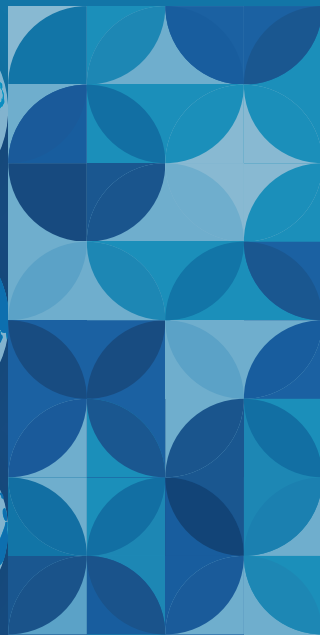


2022-2023 WILSON CHINA FELLOWSHIP

The Decline of Factions in the PLA

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Abstract

How has the People's Liberation Army (PLA) changed under Xi Jinping? This study examines this question through a study of factional networks in the PLA. The presence of factions in the PLA has implications for the military's battlefield effectiveness, loyalty to the party's civilian leadership, and ability to maintain domestic stability. To investigate the changing role of factions in the PLA, I draw on a dataset of over 12,000 appointments to top military positions. I show a striking decline of the importance of promotion networks between Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. Under Hu Jintao, having a career tie to one of the generals sitting on the Central Military Commission (CMC) was highly predictive of promotion. As later corruption prosecutions made clear, officers in the Hu Era were systematically paying patrons for promotion up the ladder. This likely eroded military readiness and increased the risk of domestic political instability. Under Xi, however, having a career tie to a CMC vice chairman no longer helps a general's career prospects. In recent years, generals with ties to a military officer on the CMC member leader are not more likely to be promoted than average. Instead, ties to Xi Jinping himself matter for promotion. The decline of intra-military factions in the PLA—and the rise in importance of ties to Xi Jinping—has likely ensured the army's loyalty to Xi while on balance increasing professionalism.

Policy Implications and Key Takeaways

- For U.S. policymakers assessing the PLA's ability to project power outside of China, the picture is mixed, but on balance points to growing military professionalism under Xi. Strong patronage networks within the PLA under Hu Jintao eroded military professionalism. Xi has largely stamped out these networks, although uncertainties remain. *Policy Implications:* Military assessments of PLA military readiness should not assume that the PLA will be vulnerable to the same severe corruption issues that have evidently harmed the Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- For U.S. policymakers assessing the likelihood of domestic political instability in China, the military is significantly less likely than before to support an elite split. Under Hu, the factionalism of the military

elevated the risk that some generals could side with a challenger to the top leader. Under Xi, that risk, already low, has become much smaller. *Policy Implication:* Policymakers in the United States should expect a continuation of the status quo in elite politics as long as Xi is healthy and does not retire.

- For U.S. policymakers assessing the likelihood of armed conflict in the Taiwan straits, Xi's tight control over PLA personnel suggests that compared to his recent predecessors he is likely to be less susceptible to pressure from PLA officers to ratchet up (or down) conflict. Moreover, the composition of the new Central Military Commission (CMC) should not be seen as a signal that Xi intends to go to war soon. *Policy Implication:* When assessing PRC behavior in the Taiwan Straits, United State military and civilian officials should not view Taiwan as a likely wedge issue in Chinese elite politics. Leaders should continue to seek military-to-military exchanges and conflict de-escalation hotlines, even if these efforts are rebuffed.

Introduction

Do factional networks matter in the People's Liberation Army (PLA)? This question has implications for the PLA's battlefield effectiveness, loyalty to the party leadership, and ability to maintain domestic stability. Research shows that militaries that are focused on preventing internal coups may perform poorly in external wars and conflicts.¹ Moreover, a military riven by internal factions may also be more likely to participate in a leadership challenge or coup, especially if one of the internal factions backs a challenger to the leader.² And a military that is internally divided may also be less likely to agree to repress protest and more likely to defect to the side of protesters.³

To examine the role of factions in the PLA, this report draws on a dataset of over 12,000 appointments to the PLA to examine the shifting role of internal patronage networks under Xi Jinping and Hu Jintao—this is among the first quantitative study of internal military factions in China.⁴ The data on appointments includes information on all leaders at the deputy military region commander and above for the entire history of the People's Republic of China. However, I focus the analysis on the two most recent administrations, the leadership of Hu Jintao (2002 to 2012) and Xi Jinping (2012 to present). Not only are the two most recent administrations the most relevant for policymakers, they are also notable for lax civilian oversight of the military in the Hu Era and tighter oversight in the Xi Era. Over the last decade, Xi Jinping has consolidated power across a number of dimensions, and the military and security services are one of the most important.

