

**FROM PARTY-ARMY TO
CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS
IN CHINA**

BY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

FROM PARTY-ARMY TO CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN CHINA

by

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ABSTRACT

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More than fifty years ago Mao Zedong observed that political power flows out of the barrel of a gun. More importantly, he noted that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must control the gun. His words remain relevant today. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is central to maintaining the power base of the CCP. The relationship between the military and the communist party, however, has undergone change. Until recently, it was marked by a high degree of interpenetration and in China could be more correctly called a party-army relationship as opposed to a civil-military relationship. But what does this change mean for the communist party? Does it maintain a firm grip of power over the army? Where does the allegiance of the PLA lie? By what mechanisms does the army answer to civilian authority and participate in defense policymaking? This paper will examine these questions and others that define civil-military relations in China. It will also look at the relationship during three events in recent history, the Tiananmen crisis in 1989, the divestiture of the PLA from the Chinese economy from 1998-1999, and the EP-3 crisis in April 2001.

FROM PARTY-ARMY TO CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN CHINA

More than fifty years ago Mao Zedong observed that political power flows out of the barrel of a gun. More importantly, he noted that the gun must be controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).¹ His words remain relevant today. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is central to maintaining the power base of the CCP. The relationship between the military and the communist party, however, has undergone change. Until recently, it was marked by a high degree of interpenetration and in China could be more correctly called a party-army relationship as opposed to a civil-military relationship. A number of high-ranking military officers served in the Politburo and the Central Committee of the CCP. Conversely, many senior party members had prior military experience and maintained close personal ties with certain units and leaders. David Shambaugh calls this "an essential symbiosis between the army and the ruling communist party" and it has been a hallmark of the party-army relationship since before the founding of the PRC in 1949.²

Change in the personnel make-up of the party and the army leadership has weakened this symbiosis. The older generation of politicians and officers with revolutionary experience has retired. Today, senior party leaders have no military experience; in fact none have served in any branch of the service. The military, for its part, has significantly disengaged itself from the political arena and very few senior ranking officers have experience in high-level politics. It is only in the mid-1990s that we can consider the concept of civil-military relations as opposed to army-party relations in China.³

Change brings about uncertainty and this is certainly the case with the civil-military relationship in China. But what does this change mean for the communist party? Does it maintain a firm grip of power over the army? Where does the allegiance of the PLA lie? By what mechanisms does the army answer to civilian authority and participate in defense policymaking? This paper will examine these questions and others that define civil-military relations in China. It will also look at the relationship during three events in recent history, the Tiananmen crisis in 1989, the divestiture of the PLA from the Chinese economy from 1998-1999, and the EP-3 crisis in April 2001.

The paper will show that the Chinese military is less politically involved today than ever before in its history and is continuing a decade's old transition to a more professional army, albeit at a much quicker pace since the mid-1990s. As the PLA continues to adopt professional characteristics it will inevitably come into conflict with the party. Regardless of this, the PLA will continue to be a pivotal and powerful force in Chinese politics and will remain in the slightly less firm grasp and control of the communist party. However, in the words of Ellis Joffe, the PLA is not a "party stooge" and without a political leader capable of commanding the loyalty of the army in the manner of Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping the party will have to work to maintain its primacy over the military and carefully weigh decisions involving military interests.⁴ A schism in the CCP leadership over a key issue could easily put the PLA in a position to determine the future direction of China.

Models of Civilian Control

When discussing civil-military relations, the degree of civilian control over the military is an important question. The "liberal model" is generally celebrated as the ideal

for civilian control. It achieves firm civilian control through military professionalism. This typically Western model is defined by “expertise, responsibility, and corporateness.”⁵ Soldiers in this model are guided by professional ethics, a commitment to obey civilian authority and political neutrality. However, a later definition of this model relaxes the requirement for political neutrality, recognizing the difficulty in achieving it.⁶

