



Party-Army Relations in China: Is Another 100 Years Possible?

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Executive Summary: On July 15, the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs hosted a webinar on party-army relations in China featuring three leading experts: Dr. Chen Yali (Hunter College), Dr. Andrew Scobell (U.S. Institute of Peace), and Dr. Joel Wuthnow (National Defense University). Center Director Dr. Phillip Saunders chaired the session. This report summarizes the presentations and key points from the discussion, which was on the record. A video of the session is available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLm_QCCLbME

- The relationship between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has shown remarkable stability and success over the past century, despite changes in the PLA's institutional character, interests, and organizational autonomy, and shifts in Party control over the PLA.
- The CCP aspires to achieve full "subjective control" over the military (as opposed to Samuel Huntington's model of "objective control," as favored in the west, which requires the army to be politically neutral). However, it is difficult to fully explain all aspects of the party-army relationship using a single model of organizational control.
- Developments in the Xi Jinping era have had a major influence on party-army relations. Institutional changes, the anti-corruption campaign, and renewed political education help cement Party

control. However, control by civilians remains weak and rests largely in Xi's hands.

- Tensions in party-army relations include professionalization of the officer corps, which implies devoting more time to training and less time to political education, and the perception of military support for the PLA to be viewed as a state military rather than a party army. This does not necessarily indicate falling loyalty to the CCP, but diverges from the Party's interest in maintaining full control of the PLA as a guarantor of regime survival.
- While the future of the relationship is hard to predict, a critical variable will be how the Party manages an inevitable transition to a post-Xi era. Critical tests of the strength of party control would include a major war or the eruption of political unrest inside China, both of which could force the PLA to choose between the people and the Party.

Introductory Remarks – Dr. Phillip Saunders

The recent past reveals several major trends in the relationship between the PLA and the CCP. The first is increasing professionalism within the PLA. Second is a growing bifurcation between civilian and military elites, with Party civilians and PLA members experiencing different recruiting and advancement paths and having less contact with each other. Third is a reduced role for the PLA in China's political institutions. Fourth is a reduced emphasis on political work within the PLA. Finally,

the PLA has benefitted from increased salaries and military budgets.

The two traditional models for understanding the PLA-CCP relationship amidst these trends are “Symbiosis” and “Party Control.” The former describes the PLA as the Party’s Army and the CCP as the Army’s Party, while the latter model is simply one of CCP control over the PLA. Recent years have given rise to two additional models. The first, “Conditional Compliance,” describes a bargaining relationship between the two, wherein the CCP provides the PLA with resources and support for its favored policies in return for absolute loyalty. The second is “State Control”, describing a growth of the Chinese state institutions’ control over the PLA against that of the CCP.¹

No model fully accounts for the present situation, but two important developments since 2010 must be considered. The first is the emerging reality that Hu Jintao never fully controlled the PLA. The Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairs appointed by Jiang Zemin remained through Hu’s ten year term as CCP General Secretary, running the PLA and presiding over a massive growth in corruption. The second is the impact of Xi’s tenure. Xi immediately took over chairmanship of the CMC and asserted control over PLA. He purged perceived Jiang loyalists, pushed through reforms that eluded his predecessors, took a personal role in promotions (promoting loyal cadre), and reinvigorated Party cells within the PLA.

Presentation – Dr. Chen Yali

The PLA remains both the CCP and Xi’s ultimate protector, but long-enduring competing interests and key complicating issues in the present mean that the future of the relationship will be characterized by uncertainty and conflict.

In times of crisis, the Party’s “muscle memory” is to rely on the PLA to reassert its legitimacy. In turn,

the PLA serves as a “wind vane” in CCP politics. Their support, opposition, or even silence about an aspiring top leader can tip the balance towards or against that leader. In 2014, Xi stated that the PLA was the “night watch” of the Party. That is true, but the PLA is also Xi’s personal night watch, with his reliance on PLA support exceeding that of any leader since Mao Zedong.

Combat readiness conflicting with politicization

Xi has done more to reform the PLA than any post-Mao leader. A paradox of Xi’s leadership is that while he emphasizes combat readiness, he has also strongly politicized the PLA.

