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China's Xi Jinping: Hawk or Reformer?

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As the heir-apparent to succeed Hu Jintao as leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and state, there was much speculation on what policies he would pursue. Generally speaking, these fell into two broad categories, not necessarily mutually exclusive:

- Xi the liberal reformer
- Xi's good connections with the People's Liberation Army

With regard to the first, the media made much of his return visit to a farm in Iowa---he had been a junior official, albeit a rising star during his earlier visit in 1985. In the interim, his former hosts had moved to Florida, but returned specifically for the occasion. The couple enthusiastically recounted how impressed they had been with Xi's interest in Iowa's hog and cattle operations, and with the huge size of the area's corn and soybean fields. The *Washington Post* commented that "love is in the air,"¹ and a foreign policy specialist opined that the new leader showed a familiarity with the United States that stretched straight into the heartland.² Perhaps, they speculated, the hardships of Xi's life as a sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution from 1969-1975 had helped shape these insights. Moreover, Xi had sent his daughter to study at Harvard. Surely this new leader, who cheerfully ate his breakfast with fork and spoon because his host had no chopsticks, would be the Western-oriented reformer that the U.S. had been anticipating ever since the "Eight Immortals" emerged from the ruins of the democracy movement of 1989.

As for the military, it was pointed out that although Xi had never seen active duty himself, he had military connections through those of his father, revolutionary leader Xi Zhongxun, and had served as personal secretary to then-secretary of defense Geng Biao. His wife, Peng Liyuan, holds the rank of major general in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), albeit as a result of her singing ability rather than combat service. Additionally, when the Xi family was rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution, they moved back into the privileged enclave of Zhongnanhai, where Jinping socialized with other princelings who became high-ranking officers in the PLA. Since the party's top-ranking position of CCP General Secretary entails chairmanship of the party and state's Central

¹ William Wan, "Xi Jinping Visits Iowa, Where the Diplomatic Equivalent of Love is in the Air," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2012. http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-02-15/world/35444345_1_sarah-lande-xi-asian-american.

² David Shorr of the Stanley Foundation, cited in David Pitt, "Why is China's Xi Jinping Going to Iowa?," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 15, 2012. <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Latest-News-Wires/2012/0215/Why-is-China-s-Xi-Jinping-going-to-Iowa>.

Military Commission, it was believed that Xi would be able to utilize his military connections to ensure rapport with the PLA. The high command had initially regarded the first general secretary to lack military credentials, Jiang Zemin, with some skepticism. However, after increasing the number of billets for full generals, raising military pay, and a series of visits to military units in jungles and frigid borderlands, he managed to ingratiate himself with them thereafter, to the extent that the high command would have been happy to have Jiang stay beyond his normal term; Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, never managed to achieve this degree of support.

The issue of civil-military connections in China has itself been a topic of speculation for some years. Deng Xiaoping's personally chosen successor, Hu Yaobang, was never appointed head of the CMC, presumably because the PLA objected to his lack of military service. A few years later, during the 1989 democracy demonstrations at Tiananmen and over a hundred other cities in the PRC, the military, or certain segments thereof, had been reluctant to move against the demonstrators, with officers declaring that the people's army should not be used against the people, even after the Politburo had declared martial law in Beijing. To the extent that they could be identified, these officers were purged during the conservative backlash that followed the demonstrations, and the entire army was not only required to take an oath of loyalty to the CCP but subjected to months of study sessions to internalize the message that the party's commands were to be obeyed unquestioningly. At least to external appearances, this seemed to have solved the problem: the party had reasserted its primacy over the gun.

Gradually, voices that were different in tone and nature emerged from military men.³ One of the first and more prominent was the publication in 1999 of a book by two senior colonels entitled *Unrestricted Warfare*, carrying the imprimatur of the PLA's Literature and Arts Publishing House in Beijing.⁴ The authors argued, albeit erroneously, that, since the rules of war had been devised by Western countries to benefit themselves and China had had no part in doing so, the PRC need not feel bound by them. Hence it could use whatever means were available to defeat the enemy, including terrorism and climate alternation, which would result in massive civilian casualties. Responding to foreign concern about what this meant for the future direction of Chinese strategy, spokespersons replied that the authors spoke only for themselves.