When comparing China to the liberal model we first must understand that control of the military in China is not based on military professionalism. The PLA has been described by many as professional in some aspects, but the military has always been an organization heavily involved in politics. At the height of its political power in 1969, the military held fifty percent of the seats in the Politburo and forty-four percent of the seats in the Central Committee. For this reason we run into difficulty when attempting to fit China to the liberal model of civil-military relations.⁷

Another model is more commonly used to analyze the former communist Soviet Union and other East European states. In the “penetration model”, the political apparatus controls the military by penetrating it with ideology and an organization of political watchdogs. Military personnel undergo rigid political indoctrination enforced by political officers and secret policemen. This model is meant to limit professionalism and thereby control the military. Intuitively, penetration may seem to be a good model for evaluating civilian control of the military in China, but like the liberal model it fails to explain the scope of the PLA elite's involvement in politics.⁸

Fang Zhu maintains that the most important element differentiating the system in China and most others is the blurring of the line between civilian and military institutions. During the Mao era, all military officers were members of the communist party and

many high-ranking military leaders also held party and government positions. Zhu calls this “a revised version of the penetration model in which not only the party penetrated the army but vice versa.”⁹ This merging of military and politics has been called the “symbiosis model” by Shambaugh and others.

Ellis Joffe contends that none of the three approaches is sufficient to explain the complexities of civil-military relations in China. Each may show some facet of the relationship, but alone is not enough. He proposes that we use a synthesis of all three. Below we will see how Joffe uses this synthesis to attempt to identify patterns in the civil-military relationship.¹⁰

Defining the Relationship: 1949-1997

Joffe argues that up to the mid-1990s six major patterns have characterized party-army relations in China. The first and most important of the patterns is “integration at the top” and explains the crucial political role that the army has traditionally maintained. Joffe’s definition of integration is similar to the idea of interpenetration discussed above. During the formative years of the PRC civil-military relations were defined by the integration of the party and army. Early revolutionary leaders of the communist party served in both political and military capacities. The political power and authority accorded them came not just from the institution, but also from their individual fame and stature accrued during the revolutionary period. These national figures easily and naturally crossed civil and military boundaries. The archetypes for this were of course Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Both of these leaders enjoyed the almost unconditional support of the army and were able to use it as a base of power in the political realm.¹¹

The second basic pattern is “separation at the bottom” and is characterized by the separation of military leadership and politics at the group army level and below. This wasn’t always the case in the PLA. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao called in the military to help restore order to the chaotic countryside as the Red Guards rampaged out of control. Afterwards, the military temporarily filled local party positions and there was virtually no distinction between the party and the army at lower levels. After Mao’s death, Deng was able to wrest local political control away from the military through personnel changes. Separation at the bottom continued from that time forward.¹²

One of the underlying reasons that separation at the bottom occurred during the Deng era can be attributed to the third basic pattern which is “modernization and professionalism”. Joffe contends that professionalism has been inseparable from modernization in the PLA and has formed the basis for separation between the military and the communist party. The Korean War illustrated to leadership the need for a modern military. The post-war military effort, with the aid of the Soviet Union, concentrated on training and educating new officers. Those officers have now risen to the top ranks of the PLA and are in positions to instill greater professional values in the army. Since modernization and reform began under Deng in the 1980s, military professionalism has been on the rise. It has also been helpful that many of the revolutionary generation who were unable to grasp the concept of modern warfare have retired or died. However, the 1990s brought a new threat to the military that temporarily hampered professionalism: the PLA’s entry into the Chinese economy. Fortunately, the

army has since divested itself from the economy and this action will be revisited later in the paper.¹³

The fourth pattern that Joffe raises is “political control of the PLA” and is a concept similar to the penetration model. The military chain of command in this pattern is augmented by political commissars and committees who are responsible for the ideological education of the military and are also a major part of the decision process. But the process of implementing and maintaining strong political control of the PLA has been random over the years. Professionalism in the Chinese army has often hampered the full implementation of political control. Military officers concerned with the profession of arms have traditionally thwarted this system whenever they felt it interfered with military effectiveness. Military modernization begun by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s subordinated political control to army training. However, after the Tiananmen incident in 1989, political control of the PLA was once again considered mandatory.¹⁴