Xi’s anti-corruption efforts and other reforms have created major organizational shocks in the PLA, lowering both its incentives and ability to influence politics. Two common themes of Xi’s anti-corruption campaign are replacing untrustworthy officers with loyalists (in contrast with Jiang’s approach of trying to win over such people as political allies) and the resulting decline in morale. The latter can be evidenced by CMC’s 2019 order to emphasize boosting morale within the ranks. While many officers acknowledge genuine corruption that must be excised, they also think the campaign has failed to address institutional root causes. A major concern is that there are no mechanisms to ensure the incorruptibility of the anti-corruption enforcers themselves.

Inevitable divergence of interests

The general stance of many professional PLA officers towards their commissars (political officers) has been one of toleration. Though the Party has promoted many PLA institutional interests in recent times (such as a greater drive for combat readiness, attention to officer salary increases, and the CMC’s 2019 emphasis on merit-based promotion), the PLA professional class generally wants to be left alone to pursue training,

¹ See Michael Kiselycznyk and Phillip C. Saunders, [*Civil-Military Relations in China: Assessing the PLA’s Role in Elite Politics*](#), INSS China Strategic Perspectives 2 (2010).

professionalization, and modernization. These desires are strongest among newer, better educated officers. As their numbers grow, tension between them and the Party's interests is likely to rise. For instance, these officers chafe at the influence of politics as the primary promotion criterion (something that their predecessors in the 1980s might have more readily accepted).

There thus remains a fundamental divergence between the interests of the Party and the military. The relationship between the CCP and the PLA may endure for another one hundred years, but it will encounter more uncertainty and conflict.

Presentation – Dr. Andrew Scobell

The CCP is widely considered to be successful at maintaining a politically reliable and operationally competent military. Whereas the Western model of civil-military relations centers on Samuel Huntington's concept of "objective control" (with apolitical military leaders given professional space with civilian oversight), civil-military relations in China equates to total Party control and constant meddling in military affairs. This has been surprisingly successful, because almost all PLA officers are Party members, sharing interests with the CCP and affirming the mantra that "The Party controls the Gun, and the Gun must never be allowed to control the Party." Additionally, the PLA has a robust network of commissars and other systems of Party control. Finally, the PLA has little reason to be dissatisfied with the Party and has many interests in common with the CCP.

The future trajectory of PLA-CCP relations

The core interests of both sides have potential to cause conflict in the relationship.

"One Obsession". The CCP is obsessed with maintaining absolute allegiance and total control of the military machine, as reflected by the massive reorganization launched by Xi. This certainly had operational effectiveness as a key goal, but it also aimed to concentrate control in the CMC.

"One Aspiration". The PLA has long aspired to be what Xi calls a "world-class armed military." An inescapable commonality of foreign militaries in this league is that they are all formally state militaries rather than party armies. Thus, for decades, soldiers have been tempted by the idea of "state-ification" (guojiahua - 国家化). This is not necessarily a sign of falling loyalty to the CCP, but the CCP nonetheless regards it as a dangerous heresy and an existential threat.

In addition to these core interests, the future will be determined by "Two Looming Critical Tests". The first is China's inevitable transition to a Post-Xi era, which will likely be rocky, and could even become a regime crisis (especially if Xi dies in office without a chosen successor). In this event, the PLA will inevitably be drawn into the maelstrom, and its cohesion is impossible to predict. The second critical test would be a major war (as distinct from, for instance, a localized skirmish in the South China Sea). Defeat could be traumatic for the PLA, with massive ramifications for PLA-CCP relations. In sum, prevailing CCP obsessions and PLA aspirations are the key factors in determining the future, and these coming tests will be major inflection points in the trajectory of the relationship.

Presentation – Dr. Joel Wuthnow

Xi has undeniably changed and exerted greater personal control over the PLA. However, it remains a largely self-contained organization without external checks and balances beyond Xi himself. As long as he is in power, the Party's control over the military seems assured; the future of the relationship will depend on the personal strength of his successor.

