

# China's Institutional Changes in the Foreign and Security Policy Realm Under Xi Jinping: Power Concentration vs. Fragmentation Without Institutionalization

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Received: 30 November 2016 / Accepted: 24 May 2017  
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**Abstract** This article focuses on the institutional changes that have occurred in the foreign and security policy realm since Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012. The establishment of a National Security Commission (NSC) in November 2013, the power centralization in the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the reorganization of the CCP leadership of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as well as the major branches of the PLA, the reorganization in March 2013 of the various civilian maritime security agencies and the establishment in December 2013 of a Cybersecurity and Informatization Leading Small Group (LSG) are the most striking organizational reforms introduced by Xi. But other institutional changes have taken place as Xi's inclination to rely on a larger number of actors and in particular to give his closer political allies a bigger role also in foreign and security policy. These changes have obviously helped concentrate more power in the hands of Xi Jinping and, to some extent, better coordinate domestic and external security objectives and on the whole have well served China's foreign and security policy's assertiveness and initiatives. However, these changes have only partly reduced the power fragmentation that has developed extensively under Hu Jintao, and they have not contributed to institutionalizing decision-making processes at the top of the CCP and the state apparatuses. On the contrary, it appears that through these changes Xi has not only created new bureaucratic overlaps and tensions but also, in relying more on his own advisers, fed frustrations and competitions among agencies and officials, in other words, new forms of power fragmentation.

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**Keywords** Xi Jinping · Foreign policy · Security policy · Chinese Communist Party · People's Liberation Army · Central Military Commission · National Security Commission · Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group

## Introduction

Since Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, unprecedented institutional changes have taken place in the foreign and security policy realm. These changes do include deliberate institutional reforms that have been well-publicized, but they do also include evolutions that are not officially presented or assumed as reforms but which also inform us both about Xi's priorities and governing style. These changes have been driven by Xi's willingness to concentrate more foreign and security levers of powers in his own hands, to rationalize or better coordinate the activities of the various agencies in charge of these areas and to link up more intimately China's domestic and external objectives and concerns at a time China's international activities, be they diplomatic, economic or military, have dramatically intensified. As Xi Jinping has embarked in a much more assertive foreign and security policy, there has been an urgent need in his eyes to adapt the policy-making and policy-implementing structures to the new foreign and security priorities of the country. As far as Chinese polity is concerned, Xi's institutional reforms have been part of a fight against a power fragmentation that, although not a new phenomenon, has developed extensively under his predecessor, Hu Jintao [3, 26].

While these changes have obviously helped concentrate more power in the hands of Xi Jinping and, to some extent, better coordinate domestic and external security objectives, they have only partly helped in reducing power fragmentation and not contributed whatsoever to institutionalizing decision-making processes at the top of the CCP and the state apparatuses, let alone making them more transparent. On the contrary, it appears that through these changes Xi has not only created new bureaucratic overlaps and tensions but also, in relying more on his own advisers, fed frustrations and competitions among agencies and officials, in other words, new forms of power fragmentation.

Debates about the CCP regime's institutionalization have relapsed in the last decade as hope for structural political reforms has faded away [22, 31]. And Xi's increasing personal powers as well as half-publicized intention to revise the state constitution in order to extend his term as president of the People's Republic of China (PRC) beyond 2023 (the end of his 5-year second and now final term) [30] have actually moved the Chinese political system away from any institutionalization process [4].

It can be argued that China's expanding international role as well as the multiple diplomatic, economic and military initiatives that Xi Jinping has taken—the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea, One Belt-One Road, the plan to set up a New Security Architecture in Asia, the creation of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) or the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti to name a few—have partly motivated the changes and reforms that we are going to present below. But these organizational evolutions also embody a clear domestic dimension: the need to both reverse the power fragmentation that had developed under Hu Jintao and better protect the political regime in the new globalized international environment in which China has

prospered [19]. As Xi indicated in Davos in February 2017, China supports globalization. However, it has also maintained a selective approach to existing international norms and tries to revise them [5], and the CCP wants to prevent globalization from weakening its sovereign and hegemonic control of its domestic polity and society.

Our conclusion is that the institutional reforms and changes that Xi has initiated have helped him in deploying China's power and influence around the world. Nonetheless, in creating new agencies and concentrating more power in his own hands, Xi has not only instilled fresh gridlocks and fragmentations but also created new obstacles to any institutionalization of decision-making in foreign and security policy.

## **The Scope of Xi's Institutional Changes in the Foreign and Security Policy Realm**

In 2012, there was probably a greater need to reform and recentralize institutions dealing with China's domestic policies rather than foreign and security policy. The Chinese No. 1 has always been directly in charge of this latter area, except in the short and rather awkward 2002–2004 period during which, while Hu Jintao had succeeded to Jiang Zemin at the top of the Party and the state, Jiang had kept the CCP (and state) Central Military Commission (CMC) chairmanship. Yet, to support his ambitious international objectives and pre-empt any new power fragmentation, Xi Jinping felt that he needed to introduce important reforms in the foreign and security realm as well.

Four reforms of different importance have taken place. The two major ones have been, on the one hand, the establishment of a National Security Commission (NSC) in November 2013, a new structure aimed at better linking up and coordinating internal and external security issues and objectives, and, on the other hand, the reorganization of the CCP leadership of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as well as the major branches of the PLA and the unprecedented centralization in the CMC, a commission but also an organization chaired by Xi himself since the 18th Party Congress, of all key military competences. Xi's elevation in April 2016 to the position of "commander-in-chief of the CMC Joint Operations Centre" (中央军委联合作战指挥中心总指挥) participates of this important restructuring. Two other reforms, less crucial but indicative of Xi's current objectives, also need to be discussed: the reorganization in March 2013 of the various civilian maritime security agencies and the establishment in December 2013 of a Cybersecurity and Informatization Leading Small Group (LSG), also chaired by the Chinese president.

