

China's Army needs reform, Xi has work to do¹

August 1 is important date in China.

On that day in 1927, the Nanchang Uprising took place: following the dissolution of the first Kuomintang-Communist Party of China 'United Front' (alliance), several senior Communists leaders led by Zhu De, He Long and Zhou Enlai rebelled against the Kuomintang. They later joined Mao Zedong's Autumn Harvest Uprising and fled to the Jinggang Mountains near the border of Hunan and Jiangxi provinces. Under the leadership of Mao and Zhu, they became the First Workers' and Peasants' Army, or Red Army.

It was renamed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) at the time of the Chinese civil war.

During the past months, Xi Jinping, the new Central Military Commission's (CMC) Chairman (in other words, the PLA's boss) has been hammering a slogan reminiscent of Mao's days, on 'mass line, an important guideline that defines the relations between the Party and the people'.

The idea of the new President is a 'thorough cleanup of undesirable work styles' such as formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism and extravagance.

An interesting program!

A few months ago, the Politburo of the Communist Party decided to launch this campaign 'to boost ties between CPC members and the public'.

Xi Jinping and his colleagues considered that the Party and the PLA had lost touch with the 'common men' (the 'masses' in Communist jargon).

¹ Published in ***Niti Central*** on September 16, 2013 (URL not available).

Last week, a circular issued by the PLA General Political Department quotes Xi as saying that the Party is "consciously adaptable to changing times and can maintain its advanced nature and purity."

Well, before that, it needs some purification. The Chinese President had earlier stated that if the Party did not reform itself, it would be destroyed.

This is the choice before the new leadership.

The condition for the Party to survive: getting rid of the corruption. This is valid for the PLA too.

According to the PLA circular, the new campaign will "improve the construction of the CPC's work style and boost its creativity, cohesion and combat capabilities."

In December 2012, soon after he took over the CMC chair, Xi banned receptions, welcome banners, red carpets, floral arrangements, formations of soldiers and lavish performances.

The PLA officers were even required to discipline their spouses and children and make sure they do not take bribes.

One can imagine the resentment at the senior levels of the PLA; it was more like a Nightmare than a Dream, at a time Xi Jinping was speaking of the Chinese Dream, the Dream of a resurgent China (led by the Party).

Another of Xi's leitmotifs: the 2.3 million-strong PLA must "strictly follow the party leadership and be absolutely loyal and reliable".

Does it mean that the generals are sometimes not so reliable?

Do the Chinese troops follow the party leadership when they intrude into Indian territory in Ladakh?

Chinese actions, whether it is in the Depsang Plain, in Chumar area or in Siri Jap, near the Panggong Lake or Brahoti in Uttarakhand appeared to be the opposite of President Xi's recent public 'peace' utterances. This raises questions about the control over the PLA by the central leadership.

The August 1 celebration was the occasion to promote six senior officers to the rank of full general. Observers believe that it indicates that Xi may be slowly consolidating his grip on the military ahead of a crucial Plenum in November.

Interestingly, the Commanders of the Guangzhou and Nanjing Military Regions (MR) were promoted to full generals; no goodies for their colleagues over-looking India's borders (in Lanzhou and Xinjiang MR). Does it mean that these regions are less important for the new leadership in Beijing? Possibly.

The promotions of General Cai Yingting, 59 (Nanjing MR) and Xu Fenlin (Guangzhou MR) seem to show that Guangzhou and Nanjing regions are the two most critical out of the seven military commands.

Soon after taking over last year, Xi had visited Guangzhou. The media dubbed Xi's trip a 'southern tour', comparing it to Deng Xiaoping's 1992 visit to Guangdong, when the paramount leader started his reform programme. As for Nanjing MR, its importance comes because it oversees the Taiwan Strait.

Xi has a great advantage on his predecessor; he immediately wore his military chief's hat (or cap) after assuming the leadership of the Party. Hu Jintao had to wait 21/2 years for Jiang Zemin to retire from the CMC chairmanship. This is a positive happening.

Since then, Xi has managed to inspect some of the major military regions as well the People's Armed Police's troops and the maritime guards. He even paid a visit to an air force base deep in the Gobi desert.

'Combat capability' and 'combat readiness' are the fundamental duties of the troops, he likes to repeat; he also never missed an occasion to speak about the role of information technology (cyberwar?) in today's world.

While talking of 'readiness', the PLA tries 'to put its best foot forward' as Reuters remarked: the Army recently opened a secretive base in Lanzhou MR for a visit by foreign journalists.

The news agency explains: "The moves come as China jangles nerves in Asia and the United States with increasingly bold moves to assert territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. But on an annual trip to a Chinese military base - this year, for the first time, one outside of Beijing - officers were at pains to show they had nothing to hide and the world had nothing to fear."

Chen Xifeng, the commander of the Lintong base of an air defense brigade told the journalists: "The Chinese people and the People's Liberation Army are peace loving". He added: "China does have territorial disputes with some neighbors but the government and military are quite restrained in dealing with them."

But nothing is simple and straight in China. In a previous column, I mentioned about the 'buffons', the war-monger generals.

An article in the last issue of *The China Brief* of the Jamestown Foundation is consecrated to them: "The regular appearance in the Chinese media of PLA figures calling for aggressive foreign policy causes controversy and confusion

among foreign observers. ...Foreign media routinely pick up sensational quotes from these military officers.”

One could ask: if these generals really create confusion, why not stop them?

The problem is that they represent a constituency and Xi has to deal with it.

The China Brief quotes foreign policy analyst Wang Jisi saying, they make “reckless statements, made with no official authorization, creating a great deal of confusion”, adding “they might represent the voice of hawkish PLA constituencies, pressuring the leadership to adopt more aggressive policies.”

The complexity of the situation must leave the Indian strategic thinkers pondering. Despite all this, there is no doubt that the state of the PLA’s preparedness is far in advance on India.