Growth in autonomy from Mao until Xi

The Party's total co-optation of the PLA was strongest during Mao's rule, with frequent crossover between civilian and military leaders. Under Mao, the PLA was itself heavily involved in governing society and was represented in key Party organizations. The 1980s saw a significant move

towards greater autonomy for the PLA, for several reasons. First, both Party and military desired greater professionalization, which required a distinct professional sphere. Second, Deng Xiaoping insisted that the PLA “go back to the barracks” and attend to its own affairs with less involvement in Party politics. During this phase, the military was even allowed to run private enterprises to serve its institutional interests. Third, the PLA was prioritized last under Deng’s various pushes for modernization. All this meant that the PLA was allowed to operate with less supervision, so long as it followed the Party’s general direction.

This trend towards greater autonomy sowed the seeds of many problems that grew in 1990s and 2000s.

1. Military secrecy. The PLA acquired a tendency to act without necessarily coordinating with Party leadership, most notoriously with the 2011 Chengdu J-20 test flight. Some observers even began to talk of a “roguish” PLA.

2. Corruption. Corruption became prolific and systemic, originating in the PLA’s ability to run private enterprises. This ranged from high-level cases like senior officials buying and selling promotions, down to petty corruption like officers abusing personal privileges.

3. Ideological laxity. The idea of “nationalization” (or “state-ification”) began to take hold, raising the question of whether the PLA is actually responsible for protecting the Chinese people’s interests over the sole interests of the Party.

Xi’s personal control versus overall Party control

When Xi came to power in November 2012, he likely saw waning Party influence and control over the PLA, prompting his reforms to reassert not only the position of the CMC Chairman, but also the relevance of Party itself. However, the Party’s other elite civilian leaders have not gained much authority, meaning that while Xi’s personal control over the PLA has expanded, the degree of autonomy the PLA had from the Party as a whole

remains unchanged. Xi’s reforms pursued four general lines of effort:

1. A cult of personality. Xi Jinping Thought and his personal politics were pushed down through the PLA ranks. Xi frequently came to military events and was personally involved in crafting the new military strategy.

2. Organizational change. Xi changed supervision within the PLA (as well as that of the CMC over the PLA). He removed existing auditors and disciplinary organizations and created separate reporting chains responsible to him alone. He also installed his own agents in sensitive positions.

3. Anti-Corruption. Xi accelerated the anti-corruption campaign within the PLA.

4. Improved inter-agency coordination through the National Security Commission

The persistence of PLA autonomy, and the future trajectory of the PLA-CCP relationship

Despite these reforms, the PLA remains a largely self-contained organization, with outside supervision constrained by a few key factors. First, the imperative to fight “informationized warfare” requires a high level of autonomy and leaves the PLA largely responsible for developing its own plans and proposals. Second, the current Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) has very little military experience or expertise. Finally, the PLA has no external supervision and essentially self-polices; there is no independent judiciary, legal system, media, or legislature that check its behavior. These factors mean that civilian control is exercised by the CMC Chairman himself – the only civilian in China with any control over the PLA. Without a designated successor to Xi, it is just one man now.

As long as Xi is in power, there is no reason to doubt Party control over the PLA. After Xi, this becomes more complicated. The PLA’s commitment to Party ideology is hard to judge, as is the PLA’s loyalty to the People over the Party. These cannot be known for certain unless they are – for instance - ordered to fire on Han Chinese in

Taiwan. The future will depend on the strength of the civilian successor to Xi; that individual's personality and political influence will be critical.

Q&A Session

This section summarizes answers given by all scholars to questions submitted by the audience.

Comparing the loyalty of PLA officers to the Party versus to their supervisors and the military as an institution.

The answer is complex and evades a clear model of understanding. The drive towards professionalization in the PLA has long roots and is partially a result of a perception that the military was too enmeshed in Party politics during the 1960s. Many officers wish to avoid repeating that situation. However, they cannot simply eschew their Party identity.

Nonetheless, models that view the PLA simply as part of the CCP or as an institution utterly controlled by the Party are too simplistic. The former model has a great deal of continuity, but there has also been a divergence between political elites and military elites in recent decades. For instance, since Liu Huaqing stepped down from the PBSC, no serving PLA officer has been a part of that body.

Finally, comparing PLA interests against CCP interests is only one dimension of analysis; one must also consider the personal interests of these officers as major factors in the relationship. For instance, political commissars buying and selling promotions in recent years shows that even the "reddest of the red" are not immune to placing personal interests over both professional ethos and the Party.

Explaining corruption flourishing under Hu Jintao.