Pattern five is “command and control of the PLA”. With very few exceptions PLA and party leadership have been able to maintain very tight command and control over the troops. The PLA has accomplished this with a top-down system that removes initiative from lower-level commanders. Local commanders take action only when told to and in the manner instructed. This system remains one of the major weaknesses in the PLA’s warfighting ability. Command and control has also been achieved by tightly controlling the personnel system at the regional command level. The high command has frequently reassigned regional commanders in response to any behavior it has considered suspect.¹⁵

A “non-interventionist army” is the final pattern that Joffe puts forward. He contends that the PLA has only used force in the political arena when ordered by Mao or Deng. The PLA has never used force to promote its own interests or shown eagerness to intervene. Army intervention during the Cultural Revolution was ordered by Mao and resulted in military rule under his leadership. The military returned these political positions to the party after the demise of the radicals and Deng’s return to power. The PLA’s intervention during the Tiananmen incident was ordered by Deng and despite misgivings was carried out by the military. Tiananmen will be discussed in detail later in the paper.¹⁶

Joffe’s analysis of the party-army relationship in China reveals a very complicated landscape for a military to operate in. The relationship has been far from static and consequently the military’s level of political involvement has varied over the decades as the needs of the party dictated and usually at the behest of Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping. Despite this, the PLA has continued its quest for professionalism and has achieved some measure of success. The 1990s ushered in a new era of military modernization in China that requires better trained and more professional officers and soldiers. As we will see below, generational succession in the military and communist party during the last half of the 1990s has helped the army further reduce its political involvement and has aided in advancing military professionalism.

Relations After 1997

Civil-military relations in China have undergone significant change since 1997. During the 15th Party Congress in September 1997, Admiral Liu Huaqing and General Zhang Zhen formally retired and gave up their positions in the Politburo Standing

Committee (PBSC), the highest decision making organ in China. They were replaced by Generals Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian, who assumed positions in the Politburo but not the PBSC. Zhang and Chi were replaced by Generals Cao Gangchuan and Guo Boxing during the 16th Party Congress in October 2002. While it is not unprecedented in China's history to be without military representation in the PBSC it is important at this time because it continues the trend of military withdrawal from the political arena.¹⁷

The central change in civil-military relations, however, occurred with the March 1997 promulgation of the National Defense Law (NDL). On paper, this gives the state government, under direction of the president and National People's Congress (NPC), command authority over the military. The NDL clearly states in several of its seventy articles that the PLA is subordinate to the state. The document also gives state agencies more control over the military budget process. This is an important step for a country with a military that is traditionally subordinate to only the communist party and operates a very opaque budgeting process. The NPC has also passed revised military service laws and regulations that govern virtually all aspects of military service. Thousands of other rules and regulations governing the military have also been passed at lower levels that provide the PLA with more guidance and direction. This institutionalization of the military is laying the groundwork for its continued professional growth.¹⁸

The recruitment and training of soldiers is also changing. In the latter half of the 1990s technical proficiency and military aptitude have become more valuable than political reliability and personal connections. The promotion rate for mainstream officers

is now higher than that of political officers. Political ideology no longer exists as a pervasive force in the army and the political department and its officers have taken on the role of morale and welfare for soldiers and families. The priority is on military education and mastery of the skills required to operate the increasingly high-tech equipment that the PLA is fielding; consequently more time is now spent training.¹⁹

The army's mission has also experienced recent changes. Since the Tiananmen Square incident, the People's Armed Police (PAP) has been considerably strengthened and equipped in order to handle future civil unrest.²⁰ PAP inability to cope with a very difficult mass disturbance eventually resulted in the direct involvement of combat troops. The PLA's focus is now overwhelming external and concentrated on national security with the PAP assigned the mission of internal security.

