

CPC Futures

*The New Era of
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The People's Liberation Army as a Party Army

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Unlike liberal democracies where the military is at least nominally apolitical and non-partisan and pledges its allegiance to the state constitution, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in China is a party army that pledges its allegiance and loyalty to the Communist Party of China (CPC), a Leninist party that monopolises political power. Several distinctive features help discriminate the PLA from non-party armies.

Distinctive features

One such feature is that most military officers, like the civilian elite in China, are party members. This makes it possible for the PLA to be represented on the CPC Central Committee and its Politburo and thus be included in top-level decisions and policymaking.

Other mechanisms for the CPC to link up with and control the PLA include the political work system which is deeply embedded across the military. This system has three major components. The first is known as the “dual-command system”: each major PLA unit is headed by both a commander and a political commissar. The latter has the same bureaucratic grade as the commander and has the power to co-sign orders with the commander.

Second, to provide functional and staff support to the political commissar in his or her areas of responsibilities, the headquarters of each major PLA unit include a political work department. This department has divisions that specialise in: party organisation; cadre work and human resources; political education; public relations; political intelligence and warfare; and discipline inspection and supervision.

Third, each major PLA unit is presided over by a party standing committee on decision-making. The committee members include the commander, the political commissar and their deputies. Major decisions on important military and political issues of the unit are made based on collective discussions and voting among the members, and both commander and political commissar are held accountable for implementing these committee decisions. In times of crisis and war, however, the commander has the authority to command according to circumstances without consulting the party committee.

Limits of the political work system for party control of the gun

It is commonly assumed that the political work system is externally imposed on the PLA by civilian CPC authorities to supervise the PLA for political loyalty and discipline and report back to the civilian party authorities. Organisational theory, for instance, postulates that for a supervisory agency to be effective, it must be external to and independent from the performing agency it is tasked to supervise (Downs 1967: 149).

The political work system of the PLA, however, reports only to their superiors in the PLA. It has no authority relationship with external civilian party authorities and does not report to such authorities. Political officers are selected from the ranks of the PLA and trained in PLA institutions. Finally, political officers are subject to the PLA's incentive structure, including its bureaucratic grades, military ranks and pay scales. To enhance their promotion prospects in the PLA, political officers are incentivised to cooperate with the commanders of the units that they co-command by reporting good performance to their superiors and covering up major errors and failures.

As an internal constituency of the PLA, the political work system thus cannot be expected to function as an effective supervisory agency; its supervisory role has largely been compromised by its incorporation into the PLA structure. Xi Jinping's counter-corruption drive in the PLA, for instance, reveals that political officers are not more loyal to the Party and less corruptible than the commanders they are supposed to oversee. Just as many political officers are investigated and prosecuted for corruption as military, logistics or armament officers.

Reform to enhance party control of the gun

In the post-2015 military reform, Xi made several institutional changes to enhance the power of the Central Military Commission (CMC) chair, the civilian commander-in-chief position that he holds as the top leader, to control the PLA. First, he dismantled the PLA General Staff, Political, Logistics and Armament

Departments, which he believed constituted an independent and powerful administrative layer that undermined the authority of the CMC leadership and served as venues of military corruption. He then integrated the major functional agencies of these general departments into the CMC itself to provide functional and staff support to the CMC leadership.

Second, he has reiterated the importance of the CMC chair responsibility system, which was largely neglected in the Hu Jintao era. Thus, all major PLA organisations are required to “report to the CMC chair on all important matters, and decisions on all important issues must be made by the CMC chair” (Li 2016).

Third, Xi separated the supervisory agencies from the traditional political work system, including those that specialise in discipline inspection, criminal investigation and prosecution, and the courts. These agencies have turned into separate chains of command, reporting directly to the CMC chair without interference from the organisations they supervise. This change serves to enhance the independence and authority of these agencies to improve their effectiveness in supervising the PLA operational organisations.

Finally, Xi has enhanced his control over the PLA by dividing the power between PLA service chiefs and its regional theatre chiefs. The power of the PLA service chiefs is now limited to peacetime force construction and administration, while the power of the theatre chiefs is confined to operational command in times of crisis and war. Before this change, these powers were fused in the commanding officers of major PLA organisations, which enabled these officers to become the “lords of their own estates” particularly in engaging in corruption.

Shifting away from domestic politics

Since the PLA is a party army, historically it was heavily involved in party and domestic politics, particularly in the eras of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Post-Deng leaders, however, have developed a stronger sense of insecurity stemming from their lack of revolutionary and military credentials and the associated political capital and personal networks in the PLA. This sense of insecurity has motivated them to adopt a policy that stresses effective civilian governance and the promotion of economic development along with political and social stability. Effective governance enhances the party's legitimacy to rule, but more importantly prevents major political and social upheavals that may incentivise the military's intervention in domestic politics, which these leaders may find difficult to control and manage.

Some analysts suggest that post-Deng leaders attempt to buy off the military with higher ranks and more money to cultivate their personal networks in the PLA, which they can leverage in power struggles against their political opponents. This view, however, is flawed for two reasons.