Other institutional changes have occurred since 2012 as far as foreign and security policies are concerned, most probably decided by Xi himself and his entourage. Four noticeable changes can be identified. The first one is obvious but ought to be mentioned: the increasing role of Xi Jinping as a paramount leader in China's diplomatic action but also military affairs. The second one has been in line with a more general trend since Xi took over, aimed at empowering even more Party organs, and not only the CCP Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG) also chaired by Xi, to the detriment of government agencies; while since 1949, the CCP has always led and coalesced with the state to form what has been commonly called a Party-state, under Xi, government's ministries and commissions have lost part of the competences to the benefit of various CCP leading small groups or organs [13, 20]. Consistent with the

former, the third change has been Xi's inclination, while concentrating more power in his own hand to rely on a larger number of actors and in particular to give his closer political allies, as Li Zhanshu and Liu He, a bigger role also in foreign and security policy. Partly eased by the creation of new institutions, the fourth change is aimed at better integrating the military in the decision-making processes in this area.

Xi's elevation to the status of "core" of the leadership at the 6th plenum of the 18th Central Committee in October 2016 has in many respects confirmed the CCP General Secretary's enhanced power within the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), the top CCP decision-making body. Xi is no more *primus inter pares* (first among equals) but both the "chairman of the board" and the "CEO" of the PRC as Roderick MacFarquhar suggested, both as far as domestic politics and foreign and security policy are concerned [28]. This is precisely this new status, grabbed way before it was officially granted by the CCP Central Committee, that has allowed him to introduce the organizational reforms and changes that will be analysed below.

## Reforms

Xi Jinping's promotion both as General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee and CMC Chairman at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012—actually much more than his election as President of the People's Republic by the Chinese Parliament in March 2013—obviously helped him in introducing rather rapidly swift institutional reforms in the foreign and security policy realm.

It should first be mentioned that then Xi was not a newcomer on these areas. After the 17th Party Congress held in October 2007 and where he became Hu Jintao's official heir apparent, Xi was already associated to key foreign and security policy decisions. More concretely, shortly after this congress, he was appointed Vice-Chairman of FALSG and the National Security LSG, a structure that partly overlapped with the former and was probably replaced in 2013 by the NSC, as well as Chairman of the LSG in charge of Hong Kong and Macao. In March 2008, he was elected Vice-President of the Republic and started to play a more visible role in foreign policy. And finally in October 2010, Xi was appointed CMC Vice-Chairman, getting more involved in military matters.

An early sign of Xi's willingness to empower and reorganize foreign and security policy agencies was probably his elevation to the chairmanship of the Central Maritime Rights Protection LSG (中央海洋权益工作领导小组), a new structure that was identified in mid-2012 and apparently continues to operate today under Xi's leadership, although we do not know much about it (see below) [12, 17].

In any event, when he became CCP Supremo, Xi inherited all of these institutions and decided to rationalize and simplify them.

## An NSC with Chinese Characteristics

The creation of the NSC was decided at the 3rd Central Committee Plenum in November 2013. But it was established only in January 2014 and had its first meeting in April 2014. It is a Party and not a state structure. It is aimed at introducing an overall "approach to national security", better coordinating agencies in charge of national

security and better preparing the country to crisis management, both inside and outside of China [15]. However, up to now, it deals more with domestic (60% of its time according to some experts) rather than foreign security (40%) [10] or, to be more accurate, focuses on cross-border security issues, including terrorist and separatist activities in or affecting Xinjiang, Tibet, as well as the surveillance of any political, economic, social or religious organized forces that, inside or outside of China (or in Hong Kong), can potentially threaten or even weaken the CCP's grip on the state and the country [45].

Chaired by Xi, the NSC has two vice-chairmen, Premier Li Keqiang and National People's Congress (NPC) Chairman Zhang Dejiang, the No. 2 and 3 of the regime and the CCP PBSC. More importantly, the NSC Office is directed by Li Zhanshu, CCP General Office Director and a key political ally of Xi. Cai Qi, a close subordinate of Xi in Zhejiang (he directed the CCP provincial organization department) and Fujian, was appointed in March 2014 deputy director of the office, and a year later he became its executive deputy director [8, 36]. While the NSC relies heavily on Li Keqiang's bureaucracies in the State Council for managing crises, it also needs Zhang's NPC support to "legalize" and turn into state laws and regulations its decisions. However, the role of Li Zhanshu and Cai Qi (until October 2016, see below) has been crucial since both of them are Xi's trusted protégés and run the NSC day-to-day operations [45].

Only two other leaders (and Politburo members) were initially identified as sitting in the NSC, confirming its domestic priorities: Meng Jianzhu, Secretary of the powerful CCP Political and Legal Affairs Commission, and Zhang Chunxian, who was until August 2016, Xinjiang Party Secretary, and is since then deputy leader of the Party Building LSG, an important body chaired by Liu Yunshan, No. 5 of the Party in charge of the CCP Secretariat and Propaganda. Later, more names were made public, highlighting a robust involvement of the PLA: apart from Meng, general Fan Changlong, CMC first Vice-Chairman, and general Chang Wanquan, Defence Minister and CMC member, appeared as NSC standing committee members while Wang Ning, Commander of the People's Armed Police (PAP) and a close ally of Xi (both worked in Fujian together), and lieutenant-general Meng Xuezheng, in charge of PLA signal intelligence (the equivalent of the US NSA), were added as members [21, 38]. However, this list is probably incomplete and the NSC membership has been subject to change. For instance, it is not clear whether Wang Ning has remained in the NSC after he was promoted Deputy-Chief of the General Staff. And Cai Qi left the NSC in October 2016 after having been appointed Acting Mayor of Beijing [8]. He became Mayor of Beijing in January 2017 [6].

