

[China's Defense and Foreign Policy Topic Week](#)

By Ching Chang

Predicted Event and Statements

The Nineteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and its subsequent First Plenary Session of the Central Committee was concluded as scheduled in late October 2017. As predicted, the Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, on behalf of the Eighteenth Central Committee, delivered the working report at the Nineteenth National Congress on October 18, 2017. This report was titled *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era* describes all the previous major efforts and achievements completed in the past five years with retrospective perspectives. Nonetheless, certain visions were also noted in the same report.

For instance, in Xi's report, he has addressed that, "We have initiated a new stage in strengthening and revitalizing the armed forces." To elaborate this concern more detail, this report noted:

"With a view to realizing the Chinese Dream and the dream of building a powerful military, we have developed a strategy for the military under new circumstances, and have made every effort to modernize national defense and the armed forces. We convened the Gutian military political work meeting to revive and pass on the proud traditions and fine conduct of our Party and our armed forces, and have seen a strong improvement in the political integrity of the people's armed forces. Historic breakthroughs have been made in

reforming national defense and the armed forces: a new military structure has been established with the Central Military Commission exercising overall leadership, the theater commands responsible for military operations, and the services focusing on developing capabilities. This represents a revolutionary restructuring of the organization and the services of the people's armed forces. We have strengthened military training and war preparedness, and undertaken major missions related to the protection of maritime rights, countering terrorism, maintaining stability, disaster rescue and relief, international peacekeeping, escort services in the Gulf of Aden, and humanitarian assistance. We have stepped up weapons and equipment development, and made major progress in enhancing military preparedness. The people's armed forces have taken solid strides on the path of building a powerful military with Chinese characteristics."

Later, Xi further emphasized the goal of the Chinese Communist Party, that "... the Party's goal of building a strong military in the new era is to build the people's forces into world-class forces that obey the Party's command, can fight and win, and maintain excellent conduct." In the eleventh point of his "Fourteen Upholding Issues" titled *Upholding Absolute Party Leadership over the People's Forces*, Xi addressed that,

"Building people's forces that obey the Party's command, can fight and win, and maintain excellent conduct is strategically important to achieving the two centenary goals and national rejuvenation. To realize the Party's goal of building a powerful military in the new era, we must fully implement the fundamental principles and systems of Party leadership over the military, and see that Party strategy on strengthening military capabilities for the new era guides work to build national defense and the armed forces. We must continue to enhance the political loyalty of the armed forces, strengthen them through

reform and technology, and run them in accordance with law. We must place greater focus on combat, encourage innovation, build systems, increase efficacy and efficiency, and further military-civilian integration.”

Finally, in Chapter Ten of Xi’s report titled *Staying Committed to the Chinese Path of Building Strong Armed Forces and Fully Advancing the Modernization of National Defense and the Military*, Xi repeatedly underscored the following efforts for the future:

“We have reached a new historical starting point in strengthening national defense and the armed forces. Confronted with profound changes in our national security environment and responding to the demands of the day for a strong country with a strong military, we must fully implement the Party’s thinking on strengthening the military for the new era, adapt military strategy to 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. Our armed forces must be up to shouldering the missions and tasks of the new era entrusted to them by the Party and the people.”

Xi also concluded that, “We will adapt to the trend of a new global military revolution and to national security needs; we will upgrade our military capabilities, and see that, by the year 2020, mechanization is basically achieved, IT application has come a long way, and strategic capabilities have seen a big improvement. In step with our country’s modernization process, we will modernize our military across the board in terms of theory, organizational structure, service personnel, and weaponry. We will make it our mission to see that by 2035, the modernization of our national defense and our forces is

basically completed; and that by the mid-21st century our people's armed forces have been fully transformed into world-class forces."

Regarding the party leadership above the military, Xi insisted that, "We will strengthen Party building in the military. We will launch activities with the theme of passing on the traditions of revolution; stepping up to the task of making the military strong. We will move forward with the development of the military honors system. We will train the revolutionary officers and soldiers of a new era with faith, ability, courage, and integrity, and see that our forces forever preserve their nature, purpose, and character as the forces of the people." Indeed, it is no surprise to readdress the principle of "party commands the gun" that emphasizes the party leadership within military command authorities.

