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Author
MILLER, Joseph

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China’s Dream Army

Joseph E. MILLER
Graduate Student Researcher
UC San Diego School of International Relations and Pacific Studies

In Chinese politics, slogans can come to define the governing philosophy and goals of a paramount ruler. Jiang Zemin promoted the “Three Represents” and Hu Jintao worked for a “Harmonious Society.” Although the Xi Jinping presidency has just begun, the “China Dream” (中国梦), announced at the 18th National People’s Congress, may come to crystallize Xi’s initial governing philosophy. According to Xi, the China Dream is to realize the hopes of the Chinese people and achieve the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. While Politburo level leadership has left the exact definition of these goals vague, other government and military officials have read their own aspirations into the dream such as raising living standards, creating a level playing field, strengthening party training, and building a strong military. The “Strong Army Dream” is the principal military interpretation of the China Dream. Since its formulation in December 2012, Central Military Commission (CMC) leadership has absorbed and affirmed this principle and is using it to push for a broader development of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) power projection capabilities.

The “China Dream” is not a new phrase. The term has been the subject of political tracts well before 2012. Its current use may date back to 2010, when Colonel Liu Mingfu wrote the book China Dream: The Great Power Thinking and Strategic Positioning of China in the Post-American Age. This book calls not only for China to confront inequality and corruption, but also for the building of a powerful military and the renaissance of the Chinese military spirit. Liu is quoted as saying, “One, it means to be No. 1 in the world. Secondly, it’s the rejuvenation of the nation.” If this is the basis of the China Dream, it is broad, ambitious, and geopolitically salient. However, Xi Jinping’s formulation of the China Dream at the National Museum of China “Road to Revival” exhibition in November 2012 does not contain those specifics and does not progress beyond calls for achieving the aspirations of the Chinese people and national rejuvenation. They are, however, part of a larger set of goals to achieve a “moderately prosperous society” (小康社会) by 2021 (the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese

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1 “习近平在十二届全国人大一次会议闭幕会上发表重要讲话” [Xi Jinping Delivers an Important Speech at the Closing of the First Meeting of the 12th Session of the National People’s Congress], CCTV, March 17, 2013, http://news.cntv.cn/special/xijinpingjianghua/index.shtml.

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Communist Party) and a strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and modernized socialist country by 2049.⁷

These tenets share the “path of rejuvenation’s” focus on the Century of Humiliation,⁸ the period of roughly 100 years between the First Opium War and the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 when foreign powers took advantage of a weak China.⁹ Core to the idea of the China Dream is that China is finally reclaiming a position of prosperity and power enjoyed before the period of national humiliation. To achieve the dream, China requires an effective government, a prosperous economy, a harmonious society, and a strong military.¹⁰

The PLA’s “Strong Army Dream” (强军梦) had its genesis in Xi Jinping’s inspection of the Guangzhou Military Region in December 2012, a visit in which he prominently visited the destroyer Haikou.¹¹ There, Xi did not mention the Strong Army Dream, but did expound on the need for a strong military to achieve national rejuvenation. Xi impressed upon observers the need for increased training, Party control of the military, and the ability to fight and win any type of war.¹² Similarly, Xu Qiliang, vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission and former head of the Air Force has stated, “The China Dream explicitly set forth the Party’s goal of strengthening the military.”¹³

Xi’s visits to naval installations have led many Chinese Navy observers to state that the dream involves naval power and the need to protect territorial seas. During Xi’s inspection of the Guangzhou Military Region, which showcased naval reviews, South Sea Fleet Commander Jiang Weilie stated, “The over three million square kilometers of territorial waters represents an important strategic resource for the achievement of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the China Dream.”¹⁴ In addition, in April 2012, President Xi visited the naval base at Sanya, a strategically important base in Southern Hainan province that lies at the northern part of the South China Sea. There, Xi stressed that the Navy keep in mind the goals of a strong army, merge individual ideals with the Strong Army Dream, and strengthen the sense of mission.¹⁵

The Strong Army Dream is not the sole purview of the PLA Navy, however. General Armament Department chief Zhang Youxia, for example, is quoted as saying, “We must lose no time preparing the necessary equipment for military struggle, accelerate the promotion of high-tech equipment projects, concentrate efforts on resolving contradictions and problems that restrict the innovation and development of equipment, complete the rendezvous and docking of the Shenzhou 10 … and Tiangong 1, and make our due contributions to the realization of the ‘China Dream’ and

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‘dream of a strong army.’”¹⁶ Wei Fenghe, commander of the 2nd Artillery division, reinforced this technology interpretation by stating that his forces should “use the ‘China Dream’ and the ‘dream of a strong army’ to educate and stimulate officers and men, exert to build a strong strategic missile force based on information technology…”¹⁷ These views are consistent with the current Military Strategic Guidelines, which call for winning wars under conditions of informatization.¹⁸

While the precise meaning of the Strong Army Dream is ill-defined, statements from high officials, including President Xi, and its connection to the China Dream mean that this concept is likely to be a guiding force in Chinese military policy. This overarching dream is conceptually ambitious both in the military and non-military realms. However, the government has yet to take concrete action that will show the dream’s effect on military modernization. It may signal more funds for a blue water navy, an increased effort to informatize the military, or a mix of both. At this point, it appears that Chinese military modernization is set to continue under Xi Jinping in much the same lines as that under Hu. As this policy is more a continuation than a break, we may never see a policy that is an obvious direct result of the dream. Whatever the relative focus of the Strong Army Dream, a PLA with increased capacities in all areas will most likely result.

¹⁷ ibid.  