

# XI JINPING'S THOUGHTS ON THE CHINESE ARMED FORCES IN THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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## ABSTRACT

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In July 2022, the document *Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the armed forces* was released, a compilation of questions and answers following the president's guidance included in the Chinese Constitution. On September 9, 2022, an official letter from the Communist Party of China (CPC) called for the study of President Xi's thought book on the performance of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). From the second decade of the 21st century, at a time when the rise of a China-United States-Taiwan rivalry is taking place, is crucial to have an understanding of the relationship between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), as well as the regional and international threats which brought to an end the peaceful period in East Asia, China's new prominent role in the creation of a new world order, and the guidelines expressed in the document *Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the armed forces*.

**Keywords:** Contemporary China; Political and Military Studies; People's Liberation Army.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to analyze the document that lays out Xi Jinping's principles and concepts for China's Armed Forces in view of the new geopolitical strategic configurations and events and Chinese domestic politics of recent years. The latest documents and pronouncements of the Chinese leadership indicate the new guidelines for strengthening the Chinese Armed Forces coupled with the new perspectives of changes in the world geopolitical context.

The Chinese Red Army of Workers and Peasants, created in 1927 as the armed arm of the Communist Party of China (CPC), was the driving force behind the struggle against the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang - KMT). The KMT leader, Chiang Kai-shek, could not free himself from the strong support the United States provided during World War II in the same way that the Qing dynasty, in its last decades of reign, could not free itself from the imperialist clutches of European countries such as Britain, Germany, France, and Portugal. The Long March (1934-1935) idealized by Mao Zedong, was the initial mark of the great revolution that would be established, not only a drastic change of the political paradigms, but also in a deep ideological, social, political and economic change. After years of Civil War, what the People's Republic of China (PRC) has accomplished since 1949 is unprecedented in world history. If we look at the last 30 years, the advance goes beyond the Western theories contained in the canons of International Relations and in the most important books of Political Science, Economics and History.

The roots of the CPC lie in the last century, as the Russian revolution of 1917 inspired the formation of the Communist Party in China. While the Bolsheviks "Sovietized" socialism, the Chinese Communists led by Mao Zedong reversed the order of where to start the revolution. For Marx, and followed by Lenin, the struggle would begin in the cities, by the intellectualized layer, and then go on to conquer the minds and hearts of the rural worker. Maoism reverses this premise and begins with strong support from the peasantry, a gigantic number of rural workers at the time who saw in Mao the chance to achieve their labor and social demands (VOGEL, 2013).

The long period of Mao's rule (1949-1976) until his death was imperial, particularly in the years of the Cultural Revolution which limited any reformist ideas with purges, imprisonments, and persecutions. His successor, Hua Guofeng, simultaneously held the three most important

seats in China: chairman of the CPC Central Committee; Premier of the State Council, and chairman of the Central Military Commission. However, he lost these positions one after another. He soon became “the forgotten successor”.<sup>3</sup> While Hua’s leadership was quickly exhausted, Deng Xiaoping resurfaced establishing his leadership once and for all at the Third Plenum of the CPC Central Committee in 1978. Deng was a revolutionary who fought against corruption and ousted the Kuomintang along with Mao. He fell into disgrace during the Cultural Revolution, which was encouraged by what became known as the Gang of Four formed by Jiang Qing (Mao’s wife), Zhang Chunqiao, Wang Hongwen, and Yao Wenyuan, who saw in Deng a reformist figure who would depart from Marxist ideals.

Rehabilitated, the old CPC cadre showed his pragmatism crystallized in Deng’s period (1978-1989) famous catchphrase from the 1960s - *“it doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white: the important thing is that he catches the mouse.”* This was his vision of reform and opening of the Chinese economy, where it did not matter how Chinese socialism would be built, whether through the so-called market economy and by foreign investment. The most relevant thing was to keep the reins under the Party’s total and unrestricted control to lead the country to communism.