The PLA's professional growth, however, has not led to the complete severing of the relationship with the CCP. This may be at least partly due to the ambiguity in the relationship between the army, the party and the state and the fact that many military officers see little differentiation between party and state. This ambiguity is confirmed in the words of Deng Xiaoping as he discusses the essence of the army:

This essence is the Party's army, the people's army, the army of the socialist state. This is different from the army of other countries in the world ... even different from the army in other socialist states, because their armies and ours have different experiences. Our army will in the final analysis be loyal to the Party, loyal to the people, loyal to the state and loyal to socialism.²¹

As stated earlier, the NDL clearly gives command primacy to the state and PLA publications and manuals emphasize this claim. However, publications that the political department uses and that were printed after the promulgation of NDL, state that the party must maintain absolute control and command leadership over the military. This

confusing doctrinal disconnect perhaps shows that a struggle between the party and the state for the control of the military is ongoing. Regardless, for now the CCP retains a tenuous hold on the military. Clearly though, the legal groundwork has been laid for the state to seize a more dominant position and it seems apparent that the party's position has been and will continue to erode.²²

The Central Military Commission

The main mechanism by which the CCP maintains a measure of control over the PLA is the party's Central Military Commission. Tai Ming Cheung has called the CMC "the organizational embodiment of the relationship between the power and the gun."²³ Correspondingly, the general rule in politics has been that China's most important leader leads the CMC. The chairman of the CMC is considered the commander-in-chief of the PLA and arguably occupies the most powerful political position in China. The current chairman is Hu Jintao, who also serves as president of the PRC and CCP general secretary. He was named as CMC chairman at the 17th Party Congress in October 2007. Hu's most important supporters on the CMC are: Vice-Chairman, General Guo Boxiong and Vice-Chairman, General Xu Caihou.²⁴

The CMC is "the real nerve center of the Chinese military system."²⁵ It falls to this body of leaders to make all major military decisions. It has command and control authority over army deployments and is directly responsible for the PLA's premier military educational and research institutes, the National Defense University, the Academy of Military Sciences and the National Defense Science & Technology University. The CMC also directly controls the PLA's missile forces, the Second Artillery.²⁶

There is some debate as to how much power this body actually wields in the defense arena. In reality the Politburo is the supreme decision-making organ in the CCP and probably deliberates all high-level defense issues. However, since the three highest-ranking members of the CMC are also members of the Politburo, it seems likely that regardless of which body is making the decision there is probably agreement on most of the issues.

To better understand civil-military relations in China and put them into historical perspective it would perhaps be useful to look at significant points in time where the relationship was tested and conduct some analysis. The first case study will analyze the civil-military relationship immediately before, during and after the crushing of the student pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Case Study I: The Tiananmen Incident

In the latter half of the 1980s, China's economic growth and reform began having some unwanted side effects. Chief among them were inflation and blatant official corruption. Chinese all over the country were on edge and a feeling of unrest was in the air. Senior party leadership vacillated on how to proceed. On 15 April 1989 former CCP secretary general Hu Yaobang died from a heart attack he had suffered the week prior. Hu had been forced to resign in disgrace from his position in 1987 because he was seen as sympathetic to intellectuals who had been urging the party to reform. On 16 April thousands of students traveled from their college campuses to lay wreaths and mourn the death of a man that they called the 'soul of China'. The demonstrations quickly gained momentum and spread to other cities despite strong condemnation from the communist party. Weeks went by and the protests continued with crowds often

numbering in the hundreds of thousands and sometimes more than a million in and around Tiananmen Square. Moreover, the student protestors were not just receiving support from the people; some in the CCP had become sympathetic to their cause, chief among them the party secretary Zhao Ziyang.²⁷

Zhao's support of the students represented a split in the communist leadership at the highest level. Two factions emerged, one that wanted to continue with economic reforms and was not averse to limited political reform and the other that believed that reforms had gone too far and the demonstrations were a threat to the party. The party division on how to deal with the incident essentially inhibited the decision making process and clear orders on how to resolve the crisis were not issued.²⁸ Further complicating the situation for the CCP was the presence, in Beijing, of a large number of international journalists. They were drawn by two high-profile international events scheduled in May: a meeting of the Asian Development Bank and the first Sino-Soviet summit in 30 years.²⁹

The PLA understood that the leadership was divided and was hesitant to side with either faction. There was also a minor division within the military itself. Some soldiers had joined in with the demonstrators and many were sympathetic to the students' causes. At one point in mid-May over 1000 troops linked arms and walked down the main avenue leading to Tiananmen in a show of solidarity with the students. Many active duty officers also publicly expressed their hesitancy to use force. Echoing this sentiment, several influential retired PLA elders wrote a one sentence letter to the CMC begging for restraint and reminding the high command that the PLA belonged to the people and therefore should not confront or suppress them.

