional competence over political connections.

Meanwhile, there has been much discussion regarding the political work system as a crucial element of the CCP's control over the armed forces. The political work system comprises three major components: the party committee, the political commissar, and the political department system. The former two components are particularly significant as they jointly constitute the key mechanism by which the Party imposes its will on the military and aligns military behavior with the civilian leadership's preferences.[38] However, it is essential to note that political commissars, who chair the party committee, are not independent party representatives; they are selected from professional soldiers and carry out political functions on behalf of the party, as do officers in the political department.[39] While there have been civilian party secretaries who concurrently assume the position of the first secretary of the local military command, they have an ambiguous role in monitoring military agents. Some analysts argue that they are only "part-timers" with incomplete institutional authority over the units in the locality.[40] In short, the political work system in the PLA does not constitute a form of institutional check in which a parallel party apparatus watches military behavior and blocks it as needed.

It is not entirely accurate, however, to assert that there is no external mechanism for supervising the military in China. In fact, there have been attempts to institute separate monitoring schemes for the military.

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[35] For example, in December 2000, the members of the 19th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress approved the amendment of the "Regulations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army on the military services of officers in active service." The new regulations aimed to create clear and uniform requirements for the appointment and removal of PLA officers.

[36] Wang 2016, 977.

[37] For a detailed discussion, see Wang and Wang 2018. They conclude that the PLA's formal cadre evaluation system does not effectively identify and reward military officers possessing both political integrity and professional competence.

[38] Shambaugh 1991.

[39] You, Ji 2015; You, Ji 2006; Cheng 1990, 51.

[40] You, Ji 2006, 89-116.

Particularly, the growing role of the state in defense affairs has drawn significant attention from observers. For instance, Andrew Scobell argues that under Deng and his co-reformers, there was a concerted effort to separate the Party from the state and establish a division of labor, which "transformed the PLA from a strictly party-army into a party-state-army that is supervised and monitored by the CCP and PRC."[41] While the reform initiative itself receded after the Tiananmen incident, scholars note that the Party's increased emphasis on the "rule of law" has pushed the state apparatus to assume greater responsibilities over defense affairs. In particular, the National People's Congress has provided an "interest group environment" in which other state agencies can observe military behavior and report problems to party leaders, in addition to its constitutional power to oversee the armed forces.[42]

However, two caveats should be noted when assessing the effect of the government's increased involvement in defense affairs on party-military relations. First, the primary function of the institutional platforms where state and military agents regularly interact is policy coordination, not military oversight. Second, there remains a significant risk that these bureaucratic agents may collude to pursue their mutual interests, potentially defying the Party's directives. This creates incentives for the Party leadership to intervene when necessary.

Efforts to oversee the military are further complicated by the absence of societal forces that could help share the burden of monitoring. For instance, while the news media is occasionally permitted to disclose governmental malpractices, it is never granted the same level of access to the military. Similarly, compared to other governmental agencies, the PLA enjoys significant immunity from prosecution. Investigations into corruption and economic disputes within the PLA are handled internally by the military procurator and are kept under strict secrecy.[43] These restrictions protect the military from civilian oversight and political accountability. Consequently, corrupt officers exposed by the authorities are rarely punished and typically receive only warnings.

Finally, at the top of the hierarchy for controlling the PLA is the CMC, led by the chairman. Although the CMC holds formal authority as the highest command organ under both the Party and state constitutions, it's

[41] Scobell 2006, 30. David Shambaugh also stressed the increasing role of the state in the control and management of the military through law, arguing that the term of "Party-Military" relations should be replaced by "Civil-Military" relations. Shambaugh 2002, 19-21.
[42] This type of monitoring corresponds to what Huntington terms as "horizontal civilian control" that is "exercised by the parallel activities of civilian agencies or groups roughly at the same level of the authority in the government." Huntington 1957 [1985], 88. While NPC is formally authorized to have oversight of the PLA, the military is more or less an embedded and organic part of China's legislature, as many of the PLA members were quite outspoken, especially on security and defense matters.
[43] Mulvenon 1998, 17.

practical role in civilian control is limited due to the institutional structure, which allows for a significant informational gap between the chairman (the only civilian) and the military professionals who dominate the commission. The Chairman Responsibility System compensates for this structural flaw by ensuring that decision-making in the CMC is based on a single-head system, with the chairman having the final say. But without additional civilian mechanism for oversight, the system's effectiveness depends heavily on the chairman's military expertise and personal preferences. Given the usual lack of military experience, the chairman tends to rely on a small group of senior officers who, in practice, run the PLA from their position.[44] The scandals involving Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong underscore the persistence of systemic flaws inherent in the organizational structure of the CMC.[45]

In summary, despite the considerable tasks and resources assigned to the army, the party-state's formal institutions for controlling the PLA, such as promotion policies, monitoring schemes, and sanctioning tools, have failed to function as intended. Although the PLA is often seen as being under intrusive civilian control as a party-army, it has been granted significant autonomy in managing its forces, effectively operating as a separate bureaucratic system within the state. Ironically, this limited civilian oversight has created institutional stability while simultaneously reducing the PLA's political influence within the Party's policymaking. Consequently, even in situations demanding urgent military readiness in response to changing security circumstances, civilian interference in military affairs remains minimal. Instead, it falls to the party leader to maximize institutional control, which is influenced by a range of contextual factors, including personal preferences.

