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Nan, Li

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Why China's Central Military Commission Admitted New Members

Nan Li*

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China's Central Military Commission (CMC) is important for several reasons. It commands China's armed forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and it makes decisions on the nation's military strategy, military organization, higher military personnel appointments, defence budget, and arms acquisitions. It also advises on China's highest policy council, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo and the National People's Congress on defence and military policy. Moreover, it is manned by some of the most powerful people in China. It is chaired by Jiang Zemin (former CCP General Secretary), while its vice chairs include Hu Jintao (the current CCP General Secretary) and two most senior officers in the PLA. Other members include the heads of the PLA's four general (staff, political, logistics and armament) departments. Finally, as the PLA has been getting bigger budgets and better technologies, what happens to the CMC or what decisions it makes may have implications for the security of China's neighbours, as well as for domestic politics.

An interesting development in the CMC was its recent decision to expand by admitting three new members: commanders of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), Navy (PLAN), and Second Artillery (China's strategic missile force). The decision was leaked to the pro-Beijing Wen Wei Po in Hong Kong, and would be approved by the next CCP Central Committee Plenum to be held later in the year (Benjamin K. Lim, "China Military to expand Decision-Making Body," Reuters, April 30). What can explain such a development?

Taiwan?

One explanation is that the decision was made to send a message to Taiwan. To the extent naval, air, and missile capabilities are central to winning a war over Taiwan, by admitting into CMC the heads of the three services, the message is that the PLA is seriously preparing to fight a technology-based war in the Taiwan Strait. This may deter Chen Shuibian, the recently re-elected President of Taiwan, from moving towards independence. The reasoning behind this is that rather than wait until after the CCP plenum later in the year, Beijing chose to leak it just before the presidential inauguration on May 20th, in order to highlight the message.

There is no question that Taiwan could be one motivation underlying the decision. But other sources reveal that the decision was passed on to PLA officers at and above corps (jun) level even before the March 20th presidential election. This indicates that the idea had been deliberated over for some time, and the decision was not a hasty response to Taiwan's election results.

Power Struggle?

Another explanation is that of power struggle, where Jiang or Hu attempts to enhance his relative capabilities by bringing into CMC allies who control high-tech arms. Some may recall that during 1968-69, Lin Biao packed the CMC with loyalists such as Wu Faxian (PLAAF commander) and Li Zuopeng (PLAN commissar). This allowed Lin to plot a coup against Mao, where PLAAF land attack aircraft would be used to strike at the latter as he travelled by train.

A major flaw in this explanation is that while recruiting those who control planes, ships, and missiles may enhance influence, the hardware themselves are inappropriate for a coup. Lin had to be dumb to count on PLAAF to assassinate Mao as it was ill equipped and trained for such missions. Except for a battle over a Kuomintang-controlled offshore island in 1955, PLAAF had never been employed to attack land targets, whether in Korea, 1962 war with India, or the 1979 war with Vietnam. The PLAAF was simply not capable of accomplishing such missions, and there was no confidence it could be used successfully. Lin, one of the best PLA commanders, could not have been ignorant of this. While the CCP account of Lin using PLAAF for a coup may not be totally false, it can neither be entirely true. Lin did get access to a PLAAF Trident to flee China, but it crashed in Mongolia.

In contrast, to balance Lin's power, rather than relying on high-tech arms, Mao went to the PLA's low-tech ground and internal security forces. Using a strategy of what he called "undermining foundation" (wa qiangjiao) and "mixing sands" (can sazi), Mao brought into the CMC Military Region commanders who were not from the 4th Field Army (Lin's power base) in 1969. He also transferred Li Desheng from Anhui to command the Beijing Military Region, which controlled the Beijing garrison, and got him into CMC. He recruited Wang Dongxin, who directed the CCP Central Administrative Office and central guard unit, into CMC in early 1970. These moves could not but be highly alarming to Lin, which may have triggered Lin's decision to go into exile. Similarly, Ye Jianying did not go to PLAAF, PLAN or Second Artillery for help in his struggle against the Gang of Four in late 1976. Instead, he persuaded Wang Dongxin to take his side, and employed the central guard unit to arrest the Gang.

In both instances, winners counted on low-tech ground and internal security forces for successes, but not planes, ships, and missiles. The former are more effective than the latter in power struggles. If this is true, Jiang or Hu must be naïve to cultivate favour from PLAAF, PLAN, and Second Artillery in their struggle for power. Instead, they should have admitted into CMC the commanders of the Beijing Military Region and People's Armed Police, or the director of CCP's Central Administrative Office. Because this did not happen, there may be other better explanations.

Military Modernization

In an earlier analysis of the CMC, this author suggested that unless the Commission admits officers with a background in these three services, which are gaining prominence in China's security posture, there would have been "discord" in coordinating resource allocation in operations, personnel, and finance (Nan Li, "Organizational Changes of the PLA, 1985-1997," *China Quarterly*, June 1999, p. 323). The decision to admit into CMC the commanders of three technology-based services therefore appears to be an attempt to

alleviate such “discord.” This means that an acceleration of technology-based military modernization is the primary motivation underlying the decision.

But how can new CMC memberships contribute to technology-based modernization? First, having representatives at the highest military policy council contributes to enhanced identity and confidence of the three technology-based services. Such identity has been weak due to the hegemony of the PLA ground forces. Second, membership of the CMC strengthens the position of the three services when they bargain on budget, manpower, and arms acquisitions. Finally, membership contributes to enhanced command and control simulating joint services operations, where three services may play a more prominent role.

* Dr. Nan Li is a Senior Fellow with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.