Overall, I find that under Hu Jintao, membership in patronage networks helped officers get promoted. That is, having a career tie to one of the generals sitting on the Central Military Commission (CMC), and especially the two Vice Chairs, was highly predictive of promotion to full general. I define career ties as overlapping service in the same military unit. Officers with career ties to CMC Vice Chair Guo Boxiong were more than 25 percentage points more likely to be promoted to full general than their peers. Remarkably, officers with career ties to CMC Vice Chair Xu Caihou were more than 50 percentage point more likely to be promoted than the average officer. Qualitatively, there is strong evidence that under Hu, officers were systematically paying their patrons like Xu Caihou for promotion up the ladder. I show that this eroded the professionalism of the officer corps, since

the promoted officers were systematically like likely to have combat experience than their peers.

Under Xi, by contrast, the importance of intra-military patronage networks has declined dramatically. Officers with ties to the CMC Vice Chairman are no more likely than average to be promoted. Instead, officers with career ties to Xi Jinping are more likely to be promoted. This marks an important shift, since ties to Hu Jintao were not predictive of promotion in the 2002–2012 period.

The decline of intra-military factions in the PLA, and the rise in importance of ties to Xi Jinping, has important implications for policymakers.

First, the trends on balance point to growing military professionalism under Xi. Strong patronage networks within the PLA under Hu Jintao almost certainly eroded military professionalism and readiness. Xi has largely stamped out these networks, while at the same time basing promotion to top positions on ties to himself. Promotion of a small number of top officers based on ties to Xi is on balance likely to be less harmful to military readiness than the more widespread patronage networks of the Hu Era, which divided the PLA internally.

Second, the PLA today is significantly less likely than before to support an elite split. Under Hu, the factionalism of the military elevated the risk that some generals could side with a challenger to the top leader. Under Xi, that risk, already low, has become much smaller. The systematic promotion of officers with longstanding ties to Xi would make any coup plot extraordinarily dangerous to execute.

Finally, Xi's tight control over PLA personnel suggests that compared to his recent predecessors he is likely to be less susceptible to pressure from PLA officers to ratchet up (or down) conflict. Past reports suggested that leaders such as Jiang Zemin were susceptible to pressure from nationalist military officers.⁵ Under Xi, such pressure is on the whole less likely to play into the leadership's political calculus.

Background: The PLA

The People's Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party. It is not in name or in practice a national army controlled by the government. Instead, it is controlled by the Central Military Commission (CMC) of

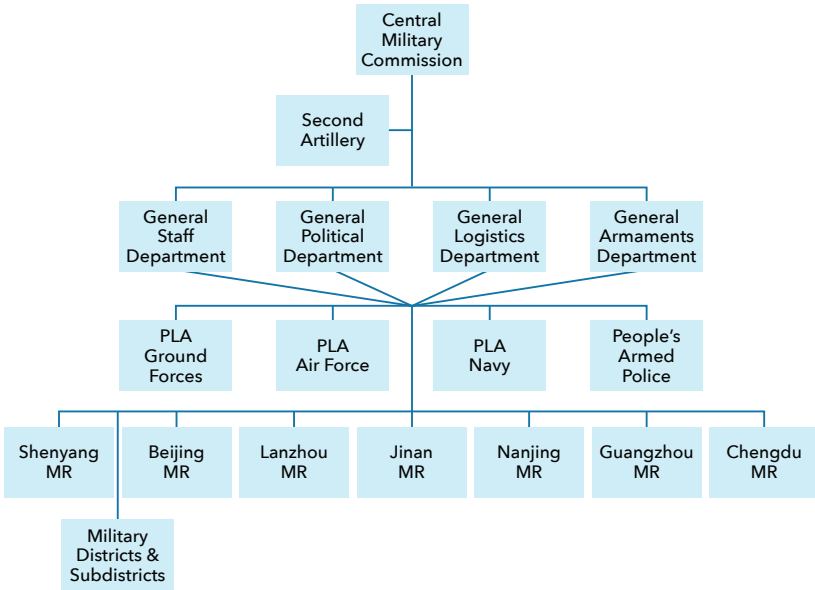
the CCP. In recent decades, the CMC has generally had a civilian chairman who is also generally the country's top civilian leader. The CMC chairman has control over all key military matters, including officer appointments and the deployment of troops, both domestically and internationally. There are generally two uniformed vice-chairmen of the CMC, who are the PLA's top two military leaders. This position is roughly equivalent to chief of the joint staff in the United States. At times there has also been a civilian vice chairman of the CMC, when the party is training a successor to the leader. The size of the overall CMC has fluctuated significantly over time. Currently, it has one chairman (Xi Jinping), two vice chairmen (both military officers), and four regular members.

It is telling that it is the CMC Chairman who has historically been the PRC's most powerful leader, not necessarily the party secretary or head of state. For example, even though Mao relinquished his post as head of government, he maintained the dual positions of CCP chairman and CMC chairman until his death. Deng Xiaoping was never the formal head of the CCP or the state, yet was recognized as paramount leader—that is, China's top political leader—and he exercised his authority in no small part by holding the post of CMC chairman through most of the 1980s. He did so, as Ezra Vogel noted, because “in a crucial power struggle, as Mao and Deng understood, allegiances among key military leaders would be crucial.”⁶

In Figure 1, I sketch out the organization of the PLA before a set of major organizational changes launched by Xi Jinping in 2016. The PLA was organized until recently into military regions and below them districts (and sub-districts). Each of these stationed forces throughout China's provinces, prefectures, and counties.

