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Basic Analysis of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: (2) Xi Jinping's Vision of a Strong Military

Shinji Yamaguchi (Senior Research Fellow, Asia and Africa Division, Regional Studies Department)

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Continuing from the previous paper (“Basic Analysis of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: (1) Xi Jinping’s Declaration of the Dawn of a New Era”), and with a focus on Xi Jinping’s report (full text) delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (19th CPC National Congress), I will now attempt to shed light on the questions of what types of policies were set out at the 19th CPC National Congress with regard to China’s military affairs and what we can surmise from the personnel decisions that were announced for the Central Military Commission.

As I have described in the previous paper, Xi has declared the dawn of a new era, and he clearly set out the broad goals up to the year 2050. On top of that, he has also laid out a 14-point strategy. The report was structured with an explanation of the 14-point strategy, followed by a detailed explanation of the economy, society, culture, politics, military, diplomacy, and other areas. However, the explanation of the 14 points may not necessarily correspond with the contents of the detailed explanation that follows.

Xi Jinping’s Vision of a Strong Military

In the section of his report covering military matters, General Secretary Xi first talked about the need to “fully implement the Party’s thinking on strengthening the military for the new era and the military strategy for new conditions, build a powerful and modernized army, navy, air force, rocket force, and strategic support force, develop strong and efficient joint operations

commanding institutions for theater commands, and create a modern combat system with distinctive Chinese characteristics [...] (and) be up to shouldering the missions and tasks of the new era entrusted to them by the Party and the people,” in order to respond to the “profound changes in our national security environment” and “demands of the day for a strong country with a strong military.”

The “Party’s thinking on strong military in the new era” refers to Xi Jinping’s military thought. During the commemoration events for the 90th anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Liberation Army on August 1, 2017, Xi revealed that the series of military reforms, construction, and strategies that have been put in place since the 18th CPC National Congress have jointly created the “Party’s thinking on strong military in the new era.” Within the 14-point strategy as well, he highlighted “upholding absolute Party leadership” over “work to build national defense and the armed forces” for the “Party strategy on strengthening military capabilities for the new era.” To fully implement the thinking on strong military in the new era, it is important to “enhance the political loyalty of the armed forces, strengthen them through reform and technology, and run them in accordance with law.” These four elements—establishing a politically loyal army, creating through reform an army that can win wars, strengthening the army through science and technology, and controlling the army in accordance with law—form the pillars of the thinking on strengthening the military.

In the terminology of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the word “thought” (in the sense of “ideology” or

“doctrine”) is of great importance. The leaders who came before Xi have also set out various “thoughts,” including Mao Zedong’s thought on military building, Deng Xiaoping’s thought on military building in the new era, Jiang Zemin’s thought on national defense and military building, and Hu Jintao’s thought on national defense and military building under the Party’s new circumstances. While the sections on military affairs in previous National Congress reports have always touched on the military thoughts and theories of preceding leaders, there was no such mention in Xi’s report. Xi spoke only about his own thought. In his report, he expressed it as the “Party’s thinking on strong military in the new era,” but the Constitution of the CPC incorporates this as “Xi Jinping’s thinking on strong military.” Going forward, the Party’s thinking on strong military in the new era will be known as “Xi Jinping’s thinking on strong military.”

The other items outlined the contents of military strategy and military reforms that Xi has put in place to date. The “military strategy for new conditions” points to the announcement of the military strategy aimed at responding to “informationized local wars,” as outlined in its 2015 defense white paper, *China’s Military Strategy*. By the end of 2015, China had also reorganized its military structure into the components of army, navy, air force, rocket force, and strategic support force; by 2016, it restructured its “military region” system to a “theater command” system. The expression “a modern combat system with distinctive Chinese characteristics” is a new one, and it is unclear what it points to precisely.

Three-stage Plan

In the paragraphs after that, Xi presented an outlook for the overall vision, including for military affairs, in his report for the National Congress. In short, this is a three-stage vision that establishes 2020, 2035, and 2050 as the epoch years.