China was far behind other countries in all areas from education, to social issues, to access to technology. It was necessary to seek development that would guarantee opportunities to improve the quality of life of the workers and the whole society. Deng’s concern that China should reach the development level of other nations was always explicit. For him, the CPC would remain in power as long as employment, education, and improved quality of life were being delivered to the population. In his view, it was not a strong Party that would give legality and legitimacy to economic and political measures, but economic measures that would lead to the improvement of the Chinese people’s quality of life that would give legality and legitimacy to the Party’s continuity.

Deng pointed out that modernization required a new rule limiting the term of office of the General Secretary to two five-year terms and retirement at age 68. The goal was to no longer create a cult of personality, as in Mao’s case, and that the Party could be constantly replenished with new ideas. Deng was the architect of the modern economy that transformed China from an agricultural country into a fully industrialized country in just a decade.

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<sup>3</sup> WEATHERLEY, R. (2010).

Deng, without abandoning his Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology, still feared radical ideological convictions would eventually become more important than the development of the country. He was even called a reformist at the time by the most radical wing of the party, because he saw as indispensable the focus on the four modernizations of industry, agriculture, science and technology, and the armed forces, first expounded by Zhou Enlai and followed up to the present day.

Xi Jinping is the first president to break the line of succession drawn by Deng Xiaoping, the leader who led China's transformation from the late 1970s until his death in 1997. Beginning with economic reform and opening up to inward investment in the mid-1980s, Deng appointed each of the four previous general secretaries to Xi: Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao. Xi departs from some of the political premises outlined by Deng, such as on the issue of mandates and retirement. But the differences are not limited to these two rules.

The over-concentration of power is likely to give rise to arbitrary rule of individuals to the detriment of collective leadership (...). There is a limit to knowledge, experience and energy. If a person holds many positions at the same time, he will find it difficult to face problems in his work and, more importantly, he will block the way for other more suitable comrades to assume leadership positions (ECONOMY, 2019)

Jiang Zemin followed his vast experience in the CPC and the state throughout the construction of Chinese socialism and put forward the "The Theory Three Represents of the CPC": I - represent the developmental trend of China's productive forces; II - represent the orientation of China's advanced culture; III - represent the fundamental interests of the vast majority of China's people.<sup>4</sup> These interweave a scientific system integrating economics, politics, culture, military affairs and foreign relations with the CPC concerns. They involve the Party's actions regarding reform, development and stability, domestic politics and policy, foreign policy, and national defense, encompassing the CPC, the military, the country, and the Chinese society.

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<sup>4</sup> "Theory of Three Represents" launched by Jiang Zemin during his governing period (1989-2002).

Hu Jintao (2002-2012), also adhered to Deng's orientation regarding the limitation of two mandates. During his term, China became the second largest economy in the world, overcoming Germany and Japan, by applying Deng's developmental theories. Hu had been director of the CPC Central School with the responsibility of ideologically training the party's high-ranking leaders in the 1990s. China becomes, thus, a moderately prosperous society with deepening economic reform, accelerating the economic growth model in strategic high-tech sectors.

In 2012, Xi Jinping ascended as general secretary of the Communist Party of China at the 18th National Congress attentive to issues of technological development and restructuring of the armed forces. In November 2015, Xi presented at a working meeting the reform carried out by the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the guidelines for restructuring the PLA with Chinese characteristics. At the 19th National Congress of the CPC, held in October 2017, it became imperative to restructure national defense and its forces amid the world changes that were underway. The demand for the army's personal and technical advancement required party ideology to be organic in strengthening the armed forces in the new era.

In 2018, the National People's Congress approved the end of term limits for president and vice president, opening up for Xi Jinping the possibility of a third consecutive term at the 20th Congress in 2022. With that, Xi seems to face no obstacles before him except death itself.

China's military structure has changed to include the demand for advancement in technical training of personnel and the PLA, requiring party ideology to be organic in strengthening the Armed Forces in the new context ahead. It also required the development of highly skilled technology in the construction of land, sea and air forces, as well as the development of ballistic missiles and the strategic support force, the deployment of competent regional bodies and commands for the theater of joint exercises, and the advancement of modern combat systems capabilities. The goal is to modernize the national defense with regard to the tactical and technological readiness of the Armed Forces by 2035, and that by 2049 the People's Liberation Army be transformed into a world-class force. For some observers, the role to be developed by the PLA is in line with the same duties attributed to the US National Security Council.