Importantly, the civilian leaders of these provincial, prefectural, and county party committees generally also have concurrent posts as the first party secretary of the local military garrison. This unusual feature of China's Leninist system ensures party integration with the military and control over it. It also provides opportunities for civilian party leaders to get to know their military counterparts as both attempt to climb the political ladder.⁷

FIGURE 1: A visualization of the PLA’s command structure prior to the 2016 reorganization.⁸ Each military region and branch has a commissar, commander, deputy commissar, and deputy commander. Each of the general departments has a director, deputy director, and assistant director.



The Data: Measuring Military Patronage and Professionalism in the PLA

To examine the role of military patronage in China, I draw on a new dataset of PLA officers in China, introduced in my prior work.⁹ This dataset includes extensive data on all officers who were deputy military region commanders or commissars from the founding of the People’s Republic until the present day. I compiled data on each officer who served in one of these positions from open source materials, including the CCP organizational histories for the military. I then used a variety of sources including organizational histories, news reports, and biographies to collect data on nearly every position that each officer held in the military, party, or state. I also collected information on officers’ birthplace, ethnicity, education, combat experience, parental background,

and training. I was able to collect data on some 1,295 officers and over 12,000 career postings for these officers on average about 10 postings for each.

This data allows me to measure officer career ties to each other and to paramount leaders. To measure ties between military leaders, I utilize the extensive career histories to code overlap in service in the same unit. I focus particularly on whether an officer served in a junior role in the same unit where one of the commanding officers later became a member of the Central Military Commission. If a junior officer served under an officer who later rose to the CMC leadership, I code them as belonging to the same career network. For example, in the 1990s, Xu Caihou served as the political commissar of Jinan Military Region. At the same time, the deputy head of one of the region's military procurement offices was an officer named Gu Junshan. I code Gu as connected to Xu. (More on Gu and Xu below.)

I also examine a couple of important outcomes. I create a simple binary measure for promotion. Here, I focus largely on whether officers are promoted to the position of military region commander and above, which often is accompanied by promotion to three-star general. I also create indicators for whether an officer had combat experience or postgraduate training, as potential markers of professionalism or capability.

PLA Factionalism in the Hu Era

I begin by examining the PLA under Hu Jintao, who served as the Chairman of the CMC from 2004 to 2012. Under Hu, PLA leaders at the highest level engaged in sometimes spectacular levels of corruption that undermined military readiness. Both of the CMC Vice Chairmen who served in Hu's two terms, Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong, would later be prosecuted on corruption charges and expelled from the party.¹⁰

One indicator of the levels of corruption and factionalism in the military is that officers connected to Xu and Guo were more likely to earn promotion, even though they had fewer markers of professionalism like combat experience than their peers. The result was a more factional military where high-level officers sold promotions and took bribes.

Xu Caihou's corruption was especially serious since, according to party investigators, he systematically accepted bribes for positions in the PLA. The

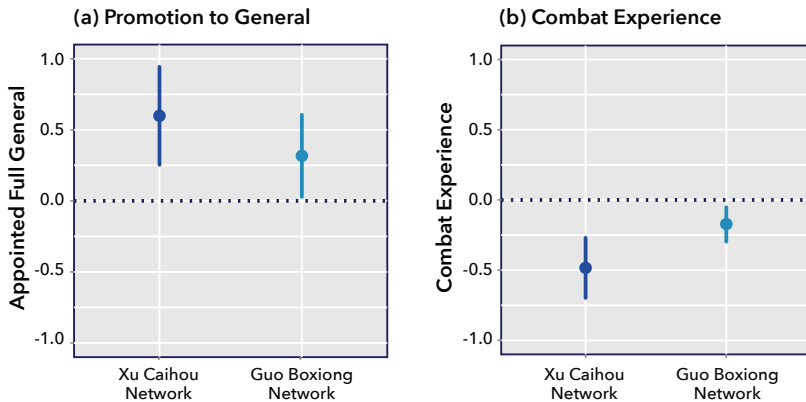
official report announcing his prosecution, which was reprinted across newspapers and read aloud on the state-run nightly news, described the amount of bribes he accepted as “especially enormous.”¹¹ Officials may have had reason to be vague in state-run media, since the scope of Xu’s corruption may have undermined faith in the party. Later reports suggested that Xu had acquired so much jade, gems, and cash that it took investigators a week to inventory it all and a dozen trucks to remove it from his house.¹² He was said to have acquired over a ton of cash in bribes—much of it kept in boxes marked with the name of the officer who had paid him.¹³ There was so much cash that Xu had evidently never bothered to open some of the boxes.