By mid-May it seemed clear that the leadership faction that was urging restraint and non-violence was in the minority. Deng Xiaoping was rumored to be furious with Zhao Ziyang for his words of dissent and had been gathering support for his harder stance. On 20 May, after a high-level government meeting that included party, military, state and city officials, Premier Li Peng declared martial law. To enforce the order, small units of soldiers began moving into the crowds surrounding Tiananmen to convince civilians to disperse. However the presence of soldiers appeared to strengthen the resolve of protesters and hundreds of thousands of Beijing residents went to the streets to block the soldiers from entering the square. The soldiers were surrounded by their fellow citizens who began pleading for them to not interfere. Some were humiliated, threatened and disarmed by the mob.³⁰

On 23 May, surprised by the involvement of regular citizens, the army withdrew from the heart of the city. There was also some hope that the incident could be resolved constitutionally. The National People's Congress (NPC) had the authority, on paper, to end martial law and dismiss Li Peng. However, as the NPC Standing Committee scrambled to convene a meeting, the long arm of the CCP reached out and persuaded it to stop. On 30 May demonstrators further stunned the CCP by unveiling "The Goddess of Democracy" statue in the square facing the portrait of Chairman Mao.³¹ On 3 June the CCP decided it was time to act and gave the order to empty Tiananmen Square of protestors. The order gave the army the right to use all means of force necessary.³²

During the weeks leading up to the order for the army to occupy Tiananmen, Deng Xiaoping is rumored to have been busily contacting military commanders across

China and enlisting their support. Troops and equipment were soon arriving at the Beijing railway station. An estimated 150,000 to 350,000 troops were eventually positioned around the city equipped with tanks and heavy artillery. The army units represented portions of over half of the group armies in the PLA. Senior leadership, concerned about whether or not some units would fight, overcompensated and sent overwhelming force to placate their fears. On the evening of 3 June the army began moving towards Tiananmen Square and soon Beijing was a battle zone.³³

When looking back on the event it seems clear that the PLA did not support the use of force against civilians until after the party had reached a consensus decision. Once Deng's faction had won the debate and Zhao was politically finished, the CCP was able to issue the order. But Deng likely did not give the order until he was sure that the military would obey. In the words of one scholar: "The conclusion seems relatively clear: a mostly united PLA defends a mostly united CCP."³⁴

The military did not want to confront civilians, but the crisis threatened the very survival of the party and possibly the state. Some may argue that the PLA's actions proved that it was an unprofessional army. In reality, however, the PLA was left with very little choice and made the only decision it could have. In 1989 there was still a great deal of interpenetration between the party and the army at the upper levels of the political system. It would have been unthinkable for the army not to defend the party. "Its action was reprehensible, but that does not make it unprofessional. It was the nature of the system rather than nature of the PLA that accounts for the tragedy."³⁵

The aftermath of the Tiananmen incident brought largely negative consequences to the PLA. The immediate and most obvious was the army's loss of prestige with the

public. The army had broken a trust that had existed for over fifty years. Also, twenty-two army divisions were tied up occupying Beijing until the lifting of martial law in January 1990. The loyalty of many soldiers was also in question and a three month military political department investigation was carried out to determine if there were grounds to take disciplinary action against any who had disobeyed orders during the crisis. One report claimed that 111 officers and 1400 soldiers had disobeyed orders and run away from the fight. Among them was the commander of the 38th Group Army, stationed in Beijing, who checked himself into a hospital rather than lead his troops into Tiananmen.³⁶

The most serious consequence, however, was the launch of a new propaganda campaign stressing discipline, the control of the party, improving political work at the lower echelons of command and combating the new enemies of liberalization and democracy. The campaign renewed the ties of the party and the army at all levels of the rank structure and the pursuit of professionalism was temporarily put on hold. One political document circulated at this time stated: "The complex situation at home and abroad makes it necessary that gun barrels are wielded by truly politically trustworthy people."³⁷ Soldiers were consequently required to spend more time in political study and less in military training.