In looking both at its activities since its inception and its membership, the NSC has clearly enhanced Xi's own and direct control of outside as well as domestic security matters. However, there are still many questions that cannot be answered: the NSC's relationship with the FALSG is unclear as neither PRC vice-president Li Yuanchao nor State Councilor in charge of foreign affairs Yang Jiechi sit in the NSC [34], its relationship with the National Security LSG even more unknown as analysts are divided about this LSG's very survival in the new institutional environment.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Both Hu and You think that the National Security LSG, completely overlapping with the FALSG, continues to operate. According to my own sources, it has stopped being referred to and has been dismantled, its competences being taken over by the NSC (interview with PRC and Taiwanese experts, November 2016).

According to some reports, the NSC is directly informed of any PLA move in the East or the South China Sea [34]. However, looking also at Sino-Japanese territorial dispute, other analysts have indicated that “there is no clear evidence that the NSC yet constitutes a major institutional reform likely to have significant implications for external crisis management” [9]. And since 2016, the NSC has become less visible and apparently less active, as if opposition to its new role in domestic as well as external security was growing among leaders of the traditional agencies in charge of these issues [41].

In any event, while this new institution is still under construction, the NSC with Chinese characteristics is quite different from the US (or even the Taiwan) NSC: chaired by the President himself, it still seems more preoccupied with any kind of threat that can jeopardize the stability of the CCP regime than busy preparing advises to leaders about potential flashpoints overseas, let alone managing international crises.

### **A Strengthened CMC**

After Xi came to power, there was an obvious need to bring the PLA to heel. Retrospectively, the expulsion from the Party and detention of the two former top PLA generals and CMC vice-chairmen Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou (who died of cancer before his trial) in 2014–2015 for corruption and promotion/office selling have revealed us a great deal about the PLA’s autonomization under Hu Jintao. But more generally, the PLA’s strong compartmentalization among its various branches, the traditional domination of the Army and its command structure were not adapted to the new situation as well as China’s new ambition to have a “strong military” and win modern wars under informationized conditions.

As a result, Xi decided to reorganize the top echelons of the PLA and to empower the CMC as an organization and not only a commission, to the detriment of the traditional four central PLA departments, namely the General Staff, the General Political Department (GPD), the General Logistics Department (GLD) and the General Armament Department (GAD) [1]. To that end, Xi has strengthened the role of the CMC General Office headed by one of his close aides, lieutenant general Qin Shengxiang, who is also director of the CMC Reform and Organization Office [42].

Announced at the third plenum of the 18th CC in November 2013, this reform took another 2 years before being really articulated, probably due to resistances within the PLA. Then, the decision to create a “joint operation command authority under the CMC and theatre joint operation command systems” was made, but it was not publicized before November 2015.

There is no need to present here every aspect of this ambitious but still unfinished reform, due to be completed by 2020. For instance, it includes a fresh reduction of 300,000 non-combatant personnel as well as the size of the militia and the fazing-out of outdated armaments. Suffice is to focus here on the structural and chain of command’s reorganization from the CMC down to the unit level [43].

The most important announced reorganization has been the abolition of the seven military region commands or headquarters and their regrouping into five battle zone commands supervised by the CMC. The PLA has introduced a three-tier combat command system from the CMC to the theatre commands and the unit distinct from the administrative chain of command. Running from the CMC, the four service

headquarters and to units, the administrative chain of command is now responsible for “construction” functions as organizing, manning and equipping units.

On December 31, 2015, the PLA Army headquarters was established and the PLA Second Artillery (in charge of nuclear weapons) was replaced by the PLA Rocket Force, China’s “core strategic deterrence power”, while a PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF) was created, a combination of various support forces that may also include high-tech operation forces as space, cyber and electronic warfare. Their respective commanders were appointed by Xi at the same time. Former Commander of the Chengdu Military Region, Li Zuocheng then became the first Commander of the PLA Army; former president of the Academy of Military Science, Gao Jin was appointed Commander of the SSF. While according to some reports, both Li and Gao have since then joined the CMC, this has not yet been officially confirmed. Instead of four, the PLA has now five branches: Army, Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force and SSF.

More decisively perhaps, on January 11, 2016, the CMC’s new organization was announced: 15 functional departments, commissions and offices were set up. This new organization includes a CMC National Defence Mobilization Department (中央军委国防动员部) leading and managing the provincial command (or military district), a task previously filled up by the military region headquarters. The reform has also put under the direct leadership of the CMC the PLA Discipline Inspection Commission and the PLA Political and Legal Commission which were previously under the PLA’s GPD. Likewise, the CMC Office for International Military Cooperation (国际军事合作办公室) centralized all PLA relations with the outside world, taking away from the Defence Ministry part of its competences.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the traditional four service headquarters changed names and were integrated in the CMC. The PLA General Staff was renamed Joint Staff Department of the CMC (中央军委联合参谋部); the GPD, Political Work Department of the CMC (中央军委政治工作部); the GLD, Logistic Support Department of the CMC (中央军委后勤保障部); and the GAD, Equipment Development Department of the CMC (中央军委装备发展部).

The five theatre commands—Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern and Central—were officially established on February 1, 2016: Appointed at the same time, their commander and political commissar are all Army generals. However, these theatre commands include an Army, an Air Force and, for four of them (Eastern, Southern, Northern and Central), a Navy component, based on the “relevant” air forces and naval fleets of the former military regions. Although each of these components has its own headquarters, this new organization pattern is supposed to facilitate joint or coordinated operations. Not included in these regional theatres, the Rocket Force will continue to directly report to the CMC.