Guo Boxiong was also reported to have accepted “massive” amounts of bribes while in office. Guo was the more senior of the two men on the Central Military Commission. The extent and nature of his corruption is less clear than with Xu, since state-run media reports did not go into detail, and unlike with Xu’s case, few credible media reports appeared outside the mainland inventorying his corruption and the nature of it.

Did Xu and Guo’s political clients dominate promotion during this period? Where their clients less professionalized than other officers? To measure this, I used my dataset on top military officers and created a connection measure based on career overlap. Similar to the connection measure used for civilian leaders, I code an officer as connected to Xu or Guo if they served in the same office in the same year as them before either officer joined the CMC. The measure is somewhat restrictive, capturing connections if the officers served in relatively close proximity. For example, the measure does not capture connections to far-flung officers serving in the same military region, but only in the same unit, such as the same group army, or the leadership office of a military region.

Consistent with the notion that patron-client ties to Xu and Guo dominated promotion during this period, officers with career ties to either Xu or Guo were much more likely than their contemporaries to earn promotion to full general. In Figure 2a, I plot the difference in means between officers connected to Xu or Guo and to other officers active in the Hu Era. Officers tied to either CMC leader (before they became CMC members) were more likely to be promoted. Officers with ties to Xu were more than fifty percentage point more likely to be promoted than the average officer, which is an extraordi-

FIGURE 2: Ties to CMC Vice Chairmen Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong and correlation with promotion to full general and combat experience. Officers with career ties to either chairmen were much more likely to be promoted than the average officer. However, officers with ties to the two leaders were also significantly less likely than the average officer to have markers of professionalism, such as combat experience. This is suggestive of how military professionalism and party discipline eroded under Hu.



narily large increase in probability. Officers tied to Guo were a little more than 25 percentage points more likely to be promoted, also a large jump.

At the same time, officers with ties to Guo and Xu were promoted even though they lacked markers of military professionalism, such as combat experience and education. Figure 2b plots the likelihood that an officer connected to either general had combat experience relative to their peers. Officers tied to Xu were about fifty percentage points less likely than the average PLA officer to have combat experience. Officers tied to Guo were also significantly less likely to have combat experience on average. Similarly, officers tied to Xu had average levels of education, but officers tied to Guo were likely to have a post-graduate degree (the two-sided difference in means is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$).

One officer who profited handsomely from ties to a CMC Chairman was Gu Junshan, who rose with the support of Xu Caihou. When Xu served as the political commissar of Jinan Military Region in the late 1990s, Gu was the deputy head in one of the military procurement and production offices. Gu had evidently seen in Xu a powerful potential patron, and he tried to ingratiate himself. According to the outspoken general Liu Yazhou:

Xu Caihou lived in a military guest house, and Gu Junshan came to see him with a gift, but he was turned away. The next morning, when the sun rose from the east, Xu Caihou opened the door and saw that Gu Junshan was still standing at the doorstep holding the present. Okay! Now he was moved. Later I said that Xu Caihou had no choice but to surrender to the hurricane-like blows of Gu Junshan.¹⁴

When Xu was elevated to top positions in the PLA leadership in the early 2000s, his subordinate Gu was quickly elevated within the central logistics department, eventually becoming the department's deputy head. He collected fine wines and was reported to be especially interested in gold: he acquired gold statues of Mao and an enormous gold boat. Not content with his relatively humble background, Gu reportedly paid a biographer to write a book about his father that manufactured a past as a revolutionary hero, and built a special "Revolutionary Martyrs" cemetery for his father to be interred in, to create the image that he had true "red genes."¹⁵

Gu's corruption made him powerful enemies within his own department—but Xu's protection spared him, at least while Hu was in office. Gu's lax party discipline had evidently outraged the Logistic Department's top leader, political commissar Liu Yuan. Liu did not have to invent a fictitious red blood past for himself: he was the son of former president Liu Shaoqi, making Liu one of the most prominent princelings in the country. In private speeches to PLA leaders, Liu expressed disgust at corruption of the PLA in general, and Gu Junshan in particular, which he noted was degrading China's military readiness.¹⁶ In late 2011, Liu recommended to Hu that Gu be prosecuted and removed from office.¹⁷

With Liu having turned against Gu, Hu Jintao ordered that the military's discipline inspection commission investigate the generals—but the CMC

dragged its feet, toeing the line of insubordination. Hu asked the CMC's discipline inspection team to investigate Gu two times without the investigation moving forward.¹⁸ According to multiple sources, Hu had to take the unprecedented step of asking the civilian discipline inspection commission to step in to investigate a military official.¹⁹ Even then, the investigation did not move swiftly. It was not until May 2012, around half a year from Hu's initial orders, that Gu was finally removed from his post.