The primacy of the political department lasted until the end of 1992. The head of the department and former member of the CMC, General Yang Baibing, had been using his newfound political power to create his own personal fiefdom. Other high-ranking officers informed Deng about what was happening and Yang and his half-brother Yang Shankun, serving as state president at the time, were dismissed from the CMC. This

allowed Jiang Zemin to begin the process of building his own base of loyalists in the military who would guide the PLA back onto the path of professionalism.³⁸

Case Study II: PLA Economic Divestiture

In the late 1970s, China was in the beginning stages of a radical restructuring of its economy and Deng Xiaoping's reforms were just beginning to take shape. Deng believed that it was vital to limit state expenditures and use the savings to spur economic growth. He quickly targeted the military for cuts primarily because it was the largest consumer of state funds receiving 17.2 percent of the annual budget. However, the military was a powerful institution with ties into politics at the highest levels. Deng got his opportunity to act against the military in 1979. Earlier that year China engaged Vietnam in a border war that was meant to teach Vietnam a lesson. Unfortunately for the army, the battle hardened Vietnamese routed the poorly trained and equipped Chinese soldiers. The PLA's embarrassing failure gave Deng the political capital he needed to insist on a restructuring of the army. Over the following two years the military budget was slashed by nearly 25 percent.³⁹

Military units soon began to feel the effects of budget cuts and in 1982 began to move tentatively into business and production activities as a supplement. By 1984 PLA production had risen significantly and came to the attention of the central government. At a CMC meeting in October of that year, Deng and senior leadership of the PLA laid out a plan for the continued expansion of the military-business complex. The idea was that the PLA could become more self-sufficient and thereby contribute to national wealth and modernization. Between 1978 and 1987, the value of military run enterprises

increased by 700 percent. Even more rapid growth occurred from 1986 to 1993 and the number of PLA business entities doubled from 10,000 to 20,000.⁴⁰

In November 1993, in reaction to increasing reports of military excesses and corruption in its business ventures, an enlarged CMC meeting was held in which Jiang Zemin and the senior military officials reduced the emphasis on the commercial role of the PLA. At the conference, the army chiefs emphasized that the essential role of the PLA was to prepare for and fight in defense of the country. Supplementing the defense budget was secondary. Jiang told the conference that members of the armed forces should be eating 'imperial grain', indicating that the defense budget should be the primary revenue source of the military. Later, however, he contradicted himself somewhat when he also told the conference that the army's active role in commercial production could ease the burden of the state.⁴¹

The PLA, in response to the conference, began a rectification campaign in 1993 aimed at reducing the involvement of combat troops in business ventures and issued a list of guidelines to follow:

- Centralized and unified control should be exercised over production and business operations throughout the armed forces.
- Commercial operations are banned at all levels.
- Combat troops should focus on agricultural and sideline production while support units are allowed to undertake industrial activities.
- Hospitals, warehouses, and scientific research institutes could provide fee-paying services.