To crown this unprecedented reform, on April 21, 2016, President Xi Jinping revealed his new military title as “commander-in-chief” (总指挥) of the “PLA’s Joint Battle Command” (中央军委联合作战指挥中心 or 军委联指总指挥), as he inspected the command centre wearing a new camouflage uniform. Then Xi said that the new command should be “absolutely loyal, resourceful in fighting, efficient in commanding, and courageous and capable of winning wars”. The Joint Battle Command body was

<sup>2</sup> For a list of the 15 functional departments and their official English translation, see [http://news.cnr.cn/native/gd/20160115/t20160115\\_521144381.shtml](http://news.cnr.cn/native/gd/20160115/t20160115_521144381.shtml)

set up to meet modern warfare demands, and is capable of commanding land, navy and air forces, as well as other special troops like the Rocket Force and SSF.

The title of commander-in-chief had a different function from the post of the CMC chairman. While the CMC is a leading organization responsible for the PLA's management and defence building, the joint battle command centre focuses on combat and relevant strategies: it is a command body in wartime.

According to observers, Xi's new title was similar to the US president's position as the commander-in-chief of the country's armed forces [37]. However, this change constitutes an additional step in the Chinese political leadership and PLA's preparation to conduct wars.

More importantly, the PLA's organizational reform and the CMC's enhanced leadership on all PLA services and agencies are part of Xi's plan to accelerate the modernization of China's armed forces and their readiness to wage wars. These changes have also strengthened the CCP General Secretary's control of the military at a time the anticorruption campaign has directly affected both the top and the grassroots of the PLA, as well as the career and the morale of many of its officers and soldiers [39].

### **Maritime Security Agencies' Reorganization**

Before March 2013, China had five civilian agencies in charge of protecting its interests in the maritime domain that it claims: China Marine Surveillance (CMS, 中国海监) under the State Oceanic Administration (SOA, 国家海洋局), of the Ministry of Land and Resources; the Fishery Law Enforcement Command (FLEC, 中国渔政) of the Ministry of Agriculture; the China Maritime Police (中国海警) under the Border Control Department of the Ministry of Public Security; the Maritime Safety Administration (MSA, 海事局) of the Ministry of Transportation and Communication and the General Administration of Customs (海关总署). This complex administrative picture increased the risks of both overlapping responsibilities and lack of coordination, precisely at a time China was asserting more actively its maritime claims, particularly in the East and the China Seas [18].

As indicated above, to start putting an end to this dispersion, in mid-2012 a Central Maritime Rights Protection LSG headed by Xi himself was put into place. Since then, its mandate has been threefold: (1) to formulate strategies to protect China's maritime rights and interests; (2) to coordinate policy among the state agencies in charge of maritime affairs and (3) to manage growing tensions with other countries over disputed maritime territories. Its creation has directly facilitated the reorganization in March 2013 of the five civilian law enforcement maritime listed above.

Then the government announced the establishment of a State Oceanic Commission and a renewed SOA coordinating the activities of the previous CMS, Maritime Police, FLEC and General Administration of Customs. Only the MSA remained separated under the Ministry of Transportation and Communication. The new SOA was set up in June 2013, and the Department of China Coast Guard (CCG, 中国海警局) was created within the SOA.

Coordinating maritime activities at the top, the Central Maritime Rights Protection LSG includes high-level representatives from 17 government branches, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the SOA, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of State



Security, the Ministry of Agriculture and the PLA Navy [17]. Since Yang Jiechi is in charge of the LSG Office, the role played by the foreign policy establishment in advancing China's maritime rights must also be reckoned with, likely to instill a relative caution and a persistent ambiguity regarding its maritime and territorial claims.

They are still many question marks and uncertainties regarding this reform and how the mentioned agencies work together, both at the national level and the local level, particularly with Hainan Province. Yet, the PLA-CCG coordination seems strong as both report to the CMC, as well as the PLA Navy-SOA since they cooperate on a number of tasks and are represented in the Central Maritime Rights Protection LSG. And since both top bodies—the CMC and the LSG—are chaired by Xi himself, there is a strong suspicion that all initiatives taken in the East or South China Sea—as the oil rig incident in May 2014 or land reclamations carried out in the Spratly area since the summer 2014—have been authorized by the Chinese President [44].

It is clear that this restructuring has not solved all coordination problems: a certain degree of fragmentation is likely to remain in this area as in others, particularly in view of the conflicting claims made by the Foreign Ministry and the PLA Navy [16]. Besides, the role of the State Oceanic Commission remains unclear. However, coordination has been improving since 2012 and coherence tends to prevail, as the recent developments in the East and South China Seas have demonstrated [11, 44].

### **Leading Small Group for Cyber-Security and Informatization**

The explosion of Internet in China has led the CCP leadership to better coordinate and centralize its supervisory role. In retrospect, this decision could have been made earlier. But launched by Xi, this task fits well the Chinese President's plan to consolidate the CCP's role in controlling the society and protecting (or better isolating it) from outside information that it perceives as hostile or dangerous for the long-term security and survival of the regime.

One important feature of this new priority has been the establishment of a LSG for Cybersecurity and Informatization (中央网络安全和信息化领导小组). Initiated in December 2013, this new LSG was officially set up in February 2014 [33]. Also chaired by Xi, it includes two vice-chairmen (Li Keqiang and propaganda czar Liu Yunshan) and 18 high-level members representing various security (Meng Jianzhu), PLA (Fan Changlong, Fang Fenhui), foreign policy (Wang Huning, Wang Yi), propaganda, education, culture, censorship (Liu Qibao, Yuan Guiren, Cai Wu, Cai Fuchao) and technology agencies (Miao Wei, Wang Zhigang). From 2014 to June 2016, its office was headed by Lu Wei, Deputy Director of the CCP Central Propaganda Department and Director of the State Council Office in charge of Internet under the Government Information Office (of which he was also Deputy Director). In June 2016, Lu Wei was replaced by Xu Lin, his former right-hand man (since June 2015) in the LSG. As Lu, Xu is also Deputy Director of the CCP Central Propaganda Department, underscoring the key role played by this agency in promoting China's Internet sovereignty [32].