This explanation became standard, even as it was noticed that more and more officers seemed to be speaking for themselves. American officers reported that their opposite numbers in the PLA had become increasingly outspoken in regional fora, even upstaging civilian leaders therein.⁵ In an article published in the party-affiliated *Global Times*, and featured prominently in the Indian media, Major General Luo Yuan, then deputy secretary of the Academy of Military Sciences, called on the Chinese government to take a more aggressive line in its foreign policy as well as recover territory "looted by neighbors", adding that the neighboring area was not peaceful, and that China faced "outside threats." His article appeared just before then-premier Wen Jiabao's 2010 visit to India, and was noticeably at variance with Wen's words on the peaceful nature of Sino-Indian ties. A rear admiral, Yin Zhuo, stated that China should play an active role in the North Pole. Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu, a professor at the PLA's National Defense University, published *The China Dream*, in which he argued that China should replace the United States as the world's premier military power. Among his plans to implement the dream were multiple aircraft carriers and other advanced weapons. The book quickly became a best seller.

At the end of the year, London's *Financial Times* reported that Beijing had recently silenced several military officers who had "raised hackles" earlier in the year with belligerent comments, citing U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff head Admiral Mike Mullen's comment that attention had "gone from curious about where China is headed to being concerned about it."⁶

The above concern words only, albeit words that would result in dismissal of serving officers in most other militaries. In terms of deeds, there are other indications of possible divergent views as well. In 2004, a PLA submarine transited Japanese territorial waters submerged which, according to the PRC's territorial sea statute, is forbidden in its own waters without express permission of the government.. Tokyo's protest was initially met with

³ Although women comprise about ten percent of the PLA, all the dissonant voices so far have been male.

⁴ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, February 1999) English translation available at <http://cryptome.org/cuw.zip>

⁵ Author's conversations at PACOM, Honolulu, in February 2011. To be sure, civilian leaders also seemed to be taking a more hardline stance internationally, as evidenced by Xi Jinping's comments in Mexico and Pyongyang in 2010 and then-foreign minister Yang Jiechi's belligerent comments in an ASEAN forum and in negotiations with his Japanese counterpart, also in 2010.

⁶ *Financial Times*, December 17, 2010.

silence. After five days, it received a formal apology: the submarine had “accidentally strayed...for technical reasons” while on routine maneuvers. A leading specialist in maritime law concluded that the naval leadership may have “been acting on its own initiative to make an independent point with Japan, (and possibly to other organs of the PRC government as well.)”⁷ He considered the Chinese government’s explanation implausible.⁸

In 2007, the destruction of a satellite by a ground-launched missile---a technological achievement that one might expect the PRC media to announce with great pride--- remained unreported until announced in the U.S. magazine *Aviation Week and Space Technology*. When asked about the test, the Chinese spokesperson replied that he knew nothing about it. Acknowledgement came only twelve days later, with few details proffered. ⁹ Precisely three years later, the PLA air force conducted the first test flight of a stealth fighter only hours before America’s then-defense secretary Bob Gates was to meet with Party General Secretary Hu Jintao to smooth over tense relations ahead of Hu’s planned trip to Washington. When Gates inquired why this was done, Hu replied that he had no knowledge of the test, thus reinforcing suspicions that elements within the PLA were trying to push their government in a more belligerent direction .¹⁰

There are other explanations for the events mentioned above. It has been pointed out that some of the people making bellicose statements are retired and others do not hold command positions. It is also possible that the civilian and military leaderships have orchestrated a good cop-bad cop routine in which the latter can argue to foreign negotiators that the other country should agree to its self-described reasonable conditions or face a harder-line from the group that would presumably succeed it in power.

Alternatively, there could be hard-line and softer line groups in both the civilian and military leaderships who are contending with each other for primacy in policy-making. Though scarcely the norm, softer-line PLA voices are occasionally heard. For example, Major General Liu Yazhou, writing in the Hong Kong magazine Phoenix stated that China’s rise depends on adopting America’s system of government rather than by challenging US presence off the PRC’s eastern coast.¹¹ Liu opined that the alternative could be Soviet-style collapse. And, finally, although it hardly shows the Chinese leadership in a better light, Hu Jintao could have been lying to Gates: he did have prior knowledge of the test. Certainly large numbers of ordinary Chinese did, judging from the hundreds of internet pictures showing the reviewing stand being constructed and crowds assembling at the test site.