3. Military Reform in Motion: Motivations and Processes

The previous section highlighted a set of institutional challenges that political leaders face in managing civil-military relations and identified relevant problems in the CCP-PLA relations. In this section, we will examine the military reforms process and the outcomes, with a particular focus on Xi Jinping's motivations, preferences and enforcement strategy. The purpose of this section is to illustrate how Xi tackled the systemic problems inherent in China's party-military relations, rather than provide an exhaustive survey of the reform process.

[44] Kou 2017, 868.
[45] It is worth noting that although past studies put an emphasis on the political ambitions of Xu and Guo, it is incorrect that their deviant behaviors and scandals are the reflection of the divergent preferences between the Party and the military.

3.1. Motivations

In order to fully comprehend the underlying motivations behind the launch of military reforms, it is necessary to reassess the state of party-military relations in the preceding years. While there are reasons to reject a sweeping denial of Hu's achievements, evidence supporting the common characterization of Hu's years as a "lost decade" can be found in his handling of military affairs. Of particular significance is Hu's failure to address two critical institutional issues within the PLA: rampant military corruption and the restructuring and downsizing of the PLA. This failure is perplexing, as Hu and his administration were clearly aware of profound shifts occurring in the security environment surrounding China, including the much-hyped "rebalancing" of America to Asia, which foreshadowed moves towards what Beijing later denounced as anti-China coalition formation.[46] Ample evidence suggests that the administration was cognizant of the new challenges posed to China's military security. In this context, the lack of systematic reform efforts to address organizational problems seems to reveal Hu's flawed control of the PLA.[47]

Certainly, it would be incorrect to claim that Hu did not acknowledge or address the structural problems within the PLA. In fact, many of the same issues that Xi Jinping has highlighted in his calls for military reforms were already recognized and articulated by Hu in his speeches and conversations with military audiences. For example, when he assumed the post of CMC chairman in 2005, Hu identified the shortcomings in the PLA's organizational structures for informatized warfare and called for command and logistics systems that are suited for "integrated joint operation."[48] Furthermore, Hu's leadership also introduced the concept of "system of systems," which aimed to address the unintended consequences of the individual service-centered policy of informatization that was implemented during Jiang Zemin's era. Despite Jiang's campaign that reduced the size of the PLA, Hu acknowledged that there were still issues with the force structure and inter-service and inter-departmental structures that needed to be rationalized.

Although military preparedness has been a common theme running through military reforms, the current reform is distinct from past efforts in several respects. First, there was a real concern among the CCP leadership

[46] Shirk 2022.
[47] There is an alternative account that Hu Jintao did promote a reorganization plan of the PLA but failed to execute it. Nan Li, a noted PLA scholar, points out that an agreement was reached in December 2008 that the PLA should be downsized substantially, eliminating some group armies and Military Region bureaucracies by consolidating the seven MRs into four, and by establishing an army headquarters to command all the remaining army units. Li, "Top Leaders and the PLA," 127.
[48] Zongzhengzhibu, *Shuli he Luoshi Kexue Fazhanguan Lilun Xuexi Duben*, 201.

regarding China's deteriorating strategic environment.[49] As previously noted, the Hu administration had perceived and started to respond to the U.S. efforts to reinforce military posture and alliance cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. From the outset, Xi urged the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to share his sense of insecurity and never hesitated to convey his own concerns about the worsening security landscape in the region. In his earlier speeches to the PLA, Xi repeatedly drew attention to the "profound changes that transpired in both domestic and international security environments" and provocations from a "great power" seeking to encircle and constrain China.[50]

Second, and more importantly, there was a strengthened demand that the PLA should be prepared to fight and win a *real* war that will likely unfold in highly complicated, multi-domain theaters. Although the military leadership has long recognized the urgency of improving the PLA's joint operational capabilities, it is now Xi himself who is demanding that the PLA enhance its actual operational ability and focus its energies on warfighting. Specifically, Xi repeatedly underscored that the most important criterion for implementing a reform initiative is whether it will unleash combat power and meet the "warfighting standard." Additionally, as discussed extensively below, Xi has been the party leader to highlight the PLA's lack of combat experience in arguably the bluntest and most straightforward way.

Third, politically, a key motivation that stands out from Xi's initial reform agendas is what David Finkelstein refers to as "bringing the PLA inside the CCP's tent," that is, reducing the military's "bureaucratic exceptionalism."[51] As outlined in earlier sections, the PLA has historically operated with significant autonomy, setting its own institutional priorities with minimal external oversight or accountability. This considerable autonomy has resulted in two problems for Party control over the PLA: rampant corruption within the officer corps, especially at the highest levels, and deeply entrenched bureaucratic interests that have obstructed structural reforms aimed at enhancing the PLA's warfighting capabilities.[52]

Thus, it is unsurprising that Xi's military reforms would feature a major effort to reassert Party control of the military. Indeed, evidence suggests that Xi was keenly aware of the structural challenges that have complicated the Party's ability to effectively oversee the military. Moreover, he recognized the fundamental difficulty of balancing national defense priorities with the imperative of maintaining "absolute leadership" over the military. For example, Xi has pointed out various "antagonistic forces" both inside and outside China

[49] Ratner 2013.
[50] Zongzhengzhibu 2014, 21-2.
[51] Finkelstein 2019, 51-2.
[52] You 2016a, 78.

that have promoted "nationalization" or "depoliticization" of the armed forces. Simultaneously, he acknowledges that major changes have occurred in the social environment surrounding the military, as well as in its missions and tasks, and organizational structure.

