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DISTANCING THE PLA FROM POLITICS – REPRESENTATIVES IN CCP STANDING COMMITTEES

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Chinese President Xi Jinping has maintained a firm focus on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) ever since he was appointed General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012. Since then he has initiated the most extensive reform ever of the PLA including the demobilisation of 300,000 personnel. He additionally brought the PLA within the purview of the Central Discipline Inspection Commission (CDIC), the Party's anti-corruption watchdog body. Xi Jinping simultaneously took steps to divest it of its business enterprises, quietly push the PLA back into the barracks and insulate it from local politics. The latter probably motivated by the need to obviate recurrence of incidents like when ousted Politburo member Bo Xilai created "cliques" within the PLA. From 2015, PLA officers began being removed from the Provincial Party Standing Committees. Indications are now surfacing that this policy is under review and possibly being reversed.

High on Xi Jinping's list of priorities has been to tighten the Party's control over the PLA, professionalise the PLA and keep it focussed on military training. At an 'enlarged' meeting of the CMC the day after taking over as its Chairman, he declared that political reliability will be the determining criteria for promoting PLA officers. This has been bolstered by Xi Jinping's conviction that that by designating the Army as the 'army of the state' the Soviet leadership had actually "disarmed" the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Consecutive campaigns in the PLA "educate" its personnel that it is an 'army of the Party' and its officers must "absolutely obey" the Party. An important reason for the campaigns is the worry that has dogged the CCP leadership, particularly since 2011-12, that new college graduates joining the PLA who might have been exposed to 'western' and 'liberal' ideas advocating that the PLA should be an 'army of the state' could carry that into their army careers.

In the meantime, since 2015 apparently as part of the military reform, Xi Jinping began quietly dismantling the military-political coordination mechanism set up since before the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) and which proved effective to an extent in reining in the excesses of the Red Guards. There was consequently since that date a gradual effort to drop PLA representatives from the Party's Provincial-level Standing Committees. Till December 2017, 17 provinces and autonomous regions out of a total of 31 had no PLA representative in their Party standing committees. These were: Xinjiang, Anhui, Henan, Shanxi, Jiangxi, Tibet, Hunan, Jiangsu, Guangxi, Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Fujian, Liaoning, Yunnan, Shanghai, Tianjin and Gansu.

Interestingly, the two troubled Autonomous Regions of Tibet and Xinjiang were among those where there were no PLA representatives on the Party Standing Committees. The official Beijing Daily

observed that this is part of the military reform and that the Xinjiang Military region, Tibet Military region and Beijing Garrison had been transferred directly to the PLA's control, implying that they would report to the CMC. It added that the other 28 provincial military commands will come under the National Defense Mobilization Department under the State Council and CMC.

Lt. Gen. Sheng Bin, former Deputy Commander of Shenyang Military Region who is now Director of the CMC's National Defense Mobilization Department (NDMD) that was established on January 11, 2016 under Xi Jinping's military reforms, said in an interview with the China National Defence News in March 2016, that as per existing laws and regulations, the provincial military command is equal with the Party's military, local government military service agencies and local garrison coordinating agencies. He clarified that with the new changes the NDMD's functions would include: Emergency Response Command, local party military affairs, Reserve force of Ministry of Construction, military service department of the same level and coordination of the military and civilian affairs. The Military District system is now managed by the NDMD, relieving Theatre Commands of many administrative burdens, including the supervision of militia work in the provinces. The exact role of Theatre Commands in the development of national defense mobilization capabilities is, however, not yet clear.

Well-informed Beijing-based Chinese analysts and some state-owned Chinese papers observed that major concerns behind the move were to prevent: PLA officers from exercising influence for personal profit; curbing corruption in the PLA; prevent senior military officers from getting involved in politics in the provinces; and prevent senior PLA officers from building lobbies in the CCP. A major factor cited by them was Xi Jinping's emphasis on professionalization of the PLA, which implies elevated levels of training and keeping PLA personnel focussed on military training tasks. Another important factor would be that as the PLA downsizes and its resources get stretched, the administrative burden on PLA officers needs to be reduced.