Firstly, by 2020, the goal is to ensure that “mechanization is basically achieved, IT application has come a long way, and strategic capabilities have seen a

big improvement.” Progress toward the realization of mechanization and the development of IT application are contents that have already been covered at the 18th CPC National Congress.

The point about significant improvement in strategic capabilities has been newly added to these. What this signifies is probably, first of all, to improve its nuclear capabilities both qualitatively and quantitatively. Until now, China has worked on improving the qualitative aspects of its nuclear capabilities with the aim of securing second-strike capability against the United States. Some examples of its enhanced nuclear capabilities include the development of solid fuels, mobile firing capabilities (firing using a transporter erector launcher), and multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV). If significant improvements in strategic capabilities signifies the development of nuclear capabilities, it would not only mean a qualitative improvement, but also a quantitative expansion. The number of nuclear warheads that China possesses is estimated to be about 260; this represents only the number deployed, and is significantly less than the United States and Russia, which each have more than 1,500. However, the number of ICBM deployed is observed to be on the rise. The new expression about strategic capabilities included in this report is perceived to indicate China’s intention of further expanding its capabilities going forward. It is also likely to move forward on the development of new forms of strategic nuclear submarines and strategic bombers.

However, China does not necessarily recognize only nuclear capabilities as a strategic capability. China’s military organizations and military experts tend to accord a high rating to the strategic significance of making surgical strikes through regular military power. Military operations in space, cyberspace, or electromagnetic spectrums are also highly appraised for their strategic significance. Based on this, we can surmise that the importance of continuing to strengthen surgical strike capability through missiles, and of strategic support force

that controls operations in space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic spectrums, will only continue to rise in the future.

With regard to the goals after 2020, General Secretary Xi declared that “by 2035, the modernization of our national defense and our forces will be basically completed, and that by the mid-21st century our people’s armed forces will have been fully transformed into world-class forces.” He hardly touches on the contents of these goals. While it is not clear what “world-class forces” means, we can expect that China’s goal after it achieves the modernization of its national defense and military will be to create a military force that is comparable to U.S. Forces.

In his report, Xi also set out clearly the military areas that greater focus should be placed on moving forward. These are: “to make progress in combat readiness in traditional and new security fields,” and “to develop new combat forces and support forces.” Traditional security fields refer to areas that focus on making strikes through the conventional methods of ground, air, and naval forces. In contrast, new security fields refer to areas such as maritime, space, and cyberspace, and advocate comprehensively improving combat capabilities in these areas. New combat forces is the general term for new weapons such as AI, robotics, and laser weapons, as well as new combat models in areas such as cyberspace or electromagnetic spectrums. As described earlier, the strategic support force controls the space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic spectrum domains, and this report reaffirms the importance of this strategic support force. There is also no doubt that China will put effort into developing AI, robotics, and laser weapons.

Furthermore, General Secretary Xi also touched on “speed(ing) up development of intelligent military.” The development of intelligent military (or development of a smart military) refers to further advancing informatization and AI in relation to military affairs, and building a real-time, force-wide military operation

system that is based on advanced information systems. Today, wireless communications systems are entering the 5G era, networks for a large volume of complex information are being formed, and we are gradually moving toward IoT where various equipment are interlinked to networks. In these modern times, the field of military affairs is also being subjected to a similar wave of technological innovation. In addition to responding to these trends, it is also likely that China is aiming to carry out innovation in these fields. China recognizes that innovation in such cutting-edge fields puts it on the path toward overcoming its previous technological disadvantage in comparison with the United States and taking a more dominant position instead.