For deepening national defense and military reform, Xi signified that, "We will continue to deepen national defense and military reform. We will further the reform of major policy systems, including the career officers system and the system for posting civilian personnel in the military. We will push ahead with transformation of military management, and improve and develop our distinctively Chinese socialist military institutions. We must keep it firm in our minds that technology is the core combat capability, encourage innovations in major technologies, and conduct innovations independently. We will strengthen the system for training military personnel, and make our people's forces more innovative. We will govern the military with strict discipline in every respect, push for a fundamental transformation in the way our military is run, and strengthen the role of rule of law in enhancing national defense and military capabilities."

For the basic goal of the military, Xi also reminded that, "A military is built to

fight. Our military must regard combat capability as the criterion to meet in all its work and focus on how to win when it is called on. We will take solid steps to ensure military preparedness for all strategic directions, and make progress in combat readiness in both traditional and new security fields. We will develop new combat forces and support forces, conduct military training under combat conditions, strengthen the application of military strength, speed up development of intelligent military, and improve combat capabilities for joint operations based on network information systems and the ability to fight under multi-dimensional conditions. This will enable us to effectively shape our military posture, manage crises, and deter and win wars.”

Of course, Xi also adopted the following statements to boost the morale of the military and armed police force members:

“We should ensure that efforts to make our country prosperous and efforts to make our military strong go hand in hand. We will strengthen unified leadership, top-level design, reform, and innovation. We will speed up implementation of major projects, deepen reform of defense-related science, technology, and industry, achieve greater military-civilian integration, and build integrated national strategies and strategic capabilities. We will improve our national defense mobilization system, and build a strong, well-structured, and modern border defense, coastal defense, and air defense. We will establish an administration for veterans; we will protect the legitimate rights and interests of military personnel and their families; and we will make military service an occupation that enjoys public respect. We will carry out further reforms to build a modernized armed police force.”

Eventually, Xi concluded with a sensational statement to readdress his vision of fulfilling the dream of building a powerful military: “Comrades, our military

is the people's military, and our national defense is the responsibility of every one of us. We must raise public awareness about the importance of national defense and strengthen unity between the government and the military and between the people and the military. Let us work together to create a mighty force for realizing the Chinese Dream and the dream of building a powerful military."

Frankly speaking, no particular new idea related to the defense policy was disclosed by Xi in this report except two deadlines of force building. However, it is still important for political observers and military analysts to read the above contents for understanding the direction and goals of Chinese military policy.

Assessing Future Developments

It is quite hard to digest specific substance on policies from the statements shown above though they were quite inspirational to the members of the People's Liberation Army. We should understand that a cover-all report of this type delivered in the vital political assembly may not necessarily reflect all the essential details associated with any specific policy. Nevertheless, we may still offer several credible assessments.

The first feature possibly concluded from the aforementioned text is that most present ongoing efforts within the Chinese defense communities will remain unchanged. These efforts include deepening national defense and military reform as well as military-civilian integration. Stability and continuity of the policies around these two dimensions can be expected in the foreseeable future.

The second feature emphasized by Xi is the relationship between the party and military. Particularly, the party leadership over the military has been repeated for several times in Xi's report. We may also expect this iron rule of the party-military relationship will not change as long as the Chinese Communist Party still retains its governing power in China. Whether this insistence of party leadership may affect the military professionalism of the People's Liberation Army is an issue worth of continuing observations.

Last but not least; two deadlines, 2020 and 2035, were emphasized for separate objectives in Xi's report for force building. The details of these efforts require more attention for clarifying the objectives attached to these two deadlines. How this two-stage force building vision possibly affect future developments of the People's Liberation Army is still obscure to many though plausible speculations have already emerged.

Conclusion: Uncertainties Still Exist

One swallow does not make a summer, neither a single speech, even though it was delivered by the highest PRC leadership, could cover all the contents of the defense policies associated with the People's Liberation Army. Many policies are fundamentally adaptive and circumstantial. There are many uncertainties around Chinese defense policies before these two newly declared deadlines. Two existing efforts of deepening national defense and military reform as well as civilian-military integration are basically unstoppable for now. The party-military relationship remains compatible to the political culture of the Chinese communist regime for the time being and will likely be retained into the future. Nonetheless, uncertainties remain and nobody may have the crystal ball to tell what exactly the future development of the Chinese defense apparatus entails.

Dr. Ching Chang was a line officer in the Republic of China Navy for more than thirty years. As a very productive commentator on the Chinese military affairs, he is recognized as a leading expert on the People's Liberation Army with unique insights on its military thinking.

Featured Image: In this November 3, 2017 photo released by China's Xinhua news agency, President Xi Jinping (center) visits the Central Military Commission in Beijing as part of an inspection tour. (AP)

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