This LSG website gives much space to Xi Jinping.<sup>3</sup> It includes the numerous and rather long and detailed speeches made by the Chinese president at LSG meetings, giving the impression that Xi has invested much time and energy in making sure that

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cac.gov.cn/>

Chinese Internet is well protected from foreign negative influence and all bureaucracies cooperate [7].

The other important initiative taken after Xi came to power was the decision to enhance the authority of the State Internet Information Office (国家互联网信息办公室) established in 2011 within the propaganda apparatus in order to strengthen the control of online content. In the spring of 2013, this office gained independent leadership from the State Council Information Office, when Lu Wei became its director. And in February 2014, it became the working office of the new LSG and received a new name in English: the Cyberspace Administration of China [7].

All in all, Xi Jinping has introduced unprecedented organizational reforms at the top of the CCP system that have directly affected not only the foreign and security policy realm but also the management of domestic security issues. As we will see now, Xi has also imposed more discreet but not less important changes that all go in the same direction as the four reforms discussed above: they all have contributed to strengthening Xi's own power and leadership role.

## Changes

Beyond the restructuring presented above, three major changes have taken place: (1) Xi Jinping has increased its own role as a the paramount leader in China's diplomatic, security and also military affairs; (2) he has empowered even more the Party organs to the detriment of government agencies and (3) he has used a larger number of actors and in particular given his closer political allies and advisers, as Li Zhanshu, Wang Huning and Liu He, a bigger role also in foreign and security policy. In other words, while Xi has clearly demonstrated being a hands-on No. 1, he has been inclined to rely on two parallel groups of people: the traditional "foreign affairs system" (系统 *xitong*) officials and his own people, probably to better check the former. Finally, we will try to assess whether the role of the military has changed in foreign and security affairs.

### Xi Jinping: a Hands-on Leader

As we have seen, like his predecessors, Xi chairs all leading structures in charge of foreign and security policy as well as military affairs, including the LSG in charge of Taiwan. The only LSG in this area that is formally controlled by another leader is the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs LSG, chaired by Zhang Dejiang. However, it is more than likely that important decisions—as the interpretations of the Hong Kong Basic Law issued by the NPC on August 31, 2014 and November 7, 2016—must be endorsed by Xi himself.

Xi is also more powerful and hands-on than Hu Jintao and even Jiang Zemin in two different ways.

On the one hand, he has not only immediately been promoted CMC chairman but also taken direct control of domestic security as well as national economic policy and reforms. Not long after he took over, in March 2013, he decided to chair the Central LSG of Financial and Economic Affairs (中央财经领导小组), previously chaired by the Chinese Premier, and, perhaps more importantly, appoint his trusted economic adviser Liu He (who is only first Vice-Chairman of the National Development and Reform

Commission, NDRC), Director of this LSG Office. Among other things, this new position helps Xi in leading and coordinating economic and financial policies that have international ramifications. The way he personally piloted the G20 meeting in Hangzhou in September 2016 is just the most recent and visible illustration of this new role.

On the other hand, while his predecessors already travelled a great deal, Xi has intensified the PRC president's diplomatic activities. There is still some division of labour among CCP PBSC members, particularly with the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang who also makes a good number of official visits overseas. Nonetheless, Xi has always chosen to attend the most important summits and *fora* (UN General Assembly, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Paris CPO21, Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia in Shanghai, Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, etc.), taking advantage of these trips or meetings to present his country's new foreign and security priorities, as "One Belt, One Road" or "Asia's New Security Architecture". Li usually participates in less important meetings, e.g. involving the ASEAN, the European Union (EU) or smaller regional groupings as Central and Eastern European Countries (the so-called 16 + 1 meetings).

Other PBSC members play their own partition, but under Xi's close supervision: for instance, Yu Zhengsheng, Chairman of China's People Political Consultative Conference, is in charge of Taiwan affairs: he is the only Vice-Chair of the relevant LSG. But he does not enjoy much room for manoeuvre. For instance, it was Xi himself who decided to rapidly organize a summit with Taiwan president Ma Ying-jeou in November 2015 in order to narrow the options for Ma's successor, whoever he or she would be. Liu Yunshan, who is also in charge of the CCP Central Secretariat, has sometimes been asked to deal with difficult partners as North Korea. For example, he was sent there in October 2015 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the Korea's Workers Party and more importantly to renew China's arduous dialogue with Kim Jong-un. Nonetheless, Liu does not play an important role in foreign policy. The same can be said of anticorruption Czar Wang Qishan or Executive Vice-Premier Zhang Gaoli. Wang travelled to the USA in December 2012 (but was unable to go there in May 2015 to convince the Obama Administration to cooperate more actively to China's "Fox Hunt" operation aimed at getting back the corrupt cadres who have fled abroad). And Zhang helps Li in conducting Beijing's economic diplomacy (for example, he visited Vietnam in July 2015, Singapore in October and Serbia in November of the same year), but he does not enjoy much autonomy.