Prof. Xu Yaotong of the Chinese Academy of Governance said that the withdrawal of military officers from the standing committees would have a positive impact on the development of a modern military force. In an interview to China News Weekly, Prof Xu Yaotong said not choosing military officers as provincial Standing Committee members would help create well-equipped military forces in the future.

A major reversal in this policy has, however, become evident from December 2017 since when PLA officers have begun being brought back into the Provincial Party Standing Committees. PLA Major General Han Xiaodong, Political Commissar of the Hebei Military District was inducted on December 30, 2017 to the Hebei Provincial Party Standing Committee and PLA Major General Wang Bianjiang, Political Commissar of the Liaoning Military District was inducted on December 30, 2017 to the Liaoning Provincial Party Standing Committee. Clearly confirming the reversal of the earlier policy, Lt General Xu Yong, Commander of the Tibet Military Region, has also been re-inducted into the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Party Standing Committee. Till now, however, there is no PLA representative in the Party Standing Committee of the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region.

A total of 15 Provinces and Autonomous Regions have till January 28, 2018 now got PLA representatives in their respective Party Standing Committees. These are: Hubei, Anhui, Hebei, Hainan, Liaoning, Hunan, Guangdong, Gansu, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, TAR, Shandong, Sichuan, Beijing and Guangxi-Zhuang AR. Seven of the 15 are PLA Commanders while the remaining are Political Commissars.

A list of the PLA officers appointed to the Provincial Party Standing Committees is appended.

(The author is a former Additional Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India and is President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.)

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APPENDIX

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1. Major General Ma Tao (马涛), member of Hubei provincial standing committee (Date of announcement-2nd January, 2018), commander of Hubei military district (appointed in August, 2017).
2. Major General Yang Zheng (杨征), member of Anhui provincial standing committee (Date of announcement-2nd January 2018), commander of Anhui military district (appointed in August, 2017).
3. Major General Han Xiaodong (韩晓东), member of Hebei provincial standing committee (Date of announcement-30th December, 2017), political commissar of Hebei military district (appointed in August, 2017).
4. Major General Chen Shoumin (陈守民), member of Hainan provincial committee and standing committee (Date of announcement-2nd January, 2018), commander of Hainan military district (appointed in May, 2016).
5. Major General Wang Bianjiang (王边疆), member of Liaoning provincial standing committee (Date of announcement- 30th December, 2017), Political commissar of Liaoning military district (appointed in December, 2016).
6. Major General Feng Yi (冯毅), member of Hunan provincial committee and standing committee (Date of announcement- 3rd January, 2018), Political commissar of Hunan military district (appointed in April, 2017).
7. Major General Zhang Liming (张利明), member of Guangdong provincial committee and standing committee (date of announcement-3rd January, 2018), commander of Guangdong military district (appointed in January, 2015)
8. Major General Pu Yongneng (蒲永能), member of Gansu provincial committee and standing committee (Date of announcement-3rd January, 2018), political commissar of Gansu military district (appointed in July, 2017).
9. Major General Meng Zhongkang (孟中康), member of Jiangsu provincial committee and standing committee (Date of announcement-3rd January, 2018), political commissar of Jiangsu military district (appointed in May, 2017).
10. Major General Yang Xiaoxiang (杨笑祥), member of Jiangxi provincial committee and standing committee (Date of announcement-3rd January, 2018), political commissar of Jiangxi military district (appointed in March, 2015).
11. Lieutenant General Xu Yong (许勇), member of TAR standing committee (Date of announcement-6th January, 2018), commander of TAR military region.
12. Major General Zhao Jilu (赵冀鲁), member of Shandong provincial committee and standing committee (date of announcement-4th January, 2018), commander of Shandong military district (appointed in May 2017).

13. Major General Jiang Yongshen (姜永申), member of Sichuan provincial committee and standing committee (Date of announcement-5th January, 2018), commander of Sichuan military district (appointed in July, 2015)
14. Lieutenant General Jiang Yong (姜勇), member of Beijing standing committee (Date of announcement-4th January, 2018), political commissar of Beijing Garrison (appointed in January, 2015)
15. Major General Jiang Yingyu (姜英宇), member of Guangxi autonomous region committee and standing committee (Date of announcement-3rd January, 2018), Political commissar of Guangxi military district (appointed in July 2016).

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