The CMC's reluctance to investigate Gu was emblematic of the PLA's lack of discipline and responsiveness to Hu Jintao. In fact, it was not until 2013—under a new CMC Chairman, Xi Jinping—that Gu's home would be raided. And it would wait until 2014 for an investigation into Gu to be publicly announced. In his speeches, Xi would repeatedly single out Xu Caihou and Gu Junshan as egregious cases of a lack of party discipline in the military: “It is necessary to profoundly learn the painful lessons of Xu Caihou's case...Both Xu Caihou and Gu Junshan are important cases for cadres at all level to study, but especially senior cadres, so that they are warned about the bottom line.”²⁰ Next, I turn to the Xi Era to examine whether Xi Jinping was successful in reducing the importance of promotion networks in the PLA.

The Xi Era: Eradicating Promotion Networks and Promoting Officers with Ties to Xi

How did Xi Jinping's relationship with the military differ from Hu Jintao's? Was Xi able to reduce the importance of military patronage networks that had been important under Hu?

Stacking the CMC

Controlling the party's guns in China requires a firm grip on the Central Military Commission (CMC). Early on in his party leadership, Xi moved to dominate the CMC on several fronts: by devoting personal time, by reaffirming his supremacy in the CMC bureaucracy, and by stacking the commission with loyalists.

Unlike his predecessors, Xi devoted significant time on his schedule each week to his work on the PLA. Where recent paramount leaders rarely worked

in the CMC headquarters, Xi quickly established that he would work there at least half of a day each week.²¹ By contrast, Mao and Deng had rarely attended CMC meetings, and Hu had been sparing in going on inspection tours.

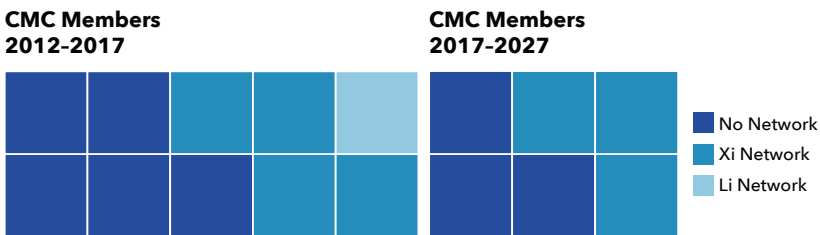
Xi also sought to reassert the primacy of the chairman in the operation of the CMC after decades in which the military vice chairman had effectively run the show. PLA propaganda organs began to discuss and highlight the importance of the “Chairman Responsibility System” (军委主席负责制), which highlights that the chairman has final decision-making power over all aspects of the operation of the CMC and military.²² In fact, the “chairman responsibility system” had been an institutional feature of the CMC since the 1982 party constitution, but the emphasis on it in PLA propaganda starting around 2014 signaled a rhetorical shift that embedded in it an implicit criticism of the power of the CMC Vice Chairman under Hu and Jiang.

In his first two terms, Xi stocked the CMC with an unusual number of leaders with ties to himself. During his first term in office as general secretary, Xi had ties to four of the ten members of the CMC (see Figure 2) including one of the CMC vice chairmen, Xu Qiliang. Xu had served alongside Xi in Fujian, where the two had met early on his career. By comparison, Li Keqiang had career ties to just one general on the CMC. The degree to which Xi stacked the CMC leadership with generals with ties to himself is equaled only by Deng and exceeds that of Mao, Jiang, and Hu.

During his second term in office, Xi increased his dominance of the CMC, at least in relative terms, as the proportion of generals in his network on the CMC rose from 40 to 50 percent (see Figure 2). Remarkably, Xi now had ties to *both* CMC vice chairs. Xi had known Xu Qiliang since the 1990s at least, when Xu served in Fujian alongside Xi. However, the general secretary had known the newly promoted vice chair, Zhang Youxia, even longer. Zhang’s father was a veteran CCP leader who was one of the founding generals of the PRC; he had fought alongside Xi’s father in the Northwest Field Army during the civil war, with Zhang as commander and Xi as commissar. Zhang and Xi had both grown up in the circle of princeling elites in Beijing, and both lived in military compounds as children (though it is not known if it was the same compound).

Notably, Xi also included two generals on the CMC who belonged to the PLA rocket force. It is not unprecedented for generals in the nuclear forces to

FIGURE 3: Career network ties to Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang among generals in the Central Military Commission. Generals in Xi Jinping’s network have made up a significant portion of the Central Military Commission, including during the 18th Party Congress (2012-2017) and the 19th Party Congress. During the later period, generals with ties to Xi were the two CMC vice chairs, and two of three generals without connections to Xi came from the rocket forces, which have historically not been politically powerful.



serve on the CMC, since generals with a background in the Second Artillery have served from Mao onward, but the fact that a third of the CMC has a rocket force background is unusual.