From Xi's perspective, however, the biggest challenge for Party control of the military, arises from the fact that the Chinese military has not fought any single war for an extended period of time. This lack of warfighting experience has not only resulted in a worrying state of the military's combat readiness; the "long peace" has also eroded Party control of the military because the absence of engagement has deprived the Party of the opportunity to test the true capabilities – both political and military – of the officer corps. And this trend is particularly concerning as China is faced with increasingly complex security environment.[53]

Xi's remarkably candid acknowledgement of the PLA's absence of combat experience clearly sets him apart from his predecessors, particularly Hu Jintao. Furthermore, his repeated emphasis on the lack of warfighting experience is especially noteworthy, as it can be seen as the civilian principal's strategy to address systemic information gaps and take the offensive in advancing military reforms. It is important to emphasize that, throughout this process, Xi was consciously avoiding offending the PLA as an institution nor fingering at any of his predecessors.

Finally, it is essential to emphasize that Xi's growing personal power and authority over the entire party-state machinery likely influenced the planning and implementation of PLA reforms. This sequence is worth stressing because the promotion of military reforms can be seen as an outcome of Xi's power consolidation, rather than its cause.[54] In other words, as Xi's dominance over the political system has expanded, the original motivations behind initiating the reforms – both operational and political – may have shifted accordingly.[55]

3.2. Policy Process and Implementation Strategy

The overall process leading to the launch of military reforms is relatively well-documented. Plans for military reform, along with other policy agendas across diverse areas, were rolled out at the Third Plenum of the 18th

[53] Zongzhengzhibu 2014, 148, 158.
[54] This is not to imply that Xi did not benefit from the institutional environment he encountered when initiating the PLA reforms. Unlike Hu Jintao – and to a lesser extent, Jiang Zemin – Xi's formal authority over the armed forces was not constrained by the presence of his predecessors or Party elders. Similarly, the PLA has not been hindered by the need to answer to "two centers" of power, nor was it deprived of direct access to the apex of Chinese political authority. Char and Bitzinger 2017, 845.
[55] A recent research on Xi's policy agenda shows that militay refroms are among the themes that received consistent attention of the leadership throughout the first and second term of the Xi administration. Lim, Ito, and Zhang 2024, 23.

Party Congress in November 2013. Unlike many key agendas articulated on the same occasion, however, military reforms proceeded with remarkable speed and vigor. The CMC's Leading Small Group for Military Reform (LSGMR), which convened the first meeting in March 2014, took the lead in launching and putting the reform on track. In July 2015, the LSGMR passed and submitted a general proposal on military reforms to the CMC and the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP. Following the passing of a proposal for reforming the command structure, a major breakthrough for policy implementation came when the CMC promulgated the authoritative "Opinion on Deepening Military Reform" (the Opinion) in January 2016. Large-scale military reforms have been since executed according to the plan, as summarized earlier.[56]

However, the striking boldness and swiftness of the policy process beget a question: What enabled Xi and his reform team to push forward such a radical, comprehensive reform package, and successfully implement it in such a short period? An easy answer may lie in the motivations discussed in the preceding section: the widely shared sense of crisis surrounding China's shifting security environment and the lack of military readiness. It could also be argued that Xi and his generals were merely continuing reforms initiated and advanced under previous administrations. Nevertheless, beyond a series of conventional issues tackled by previous rounds of reform, in light of institutional developments of CCP-PLA relations, three key features merit particular emphasis in the policy implementation process.

Redefining Military Responsibilities

The most salient aspect of the recent reforms under Xi is the scope and depth of the civilian leader's involvement in the actual policy process. This involvement has multiple dimensions, but particularly significant in the context of party-military relations is Xi's deliberate effort to redefine the military's responsibilities. If, as Samuel Huntington suggests, the essence of civilian control lies in a "clear distinction between political and military responsibilities and the institutional subordination of the latter to the former,"[57] Xi, at least conceptually, appears to have recognized the significance of rebuilding systems of civilian control over the army.