- Separation of ties between military units and enterprises should be strengthened with the establishment of an autonomous production management system.
- General departments would dispatch working groups to undertake a comprehensive investigation and audit of military units and enterprises.
- Combat units at and below the army-level are prohibited from engaging in business activities.
- Army-owned coalmines in Shanxi Province are to be transferred to local civilian authorities.⁴²

The campaign lasted for two years and wrought great change on the military's enterprise system. The total number of PLA enterprises was cut in half to 10,000. As many as 1000 companies were closed and audits revealed more than RMB 700 million in undeclared profits. But the reform did not remove the businesses and profits from the PLA; it merely centralized them at a higher level. The enterprises were now organized into national and regional conglomerates. Despite budget increases from Beijing, the demands of modernization and high inflation rates put the PLA in a position where it needed to rely on the funds received from its business enterprises.⁴³

In July 1998 an enlarged session of the CMC met in which Jiang Zemin gave a speech calling for the PLA to immediately begin divesting itself from its business interests. The meeting was in response to reports of rampant military smuggling involving all manner of contraband. The decision for the military to divest had actually been agreed to the year prior and wasn't scheduled to begin until May 2000; however, the level of PLA illegal activities alarmed Jiang causing him to accelerate the process.

Immediately after the meeting, Jiang released the announcement through the party's propaganda apparatus, hoping to gain widespread support.⁴⁴

The army chiefs reportedly endorsed the decision enthusiastically. It appears that they were weary of the massive corruption and the negative impact it was having on the growth of professionalism. Although the military embraced the idea of divestiture there was still the issue of an increase in the military budget to offset the funds lost. There was also the question of financial compensation for businesses. The civilian body responsible for sorting out these issues was the State Economic Trade Commission (SETC). Under the direction of State Vice-President Hu Jintao, the SETC was given operational oversight of divestiture. Despite being undermanned and overwhelmed by the responsibility, the SETC was able to guide the process to a successful end and divestiture was declared complete in March 2000.⁴⁵

It is unsure how much the PLA received in compensation. However, reports through U.S. diplomats indicate that the government offered US\$ 1.2 billion but the army was requesting US\$24 billion. Of course, there was also worry within the ranks over the trickle-down of funding from the central government. Military units had grown accustomed to controlling their own budgets and were reluctant to give up this power without assurances. The government somewhat mollified these concerns by increasing military salaries 10 to 25 percent. The salary of the military, however, is still considered quite low and has not eliminated concerns of corruption. Regardless, divestiture was carried out and the PLA has enjoyed double-digit budget increases since.⁴⁶

The PLA's willingness to rein in its economic enterprises and submit to the demands of the state has had an important impact on civil-military relations. First,

divestiture showed that the party and also the state have supervisory influence over the military. Second, the military can concentrate on improving professionalism without the corrosive influence of corruption and the distraction of operating business enterprises. Third, the chain of command was strengthened by divestiture. Units are now more dependent on funding from higher and are more likely to adhere to orders from Beijing. Fourth, the influence and presence of the PLA in the domestic affairs of China should diminish and give it a more neutral role. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, divestiture set a precedent for civilian oversight of military affairs. The SETC played an important role in implementing and carrying out the PLA's withdrawal from the economy.⁴⁷

Case Study III: The EP-3 Incident

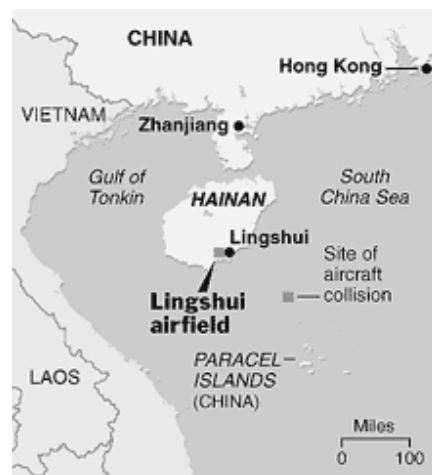


Figure 1:

On 1 April 1991 a U.S. Navy EP-3 aircraft collided with a Chinese F-8II fighter over the South China Sea, destroying the Chinese plane and killing the pilot. The American pilot, forced to decide whether to ditch the airplane or attempt to make an emergency landing in China, determined in the interests of the safety of his 23 member

crew to land at the nearest available airstrip, Lingshui on Hainan Island. After landing, the crew was immediately taken into custody.