Technological innovation is vital to promoting the development of an intelligent military. To that end, General Secretary Xi emphasized “military-civilian integration.” In January 2017, General Secretary Xi established the Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development. This commission is a committee that brings together key personnel from the Party, military, and government. It is headed by General Secretary Xi, with three members from the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau of the CPC as his deputies. Its purpose is to provide leadership and guidance in the development of national defense technology at the politburo level of the CPC, and implement such defense technology through the joint efforts of the military, government, and private sector. Until now, China has always been outdone by the United States and Russia when it comes to military technology, and China has mainly adopted an approach of copying them. In light of this, China now aims to create innovation through its own efforts. This is aligned on the same track as the goal to achieve innovation for the Chinese economy.

In relation to this, General Secretary Xi emphasizes innovation in the section about the economy in his report.

By strengthening efforts to build a nationwide innovation system and strengthening strategic science and technology capabilities, he explains, these efforts will “provide powerful support for building China’s strength in science and technology, product quality, aerospace, cyberspace, and transportation, and for building a digital China and a smart society.” In the aim to develop military-civilian integration, economic strategies are likely to have a direct impact on the development of military technology. From the perspective of security as well, attention should be paid to China’s innovation strategy.

Apart from the abovementioned, another statement that the author has highlighted is “effectively shape our military posture, manage crises, and deter and win wars.” This was also included in *China’s Military Strategy*, the defense white paper published in 2015, and can be perceived as an indication of China’s approach to modern-day conflicts. In other words, it is rare for a direct armed attack to occur without warning in a modern-day conflict; rather, instead of direct military strikes, non-military means are more frequently used first. China has sought to strengthen its claims to rights and interests in the oceans using vessels operated by law-enforcement agencies and militia, while Russia has also combined information warfare and militia activities with military action in its conflict with Ukraine. When considering such characteristics of modern-day conflicts, it is important for China to manage crises and effectively shape its military posture as far as possible while avoiding war. Furthermore, in the event of a war, if it does not possess the capability to win the war, or is unable to deter the outbreak of war, it will fail to protect its own national rights and interests. We could say that General Secretary Xi’s words express this stance.

Personnel Affairs and Organization of the Military

At the First Plenary Session of the 19th CPC National Congress of the Communist Party of China (First Plenary

Session of the 19th CPC National Congress), the list of members of the Central Military Commission was unveiled alongside the list of members of the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau. Basically, the members included in this announcement will lead the military for the next five years.

Table: Members of the Central Military Commission

Chairman	Xi Jinping	President of the People’s Republic of China, General Secretary of the CPC, and other concurrent positions
Vice Chairman	Xu Qiliang	Member of the Central Political Bureau, General, Air Force
Vice Chairman	Zhang Youxia	Member of the Central Political Bureau, General, Ground Force
Member	Wei Fenghe	Defense minister (prospective), General, Rocket Force
Member	Li Zuocheng	Chief of Joint Staff Department, General, Ground Force
Member	Miao Hua	Director of Political Work Department, previously served as General, Ground Force (has experience has Political Commissar of the Navy)
Member	Zhang Shengmin	Secretary of the CMC Commission for Discipline Inspection, Lieutenant, Rocket Force

*The decision to appoint Wei Fenghe as the defense minister is expected to be made at the National People’s Congress in March 2018.

The first point worthy of note in this announcement are the major changes to the structure of the Central Military Commission. This time, only four members have been placed on the Commission apart from the Chairman and two Vice Chairmen. This marks a change from the 11-member system that was in place from the 16th to 18th CPC National Congress. A structure that comprises of only seven members is the smallest group to form the Commission since the 14th CPC National Congress (1992) and 15th CPC National Congress

(1997). The small number of members overturned expectations from before the National Congress. That is to say, as a part of the military reforms, the number of organizations that come directly under the Central Military Commission was expected to increase, as was the number of members of the Commission who will serve as the top of these directly affiliated organizations, while the Vice Chairmen were expected to work in a four-person structure. However, in this personnel reshuffle, the commanders of the five major “battle zones”—Ground, Navy, Air, Rocket, and Strategic Support—were appointed as members of the Central Military Commission.