The most recent Defense White Paper (2019) entitled *China's National Defense in the New Era*, points to political and military guidelines

established in a framework of resolutions aimed at strengthening the PLA's desired prominent military role. This is not a radical change or alteration of security and defense policies. Rather, it is an amalgam of the thoughts of Mao Zedong, Hua Guofeng (1949-1978, *Mao Zedong Thought*<sup>5</sup>); Deng Xiaoping (1978-1989, *Deng Xiaoping Theory*); Jiang Zemin (1989-2002, *Three Represents*); Hu Jintao (2002-2012, *Scientific Outlook on Development*) and Xi Jinping; (2012- current, *Xi Jinping thinking*), organized and updated to the current historical moment. The 21st century has seen monumental technological advancement, so it is essential that the military is engaged with the presence and use of the latest technologies. But it is not only this. It is to integrate the man/machine elements in a way that they become part of each other. For this, there is a need for the training of human resources capable of handling all the innovation that has been achieved.

According to *China's National Defense in the New Era*:

Efforts will be made to promote the integrated development of mechanization and computerization, accelerate the development of intelligent armed forces, create a modernized military force structure with Chinese characteristics, improve and develop socialist military institutions with Chinese characteristics, and constantly enhance capabilities to fulfill missions and tasks in the new era (LI, 2019).

The document *Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the armed forces*, released in July 2022, has been continuously released, and on September 9, 2022, an official letter from the CPC in major state media outlets urged its systematic study by members of the Armed Forces, as well as reiterating its study by the Chinese people in general.

Released in July 2022, the text is a compilation of questions and answers with President Xi's determinations for the performance of the People Liberation Army. Among the guidelines established by the document is the modernization of the PLA, both for an eventual regional and international conflict.

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<sup>5</sup> HUA Guofeng (1977, 2004) - Continue the Revolution Under the Dictatorship of the Proletariat to the End - A Study of Volume V of the *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*. Written/ First Published: Foreign Languages Press, 1977. Source: pamphlet, Online Version: Hua Guofeng Internet Archive, February 2004.

Notwithstanding that this is not an exhaustive analysis of Xi *Jinping's* *thinking on strengthening the armed forces* and other documents, it is important to highlight the shared and evolving vision of the PLA since the 1980s. In light of China's domestic politics and strategic geopolitical events of the past five years, one can see an escalation of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist doctrine within the Armed Forces, especially in the training of the manpower. The most recent guidelines of the Chinese Armed Forces are a consequence of both the geopolitical context and the Chinese economic prominence.

## **XI JINPING'S THOUGHT FOR THE STRENGTHENING OF THE ARMED FORCES**

The distinctive feature of China's national defense in the new era is described on Chapter 2 of the *Defense White Paper*: "never seek hegemony, expansion or spheres of influence" (ibid). The same document reinforces:

'Since its founding 70 years ago, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has never initiated any war or conflict. Since the introduction of reform and opening-up, China has committed itself to promoting world peace and has voluntarily reduced the PLA by more than 4 million soldiers. (...) China is committed to developing friendly cooperation with all countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. (DEFENSE WHITE PAPER, 2019, pg. 8)

It adds:

History proves and will continue to prove that China will never follow the path of the great powers seeking hegemony. No matter how it may develop, China will never threaten any other country or seek any sphere of influence. (ibid)

The thoughts of Xi Jinping expose the need to comprehensively promote reform, strengthening, investment in Science, Technology & Innovation, and, at the same time, boosting the qualification

of human resources. He emphasizes that a strong military must be proportional to the country's international status and in line with national security and development interests. Both would be determining factors for the success of continued socialist development in China.

The following sessions will address the basic premises outlined by Xi Jinping in the aforementioned document and which have been divided into four themes: ongoing world changes; the new global military revolution; the need to learn from history, and total obedience to the Party.