Such a position manifested in his early conversations with senior military officers even before the reform plans were officially circulated. For instance, shortly after assuming power, Xi stressed that "the military is

[56] For a more detailed account of policy implementation, see Saunders and Wuthnow 2016.
[57] Huntington 1957, 70.

first and foremost a fighting force that exists to fight wars. Although our military has assumed different tasks in different periods, its *fundamental* function as a fighting force has never changed."[58] While acknowledging the PLA's distinctiveness as an institution with multiple responsibilities – ranging from warfighting and political work to economic production – Xi underscored that warfighting should remain the institution's core mission and resource focus, which in turn forms the basis for the performance of other missions. Noticeably, this qualification of military responsibilities was explicitly made in the assessment of "diversified military tasks," a phrase forged by the military during Hu's tenure to conceptualize and justify the PLA's noncombat activities.[59]

Xi's emphasis on the significance of the warfighting task is not merely rhetorical; it carries substantive weight since the core mission defines the criterion by which "every aspect of organizational and individual activities must be evaluated."[60] As such, it is contrasted with Hu Jintao's "new historic missions" that still place heavy emphasis on a diverse array of peacetime duties, including PLA's traditional role of maintaining domestic stability and protecting the CCP. According to Scobell and Nathan, although the "new historic missions" highlighted the new challenges for which the PLA should prepare, this also created a tension between the continued domestic demands on the PLA and the expanded list of responsibilities at and beyond China's borders.[61]

It is in this context that Xi began reciting the mantras emphasizing that the PLA must be "prepared for military struggle," a strategic move that was likely to be well-received by most military personnel. After years of focusing on what many in the PLA viewed as largely superfluous noncombat duties, a renewed attention to warfighting signaled a return to what many soldiers see as their primary mission. Moreover, Xi's redefinition of the core mission also served to mitigate disaffection within the ranks, especially in light of the ongoing high-profile anticorruption campaign in the PLA, which had generated considerable negative publicity.

In short, if the primary rule of party-military relations in China is "the army obeys the Party, but the CCP will not tell the PLA what to do,"[62] Xi appears to be a notable exception to this principle. Unlike his predecessors, especially Hu Jintao, Xi has been far more outspoken and specific in communicating what the Party – and he himself – expects from the military. It is important to emphasize, however, that he has not sought to undermine the military's corporate interests; in fact, his demands generally resonate with – or

[58] Zongzhengzhibu 2014, 59-60 (emphasis added).
[59] Ibid., 114-5.
[60] Ibid., 22.
[61] Scobell and Nathan 2012, 141-2.
[62] Scobell 2017, 5.

perhaps partially stems from – priorities from the military leadership as well as the rank and file. Enhancing joint operational capability is obviously one such priority that has long received military attention.

At the same time, there are certain issues that professional soldiers are not allowed to raise or express their preferences over – most notably the nature and priorities of military responsibilities. In this regard, Xi has distinguished himself from his predecessors by prioritizing the preparation for military struggle as the top objective of the PLA's activities. A likely consequence of this is, despite the potential negative impact on some organizational and individual interests, considerable support within the PLA leadership for reforms aimed at enhancing the military's combat capability.

Personalization of the CMC

While military reforms under Xi have addressed a broad array of institutional and policy issues, at the heart of the multifaceted endeavor was overhauling the structure of CMC. Reforming the CMC is critically important to reinforcing party-military connection since the organization sits at the apex of the parallel party hierarchy and supposedly embodies the Party's institutional supremacy over the military.[63] However, rather than constructing a functioning controlling mechanism, the essence of the reform efforts lies in the concentration of authority and power in the hands of the chairman in ways that potentially undermine the already weak institutional basis of civilian control of the military.

For example, despite the stated goal of enhancing the CMC's ability to direct and oversee military personnel and activities, it is unclear whether the organizational restructuring has effectively established the much-proclaimed checks and balances within the expanded CMC. Instead, what Xi has pushed forward is strengthening his personal authority and power within the military. Examples abound. First, the renewed emphasis on the Chairman Responsibility System is largely a rhetorical move that introduces no meaningful institutional change to the party-military relations. Historically, this system has been highlighted when party leaders perceived internal challenges to their authority; Xi's reiteration of it appears more political than military or managerial in nature. The "fragmentation" of CCP's organizational leadership over the PLA has remained unresolved, as Xi continues to uphold Mao's formula of "The Politburo run[ning] political affairs and the CMC military affairs."[64] No other civilian Politburo member is authorized to handle PLA affairs and

[63] Lampton 2014, 45.
[64] You 2016b.

no external party organs are allowed to intrude into PLA management, particularly in personnel appointments and disciplinary affairs.

Another example of Xi shaping the CMC reform trajectory in his advantage can be found in the composition of its leadership. The new configuration, announced at the first plenary session of the 19th Central Committee in October 2017, "shattered previous paradigms of military leadership."[65] Not only was the number of members reduced from 11 to 7, but the allocation of seats by office underwent a complete overhaul, reflecting Xi's attempts to *reverse* the CMC institutionalization as a top-level coordination body. The shift stands in contrast to the leadership structure under Hu Jintao, who had approved the inclusion of services commanders as ex officio members. Put differently, before Xi's arrival, the CMC was evolving into a more conventional party committee where decision-making followed the principle of "division of responsibilities among leading members."[66] While such a collective decision-making could slow policy responses, it could also constrain the CMC chairman's influence by amplifying informational asymmetries. Alongside the CMC's organizational expansion, Xi radically altered the leadership composition, shifting the balance of power in his favor.