This updated organization and personnel structure of the military is significant in the following ways. Firstly, reducing the number of members elevates the role of the Central Military Commission as a policymaking organization. An increase in the number of members would hamper the efficiency of decision-making processes. If, hypothetically, the number of members had been increased this time, it would have been unlikely that Central Military Commission would serve as an organization involved in policymaking; conversely, by reducing the number of members, it will be possible for the commission to make decisions faster and more efficiently under the leadership of Xi. From the political perspective as well, the members appointed to the Commission in this round are all military men who are considered to be highly loyal to Xi.

In relation to that, the clear stipulation that a “Chairperson of the Central Military Commission assumes overall responsibility over the work of the Commission” in the Constitution of the CPC is another point of great importance. Until now, there has been no doubt that the supreme leader, who is the Chairman of the Central Military Commission as well as the Party’s General Secretary and President of China, fulfills an important role even in the military. On the other hand, leaders who came after Deng Xiaoping sometimes

lacked military experience, and the practical job of managing the military often fell to the uniformed team of Vice Chairmen of the Commission. In contrast, by clearly stipulating that the Chairman of the Commission holds responsibility over the work of the Commission, Xi has made a clear statement that he has the final authority when it comes to making decisions in the Central Military Commission.

Secondly, by excluding the top leaders of the respective branches of the military from membership in the Commission, we can see that the approach is to avoid confrontation between different branches of the military into the Central Military Commission and to promote integrated operations under the leadership of Xi. The People’s Liberation Army has overwhelmingly been a ground force-oriented army; however, the reforms put in place by Xi have sought to correct this problem and drive forward integration. The absence of representatives from the respective organizations of the ground, naval, air, and rocket forces could be described as an expression of this intention. Furthermore, looking at the departments of government that the members of the Central Military Commission have come from, it is clear that there is no particular evidence of any consideration given to balance in this respect.

Thirdly, we can expect a rise in the authority of the Central Military Commission’s Commission for Discipline Inspection. Until the start of military reforms launched by Xi, the Commission for Discipline Inspection had held a low status within the military. In 1990, soon after its establishment in 1980, the Commission for Discipline Inspection was reorganized as the Department for Discipline Inspection, subsumed under the General Political Department. However, it gained independence as the Commission for Discipline Inspection in the organizational restructuring that took place in 2016 and is expected to play an important role in the implementation of Xi’s anti-corruption campaign in the military. The appointment of Lieutenant Zhang

Shengmin, Secretary of the CMC Commission for Discipline Inspection, as a member of the Central Military Commission on this occasion signifies the elevation in the position of the Commission for Discipline Inspection. This means that the Commission for Discipline Inspection is an important means of political control for the People's Liberation Army.

Fourthly and in relation to the third point, the amended Constitution of the CPC states clearly that "the Central Military Commission is responsible for Party work and political work in the armed forces." In accordance with this, the Political Work Department is ultimately an organization that engages in political work and follows the command of the Central Military Commission. Previously, party work and political work in the military

had come under the responsibility of the General Political Department. This department was dissolved in Xi's military reform in what could be described as an attempt to consolidate authority to the Central Military Commission. We could say that this text sets out this relationship clearly. In truth, the organization that controls activities within the military, such as documentation and resolutions of the CPC, is the General Office of the Central Military Commission (an administrative organization under the Central Military Commission); the strengthening of the actual power wielded by the Central Military Commission is clear.

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profile

Shinji Yamaguchi

Senior Fellow, Asia and Africa Division,
Regional Studies Department

Areas of Expertise:

Chinese Politics, Chinese Security Policy, Civil-
Military Relations in China, Contemporary
Chinese History

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Planning and Coordination Office,
The National Institute for Defense Studies

Telephone (direct): 03-3260-3011

Telephone (general): 03-3268-3111 (ext. 29171)

FAX: 03-3260-3034

* Website: <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/>