## THE WORLD IS UNDERGOING CHANGES

Drastic changes in Eastern Europe, invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) by the United States, revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East, Color Revolutions (2003 to 2005): in Georgia; Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, former colonies of the former Soviet Union. From time to time the world goes through transitions that may compromise the *status quo* in place. The last twenty years have been marked by changes that reflect on the world order imposed up to the present and the near future. China has been following all this closely and paying special attention to the military capabilities of the actors involved.

The television images of the bombing of Iraq by the US and the UK (March 2003) marked the beginning of a new form of warfare where technology has replaced soldiers fighting within sight of each other. This is a time where ultra-modern machines with high technology built in have changed the way battles are fought. What from a distance looked more like a video game from the 1980s, alerted the Chinese leadership to a new form of confrontation. Planning was needed to enable the country to be prepared for an eventual regional or international conflict. The last confrontation in which the Chinese were involved was the Vietnam War (1955-1975). Therefore, for almost fifty years the country has not had the opportunity to evaluate both its military hardware and its human resources. It is no surprise that China is the country that has participated in most of the United Nations peace missions.

There are changes taking place in the world, both politically and militarily. The Chinese realize that their socialist model is not accepted by other countries, especially Western ones, and this puts them in a defensive position. The result of this is the movement defined by the German-American scholar John Herz in the 1950s as the Security Dilemma (HERZ,



1951), where, when states feel threatened they start to arm themselves. Therefore, the more a country arms itself, the other, perceiving this move will also seek to increase its military power thus creating an infinite escalation of fear, insecurity, and an expanding arms buildup.

In October 2022, the White House released the document *National Security Strategy* where it establishes the challenges and opportunities perceived by the executive branch that will cause interference in the internal and external policy of the United States in the coming years. According to the text, China is the biggest geopolitical challenge to U.S. dominance, regarding the technological dispute in the semiconductor field and the defense of “freedom of navigation” in the Taiwan Strait. The document reports:

This strategy recognizes that the People’s Republic of China presents America’s most important geopolitical challenge. While the Indo-Pacific is where its outcomes will be most acutely shaped, there are significant global dimensions to this challenge. Russia poses an immediate and continuing threat to the regional security order in Europe and is a source of disruption and instability globally, but lacks the full spectrum capabilities of the People’s Republic of China. (NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY, 2022).

In addition to the already mentioned internal invasions and revolutions, there are also the agreements and alliances of countries that maintain a confrontational position to China. This is the case of the alliance between US and Taiwan, US and Japan, Five Eyes (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK and US), Aukus (Australia, UK and US) and Quads (US, Japan, Australia and India). Despite the relaxed atmosphere of the most recent meeting between Presidents Xi Jinping and Joe Biden (November 2022) at a G20 meeting, there are no indications that the rivalry will tend to loosen. In fact, it may become more intense as China will not slow down investment in research and production of chips, microchips, and new technologies in general.

The clashes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries drew attention for their warlike capability and technological innovation. The alliances formed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries reinforce the competitive environment with a focus on artificial intelligence, information science,

chips, semiconductors, biotechnology, and green energy. In other words, this is a range of technological developments that are impossible to stop.

Issues such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, border conflicts with India, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with Japan, are some of the tensions that worry the CPC. National sovereignty, maritime disputes, ethnic and religious conflicts, terrorism, and other conditions to which China is geographically exposed, determine the investment in smart weapons and equipment. Precision-guided weapons, lean organization, multidimensional combat space, command and training. It is all part of a strategy already conceived by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s and followed by political leaderships since then as exemplified by the aforementioned China's Defense White Paper released in 2019:

China's socialist system, strategic decision to tread the path of peaceful development, independent foreign policy of peace, and the best of cultural traditions - considering peace and harmony as foundations - determine that China pursue a defensive national defense policy in nature.