Among the Politburo members, PRC Vice-President Li Yuanchao, No. 8 in the CCP-state official hierarchy, plays a specific foreign policy role. He sits as Vice-Chair both in the FALSG as well as the Hong Kong and Macau LSG. However, initially substantial, although checked by Xi's close aids as Li Zhanshu (see below) [40], his role seems to have rapidly become secondary and often reduced to symbolic and unimportant functions as meeting foreign ambassadors and attending ceremonies abroad. He travels quite often, but to less important countries: for instance, he visited Zambia and Tanzania in June 2014 and Burma in December 2014 and Afghanistan and India in October 2015. He was China's representative at Mandela's funeral in December 2013 and Lee Kwan-yew's funeral in 2015; he is also frequently chosen to attend inaugurations of new presidents in developing countries. Politically close to Hu Jintao and indirectly affected by corruption scandals in Jiangsu, the province he ran for a long

time, Li has clearly been imposed by Xi himself this kind of division of labour with the President. Side-lined, he may be replaced as PRC Vice-President in March 2018.

### The Role of the “Foreign Policy System”

Since March 2013, China’s foreign policy system has been dominated by Yang Jiechi, the State Councilor (or quasi Vice-Premier) in charge of foreign affairs in the State Council, and particularly in its Executive or Standing Committee—a committee which only includes the Premier, the Vice-Premier, the State Councilors and the Secretary General of the central government. The story is that he managed to gain Xi’s confidence when he travelled with him to the USA in February 2012. Then, Yang was still Foreign Minister, Dai Bingguo State Councilor and Xi PRC Vice-President.

Today, Yang Jiechi is clearly Xi’s top diplomat: he is the Office Director of both the FALSG as well as the Maritime Rights Protection LSG; he is Secretary General of Taiwan Affairs LSG and second Vice-Chairman of Hong Kong and Macau LSG. He prepares all presidential and prime-ministerial visits as well as emergency meetings on foreign affairs. He is also in charge of delicate missions: after China had placed in May 2014 an oil rig (HYSY981) in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands also claimed by Vietnam, he was the Chinese official who went twice to Hanoi, in June and October of the same year, to (successfully) solve the crisis with this country (China removed the oil rig in July 2014).

As his predecessor Dai, Yang is also the Director of the CCP Central Committee Foreign Affairs Office (CCFAO), a bureaucracy that does not interact much with the outside world but is very powerful. According to some sources, the FALSG’s and Maritime Rights Protection LSG’s Offices, and therefore administrations, are located in the CCFAO. Kong Quan, the CCFAO Deputy Director and a former Ambassador to France, is also the Deputy Director of the Maritime Rights Protection LSG Office. Moreover, it is said that Xi turns in priority to the CCFAO when he needs information on major foreign policy issues [12].

Nevertheless, Yang’s influence in foreign and security policy is not without limits. Firstly, as Dai and before Tang Jiaxuan (2003–2008), he does not belong to the CCP Politburo but only the Central Committee. The last State Councilor in charge of foreign affairs who sat in the Politburo was Qian Qichen (1998–2003). Secondly, Yang has not been included in the NSC, a new structure which every day’s operation is led, as we have seen, by Li Zhanshu. Thirdly, another segment of the foreign policy system, the CCP Central International Liaison Department, is supposed to coordinate with him: his head, Wang Jiarui from 2003 to November 2015, a Central Committee member, and Song Tao since then sit *ex officio* in the FALSG. But this bureaucracy plays a specific role not only in developing relations with foreign political parties whatever their colour can be but also in taking care of difficult issues, as North Korea. And more generally, Yang competes with Xi’s close allies and advisers in the foreign policy realm (see below).

In any events, Yang and to a lesser extent Song tend to reduce the role of the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, since March 2013. Former Ambassador to Japan (he speaks Japanese) and from 2008 to 2013 Director of the Party and state Taiwan Affairs Office, Wang Yi is a seasoned top diplomat. However, the division of labour between him and Yang has been uneasy. In general, Wang takes care of the issues and interact with the

regions and foreign partners that Yang does not have time to deal with (for example, Middle East, Central and Eastern Europe, Turkey). Wang travels a lot, sometimes with the President (USA, EU) or the Prime Minister (Russia, Latin America). But usually, Yang is part of the delegation and overshadows his role.

It is true that Wang is the one taking part in most multilateral negotiations (as the 5+1 talks with Iran or Climate Change COP21 negotiation). Nonetheless, he travels to Poland, Bulgaria, South Korea or Cameroon when Yang pays official visits to Japan, Russia, India or South Africa. The rivalry between Yang and Wang is sometimes quasi transparent. And born in 1953, it is rather unlikely that he will be able to succeed to Wang (born in 1950) as State Councilor in charge of foreign affairs in March 2018.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Song Tao comes from the CCPFAO of which he was the Deputy Director from 2013 to 2015 (and Executive Deputy Director after 2014). In charge of the Party discipline inspection within the Foreign Ministry from 2008 to 2011, Song also worked for a long time in Fujian (1973–2001), at the same time as Xi Jinping [35]. In this respect, Song is less of a diplomat than Xi's man.

## Xi's Men

Among Xi's men, three top officials play a specific role in foreign and security affairs: Li Zhanshu, Wang Huning and, to a lesser extent, Liu He.

Today, Li Zhanshu is probably Xi Jinping's closest political ally and confidant. Both worked in neighbouring counties in Henan in the 1980s and have remained in touch since then. As Zhao Leji, the Director of the powerful CCP Central Organization Department, Li belongs to the so-called "Shaanxi Clique", a province where Xi spent most of the Cultural Revolution as "educated youth" (知情) and his father, Xi Zhongxun (1913–2002), member of the CCP Secretariat in the 1980s and a strong ally of Deng Xiaoping, is originated from [23]. Li comes from a "princelings" family (太子党) but also spent some time in the Communist Youth League, an experience that allowed him to develop ties with Hu Jintao and his protégés [25].