During his third term in office, Xi continued to ensure the dominance of generals he was connected to by breaking important precedent. Most remarkably, he elevated Zhang Youxia, his childhood acquaintance, from first to second CMC vice chair even though Zhang was 72 years old, four years past the retirement norm of 68, and Zhang also retained his seat on the Politburo. It is noteworthy that Xi broke retirement norms in place since the Jiang Era specifically to ensure continued CMC dominance. Second, Xi helicoptered General He Weidong from outside the CMC to the position of second-ranked CMC vice chair, allowing him to skip over a term as CMC chair. This rapid elevation to a vice chair role had precedent but was nevertheless unusual. He Weidong had been the commander of the major military unit stationed in the provincial capital of Fujian—the 86th division of the 31st group army—at the same time that Xi Jinping was the provincial governor. Once again he had

elevated a general he had career ties to top post and once again he had direct connections to half the CMC.

This combination of a personal investment in time, reasserting the chairman's dominance over the CMC bureaucracy, and, especially, stacking the CMC with loyalists gave Xi tighter control over the CMC than any leader at least since Deng. Indeed, it is possible to make a case that no leader including Mao or Deng has dominated the CMC to such a degree, since both Mao and Deng had to contend with other power revolutionaries at the top of the military hierarchy.

Purging Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong

With ties to almost half of the CMC from his first day as CMC chair, Xi Jinping had the security to start to move against the entrenched networks created by Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong. Xi's ability to undertake a corruption crackdown that removed two very powerful generals is, on its surface, somewhat puzzling. How did he crack down on the PLA without it leading to a backlash? Crucial to Xi's success was the sequencing of events: the two key players Xi sought to remove were no longer active-duty soldiers with control over troop movements, and did not pose a threat, and Xi used military organs under party control to pursue them.

In the spring of 2014, Xi Jinping began to move against the first key PLA leader, by succeeding in launching a prosecution of Gu Junshan, the former deputy director of the logistics department whose case in the late Hu era had symbolized the PLA's corruption and the lack of control (and near-insubordination). As discussed above, Gu had amassed an enormous fortune—he possessed solid gold statues of Mao and the Buddha in a compound said to be modeled after the Forbidden City—while the CMC dragged its feet when ordered by Hu Jintao to investigate Gu. Hu took the extraordinary step of ordering civilian party organs to investigate Gu after the CMC's discipline inspection department twice rebuffed requests to investigate him. Gu had evidently been protected by CMC Vice Chair Xu Caihou, who shielded him.²³ Gu was soon arrested but many of his allies in the PLA remained in place and the investigation dragged into the Xi years. Two years into Xi's tenure, prosecutors finally announced a case against him. In an internal speech, Xi

railed on a “Gu Junshan phenomenon” and ask the PLA to “dredge the soil that produced Gu Junshan.”²⁴

Building on the Gu prosecution, a few months later, the party launched parallel investigations into retired Central Military Commission Vice Chairs Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou. Xu and Guo had been appointed to the CMC at the end of Jiang Zemin’s tenure as CMC chair, when Hu Jintao had become party secretary. Their appointments had undermined Hu and strengthened the hand of Jiang Zemin in his retirement, and the PLA under their leadership was not always subordinate to party rule.

Both CMC Vice Chairs were accused of accepting bribes in exchange for promotions. According to reports in the Hong Kong media, Xu had over a ton of cash hidden in his house as well as gems, jade, and antiques, and altogether, it reportedly took 10 trucks to haul away the goods Xu had collected.²⁵ When the case against him was announced, dozens of armed police were sent to remove Xu from a bed in PLA hospital 301, where he was dying of bladder cancer.²⁶ The Politburo issued a statement declaring: “His case is serious and leaves a vile impact.”

The two retired CMC vice chairs were stripped of their military and party positions. Guo was sentenced to life in prison, but Xu died of bladder cancer before his trial and sentencing was completed. The *PLA Daily* published an editorial that lamented Guo’s “evil influence”²⁷ and later wrote that “the negative impact of Guo and Xu’s cases should be fully eradicated, and the combat capacity of the army should be continuously enhanced...All military members should learn lessons from these cases and bear in mind that loyalty to the Communist Party of China is vital to PLA development.”²⁸

Following the charges against Xu and Guo, Xi undertook a broader years-long crackdown within the PLA that targeted generals that were untouchable under Hu. Among those targeted for investigation were former CMC members Fang Fenghui (who had some career connections, albeit tenuous, to Hu Jintao) and Zhang Yang. Thousands of lower-level officers were also prosecuted. As I noted earlier, these investigations had the ancillary benefit of helping Xi to rid the PLA of officers whose political networks made their loyalty suspect, such as those tainted by association with Bo Xilai.

Notably, the cases of the CMC Vice Chairs and other generals like Gu Junshan were handled through routinized party-army institutions. In the

Mao years, Luo Ruiqing had been expelled after an enlarged Politburo meeting struggle session, in which Mao surprised Luo and other leaders by attacking him, after which Luo attempted suicide by jumping out of a window. In the Hu years, party-military organs reportedly dragged their feet on investigating Gu for corruption. By contrast, under Xi, Guo was detained by party investigators and investigated by the Discipline Inspection Commission of the Central Military Commission. Evidence for his case was then presented in a dossier to the larger CCP Central Committee, who voted to expel him and refer his case to military prosecutors. While the party also used the extrajudicial system of *shuanggui* to detain and investigate officers through party organs, the process was on the whole more institutionalized, routinized, and under the control of party organs than in the Mao years.