Other directives are those concerning the right to "Resolutely protect China's sovereignty, security and development interests" such as deterring and resisting aggression; safeguarding national political security, people's security and social stability; opposing and containing "Taiwan independence"; repressing proponents of separatist movements and the "independence of Tibet" and the creation of "East Turkestan." The document also deals with defending national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security; safeguarding China's maritime rights and interests; protecting China's security interests in outer space, electromagnetic space and cyberspace, to safeguard China's "overseas interests, and support the country's sustainable development." The document states:

The military strategic guideline for a new era follows the principles of defense, self-defense and post-attack response, adopting active defense. It maintains the stance that "we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will certainly counterattack if attacked," emphasizes both

containment and victory of wars, and stresses the unity of strategic defense and offense at the operational and tactical levels (ibid.).

## NEW WORLD MILITARY REVOLUTION

Countries considered world leaders established a few decades ago the imposition of the most innovative equipment and weapons in the defense industry to arm a strong fighting force. China was isolated for almost 30 years, and its military combat example was the guerrilla war between the Red Army and the Nationalists. As it re-entered international relations, it found itself lagging behind, both technologically and in terms of personnel training. In the 1980s, there were not enough financial resources to invest in weapons. Therefore, Deng Xiaoping allowed the army to sell the weapons it produced and use its industries to manufacture popular consumer items (MARTI, 2012). In the same period, Deng reduced the military personnel by 1 million (1995) and those who remained underwent a new educational training system (ibid.).

The US demonstration of military superiority in the Gulf War (1992) optimized the combat structure with three main components: state-of-the-art weapons and equipment, highly skilled personnel, and a system of organic integration between personnel and materiel. Proving grounds for new technologically sensitive weapons, undetectable bombers, cruise missiles, new generation operational platforms, were some of the technologies developed.

One of the ways the Chinese government keeps its troops trained is by sending its military to participate in United Nations Peace Operations (PRC, 2020). In September 2020, the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China released the document *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*. The text celebrates thirty years of Chinese involvement in peacekeeping missions, with more than 40,000 Blue Helmets serving in 25 missions including Iraq-Kuwait, Cambodia, Mozambique, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Syria, among others. The document also reports China as the second largest contributor of financial resources and troops among the UN Security Council members. The importance of these operations to China prompted the country to maintain a standby peacekeeping force of about 8,000 troops in September 2017. The force has 28 units divided into ten categories - infantry, engineering,

transport, health, force protection, rapid response, helicopter, transport aircraft, UAV, and surface ship units (ibid).

Another form of exercise for the troops are the joint strategic trainings, or Strategic Exercise, held mainly with Central Asian and Shanghai Cooperation countries. The last of these took place between August/September 2022 in Vostok, Russia, where an Air Force aviation regiment under PLA Command sent two helicopters for emergency reconnaissance and rescue operations in Luding County (CHEN, 2022).

The world geopolitical situation has changed overall and requires contemporary conducts for military training as in the case of hybrid wars. For the CPC leadership, China is at a critical stage of evolution from an economically robust country to one that needs to show combat strength (“hard power”). External conflicts threaten its development and can create internal crises (WANG, 2022). Therefore, in order to maintain national unity, ensure economic growth, and advance the Chinese dream, it is urgent that the country’s military level keeps up with world changes with the modernization of National Defense.

## LEARNING FROM HISTORY

The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), of Manchu origin, was strong and economically well structured in its first couple of hundred years. However, from 1850 on, the population increase, the land ownership concentration and corruption led to uprisings such as those of Taiping (1851-1864), Nian (1851-1868), and the Boxers (1899 and 1900). In the course of these conflicts, the two Opium Wars against the British (1840 to 1850) and a series of attempts by Western countries to dominate the Chinese territories by imposing their own legislation, as was the case of England.

The first Sino-Japanese war, or Jiawu War (甲午戰爭, 1894-1895), for control of Korea, marked the decline of the Qing Dynasty. Although economically prosperous and having the Beiyang Fleet,<sup>6</sup> this Dynasty collapsed due to lack of discipline and negligence in taking care of it. The country had its development phase halted and then fell into poverty with the return of a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. These past experiences shaped President Xi’s doctrine

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<sup>6</sup> Beiyang Fleet was one of the four modernized Chinese navies that had been dominant in East Asia and the 8th largest in the world in the late 1880s.

for the Chinese military strengthening. According to him, China is going through a period of economic development and, for this very reason, needs to be attentive to its defense since there is a risk of other powers attacking the country as a means to hinder its prosperity.