As Director of the CCP General Office, Li occupies a strategic position: he is responsible for the circulation of information within the Party apparatus. Contrary to his predecessor, Ling Jihua, who is now in jail after being sentenced for life in prison for corruption in July 2016, Li entered both the CCP Politburo and the Central Secretariat at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012 (Ling was only a member of the Secretariat between 2007 and 2012). Since then, Li has been included in various CCP LSGs. Identified by some sources in the Spring of 2013 as "Foreign Policy and National Security LSG" Office Director [40], he was appointed later in the same year, as we have seen, to the same position in the NSC, contributing to limiting both Li Yuanchao and Yang Jiechi's role in international security affairs. Li also sits in the Cybersecurity and Informatization LSG.

Li Zhanshu's role in foreign affairs is rather recent. For instance, Xi Jinping sent him to Moscow in March 2015 where he met with Vladimir Putin in order to prepare the Russian President's visit to China in May. In September 2015, he also accompanied Xi to the USA, an unusual addition to the delegation, since before he rarely took part in presidential visits. In March 2016, he travelled to the Czech Republic with Xi. Is it a sign that Yang Jiechi's relation with the Chinese President has been deteriorating? Both Li and Yang accompanied Xi to Mar-a-Lago in April 2017 where the Chinese president

met for the first time his US counterpart, Donald Trump. In any event, trusted by Xi, Li is likely to be promoted to the PBSC and become in charge of the Party Central Secretariat at the 19th CCP Congress in late 2017.

Trained as a political scientist, Head of the International Politics Department in the late 1980s and early 1990s, fluent in English and French, Wang Huning is a very different political animal. He entered into the inner circle of the Party leadership in 1995 when he was appointed Director of the CCP Central Committee Policy Research Office (PRO)'s Policy Division. He moved up the ladder in this official think tank and became the PRO Director in 2002 and at the same time entered the Central Committee. Five years later, he was co-opted into the CCP Central Secretariat and in 2012 into the Politburo, keeping all along the same administrative responsibility as head of the PRO. The PRO produces analytical work not only on domestic issues but also on international affairs, and Wang may have encouraged his team to develop a stronger expertise on the latter. It is said that in 2012 he was offered to lead a province but refused, arguing his incompetence and preferring to carry on his task as adviser to the Party centre and the General Secretary/President on various subjects.<sup>4</sup> In spite of his academic background, Wang is no liberal. For instance, he criticized neoliberalism's excesses and dreadful side effects in the former Soviet Union and is one of the most influential promoters of the Singaporean Model and Confucianism's revival in China [14].

Wang Huning's strength is to have been able to work with and advise three very successive CCP Secretary Generals: Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, suggesting them among other things fresh ideological ideas and concepts. However, it is under Xi that Wang's foreign policy role has started to become more important and visible. Wang's own political inclinations have probably helped him attract Xi's attention.

Since 2013, Wang Huning has been part of Xi Jinping's most official visits overseas, for example to Russia, Europe, France and the USA. He attends many high-level meetings with foreign dignitaries travelling to China. He is also involved in Taiwan's affairs, having taken part in the talks both with Ma Ying-jeou in Singapore in November 2015 and with Kuomintang Chairwoman Hung Hsiu-chu in Beijing in November 2016. This change in Wang's career seems to have started under Hu around 2010 (he was part of the Chinese delegation to the G20 meeting in Toronto, Canada, in June 2010). But it is under Xi that Wang has become China's most discreet, but also most present and perhaps most influential diplomatic adviser. As expected, Wang was part of the Chinese delegation to Mar-a-Lago. Today, Wang is clearly Xi's *eminence grise* on foreign policy matters. Wang and his team are reported in particular of drafting parts of Xi's official speeches uttered abroad. Wang's role therefore is also likely to have diminished the influence of China's official top diplomats, Yang Jiechi, and even more Wang Yi.

Liu He's role in foreign affairs is less important and appears to have mainly concentrated on international economic and financial matters. Sometimes presented as Xi Jinping's childhood friend (although this information has never been confirmed) [24], Liu is, as we have seen, Xi's major economic adviser. In May 2016, he was probably the "authoritative person" (权威人物) quoted by the *People's Daily* asking to pursue economic reforms, reduce the debt and refrain from short-term economic stimulus, contrary to what Prime Minister Li Keqiang was then recommending [29].

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Chinese scholars (November 2016).

Liu He does not travel a lot overseas, but he meets a large number of foreign visitors and not only the ones that have an economic or financial profile. For instance, in October 2013, he met with Thomas Donilon, President Obama's National Security Adviser, and 2 years later, in August 2015, with Donilon's successor, Ms. Susan Rice. He was also part of Xi Jinping's delegation to the USA in September 2015.

These various developments highlight an inclination of the part of Xi to rely more heavily on his own adviser to the detriment of the country's foreign policy officials.

### **The Role of the Military Under Xi**

On this issue, there are more questions than answers. For one thing, PLA top generals (and CMC members) are represented in a number of CCP LSGs but they never occupy a dominant position in them. And this has not changed under Xi, even after the establishment of the NSC. For another thing, the PLA is going through a painful and complicated restructuring that will keep it busy until at least 2020, probably contributing to reducing its appetite for imposing foreign or security policy choices that would go against Xi's own intentions, and perhaps external adventures [43]. In other words, under Xi more than under his predecessors, the PLA seems to be more constrained to toe the line, support the new leadership "core" and go as far as their commander-in-chief will tell them to proceed, be it in the South or the East China Seas or vis-à-vis the USA.

Moreover, Xi has not included the same CMC members in every LSG and, as his predecessors, has made sure that they do not dominate them. For instance, General Chang Wanquan, Defence Minister, and Admiral Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of staff in charge of intelligence and a PLA rising star who may succeed to Wu Shengli as Navy Commander in late 2017, are part of the FALSOG [27]. General Fan Changlong, the de facto No. 1 of the PLA, and Sun Jianguo sit in the Taiwan Affairs LSG while Fan and Chang are the only two generals who have been included in the NSC. Finally, while Fan Changlong and Fang Fenghui, the Chief of the General Staff, represent the PLA in the Cybersecurity and Informatization LSG, only one PLA Navy top official, probably Navy Commander Wu Shengli, belongs to the Maritime Rights Protection LSG.

