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The PLA Puzzle in Chinese Politics

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Significance

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a significant part of China's political landscape. Although the PLA's evolution away from overt political roles can be charted, critical puzzles remain that make it difficult to interpret the military's influence and the degree of control exercised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the PLA.

What We Need to Know

As the PLA slowly shifted away from being a visibly central player in Chinese politics, the Chinese military became a more professional body offering technical expertise to Chinese policymakers. The PLA under Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping often was a political instrument, being used by the leadership to secure power and to act as the vanguard for various modernization drives. The PLA's efforts to prepare for modern conventional war have built up new capabilities and competencies that provide the military with a seat at the table to shape and influence policy decisions and their execution. The conventional wisdom that the PLA's evolution toward professionalism by nature divides it from the party, however, leaves several important gaps in our understanding of the military's role in Chinese politics and policymaking. The continuing domination of the ground forces within the PLA, the military's disproportionately high representation on the CCP Central Committee, and the true nature of party control—its mechanisms and impact—remain unexplored. Without resolving these gaps through sustained effort, foreign governments are likely to misunderstand Chinese signals and misinterpret PLA activities.

Discussion/Analysis

The evolution of the PLA has transformed the army from model soldiers serving as a revolutionary vanguard within the party to increasingly professional and technical advisors in the policy process. The discernible areas where the PLA provides input into the policy process are all areas where the military has demonstrated relevance and professional competency.

Both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping proved willing to sacrifice the PLA's fighting power and professionalism for domestic political objectives. As the armed wing of the party, the PLA was just another tentacle of the party, subject to the same factional and political division as the rest of their fellow party cadre—albeit more loyal to the supreme commander.

The army was not really a distinct group, because so many of China's first and second generation leadership had military experience if not actually serving in both civilian and military positions. The difference was in that, because of senior officers' loyalty to Mao and Deng, the PLA could be used to demonstrate the effectiveness of the leader's preferred policy or to free up resources to pursue those policies. For example, Mao kept up the PLA's self-sufficiency program long after the necessities of

guerilla warfare faded, and he ordered the PLA to commit more resources to economic support activities during the Great Leap Forward to demonstrate his policies worked.¹

From 1980 to 1989, Deng sacrificed the PLA on the altar of his reform policies by reducing its funding (averaging a 3.2 percent decrease annually), converting its defense-industrial base for civilian use, and encouraging the PLA to use the market to fund itself from its economic support activities.² Furthermore, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, China and the PLA began evolving away from a system of dual elites with both civilian and military experience. Prior to 1987, every Politburo Standing Committee included at least one serving PLA general, but, after that year, only Liu Huaqing served in that highest of party bodies (1992–1997). Moreover, in 1992, Deng Xiaoping ousted former comrade-in-arms President Yang Shangkun and his brother, Yang Baibing, who had coordinated the Tiananmen crackdown for allegedly plotting a coup against CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin. More than 200 officers were caught up and disciplined for their role in the Yang brothers' purported plot. Whatever the truth of these allegations, this would be the last known intrusion by PLA leadership in party leadership politics.³

Concurrently, the 100-hour victory of U.S.-led coalition ground forces over Iraq in 1991 illustrated the hollowness of the PLA. The Iraqi military was at least as well equipped as the PLA and, moreover, possessed recent battlefield experience from the country's long war with Iran. This was the first of a series of events—including the Taiwan Strait crises (1995–96) and the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (1999)—that underscored the PLA's weakness relative to the United States. These events forced the PLA to concede to the leadership that they could do very little to prevent U.S. aircraft carriers from operating with impunity near Chinese shores and U.S. bombers from striking Beijing.⁴ Preparing the PLA to fight a "local war under modern high-tech conditions" would become the overriding objective of military modernization, requiring a better equipped, better educated, and more effective PLA. The signal of this change was the alteration in 1993 of the Military Strategic Guidelines (*junshi zhanlve fangzhen*, 军事战略方针), which govern all aspects of the PLA's combat capability.⁵

This threefold combination—the end of dual elites, the Yang brothers' ouster, and the new military modernization objectives—helped isolate the PLA from the rest of the party and society. Henceforth, the PLA's discernible policy and political roles would be areas where the PLA demonstrated competency. Even the PLA's representatives on the Politburo would seem to serve a broad policy purpose to facilitate military modernization. Around the 16th Party Congress in 2002, the PLA would undergo another significant round of personnel changes, surpassing the scale of past purges. David Shambaugh wrote at the time, "the fact that such a thorough vetting could occur absent a purge or crisis is testimony to how regularized and professional personnel procedures have become in the PLA."⁶

The primary venues where the PLA exercises influence are the small number of central leading small groups where military officers sit. A Central Military Commission (CMC) vice chairman and the deputy chief of the General Staff Department responsible for intelligence sit on the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group. The vice chairman for the last thirty years has been an operational leader rather than a political commissar.