Equally significant to the personalization of the CMC is the appointment of Zhong Shaojun, a longtime civilian aide to Xi, as the director of the CMC General Office. After following Xi to Beijing, Zhong was initially appointed deputy director with a military rank of senior colonel, later promoted to major general, and ultimately named director of the General Office in 2018. The General Office is a crucial staff organization responsible for managing information flow within the broader CMC bureaucracy. Although not unprecedented,[67] installing a civilian aide as the head of the General Office was particularly noteworthy in the context of CMC reforms, as it undoubtedly increased the relative power of the General Office compared to other newly established departments. More importantly, the Office of Military Reform, the central body responsible for implementing reforms, was set up within the General Office, highlighting Xi's intent to push through reforms against opposition from the powerful general departments.[68]

Furthermore, Xi's reshuffling of the military leadership to his political advantage extends beyond the CMC.

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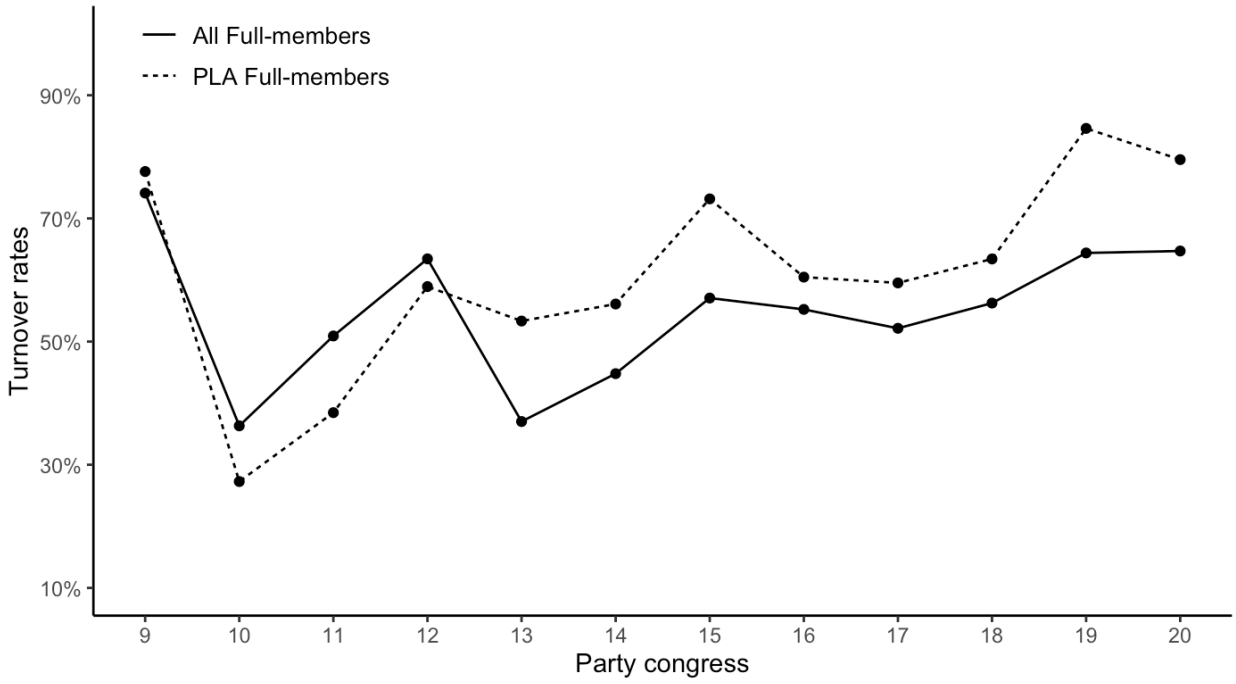
[65] Mulvenon 2018.
[66] Cheung 2015, 86-8.
[67] A more recent example is Jia Tingan who was a civilian aide to Jiang Zemin and became director of the CMC General Office in 2003. It is worth noting, however, that it took Jia 10 years to reach the position after he was transferred to the CMC, whereas the same only took 4 years for Zhong.
[68] Zhongyangjunwei 2017, 324.

Figure 1. Elite turnover in CC full members (1969-2022)



Data source: Chinese Central Committee Dataset Ver.2

Figure 1 shows that the turnover rate among military elites at the 19th Party Congress increased dramatically, with up to 85 percent of PLA representatives from the 18th Party Congress Central Committee being replaced by newcomers. While high turnover rates have been a consistent pattern in Chinese elite politics since at least the mid-1990s, the scale of military leadership turnover in 2017 cannot be fully understood without considering the impact of military reforms. According to Cheng Li, this striking trend reflects one of Xi's strategies to establish the military as a "key forum" in which he has consolidated his personal power and authority. [69] While filling key military posts with "loyalists" is not unique to Xi, the extent to which it has occurred under his leadership is unprecedented, a point corroborated by recent quantitative studies on military personnel shifts during the Xi era.[70]

In short, Xi revived the CMC model as a personalistic fiefdom as a means to enforce military reforms and consolidate his personal power and authority over the military leadership. However, from the perspective of party-military relations, these actions do not necessarily represent a systemic reform aimed at enhancing the quality of the Party's control over the military.

Centralizing Corruption Monitoring System

[69] Li 2016.
[70] Mattingly 2024; Chang, Shi, and Tung 2024.