First, all top leaders after Deng who served as CMC chair have regularly promoted PLA senior officers and increased the defence budget. However, candidates for promotion are mostly recommended by military professionals in the CMC, rather than being picked by top civilian leaders. Top leaders will interview the most senior candidates, but their knowledge of these officers is limited since they have not worked with them before. Moreover, there is only sketchy evidence to show that military officers are mobilised for intra-party leadership power struggles in the post-Deng era. Officer promotion and budget increases thus can be explained better on functional and professional grounds rather than by personal and factional reasons.

Second, top leaders are careful not to develop dependence on the military for political support and survival. Such dependence would suggest a failure of civilian governance and incompetence on the part of these leaders to resolve major political and social crises. This kind of vulnerability could be exploited by the military for political advantage. In the end, a new threat may emerge against these leaders: a military that is itself politically ambitious. In this regard, leaders have learned the lessons from the Lin Biao incident under Mao and the Yang brothers incident under Deng (Li 2021: 70–5 and 86–91).

“Objective control”

Xi Jinping’s military reform has largely been promoted along the line of what Samuel Huntington has called “objective control” (Huntington 1957: 80–5), confining the PLA to perfecting its functional and technical expertise and fulfilling its external missions (Li 2021: 124–6). Xi downsized the PLA by 300,000 billets and replaced the seven ground force-dominated military regions with five joint-services theatres. Thus, eighteen ground force-based group armies were reduced to 13 and technology-based naval, air, conventional rocket, and strategic support service forces were expanded and fully integrated into the new joint theatres.

To cope with the growing security challenges from outer and cyber space and the electromagnetic spectrum, Xi established a PLA Strategic Support Force to develop and manage the capabilities in these three domains. He also renamed China’s strategic missile force the PLA Rocket Force, and expanded China’s nuclear deterrence capabilities that is its main responsibility. The 2021

Pentagon report on China's military predicts that the "accelerating pace of the PRC's nuclear expansion may enable it to have up to 700 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2027. The PRC likely intends to have at least 1,000 warheads by 2030, exceeding the pace and size the Department of Defense projected in 2020" (Office of the [U.S.] Secretary of Defense 2021: viii).

By downsizing the ground force and expanding the technology-intensive services that are more appropriate for forward deployment and power projection, Xi's military policy clearly aims to reduce the domestic role of the PLA and enhance its capabilities to carry out external missions.

Besides safeguarding what China perceives to be its sovereignty and security interests regarding Taiwan and the "near seas" including the Yellow, East and South China Seas, China's 2019 Defence White Paper highlights the role of the PLA in providing security for China's expanding development interests overseas, including energy and resources supplies, vital sea lanes, and overseas Chinese personnel, property and investment (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2019).

The White Paper also underscores the role of the PLA in carrying out non-traditional security missions such as counter-piracy, United Nations peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Safeguarding the stability on the Korean Peninsula has been a traditional task of the PLA, while providing security at the Sino-Indian border is becoming more important following the 2020 border clash.

These missions, however, are primarily decided by the civilian leadership and assigned to the PLA. The PLA itself is largely confined to improving its doctrinal, technological and organisational efficacies for fulfilling its missions.

The Chinese government's *Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Vision 2035* issued in 2021, for instance, requires the PLA to "accelerate the integrated development of mechanization, informatization and intelligentization" as the three concrete goals of military modernisation (Xinhua 2021). Twenty years earlier, Jiang Zemin first endorsed the concepts of "mechanization" and "informatization"; both stress the equal importance of acquiring new hardware weapons platforms and developing information technology-based software and networks to integrate these platforms.

Hu Jintao particularly operationalised the concept of "informatization", endorsing the notion of an "information system-based system of systems operations" to guide PLA modernisation. This concept emphasises the integration of the PLA's highly heterogeneous service forces into a "system of systems" that is capable of multi-spatial and variable distance deployment and presence. Laterally networked by a shared information system architecture (known as "C4ISR":

command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance), this operations system enables transparency-based “information superiority” on the battlefield. This superiority in turn allows for synchronised, parallel operations by multiservice forces, giving PLA forces a “battlefield initiative” against the opponent.

Under Xi Jinping, the PLA has made substantial progress in realising all the three goals. For “mechanization”, for instance, the PLA has continued to acquire a substantial number of new and advanced weapons platforms in all operational domains. For “informatization”, Xi’s military reform has laid the organisational foundation for assembling the PLA’s “information system-based system” of systems. Meanwhile, he has integrated the new concept of “intelligentization” in modernising the PLA, leading to substantial investment in emerging technologies such as quantum computing, big data analysis, artificial intelligence, military drones and hypersonic weapons.

For the 20th CPC Congress to be held in the fall of 2022, a likely scenario is that Xi would extend his tenure for a third term and remain as the top leader until the 21st Party Congress in 2027. While Xi’s governance record may have been negatively impacted by his zero-COVID policy, he has managed to avoid a power struggle in the transition to the new CPC leadership. In this scenario, the PLA is likely to play a minimal role in the leadership transition and it remains focused on military modernisation.

A less likely scenario is that Xi’s zero-COVID policy has caused a severe economic recession. The policy thus has triggered an intra-leadership debate and a power struggle. Rather than taking sides, however, the PLA is likely to stay out of the power struggle among the civilian ruling elite. In the end, it would pledge loyalty and allegiance to the winner of the power struggle after the dust settles. In both scenarios, therefore, the PLA would play a minimal role in the leadership transition.

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