The deputy chief is the one individual in the Chinese government capable of offering an all-source assessment of foreign developments. The PLA controls Chinese signals intelligence and imagery satellites, and it possesses a wide-ranging human intelligence apparatus ranging from overt collectors like defense attachés to clandestine case officers who recruit human sources. These two officers are joined by the director of the General Political Department's Liaison Department on the Taiwan Affairs as well as the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs leading small groups. In addition to political warfare, this

department is responsible for the military's contributions to united front work, such as the "one country, two systems" policy for organizing pro-Beijing supporters in the three areas.⁷

The PLA also reportedly sits on the new Central Network Security and Informatization Leading Small Group (CNSILSG) (*zhongyang wangluo anquan he xinxihua lingdao xiaozu*, 中央网络安全和信息化领导小组).⁸ The PLA's reported representatives are military heavyweights: CMC Vice Chairman General Fan Changlong and General Staff Department (GSD) director General Fang Fenghui.⁹ The latter is responsible for overseeing the PLA's signals intelligence and electronic warfare elements, residing in the GSD's Third and Fourth Departments, respectively. Because computers, signals, and software have become ubiquitous in modern military equipment and civilian life, efforts to intercept or disrupt frequently require actions in cyberspace.

The leading small groups also illustrate the limits of PLA influence in formal channels and their confinement to the military's areas of competence. Xi Jinping's two new leading groups to guide reform in both the military and party-state— Central Deepening Reform on National Defense and Military Leading Small Group (*zhongyang junwei shenhua guofang he jundui gaige lingdao xiaozu*, 中央军委深化国防和军队改革领导小组) and the Comprehensively Deepening Reform Leading Small Group (*zhongyang quanmian shenhua gaige lingdao xiaozu*, 中央全面深化改革领导小组)—appear to share only their chairman, Xi Jinping. Although official membership lists are not available, even the rumored membership based on watching news footage does not show any PLA officers sitting on the civilian reform leading group.

Deng's reforms in the 1980s embedded national defense modernization within the broader national project of economic and industrial modernization. To harness the developments in the civilian economy, the PLA reformed its procurement processes and organizations. Centered around the General Armaments Department (GAD) created in 1998, the PLA's new procurement effort focused on exploiting dual-use technologies, particularly those related to command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR). It became one of the four pillars of military-civil integration (*junmin ronghe*, 军民融合), which embeds military modernization within China's system of social and economic development.¹⁰ Because of the embrace of dual-use, GAD sits at the center of a sprawling network of high-level committees that decide science and technology research funding and provide advice to the CMC and the Politburo Standing Committee about strategic technological modernization initiatives.

Military-civil integration necessarily calls for greater PLA involvement in local affairs, education, and the economy. The PLA's mediator with the party-state is the Ministry of National Defense, which allows the military "to remain insulated from outside forces, to preserve its position as a self-referential and semi-independent *xitong* (sub-system) within [China's] power structure."¹¹ Two of the last three defense ministers, General Chang Wanquan (2013–present) and General Cao Gangchuan (2003–2008), directed the GAD before moving to the ministry, and even the third, General Liang Guanglie (2008–2013) waxed rhapsodic about the need for military-civil integration.¹² Military-civil integration is now a critical element of military modernization, and, at the last National People's Congress, Xi called for a national strategy for military-civil integration to support the goal of being able to win local informatized wars.¹³ The full implications are uncertain, but MND is likely to become a conduit for greater PLA influence as military-civil integration becomes increasingly institutionalized as part of Chinese modernization. Again, however, the PLA role exists within a clear sphere of technical competence.

Critical Puzzles

Real knowledge of the CCP's inner workings remains as elusive as ever, despite the opening of new information sources on a wide variety of topics. Sometimes the gaps in knowledge would simply be nice to know rather than essential to understanding Chinese behavior. Below are three areas this author thinks essential to understanding Beijing's military actions and how the PLA intersects with politics.