Hence Xi Jinping’s formal anointment to the Chinese party, state, and military offices was accompanied by much speculation about how he would handle civil-military relations. Certain of Xi’s past statements might indicate that, contrary to the predictions of Western media that he would be a reformer, Xi leaned toward a harder line. Travelling to Pyongyang in 2008, Xi infuriated South Koreans by hailing Sino-North Korean cooperation in the 1950 Korean war as a glorious page in their history. While visiting Mexico in 2009, he spoke forcefully about “bored foreigners with full stomachs who have nothing better to do than point fingers at [China].” Apparently considered unfit for consumption, the speech was deleted from PRC websites and news reports. ¹²

Immediately after the 18th Party Congress, Xi began a series of military inspection tours. By contrast, his predecessor had taken longer to do so, possibly being inhibited from doing so because his own predecessor, Jiang Zemin, held on to the office of Central Military Commission head for two more years. In any case, Xinhua reported that Xi visited the Guangzhou Military Theater and Guangzhou Military Region in December 2012, which included a well-publicized inspection of the South Sea Fleet’s Haikou destroyer. In February 2013, Xi was reported in northwest China visiting an unnamed air force test training base in Lanzhou Military Region and an inspection of the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center.

⁷ Peter Dutton, “Scouting, Signaling, and Gatekeeping,” (Newport, R.I.: *U.S. Naval War College China Maritime Studies*, No. 2, February 2009) pp. 15-16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹ Stephanie C. Lieggi, “Space Arms Race: China’s ASAT Test a Wake-up Call,” *Center for Nonproliferation Studies*, January 24, 2007. <http://cns.miis.edu/stories/070124.htm>

¹⁰ Jeremy Page and Julian Barnes, “China Showing Its Growing Might: Stealth Jet Upstages Gates, Hu,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 12, 2011. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704428004576075042571461586>

¹¹ John Garnaut, “China Must Reform or Die,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, Aug 12 2010 <http://www.smh.com.au/world/china-must-reform-or-die-20100811-11zxd.html>

¹² Malcolm Moore, “China’s Next Leader in Hardline Rant,” *The Telegraph* (London), February 16, 2009. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/4637039/Chinas-next-leader-in-hardline-rant.html>

Xi had also directed specific attention to the widely known but sensitive topic of military corruption. Immediately after assuming office in November, he stressed the importance of “effectively strengthening anti-corruption army building,” and called on senior military officials to take a firm stand against it.¹³ Lest this be construed as empty ritualism, a month later the CMC issued ten regulations that included restricting military banquets, and barring CMC officials from staying in luxury rooms at civilian hotels while on inspection tours.¹⁴ In a spring 2013 follow-up, high-level military cadres were forbidden to travel for sight-seeing, receive gifts, attend banquets or “meddle in sensitive army affairs.”¹⁵ Although there is no guarantee that these directives will be obeyed, the new CMC chair has made his intent unusually clear.

Xi’s speech at the March 2013 conference that formalized his appointment as the PRC’s president proclaimed his commitment to the China dream, which he linked to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The military newspaper reacted with fulsome praise, saying his words were “like seeing a ship’s mast in the sea, like seeing the radiant sun rise in the east...[It is] the dogma of my belief, the cosmic truth...Belief is like water that carried the ship; belief is like wind that sustains the wings.”¹⁶ The extreme phraseology drew derisive comments from critics, with one pointing out that *Renmin Ribao*, the paper of the party’s Central Committee, had a decade before ranked the concept of cosmic truth as one of ten characteristics of the evil cults that the PRC had banned. By contrast, Liu Mingfu expressed great pleasure in Xi’s enunciation of the China dream. He, however, was more explicit than Xi in stating that rejuvenation meant being the premier global power.¹⁷ When Xi visited with U.S. President Barack Obama at Sunnylands, however, he equated the Chinese dream with the American dream, thereby taking a different line than *Renmin Ribao*, which explicitly said that they were not the same. According to the paper, the goal of the Chinese people is to create prosperity for the entire nation while Americans focus only on individual wealth. And whereas Chinese depend solely on their own strength, Americans exploit the resources of other nations. This created further confusion, with netizens trading satirical comments on the dream including a clever cartoon that showed Xi sleeping, surrounded by an enormous crowd of citizens puzzling over what he was dreaming.