Another key mechanism Xi mobilized to push the reform through bureaucratic resistance is conducting continual campaigns against corruption. Military corruption, as noted earlier, was a long-standing issue that had caught the attention of the previous party and military leadership. Yet, for Xi, fighting corruption was not just a key reform agenda but a strategy to enforce the reforms by imposing stricter political discipline, especially among the senior officers. Indeed, the All-Army Political Work Conference, in which Xi addressed in a detailed and straightforward way the state of indiscipline of senior officers, was held in October 2014 as Xi and his reform-minded generals prepared for the launch of reforms and circulated earlier drafts among the officer corps.

Notably, Xi has used the CMC apparatus to launch and oversee the anti-corruption drive, rather than delegating authority to the General Political Department. Specifically, Xi strengthened the CMC's ability to organize inspection teams that are dispatched to grassroots units to conduct detailed investigations and audits, especially targeting senior officials.[71] It has included establishing a CMC leading group on inspection work headed by Vice-Chairman Xu Qiliang, which is responsible for building up a comprehensive inspection system. Consequently, dozens of generals have been investigated or convicted of corruption, including the two former CMC vice chairmen.

While Xi has stressed the need to build an institutionalized system for combating corruption, Xi's emphasis is not simply on enhancing the Party's role in overseeing the military. Conversely, the party committees and branches within the army, officially the core institutions of party control over the military, have been criticized for being incapable of supervising and punishing the misbehaviors of senior officers. According to Xi, "most of the corrupt elements were either uncovered by higher-level inspection teams or reported out by the masses, while the party committee at the same level found out almost no problems, some cases even being covered up."[72] Consequently, Xi's solution was the separation and centralization of the discipline inspection sector, a functional component of a party committee, putting it under the direct leadership of the newly established CMC discipline inspection committee.

Centralizing the supervisory power is critical to reform implementation in two respects. First, the inspection teams sent by the CMC are naturally assigned to monitor the state of compliance with reform-related directives as their core task. Notably, the CMC work guidance teams, created within the General Office

[71] Cheng 2015, 112.
[72] Zongzhengzhibu 2015, 104.

to guide the policy implementation in high-level units like the central departments and military regions, were supposed to include the members of inspection teams and conduct inspection works simultaneously.[73] Second, the centralized discipline inspection system was expected to function as a separate information chain that reaches Xi directly. It supposedly provides an independent assessment of the performance of commanders, political commissars, and party committees.[74]

4. Outcomes and Implications

With key political motivations and mechanisms of policy implementation clarified, this section briefly discusses the outcomes of the reforms in the context of party-military relations and their implications for China's military effectiveness.

4.1. (Further) Erosion of Civilian Oversight

Although Xi's reforms officially aimed to revitalize party control and discipline within the PLA, perhaps motivated by a shared concern over the lack of military readiness, it is difficult to conclude at this point that the CCP-PLA relationship has been strengthened to the extent that the former now exercises genuine *civilian* control over the latter. Throughout the reform era, the military institution in China has been largely left to manage itself, with minimal external oversight and accountability. The latest military reforms only reaffirm the persistence of this extreme institutional autonomy, and it appears unlikely that this will change in the near future. Despite initial efforts to integrate the PLA reform into a larger context of national reforms[75], there is no evidence that any non-military party or state organ has intervened in the formulation and implementation of military reforms.

Rather, this analysis suggests that the institutional foundation of civilian control has either stagnated or even weakened, owing to Xi's increasingly personalized use of the sole civilian institution authorized to command and control the PLA: the chairmanship of the CMC. As previously noted, Xi's promotion of the Chairman Responsibility System – contrary to some analysts' claims that it represents an institution-building

[73] Zhongyangjunwei 2017, 378.
[74] Wuthnow and Saunders 2019, 29-30.
[75] Finkelstein 2019, 52.

effort to strengthen the Party's control of the military[76] – has not resulted in any substantive changes to the pre-existing system of civilian oversight. More critically, the current institutional configuration of party-military relations create incentives for the CMC chair to personalize the control over the military, likely perpetuating resistance to incorporating external oversight from either party or state institutions.

Similarly, centralizing the discipline inspection system does not suggest that the newly established organizations (the CMC discipline inspection committee and patrol teams) will function as truly independent entities with institutional interests distinct from those of the armed forces. Notably, compared with the civilian sectors, the number of uncovered corruption cases within the military remains relatively limited, possibly indicating a measured approach to avert possible backlash from the PLA.[77] A more effective and permanent institutional solution to preventing corruption, as Xi himself points out, will be the further legalization of military governance.[78] Yet despite its potential long-term impact on military behavior, the legal framework governing military affairs is where progress is least observed in the recent reforms under Xi.