First, despite more than two decades of emphasizing preparing to fight and win local wars under informatized conditions, the PLA is still dominated by officers from the ground forces. Few officers in senior positions within the Central Military Commission (CMC) and its staff, the "four general departments" (*si zongbu*, 四总部), and the military region headquarters have a background that incorporates the other PLA services, intelligence, or electronic warfare.¹⁴ CMC Vice Chairman General Xu Qiliang is only the second non-ground forces officer to serve at such a high level. The last defense white paper even called for a change in PLA mindsets away from continentalist thinking about national security.¹⁵

This suggests Western (and particularly many U.S.) analysts may have misread the "Taiwan-plus-regional scenarios" trajectory of PLA modernization. Critics have charged that analysts have missed key developments in Chinese military modernization.¹⁶ Some of these charges are overwrought or exaggerated, but failing to provide specific predictions of weapons system development is a very different failure than misunderstanding the logic driving PLA developments.

Two possible explanations present themselves. The first is bureaucratic politics. The ground forces simply continued their historical domination of the top brass and have not yet ceded strategic planning power, resulting in a bifurcated PLA with the ground forces focused closer to home while the navy and air force look toward power projection. The second is that an invasion of Taiwan, land border conflicts, and internal security are much more serious concerns than external observers appreciate in their rush to write analysis that meets the demands of today's news.¹⁷ Ongoing issues, like the South China Sea and the PLA's new equipment acquisitions, as well as breaking events, like aggressive Chinese intercepts U.S. surveillance aircraft and Beijing's declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea, can distract analysts from the necessary research to build a strong base of knowledge.

Second, no explanation exists for the PLA's disproportionate representation on party's Central Committee. The data supporting a reduced PLA political role within the party is based upon narrow suppositions. Namely, the military presence on the Central Committee and its Politburo serves as a useful proxy for military influence, and the absence of a military Politburo Standing Committee member signals the limited PLA influence.¹⁸ In 1985, the PLA's representation on the CCP Central Committee fell to all-time low of 16 percent, but, in the Reform Era, PLA officers have generally constituted 20 percent of the committee despite being a little over 2 percent of the party's membership. The 18th Central Committee includes 37 PLA officers or about 18 percent, but only two of those sit on the Politburo.

The conventional story about declining PLA influence may be contradicted by the institutionalization of limited, intra-party democracy at the upper reaches of the CCP to select senior party and bureaucratic posts.¹⁹ The days in which PLA support makes or breaks a leader—as it did when Hua Guofeng gave way to Deng Xiaoping—probably are gone. With 20 percent of the Central Committee, the PLA could be the largest, coherent block of party members. This depends on still another unknown: whether the PLA's identity as a corporate body within the party overrides the military's historical divisions.²⁰ Although Bo Xilai's visit to his father's old unit ahead of his dismissal in 2012 suggests at least some Chinese political

figures believe those divisions exist or a party-army divide could be exploited, the PLA left Bo to his fate suggesting some degree of coherence.

Three, virtually all analysts agree the party commands the gun, but the meaning and mechanics of the party's control remain mysterious. PLA officers are party members, but the General Political Department exercises the party's disciplinary and organizational functions within the PLA. Military cadre attend military schools for education and training. The once-integrated party-army residential compounds now are largely segregated. In an operational sense, control over PLA units' actions is believed to be quite centralized; yet, "rogue" unit commanders are responsible for aggressive intercepts of U.S. surveillance aircraft in 2001, 2014, and 2015.²¹

PLA units can take provocative actions in disputed territory like when CCP General Secretary and CMC Chairman Xi Jinping was visiting India ostensibly on a mission to build relationships and reduce tensions.²² Conversely, direct communications between the PLA and Chinese coast guard and fishing vessels to coordinate maritime rights protection in the South China Sea suggests close coordination is more routine than many observers acknowledge.²³ Party control means more than the risk of a PLA-led coup—something most observers have regarded as a distant possibility²⁴—but lack the information to determine whether "rogue" actions are anything more than a useful fiction to allow China to test its competitors but save face if it becomes necessary to back down or conciliate.