Under the Secretary-General's watchful eye, says the text, it is assimilated how not to allow historical tragedies to repeat themselves. As a response to major regional and international transformations, adaptation to the new demands of modernizing national defense is required. "Drawing lessons from history, China strengthens its national defense and military to provide security assurance for its peaceful development" and adds:

Building a fortified national defense and a strong military compatible with the country's international standing and its security and development interests is a strategic task for China's socialist modernization." (LI, 2019).

## OBEDIENCE TO THE PARTY

The Chinese Armed Forces are tools of political struggle, and in doing so they need access to military materiel, discipline and doctrine. There is the notion that the State, Party, and Armed Forces are one institution, not separate, but there is a hierarchy of command on the part of the Party since this is the essence of socialism with Chinese characteristics. The success of the socialist cause depends on this understanding (WANG, 2022). Another issue is that the PLA must be in tune with the political guidelines of the CPC, strengthening its political consciousness. "Inherit the red genes" (ibid).

Obedience to the Party, the ability to win battles, and discipline in work represent the soul, the core, and the guarantee of strengthening the PLA and winning the great struggle, the great dream of the Chinese Nation (ibid.). Without this, China would be doomed, once again, to a bitter defeat.

Strategic military policy for the new era presuppose military theory, personal organization, weapons and equipment, real and combat-oriented training, strict discipline. These are some of the goals outlined by *Xi Jinping's thinking for the armed forces*, a warning to the country of the international risks they face. As objectives outlined are securing the PLA's centennial founding goal to be achieved in 2027, renewing national defense, and modernizing the armed forces by 2035. By mid-century, the purpose is to transform the people's army into a force on par with the world level (WANG, 2022).

The final CPC document read at the close of the 20th National Congress, *Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, reports in the topic entitled *We have set the Party's goal of building a strong military in the new era*:

We held a meeting on political and military work in Gutian in 2014 and improved political conduct through rectification initiatives. (...) We coordinated efforts to strengthen military work in all directions and domains and devoted great energy to training in combat conditions. We have made bold reforms in national defense and the armed forces, restructuring the military leadership and command systems, the modern armed forces system, and the military policy system. We have moved faster to modernize our national defense and armed forces and reduced the number of active military personnel by 300,000. (REPORT, 2022)

On October 30, 2014, Xi Jinping led the Army Political Work Conference in Gutian, Fujian province, aiming to establish a new era of strategies for the people's army emphasizing the Party's absolute leadership. With the participation of more than 400 high-ranking officers, Xi stressed the need to "strengthen awareness of politics, the battlefield and the conjuncture, as well as learn various skills so that political organs and contingents will rely on absolute loyalty to the Party, combative strength and good image."<sup>7</sup>

The city of Gutian is strategic. It was there that on December 28 and 29, 1929, Mao Zedong and other Party leaders held the 9th Party Organization Congress at The Fourth Red Army Corps. The meeting strengthened the ties between the Party and the People's Army, emphasizing on the former the absolute leadership as well as confirming the tasks and objectives of the then Red Army, now the PLA.

At the commemoration of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the PLA held on August 1, 2017, Xi declared:

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<sup>7</sup> "Xi stresses CPC's absolute leadership over army". China Daily. Available at [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-11/02/content\\_18843109.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-11/02/content_18843109.htm)

(...) the People's Army, under the leadership of the CPC, has bravely dedicated itself to the historic current in pursuit of the freedom and happiness of the Chinese people, the independence and revitalization of the Chinese nation. It is closely linked to the destiny of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation.<sup>8</sup>

## **XI JINPING - CONTROL OVER THE PARTY-STATE-ARMED FORCES APPARATUS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCIENCE IN THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT**

There is no denying the rapid consolidation of Xi Jinping as the "core" of the Communist Party of China. Despite not having participated in the armed struggle alongside Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Zhou Enlai, and others, Xi inherited from his father, Xi Zhongxun, Mao's comrade-in-arms and later vice premier, the status he needed to ascend to the high ranks of Chinese politics. Xi and his father were also affected by Mao's persecutory outbursts and spent some years in re-education camps.