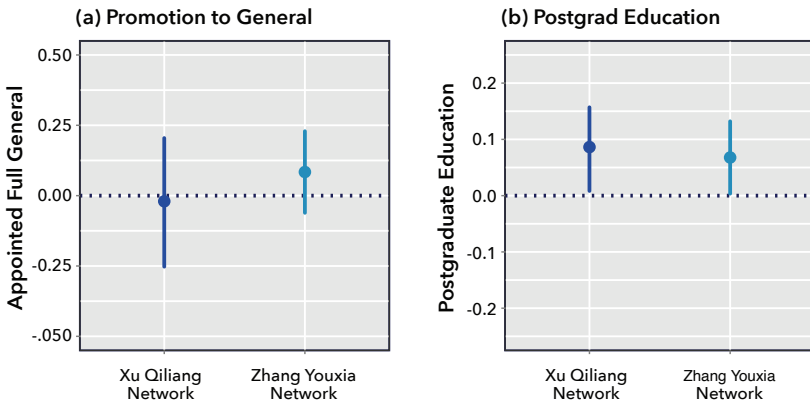
The sequencing of moves—first consolidating power within the active-duty PLA and then later taking down retired rivals one by one—was likely crucial. There are strong informal norms that discourage potential rivals against challenging a paramount leader, but Xi did not have to rely on these alone. He came into office with a strong power base in the CMC and the enlarged PLA leadership. Any challenger would need to find military allies while navigating a minefield of past Xi associates. By targeting leaders one-by-one, and withholding information about future targets of corruption problems, Xi made it difficult for disgruntled leaders to coordinate with each other.

Reducing the Importance of Patronage Networks

Did military patronage networks become less prominent under Xi Jinping? To examine this, I return to the main dataset to examine whether ties to the CMC Vice Chairman were correlated with promotion. I focus here on Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia, both of whom served at least two terms as CMC Vice Chairs, though the results hold examining the other CMC Vice Chairs.

In Figure 4(a), I plot whether being tied to either of the CMC Vice Chairmen is correlated with promotion to a position that is the equivalent of full general. The results show that ties to either general are not strongly correlated with promotion. Rather, the correlation between these ties and promotion is statistically indistinguishable from zero.

FIGURE 4: Ties to CMC Vice Chairmen Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia and correlation with promotion to full general and postgraduate education. Officers with career ties to either chairman were no more likely than average to be promoted. At the same time, officers with ties to the two leaders were also slightly more likely than average to have a postgraduate education.



At the same time, officers with ties to these generals are slightly more likely than average to have postgraduate educations. This is suggestive though not conclusive evidence that it is possible that officers with ties to these generals may on average be slightly more professionalized may actually be punished for their ties. However, because the number of generals with postgrad education has risen over time, this may confound this result, which should be treated with caution.

The Political Logic of Broader PLA Reforms

At the same time as Xi has reduced the importance of internal promotion networks, starting in 2015 he has undertaken a broad-ranging reform to the structure of the military. This set of reforms were designed to help the PLA be

a more effective joint fighting force. Among the major changes were the elimination of Military Regions, which had long structured PLA operations, and the creation of a smaller number of Theaters and a more integrated command structure. These changes have been extensively analyzed by others,²⁹ but it is worth mentioning two relevant points here.

First, the reorganization has also had the purpose of consolidating the CMC Chairman's control over the military. This has helped Xi to continue and deepen the anti-corruption campaign in the PLA.

Second, the elimination of the Military Regions and restructuring of the Group Army system has likely disrupted patronage networks. Soldiers who had spent years and sometimes decades working in the same region now found themselves shuffled together with a new set of commanders and commissars. This almost certainly made it difficult to maintain the sort of patronage networks common in the Hu Era.

Discussion

In this report, I have shown evidence for the decline in importance of intramilitary patronage networks in the PLA. Under Hu Jintao, officers with ties to the CMC Vice Chairman were significantly more likely than their peers to be promoted to one of the top positions in the military. Qualitative evidence suggested that patronage networks—in which officers bought promotions—likely distorted promotion patterns in the Hu Era. Under Xi, these patronage networks have been stamped out, with officers with ties to CMC Vice Chairmen no longer enjoying an advantage over their peers. However, for promotion to the top echelon of leadership, including the CMC, career ties to Xi Jinping himself do appear to benefit generals.

For policymakers, one core takeaway is that under Xi's leadership, the PLA has become more loyal to the party and especially Xi Jinping. Patronage based on ties to Xi, is likely to have less negative impact on military loyalty compared to the widespread patronage networks that existed during the Hu era, which caused internal divisions within the PLA. Today, the PLA is likely more unified.