Fan Changlong leads China's military diplomacy and international military cooperation. He regularly travels to other countries, for instance to important arms suppliers or clients as Russia, Pakistan or Burma or key partners as the USA and India. As Defence Minister, Chang also plays a role but less so since the international relations of the PLA have been directly managed by and from the CMC, and even more so since the end of 2015.

Fang Fenghui, the Chief of the General Staff, also occasionally travels overseas. For example, it was Fang who negotiated the opening of a Logistical Naval Base in Djibouti in 2015.

Nonetheless, it is said that Xi is taking advice from PLA generals who are close to him, as Liu Yuan, Liu Shaoqi's son, who unexpectedly retired in December 2015, probably because of his key but exposed role in fighting against corruption in the PLA [27], and since then Zhang Youxia or Sun Jianguo.

Director of the PLA Armament Department until the end of 2015, and now of the Equipment Development Department, Zhang Youxia is the CMC member who is the most associated to Xi's family. He is the son of General Zhang Zongxun (1908–1998),

a close comrade-in-arms of Xi Zhongxun in the 1940s and in particular during the Sino-Japanese war. Zhang junior is also the only CMC member who experienced hot war and combat: he took part in 1979 and 1984 in border armed conflicts with Vietnam. Zhang has had some international exposure. When he was commander of the now-dismantle Shenyang military region (2007–2012), he travelled to North Korea to hold difficult negotiations on the common border's security. As head of the Armament Department, he has also regularly visited military equipment suppliers, as Russia, and clients, as Malaysia. However, born in 1950, it remains to be seen if Zhang will be able to stay in the CMC after 2017.

Finally, Deputy Chief of Staff Sun Jianguo is apparently close to Xi and needs to be observed closely as he is likely to enter the CMC in 2017 [2].<sup>5</sup>

More generally, under Xi, the PLA has become a more visible actor of foreign and security policy. It has also become less autonomous than before. The establishment of a NSC has contributed to better integrating the military in the decision-making process on these matters, reducing the risk, up to a point, of lack of coordination between the political leadership and the PLA and, as a result, of international crisis. Past experience and recent developments in the South and East China Seas have shown that China has remained reluctant to militarize crises and keeps relying on the foreign affairs system to solve them [34]. Nevertheless, the PLA has continued to a large extent to remain stove-piped, feeding risks of dysfunctions and even power fragmentation [46]. In concentrating more power in his hands, Xi is in a stronger position than his predecessor to keep the military in check. But the CCP's ability to control the PLA much depends upon Xi's own relationship with the generals. Today, in spite of the anti-corruption campaign and the military's restructuring, Xi has remained the only hierarchical link between the PLA generals and the CCP leadership: no other CCP leader can give orders to the PLA, a reality which underscores the potential fragility of this institutional setting.

## Conclusion

Since he came to power in late 2012, Xi Jinping has introduced several important reforms and changes that have affected the way foreign and security policy is made and implemented. There is no question that Xi himself is more powerful than his predecessors and is better placed to impose decisions in this area to the rest of the CCP leadership. It also appears that the creation of an NSC, the enhanced role of the CCPFAO and the more active participation of Xi's own advisers in this area, while moving power *loci* even more from the state's to the Party's bureaucracies, have improved coordination among the various agencies involved and on the whole increased the efficiency of China's foreign and security policy.

At the same time, Xi seems to be willing to keep some kind of balance among the various "systems" involved in these matters, between domestic and international security agencies, between diplomats and advisers and between diplomats and generals. Whether this new equilibrium can be maintained in the longer run remains to be seen, but it has so far well served Xi's interests and empowerment. Besides, the whole

<sup>5</sup> Sun took part in the 2015 and 2016 Shangri La Dialogue, a major annual forum related to security in the Asia-Pacific region organized in Singapore by the International Institute of Security Studies.



architecture that has been built or reformed since 2012 depends very much on one person: Xi himself, chairman of everything but real master of the unknown number of areas that he has decided to micro-manage (as Internet). Although he seems more in control of policy implementation than on the domestic, and especially economic, reforms' front, the risks of gridlocks and even dysfunctions are far from having been eradicated, in particular in view of the practical impossibility for Xi to frequently attend every LSG or NSC meeting that he is supposed to chair. This is one of the downsides of being too powerful and now the "core" of the Chinese leadership.

So far, this new foreign and security architecture has worked rather well and, on the whole, contributed to making Xi's foreign policy's assertiveness as well as various initiatives a success, at least for China. However, this new organizational pattern is far from being transparent and institutionalized and zones of uncertainty and overlap among agencies (both old and new ones) are still numerous, keeping the door opened to difficulties, unpredictability and, perhaps, crises. In other words, in the foreign and security policy realm as well, the Chinese polity has remained fragmented, "although (today) fragmentation is held in check by a centralised power structure with the Party at the core" to use a formula coined by Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard [3]. True, under Xi there has probably been less fragmentation in foreign policy than in other areas, but, in spite of the reforms introduced, the military has remained highly separated from the rest of the CCP-state apparatuses and competition among agencies and leaders have persisted. While the 19th CCP Congress due to be held in late 2017 is likely to consolidate Xi Jinping's and Xi's allies' power, it will probably be unable to overcome these fragmentations and tensions. In the longer run, built by a paramount leader and his advisers, the current organizational pattern and division of labour in foreign and security policy may very well not survive the political longevity of their architect. And beyond Xi's own empowerment, the new organizational pattern illustrates again the limits of institutionalization in any one-Party system, in China as elsewhere.

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