The most important factor driving this was Jiang's refusal to withdraw his influence from the PLA, and

instead conniving to pit one group of officers against another. Alice Miller argued that having only one major civilian contact between the PLA and the CCP – that is, the CMC Chairperson – is deliberate. More points of contact between the two leadership structures means more opportunities to scheme on both sides: more civilians trying to influence the military for their own ends, and more chances for the military to play civilian leaders against each other.² However, Hu's weakness due to Jiang's continued grip on influence shows the limits of this ostensible safeguard against corruption.

Assessing the extent of the structural challenge of corruption today, and evaluating the sincerity of Xi's anti-corruption drive

Corruption certainly persists within the PLA, and is an endemic feature of the CCP itself. Within the PLA, the lack of an outside check and balance limits the effectiveness of anti-corruption campaigns, especially in fighting corruption at senior levels. Paramount authority is concentrated in too few hands, creating ample opportunities to hand out favors like promotions and career opportunities.

Xi's campaign likely has mixed motives. He seems sincerely motivated to create a "cleaner" military, and his campaign is seen as more impartial than previous iterations. However, he also clearly desires tighter control over the military, and likely applies some political shrewdness to the process. For instance, displacing enough corrupt officers could be a way to make room for more personally loyal officers to advance, and publicly "catching a few tigers" reminds all officers of their vulnerability should they attract Xi's ire.

Assessing Xi's political reliance on the PLA, military officers' satisfaction with his goals, and the basis of their relationship of support to Xi.

Policymaking (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 58-83.

² Alice Miller, "The PLA in the Party Leadership Decisionmaking System," in Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, eds., *PLA Influence on China's National Security*

The PLA officer corps is largely very loyal to Xi. Many officers chafed at both Hu and Jiang's management style, seeing them as out of step with the PLA's institutional interests. By contrast, Xi gave many officers the impression that he was politically moderate and had progressive goals for the PLA. While many of those officers have since been disappointed, there remains a strong perception that Xi's concentration of power will allow him to push through momentous reforms. Some of these, like the anti-corruption drive, have been wildly popular among junior officers who form the bulk of the PLA officer corps and were often victims of the previous system. Even when Xi's reforms negatively impacted many officers' personal interests, they were generally regarded as being beneficial for the military as a whole.

The CCP's control over the PLA's online activity.

The PLA as an institution is increasingly embracing the digital space as an arena to spread the Party's message and highlight its interests. In 2020, the PLA published a new edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*, with new content including on the political control of officers and enlisted members during a war. Among the additions is the point that political control can and should be exercised through many means, including social media. In practice, the PLA knows that WeChat and other platforms are very popular and increasingly useful for spreading the Party's message. By contrast, the past two to three years seem to indicate tightening control over individual PLA members' online activities. Open-source research on PLA officers has become increasingly more difficult.

The PLA's level of political influence over the expansion of its overseas mission.

There has been little institutional enthusiasm for expanding the PLA beyond China's periphery. The PLA Army in particular is wary about being deployed overseas and does not view this as part of their core mission. The PLA Navy has argued for operating outside of China's near abroad, providing justification for funding more blue-water ships. The

PLA Air Force has tried to tag on to the Navy's near-seas missions as well. But these can be explained in light of inter-service competition to justify a larger slice of the defense budget. Few are advocating for a global military role.

The PLA's willingness to be involved in a future domestic crisis, and the likely impact of this on the Party-Army relationship.

The PLA's willingness to involve itself in a domestic political crisis would depend strongly on the context of the crisis, and the unity of the Party's leadership.

If there were a political crisis within mainland China, the PLA would be very reluctant to play a role. The PLA's involvement in suppressing the Tiananmen Square protests was a deeply damaging episode in its organizational memory. The poor performance of the People's Armed Police (PAP) forced the PLA to get involved in 1989, but since then the PAP has been both strengthened and increasingly brought under PLA command. The PLA would generally be very reluctant to get involved in quelling domestic unrest again. Additionally, the increasing professionalization of the PLA officer corps means that few have any desire to involve the PLA in a CCP succession crisis. The likely exception would be if unrest presents a crisis to the entire political system. On the other hand, if a hypothetical crisis was concentrated in place like Hong Kong or Xinjiang, the PLA would show little hesitation to involve itself in restoring order.

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