The answer to whether PLA units operate under strict, clearly-defined, and centrally-managed orders or vague policy directions like the much of the rest of the government has important implications for understanding PLA actions as signals of Chinese intent and policy. The latter allows local commanders to take initiative—as long as it can be justified within their guidance—that may be odds with civilian leadership priorities. Moreover, if civilian orders only come from the very top and are not necessarily known further down the civilian party-state apparatus, then the PLA has ample opportunity to shirk or misinterpret orders without news ever reaching Xi Jinping unless a loyal insider or a third-party alerts him. The separation between civilian and military elites following the deaths of the revolutionary generations further exacerbates these potential control problems, because the PLA has a near monopoly on military expertise and no one at the CCP's highest levels has the experience to evaluate the implications of options presented by the PLA. Similarly, without knowledge of the orders and decision memoranda as well as the supporting briefing materials generated for Xi and the CMC, foreign analysts cannot know the degree of knowledge and approval the leadership provides for tactical PLA actions, like the unsafe intercepts of U.S. surveillance missions, specific cyber intrusions, and the fire control radar incidents with Japanese vessels.

Conclusion

The PLA's professionalization and modernization trends are one of the key developments that changed the Chinese political landscape after Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. The military is an increasingly segregated institution with technical expertise not found among the civilian leadership and policy apparatus. Professionalization and "the party commands the gun" do not adequately explain the evolution of PLA capabilities or the military role within Chinese politics and policymaking. The absence of information or substantiated analytic judgments on important aspects of the PLA's role in politics undermines foreign efforts to engage Beijing or understand Chinese signals while increasing the chance for miscalculation.

On the big issues, observers have little reason to suspect a “rogue” PLA. The last three decades have seen the military acquiesce to several major personnel cuts (1985, 1997, 2003–2005), orders to restrict their economic activities that also personally enriched PLA officers, and Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign. The recently-announced cut of another 300,000 personnel almost certainly will go ahead, despite rumored opposition within among some PLA officers.²⁵ Hawkish nationalist commentary, which sometimes criticizes the government, also appears licensed within the bounds of propaganda and political warfare.²⁶ Absent direct knowledge of communications and rules of engagement, foreign analysts cannot meaningfully interpret the seemingly rogue actions of pilots and border commanders. The PLA can shape leadership perspectives and policy options, because of the information asymmetry. Such shaping, however, can hardly be called a threat to Xi Jinping and the party’s ultimate authority over the PLA.

The PLA, like much of the rest of the Chinese party-state, has generated more and more publicly-available material. Nearly every topic from equipment and order of battle to potential wartime scenarios and campaign planning to the future of PLA warfighting can be found in Chinese-language publications.²⁷ Professionalizing militaries require a public conversation to test ideas, educate officers, and communicate forthcoming changes. These newfound riches, however, are largely silent on the PLA’s political and policymaking role—just as elite politics remains in the shadows of rumors and conjecture. Transparency has its limits, and the role of intelligence, discreet interviews, and grey literature acquisition cannot be replaced even as the environment for these activities in China becomes increasingly restrictive.

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⁶ David Shamabaugh, “China’s New High Command,” in Stephen Flanagan and Michael Marti, eds., *The People’s Liberation Army and China in Transition* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2003), 43.

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⁸ The official Chinese government translation is the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs.

⁹ Like other LSGs, Beijing has not publicized the full CNSILSG membership list; however, it reportedly includes the following: President Xi Jinping, Chair; Premier Li Keqiang, Vice Chair; Central Party School President Liu Yunshan, Vice Chair; Vice Premier Ma Kai; Central Policy Research Office Director Wang Huning; Propaganda Department Director Liu Qibao; CMC Vice Chairman General Fan Changlong; Central Political-Legal Affairs Committee Chair Meng Jianzhu; CCP Central Office Director Li Zhanshu; Minister of Public Security Guo Shengkun; People's Bank of China President Zhou Xiaochuan; State Council Secretary-General Yang Jing; See, "Central Network Security and Informatization Leading Small Group Membership List... [中央网络安全和信息化领导小组成员名单 12 正副国级兼职深改组]," *The Observer* [观察者], February 28, 2014 "<http://www.guancha.cn/politics/2014_02_28_209672.shtml>.

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¹⁸ The last PLA officer to serve on the Politburo Standing Committee was modernization and professionalization advocate Admiral Liu Huaqing (1992–1997).

¹⁹ Limited forms of voting occur to select senior posts, though it is not always clear who takes part. See, for example, Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 170–171. Proposals for expanded intra-party democracy to select

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