The Chinese version of the event was that the U.S. aircraft illegally entered Chinese airspace and deliberately rammed the much smaller Chinese fighter causing the death of the pilot. The aircraft then landed at Lingshui without permission. Therefore, China was entitled to detain and question the aircrew and inspect the aircraft. The Chinese also demanded that the U.S. cease all reconnaissance flights on China's borders, accept full responsibility for the incident and make a full apology.

The American version of the event was that aircraft was in international waters and the collision was caused by the recklessness of the Chinese pilot, not the American. Also, because the aircraft was sovereign U.S. property it should be returned without being boarded and the aircrew should be immediately returned. Finally, there would be no apology since the U.S. had done nothing wrong.

The great divergence in the two accounts and the unlikelihood of the EP-3 ramming the much smaller and nimbler fighter begs the question: Where did the Chinese civilian leadership get their story? James Mulvenon argues that the information was gathered at Lingshui airfield and passed through multiple layers of military command before ever arriving in the hands of the civilian leadership. This afforded the PLA an opportunity to "massage" the incident to cover-up any military wrongdoing or incompetence. A sanitized version of events was presented to the Chinese political leadership placing the blame on the U.S.⁴⁸

This version was quickly adopted as the official stance of the government. But why did the civilians so rapidly accept the PLA position? The biggest reason was lack

of evidence. No leader could accuse the PLA of deliberately lying to the civilian leadership without some form of proof. Another reason is that Jiang Zemin was campaigning to retain his position as chairman of the Central Military Commission at the 16th Party Congress to be held in 2002 and he didn't want to antagonize his military allies. Finally, Wang Wei, the Chinese pilot who was killed, was quickly designated a martyr and hero making it impossible to back away from the PLA's story.⁴⁹

There are a couple of implications here for civil-military relations in China. First there may have been a loss of trust in the relationship. In the next crisis, the government might hesitate to buy the military argument until it has conferred with officers that are trusted. This could cause civilian leaders to become more involved with advancement of the upper echelons of rank and inhibit the growth of professionalism. The second implication comes from the PLA's dissatisfaction with the outcome of the crisis. The crewmembers were released without the U.S. meeting the demands that the government originally laid out. The PLA saw this as a sign of civilian weakness and which could erode the civil-military relationship.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The PLA is clearly less involved politically today than ever before in its history. A major reason for this shift away from political involvement relates to generational change in the leadership of the party and the army. The former and current chairmen of the CMC have never served in the military. Conversely, General Officers who are rising into positions of prominence in the CMC are primarily professional soldiers with no experience at the upper echelons of government. There are also no military figures with greater personal stature than Hu currently enjoys. The army's revolutionary veterans

have all moved on. On the PLA's side of the equation, the level of professionalism, an indication of a healthy civil-military relationship, is on the rise. The driving force for the growth of professionalism has been modernization. The two have advanced hand-in-hand. At the lower ranks officers have become more technically and tactically proficient through specialization and training – training that has come at the expense of political education.

Furthermore, the Chinese State government is laying the groundwork for separating the army completely from the party and bringing it under constitutional control. The passage of the National Defense Law (NDL) in 1997 gives the state government command authority over the military. While this is only a document and is not being strictly applied at this time, the NDL provides the framework for subordinating the PLA to the state, an important step. Also, the army's divestiture from the economy and the supervisory role played by a state agency sets a precedent for civilian oversight of the military.

But there is also danger as the military hovers between party and state. The PLA has the capacity to intervene politically to a greater degree than ever before. Devoid of strong ties and total loyalty to the party but without operating under the total control of the state, the PLA has potentially gained new freedom and power. It could choose to act in its own interests. Some might argue that this occurred in January 2007 when the Chinese military carried out an anti-satellite test that destroyed a Chinese satellite in outer space without consulting civilian authorities. There is also the possibility that, as the state grows more influential and leaches power away from the communist party, a conflict could erupt between the two over a crisis situation. This nearly happened

during the Tiananmen incident, but Deng Xiaoping had the political clout to prevent it and ensure the party's primacy. When the next major crisis happens and the party and the state are split on how to proceed, the PLA could well be left in the position to decide the future course of China.

Endnotes

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