Not only has Xi lacked the incentive to "bring the PLA inside the CCP's tent," but his reforms have also deliberately removed several civilian actors that historically had direct or indirect influence over the military. One such move to sever the civilian-military connection was the removal of local party officials from the command of PLA reserve units. Prior to 2016, regional party secretaries often served as "first commissars" of PLA reserve units within the Provincial Military District (PMD) system. In this role, local CCP officials led party committee meetings for PLA reserve units, thereby – at least potentially – exercising influence over their activities. However, following the reforms, administrative control of the PMDs was transferred to the newly established National Defense Mobilization Department under the CMC, while operational control shifted to the Theater Commands. Even if the local civilian authorities wished to deploy PLA reserve units for disaster response, the relevant theater command must now assume a joint control of those forces.[79]

4.2. Implications for Military Effectiveness

What then have been the implications of Xi's reforms for military effectiveness? The latest military reform

[76] See, for instance, Kou 2017, 872-3.
[77] McCauley 2015, 9.
[78] For example, Zhongyangjunwei 2017, 353.
[79] Lee 2022, 3-4. Lee also notes that Xi removed civilian CCP members from military inspection delegations. Between 2012 to 2015, Xi's accompanying delegation during visits to PLA units included several civilian party leaders, such as Politburo members Wang Huning and Li Zhanshu; however, Xi's military visits after 2015 do away with this trend in that his entire visiting delegation consists of military officers.

under Xi Jinping has delivered substantial changes to the organizational structures that have long been considered as a major obstacle to an effective planning, training, and conduct of joint operations. Specifically, a clearer and narrower definition of military responsibilities and the streamlined command-and-control system undoubtedly created a favorable condition for the PLA to transform itself into a more effective joint force suited to undertaking its central mission: fight and win wars under informatized conditions.

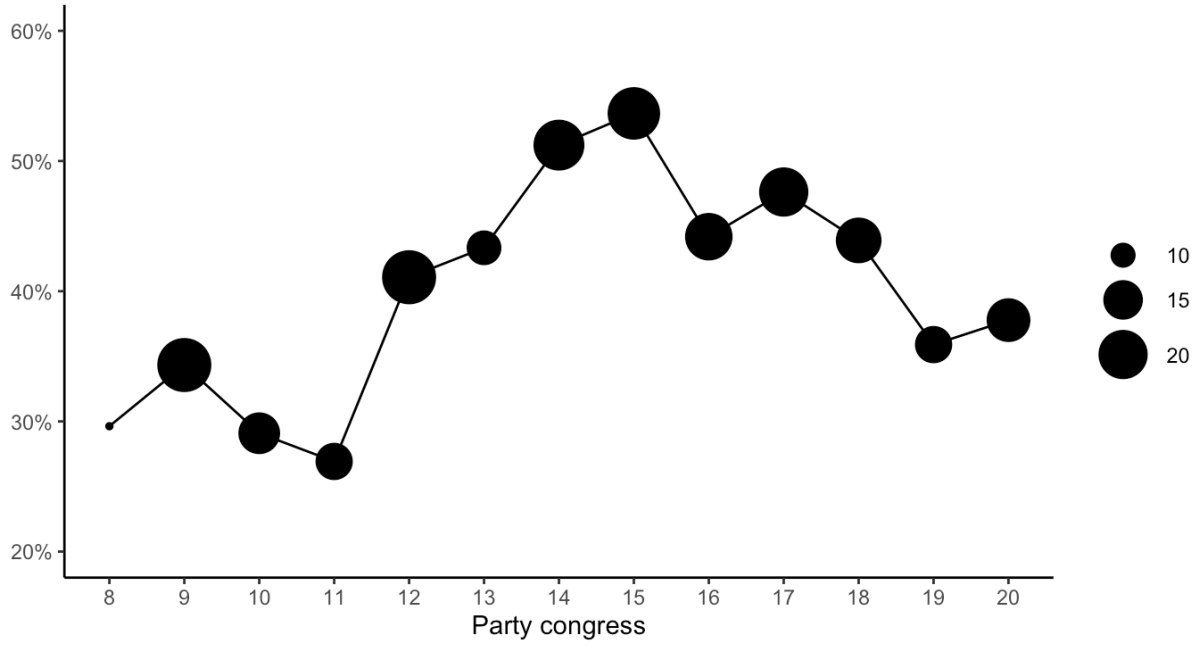
A less prominent yet significant outcome of the reforms, with potential long-term implications for operational effectiveness, is the weakening of the political work system. Several critical functions traditionally performed by this system, such as discipline inspection and personnel management, have been either eliminated or transferred to the expanded CMC, now directly overseen by the chairman.[80] This trend is evidenced in the sharp decline in the proportion of political officers among military representatives in the 19th Central Party Committee (see Figure 2), further highlighting the reform's strong emphasis on enhancing combat effectiveness. If the long-surviving Leninist structures within the PLA have indeed constrained commanders' flexibility or innovation on the battlefield and slowed the pace of joint operations, then this adjustment may represent a positive change.[81]

Additionally, as an outcome of the "below-the-neck" reforms, the PLA's overall shift towards "brigadization" warrants attention. The transition from divisions to brigades as the main units of the organization within the ground forces is generally viewed as achievable only through political decisions to refocus military responsibilities on combat readiness rather than non-military tasks.[82] Given Xi's decisive and consistent emphasis on warfighting capabilities as the military's core mission, the transformation of operational and tactical units – despite causing "great disruption and anxiety within nearly every unit in the forces"[83] – is expected to better position the armed forces for conducting joint operations.

