

The PLA at the Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress

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Introduction

The Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress was held from November 09-12, 2012 at Beijing. The Third Plenum is traditionally important because it comes at the end of the first year of every new Party Congress. Previous 'Third Plenums' have unveiled major policy directions which are implemented for the next 8-9 years by the new dispensation. The issues discussed vary from economic reforms, political reforms and social security to military and state security. The communiqué issued at the end of this 'Third Plenum' is generic and conveys little to the ordinary reader. Within the jargon, however, are some key policy decisions which will be unravelled in due course of time. This commentary is restricted to issues related to the military and state security which may have long-term implications on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and its place in China in the years to come.

State Security Committee or the National Security Council

China will soon have a 'State Security Committee' or the Western equivalent of a National Security Council (NSC), akin to the NSC in the US or Russia. While its organisation and structure are not clear, its role is likely to include internal security, external security, judiciary and party discipline by amalgamating existing

structures under one umbrella. It is well known that inter-agency and inter-ministerial interaction in China is weak. Typically, in an authoritarian regime, vertical interface overshadows horizontal interaction due to rivalry and competition in an attempt to impress Party bosses. The NSC will consolidate power in the hands of Xi Jinping and a more cohesive 'top down' approach to policy will be visible, much like a "natural forum for establishing top level designs for international affairs". The key difference from existing structures of other countries is that the Chinese NSC is likely to be dual hatted – responsible for both domestic and foreign policy.¹ The fallout of such an organisation for the PLA is obvious – it will lose clout to civilian authority as the NSC is likely to be a political body and comprise a healthy mix of politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats besides a sprinkling of a few military personnel.

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The PLA

The communique issued at the end of the Third Plenum has three statements concerning the PLA:

The Party's goal is an Army that obeys the Party's command, is capable of winning battles and has a sound work style.²

This statement is a clear endorsement of the Party's control over the PLA. In the run-up to the election of 18th Party Congress, distant calls for 'nationalising' the PLA were heard, some of which were attributed to senior Generals of the PLA. It is a worrisome trend as 'nationalising' the Army would imply divesting it from Party control, anathema to the Party's very existence. The idea of nationalisation of the PLA has been given a quiet burial in the Third Plenum. The mention of "sound work style" in the communiqué is an acceptance that inter-Service relations, which have witnessed the unquestioned dominance of the Army over the Navy and Air Force, are under duress. The increasing relevance of the PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF), supported by a healthy share of the defence budget and an increasing presence in the Central Military Commission (CMC), are indicative of the Army losing some of its sheen and relevance. The PLA has been advocating 'Integrated Joint Operations' as a critical component of its modern military doctrine and the PLAN and PLAAF have a large role in the implementation of this doctrine.

Great effort should be put to resolving outstanding conflicts and problems that hinder development of national defence and the Army.³

The Chinese Communist Party (CPC) urges urgent redressal of “conflicts and problems” that impact military modernisation. Some of the typical issues are; the erosion of the PLA's presence in the policy apparatus; inter-Service rivalry; low technology and innovation and poor recruitment of talent. The emergence of a stronger Foreign Ministry, post the 18th Party Congress, has diminished the role of the PLA in foreign policy. Secondly, inter-Service rivalry and the domination of the Army in scripting China's maritime strategy has been a cause of disconnect, particularly in coastal Military Regions (MRs). Thirdly, even as China's military industrial complex grows in size and exports have seen a marked increase, the level of innovation and induction of high end technology leaves much to be desired. Lastly, like any growing economy, China too is facing a recruitment crunch with the younger generation shying away from the rigours of military life. It is apparent that the CPC intends to address these issues comprehensively.

The communique urged deepening forms of the Army establishment, pushing forward Army policy adjustments while pushing toward harmony between the Army and civilians.⁴

This statement is telling on the Human Resource (HR) management and deteriorating civil-military relations. In recent times, the PLA has initiated a number of HR related policies regarding salaries, financial and social benefits to martyrs and pensions and related benefits, including lateral placement of ex-Servicemen. The HR policy also gave a huge fillip to the Service conditions of the rank and file with a large chunk of the defence budget allocated towards improving housing, salaries and living conditions. Non-Commissioned Officers' (NCOs') promotions and attractiveness in pay and allowances have resulted in a review of the rank structure with as many as seven out of nine ranks being NCOs. The Party, as a part of its 'mass line' campaign and anti-corruption drive, has been scathing on corrupt officers, often disbursing exemplary punishment to offenders. All officers, including general officers, by a recent decree, have to spend 15 days with enlisted soldiers in a bid to curb the rising disparities and elitist culture in the PLA. President Xi Jinping's 'Eight-Point Regulation' to stem corruption, materialism, ostentation and wasteful expenditure has seen the PLA issuing its own 10-point guidelines in a bid to reinforce its commitment to the Party's

clean-up campaign. Lastly, the growing discord between the civil and military is a natural outcome of the transformation of the PLA to a professional Army. In the days of yore, the PLA was also entrusted with the dual role of governance in addition to military duties. After Deng launched his “Four Transformations” and the subsequent “RMA with Chinese Characteristics”, the PLA’s role in governance has diminished considerably. Only the senior leadership of the PLA is on the regional Party Committees. The divide has been accentuated by the reducing presence of the PLA Generals in the Politburo and Central Committee since 1997, giving greater prominence to civilian officials. Dissonance between civil-military cadres is a natural fallout as the PLA loses its trappings of power. Realising these issues, the Third Plenum appears to be alive to the growing trends in the PLA and appears to be attempting to address these issues of concern in the coming years.

Conclusion

In sum, the Third Plenum demonstrates the Party’s intention to address security issues comprehensively by reorganising structures, addressing PLA concerns and implementing corrective measures where necessary, while reinforcing its commitment to building a strong military for the future.

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N.B. The views expressed in this article are those of the author in his personal capacity and do not carry any official endorsement.

Notes

1. Jane Perlez, “New Chinese Panel Said to Oversee Domestic Security and Foreign Policy”, *New York Times*, November 13, 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/14/world/asia/national-security-committee-china.html?pagewanted=2&r=0&pagewanted=all>, accessed on December 12, 2013.
2. “China to Develop Army, National Defense: Communique”, *Xinhua*, November 12, 2013.
3. “China’s CPC to Remove Obstacles in Modernising Military”, *The Economic Times*, November 12, 2013, available at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-11-12/news/43980965_1_cpc-liberation-army-communist-party, accessed on December 13, 2013.
4. Yang Jingjie, “Military Loyalty”, *Xinhua* report, available at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.aspx?tabid=99&tabmoduleid=94&articleid=824462&moduleid=405&PortalID=0>, accessed on December 13, 2013.