A second takeaway lesson for policymakers is that today the PLA is less likely than before to act independently of its civilian masters and is less likely

than before to place meaningful internal pressure on the civilian leadership. Jiang Zemin was reportedly constrained by military elites in how he responded to the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by American forces in 1999. Hu Jintao reportedly was not made aware of key military exercises and could not be assured that the military would always quickly respond to his orders. Xi needs to be less concerned that the military might either challenge policy decisions or might act in a way that could interpreted as independent.

A final takeaway is that the PLA is a more professionalized and capable fighting force under Xi.³⁰ Under Hu, widespread factional networks undermined military readiness by promoting officers not based on merit but on patronage. Today, these networks are much less relevant, and indeed may not exist at all. This has likely increased the PLA capabilities, professionalism, and readiness.

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Notes

1. Talmadge, Caitlin. *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes*. Cornell University Press, 2015.
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3. Hendrix, Cullen S., and Idean Salehyan. "A house divided: Threat perception, military factionalism, and repression in Africa." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61.8 (2017): 1653–1681. Alternatively, fragmented coercive services may increase the likelihood of indiscriminate repression. See Greitens, Sheena Chestnut. *Dictators and their secret police: Coercive institutions and state violence*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
4. For a fuller description of the dataset, see Mattingly, Daniel C. "How the Party Commands the Gun: The Foreign–Domestic Threat Dilemma in China." *American Journal of Political Science* (2022).
5. Fewsmith, Joseph. *China since Tiananmen: The politics of transition*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.214.
6. Vogel, Ezra F. *Deng Xiaoping and the transformation of China*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 542.
7. Shambaugh, David. *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects*. Univ of California Press, 2002. An additional feature of the PLA, not discussed at length in this article, is a system of political commissars. Military commanders and political commissars serve alongside each other. The commissars are tasked political education and monitoring troop loyalty to the party.
8. Adapted from Shambaugh, David. *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, problems, and prospects*. Univ of California Press, 2002 p. 111
9. Mattingly, Daniel C. "How the Party Commands the Gun: The Foreign–Domestic Threat Dilemma in China." *American Journal of Political Science* (2022).
10. The third CMC Chairman, who served in Hu's first term, Cao Gangchuan, would not be prosecuted.
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13. Ibid.
14. Lianhe Morning Post. "Liú Yàzhōu Bào Chū Xú Cáihuò yǔ Gǔ Jùnshān Fǔbài Měng Liào" (联合早报 | 刘亚洲爆出徐才厚与谷俊山腐败猛料) [Lianhe Zaobao | Liu Yazhou Exposes Severe Allegations of Corruption Involving Xu Caihou and Gu Junshan]. *China Digital Times* (中国数字时代). Accessed August 12, 2023. URL: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/537517.html>.
15. Wáng Héyán (王和岩). "Zōnghòu fù bùzhǎng Gǔ Jùnshān bèi chá yǐ yǒu liǎng nián" (总后副部长谷俊山被查已有两年) [Deputy Minister of General Logistics Department Gu Junshan Has Been Under Investigation for Two Years]. January 14, 2014. *Caixin Online* (财新网). Accessed August 12, 2023. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20141129022515/>

- <http://china.caixin.com/2014-01-14/100628804.html>.
16. Liu Yazhou alleges that in Xu's deathbed confession he said that Liu Yuan was one of few high-level subordinates who did not bribe him for promotion. However, this should be taken with a grain of salt since in the same breath he says that Xu's deathbed confession mentioned one other incorruptible cadre, Liu Yazhou himself.
 17. Ansfield, Jonathan. "Leader of China Aims at Military With Graft Case." *New York Times*, 31 March 2014, p. A1.
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 19. See Ibid., Wang (2014), and Garnaut, John. "Rotting from Within: Investigating the massive corruption of the Chinese military." *Foreign Policy*, 16 April 2012. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/04/16/rotting-from-within/>.
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 21. Ansfield, Jonathan. "Leader of China Aims at Military With Graft Case." *New York Times*, 31 March 2014, p. A1.
 22. PLA Daily Staff (解放军报编辑部). "Chángchéng yǒnggù de 'Dìnghǎi Shénzhēn' — Zěnmekàn wéihù hé guànchè jūnwěi zhǔxí fùzérè zhì" (长城永固的“定海神针”——怎么看维护和贯彻军委主席负责制) [Perspectives on Upholding and Implementing the System of Chairman Responsibility of the Military Commission]. June 30, 2017. *People's Liberation Army Daily* (解放军报).
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 27. "Staff commentator, "Resolutely Support the Correct Decision of the Party Central Leadership," *People's Liberation Army Daily*, 31 July 2015, p. 1.
 28. Xinhua News Staff. "PLA Daily Vows Strict Discipline for Chinese Army." *Xinhua*, 27 March 2017. Available at: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-03/27/content_28693299.htm
 29. For an excellent overview see: Saunders, Phillip Charles, Arthur S Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew ND Yang, and Joel Wuthnow. *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019.
 30. For an overview of the PLA and military strategy, see Fravel, M. Taylor. *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949*. Princeton University Press, 2019.