[80] Still, there are observations that recent reforms have involved renewed emphasis on "assuring the operational command and decision-making role of party committees." See, for example, Clemens and Rosen 2021. Nevertheless, the extent to which decision-making power should be vested in party committee, and by extension, the political officer chairing them, remains a subject of debate within the PLA. And, as noted earlier, Xi's stance on this controversial issue appears, at best, to be neutral.
[81] Wuthnow 2022, 278-9; Sugiura 2022, 78-9.
[82] Barrie and Hackett 2020, 10.
[83] Blasko 2021, 151.

Figure 2. The share of political officers in CC PLA full members (1956-2022)

The point size is proportional to total number of poltical officers who are CC full members.



Data source: CCP Central Committee Dataset Ver.2

Nevertheless, improved military effectiveness is far from guaranteed. For example, achieving operational jointness is a complex endeavor that requires more than simply establishing the appropriate organizational structures; it involves fostering a "joint mentality" to think across multiple services and operate together.[84] Certainly, reforms implemented between 2015 and 2018 have laid the groundwork to enable stronger coordination among the services and reduce delays in decision-making on the ground. However, as the poor performance of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine demonstrates, the ultimate success of large-scale organizational reforms to improve the ability to conduct joint operations, including the shifts toward brigades, can only be assessed on the battlefield.[85]

Yet, a more fundamental concern about military effectiveness can be derived from the personalized nature of the reform drive. On the one hand, military reforms under Xi have demonstrated how differences in the party leader's preferences and strategies for managing military affairs could lead to different organizational outcomes. This study further demonstrates that, contrary to conventional perceptions, strengthened political control does not necessarily conflict with the goal of enhancing military effectiveness – as long as the principal has both the power and the incentive to address the associated challenges. However, reform processes without altering the existing institutions of party-military relations indicate the potential vulnerability of some positive

[84] Mukherjee 2017. Notably, Mukherjee distinguishes the "coordination model," adopted by the Indian military, from the "integration model" that is being pursued by China and Russia.
[85] Fravel 2023, 15.

outcomes to a decline of leadership attention or shifting policy preferences. Furthermore, as recent scandals involving Xi's hand-picked generals illustrate, centralized control alone fails to mitigate the informational asymmetry between political leaders and military agents.[86]

5. Conclusion

This study seeks to reassess the motivations, policy processes, and outcomes of military reforms undertaken by Xi Jinping, with a particular focus on their impacts on party-military relations. While marking a crucial milestone in the PLA's long-term pursuit of developing a modern joint operations capability, Xi's military reforms have resulted in less than impressive outcomes in revitalizing and strengthening party control over the military. Drawing on key insights from principal-agent theory, this study offers a comprehensive and coherent explanation of the multifaceted aspects of the reforms and their strikingly divergent outcomes.

This study finds that, contrary to the conventional view that Xi's reforms have successfully reasserted the Party's authority over the PLA, most of Xi's initiatives and "innovations" during the reform process have failed to address the structural flaws deeply embedded in China's system of civilian control. More specifically, little progress has been made in remedying the lack of external oversight, one of the core institutional problems in Chinese party-military relations. Furthermore, the study posits that the current institutional arrangements, which ensure the exclusive authority of the CMC chairman, may incentivize a motivated party leader to personalize the control over the military, as demonstrated by the reform process under Xi.

Conversely, Xi has consistently and explicitly addressed another key institutional problem that had complicated Party's control over the military: the excessive delegation of responsibilities. This study shows that Xi's determination to redefine the PLA's core missions, while demanding that the armed forces focus on combat readiness, explains both the vigor and the pace of the reform drive. More broadly, Xi's reform efforts demonstrate that there are many subtle, less obtrusive mechanisms other than the imposition of sanctions that can be employed to enhance military effectiveness.

Finally, this study presents two key implications for China's foreign policy, particularly in relation to its capacity to wage economic warfare. First, the failure of the reforms to "bring the PLA inside the CCP's tent" indicates that the military will likely continue to operate as an independent actor in foreign policy. This

[86] Wuthnow 2023.

unchecked institutional autonomy could complicate effort by Chinese foreign policy apparatus to effectively coordinate with the PLA. My earlier analysis of military-civil fusion strategy made a similar point that, despite Xi's bold and seemingly innovative efforts to enforce a whole-of-government approach, Chinese policy system remains highly fragmented, with the policy process continuing to replicate previous patterns.[87]

However, this study also suggests that military reforms have enacted organizational changes that may strengthen the capability to engage in economic warfare. The most notable effort in this regard is the establishment of the Strategic Support Force, which is responsible for managing and integrating critical capabilities across space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum.[88] Additionally, the efforts to place the national defense mobilization under the CMC leadership, as previously discussed, are expected to improve the coordination and integration of military interactions with the civilian economy, both in peacetime and wartime. Yet, the organizational structure remains in flux, as evidence by the recent reorganization of the Strategic Support Force, suggesting that the new system is still in the process of adapting to political and military demands and may require some time before it fully operationalizes.

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[87] Lim 2021.
[88] Kania and Costello 2021.

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