One factor that explains Xi's accumulated power is that he is not burdened by pressure from Party elders. In fact, today he is one of the most senior members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) and the Politburo. Another key issue was his anti-corruption campaign which, sharing Hu Jintao's view, if not stopped, would be a "fatal" blow to the PLA and the regime. Xi purged the corrupt leadership in a move that swayed all fronts of the government. For Kou Chien-wen, Xi's image is of China's top leader who, in addition to rooting out corruption, dispelled rival political factions and fought military misconduct (CHAR; BITZINGER, 2017).

But how important was it to maintain the Party's firm leadership over the military? Because that was one of the lessons assimilated from the collapse of the Soviet Union where the FA was depoliticized, separated from the Party and nationalized, and the Party was disarmed. Some still tried to prevent the dissolution of the regime; they got hold of Gorbachev, but within a few days everything was reversed again. There were no security instruments for the maintenance of the old power.

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<sup>8</sup> "Highlights of Xi's speech at rally marking PLA's 90th anniversary". China Daily. Available at [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-08/02/content\\_30327309.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-08/02/content_30327309.htm)

Yeltsin made a speech on top of an armored war tank, but the military did not respond to his appeal and maintained the so-called “neutrality”. It was the end of a great power.

The exclusion of the time and age limit to remain as general secretary of the Party means for Xi Jinping to become the steersman of a new “Leap Forward,” capable of organizing and shaping the future of the fastest growing economy in the world. At the same time, the new world geopolitical context forces him to be the interlocutor for the rest of the world in facing the challenges of the long-term global agenda.

Xi, therefore, launches new challenges to engineers, scientists and researchers focusing on the goal of surpassing the United States in 2050 as the world’s largest economy, and, consequently, to have high-level Armed Forces. This wave of scientists concerned with surpassing the West in knowledge innovation had a recent example of the most effective effects of anti-Covid-19 vaccines arriving from Europe and the United States - thanks to research developed by biotech startups. The meager positive results of state research in China (and Russia) must have confirmed to Xi the pressing need for advances in research, development, and innovation. He himself, as a young official, was sent to study the agricultural complexes of Iowa (USA).<sup>9</sup> According to Lucena Silva (2016), China had already been using considerable resources to transform its Armed Forces from a large number of personnel to a force capable of projecting power through the consolidation of self-sufficiency in technology. Now, deepening the policy of innovation in all fields is fundamental to regain geopolitical prominence, especially to secure, vis-à-vis the West, its internal and regional achievements.

The global challenge of science has a value that needs to be understood in view of the fact that China is already an advanced nation in the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI), as seen in the successful use of the facial recognition mechanism even during the Coronavirus pandemic that imposed the use of masks. The production of chips, semiconductors, and nanotechnology has reached such a high degree of capability, specialization, and usefulness in daily life that it has made it impossible for a country with limited access to these devices to survive.

China, like Western democracies, has many points of convergence on the agenda of global challenges. It remains to be seen whether Xi

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<sup>9</sup> In 1985, Xi Jinping, then secretary of the Zhengding District Committee of the CPC - Hebei Province, led a delegation of experts to visit several farms in Iowa State, USA. Available at: <https://portuguese.cri.cn/news/china/407/20220701/768295.html>.



Jinping will choose to continue cooperating on climate and inequality issues. Should Xi bring China's growth to a level of international stability globalization will be relaunched on new grounds.