On the eve of the PLA’s national day, Xi took another step in asserting his control over the military, appointing six new generals¹⁸ and, a few days later, ten more.¹⁹ Little doubt exists that Xi does control the military. Hence its actions presumably conform to his policies. Outspoken statements by military leaders continue: Rear Admiral Yang Yi stating, for example, that Japan must accept China’s rising naval power.²⁰ Many of the more hawkish military figures like Dai Xu and Luo Yuan maintain blogs that have thousands of followers, though many of these may be reading for the entertainment value of the posts rather than because they espouse the writers’ sentiments. General

¹³ *Xinhua*, November 17, 2012.

¹⁴ *Xinhua Wang*, December 21, 2012.

¹⁵ *Xinhua Wang*, April 21, 2013.

¹⁶ *Jiefang Junbao* cited in *Xinhua Wang* May 22, 2013. http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2013-05/22/c_124744959.htm

¹⁷ *China Digital Times*

¹⁸ *Want China Times*, August 1, 2013. <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news/subclass-cnt.aspx?id=2013801000095&cid=1101&MainCatID=11>

¹⁹ Minnie Chan, “Xi Promotes 10 More to General---Two in Hong Kong,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), August 4, 2013.

²⁰ Yang Yi, “Japan Must Accept China’s Rising Naval Power,” *Huangqiu Ribao*, August 4 2013. http://opinion.huangqiu.com/opinion_world/2013-08/4195066.html

Liu Yazhou, who had previously called for reform, called for the development of innovative ways to guard against hostile Western forces whom, he wrote, are trying to use multiple new media sources to "overturn the party's rule."²¹ In late 2013 an unabashedly militant and anti-US film appeared, produced by the National Defense University. After receiving much commentary in the foreign press, it was quickly withdrawn, though not before becoming widely available on youtube.²² And a recently retired general warned that if Japan shot down a Chinese drone over islands controlled by Japan but whose sovereignty China contests, the result would be war.²³

Speaking as private individuals though they may be, the posts may serve the leadership's interests in staking out positions that warn other countries against what may happen if they challenge the PRC's policies. Luo, for example, gained notoriety when he called for bathing Tokyo in blood, a position he later seemed to back away from. Still, Chinese demonstrators carried banners espousing the sentiment attributed to him, and extensively covered by Japanese media.

As for deeds, Xi assumed power, the PLA has proceeded in a measured way to assert its dominance over the East and South China seas. Patrol boats warn Vietnamese fishermen off from contested islands, and Manila has tacitly conceded control over the contested Scarborough Shoal area to Chinese ships. China has refused the Philippines' effort to take the dispute to the international tribunal that adjudicates such disputes, even though both parties are signatories to the convention giving it jurisdiction to do so. In July, Chinese warships passed through the Soya Strait between the northernmost island of Japan and Russia's Sakhalin for the first time,²⁴ and a few weeks later, in honor of the 86th anniversary of the PLA's founding, a PLAN fleet circumnavigated Japan as if marking its territory.²⁵ Chinese maritime surveillance ships sail more frequently around the contested islands off Japan. In September, the Japanese air force scrambled its fighter jets when a Chinese drone flew near the islands it contests with the PRC²⁶

China continues to expand its cyberwar capabilities, its ASAT development, and plans for additional aircraft carriers. On the domestic front, Xi has promulgated the seven nos, further limiting free expression, and tightened censorship. Several outspoken university professors have lost their jobs. In all, his first year represents a disappointment for those who anticipated a more liberal regime, either domestically or in foreign policy.

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²¹ Minnie Chan, "Party Told to Innovate Online to Thwart West," *South China Morning Post*) October 16, 2013, p.6.

²² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_8ISjcoSW8

²³ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-11-04/former-chinese-commander-warns-of-war-if-japan-shoots-down-drone.html>

²⁴ *Jiji Press* (Tokyo) July 14, 2013.

²⁵ *China Daily*, August 2, 2013.

²⁶ Unattributed article, *Kyodo/Japan Times*, "ASDF Sends Jets to Check Out Drone," Sep 9, 2013

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2013/09/09/national/chinese-bombers-prompt-japan-to-scramble-fighter-jets/#.UlGCDIPOTcw>