Speaking to *The Washington Post*, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger assessed that the Iranian-Saudi agreement, brokered by China, represents "a substantial change in the strategic situation in the Middle East," with long-term reach not only in the region. "China has declared in recent years that it needs to participate in the creation of the world order." With the protagonism in mediating the recent agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the country would be, according to Henry Kissinger, "taking a significant step in the direction of putting China at the center of participating in the creation of the new world order."<sup>10</sup> This would make Beijing a protagonist in an eventual global peace and security agreement with the West.<sup>11</sup>

Confirming the pursuit of a new stance in international relations based on China's recent moves on strategic issues in seeking new cooperation with Russia, and mediating the Iran - Saudi Arabia deal, Zhou Bo invoked Deng Xiaoping and drew an analogy to current times:

"With Deng Xiaoping's reforms and openness China was seeking to cross the river feeling the stones in the bed, but now China is entering the ocean."<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

This work aimed at the analysis, not exhaustive, of *Xi Jinping's thinking on the strengthening of the armed forces* and was defined by arguments that justify the attention to the theme in the most recent years which lead to the point of producing state policies. Ongoing global transitions; military

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with columnist David Ignatius. *The Washington Post*, "Opinion - How China is heralding the beginnings of a multipolar Middle East," 16 March 2023. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/16/china-saudi-arabia-iran-middle-east-change/>.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Kissinger was the architect of the U.S. rapprochement with China as National Security Advisor (1969-1975) and Secretary of State (1973-1977) in the Republican administrations of Nixon and Ford.

<sup>12</sup> ZHOU Bo, Senior Colonel (Ref.) in the People's Liberation Army and Senior Fellow at the Center for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University. Media interviews reproduced by journalist Nelson de Sá in the article "China 'is entering the ocean' of the world with Xi". *Folha de São Paulo*, March 21, 2023.

innovations; history as learning; and the submission to Party directives were the most important points listed for the understanding of the document which consolidates national defense based on a key point for the country: the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Strengthening the PLA while never removing the predominant role of the CPC is one of the strategic supports for the great rejuvenation (fùxīng, 复兴) in all areas. The word fùxīng has been widely used by President Xi Jinping and implies the idea that something once prospered, then declined, now is resurgent: 复 fù, meaning the prefix re-, and 兴 xīng, here means prosperous. Something like “restore prosperity” or “reflowering.”

Until the visit of US Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi on August 2, 2022, China focused more on the defense of its territory and regional conflicts. However, with a more aggressive position taken by the US regarding the defense of Taiwan (which has more to do with a technological than ideological clash), the boundaries of a possible international confrontation were extended. The presence of the US Congresswoman on the island has accelerated the escalation of military tension. In President Xi Jinping's speech at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China on July 1, 2021, the CPC's goals for the coming years and even decades were made clear: “(...) to defend and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics, (with) general plans for development and security, a rich country and a strong army.”

The legality and the legitimacy of the CPC's existence depends on the commitment the Party makes to the people, and, not surprisingly, China sets specific goals for growth and development. The Chinese path follows a linear direction, even with the adversities of geopolitics, or the imposition of a world pandemic. That is why the Chinese saying “Mao made China one; Deng made China rich; Xi will make China strong” makes so much sense in the Chinese path from the 1980s to the present day.

# O PENSAMENTO DE XI JINPING PARA AS FORÇAS ARMADAS CHINESAS NO ATUAL CONTEXTO GEOPOLÍTICO

## RESUMO

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Em julho de 2022 foi lançado o documento *Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the armed forces*, um compilado de perguntas e respostas seguindo a orientação do presidente incluídas na Constituição Chinesa. No dia 9 de setembro de 2022, uma circular oficial do Partido Comunista Chines (PCCh) pedia o estudo do livro de pensamento do presidente Xi sobre a atuação do *People's Liberation Army (PLA)* – o Exército de Libertação Popular (ELP). A partir da segunda década do século 21, em um momento onde se instaura a ascensão de uma rivalidade China – Estados Unidos – Taiwan, é fundamental o entendimento da relação entre o Partido Comunista Chinês (PCCh) e o Exército de Libertação Popular (PLA), as ameaças regionais e internacionais que finalizaram o período de paz no Leste Asiático, o novo protagonismo da China na criação de uma nova ordem mundial, e as determinações do documento *Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the armed forces*.

**Palavras-chaves:** China Contemporânea; Estudo político e militar; Exército de Libertação Popular.

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