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### **3. THE MILITARY AND CHINA'S NEW POLITICS: TRENDS AND COUNTER-TRENDS**

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The political development of the Chinese army in recent years has followed several trends, which sometimes run in different directions. One set of trends has led to a substantial increase of the PLA's influence. Already apparent as Deng faded from the scene, these trends have been accentuated after his death, and will shape the PLA's behaviour on the political scene in coming years. Other trends, however, have qualified this increase. The result is uncertainty about the state of the PLA in Chinese politics.

This uncertainty is compounded by a widespread tendency to focus on one trend only, which produces a partial and misleading picture. For example, an emphasis on the new political influence of military leaders tends to ignore the trend's limitations and portrays the leaders as dominating Chinese politics and impelling China toward external conflicts. Or, an emphasis on the PLA as a political and economic force tends to downplay the impressive upgrading of professional capabilities that has occurred in recent years.

The PLA's political position, in short, is shaped by trends and counter-trends, and an attempt to draw up a balanced assessment must look in both directions. This is not easy, since available information is almost entirely circumstantial and inferential. Therefore, the conclusions, and the reasoning that leads to them, have to be speculative in part.

#### **INSIDE THE NEW POLITICS**

Since the twilight of the Deng period, the PLA has been undergoing a transformation in all major areas of its activities. One of the most important has been its role in politics, which has an impact on all other areas. This has been the result of changes which have occurred on the political scene, and which have caused the PLA to veer from past patterns of involvement and move in new directions. The extent of the shift has yet to be determined, but it is already apparent that in the transition to the post-

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Deng period, the PLA has acquired a potential for the exercise of unprecedented political influence.

In the early stages of the transition this potential has been realized only in part. Even so, the military has moved closer to the center of decisionmaking on certain issues, and, as the Hong Kong handover demonstrated, is publicly playing a newly prominent role in upholding the most valued national asset of all—Chinese sovereignty. More important, conditions have been created for the further transformation of this potential into actual influence, a prospect which may turn the PLA into a more powerful force in future Chinese politics, and which, as a result, has enhanced its political position in the present.

In order to assess this position, it is necessary to examine the changes that brought it about. Although the military may have capitalized on these changes, it did not initiate them. No one did. They have been the result of the succession process which began several years ago, and the adaptation of Chinese politics and institutions to the new times. Their impact on the military has been on three related levels. The first, and by far the most important, has been on the stature of China's paramount leader and his standing in the PLA. The second, on the procedural setup for reaching major national decisions and the military's part in it. And the third, on the institutional relationship between the party and the army.

### **THE PARAMOUNT LEADER AND THE PLA**

Despite the vast changes that it has undergone, China is still ruled by an authoritarian one-party regime. In such a regime, politics are shaped first of all by the personality and position of the paramount party leader. What distinguishes the politics of the post-Deng period from the preceding four decades is the stature of Jiang Zemin and his relations with the PLA. Since this distinction applies not only to Jiang but also, most probably, to whoever succeeds him, it can be viewed as a major feature of China's new politics. In order to illuminate it, it will be useful to compare Jiang with Mao and Deng—as paramount leaders, and as supreme commanders of the PLA.<sup>2</sup>

These two aspects are critically connected, and this connection, more than any other factor, defines the political influence of the military, for several reasons. First, the political strength or weakness of the paramount leader determines to what extent he is susceptible to pressure or faces threats from rival groups in the leadership. Second, his standing in the military determines to what extent he can rely on it for support against such rivals. Third, a combination of the first two determines the extent to which the military can make demands on the leader and his capacity to handle them.

Three categories of relations can possibly derive from this connection. In the first, the position of the paramount leader is unquestionably strong both politically and in the military. In this case, the political influence of the military as an independent

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<sup>2</sup>On Mao and Deng as paramount leaders, see Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996, pp. 124–129.

factor is minimal. In the second, the stature of the leader on the political scene is not entirely secure, but he has unswerving backing from the military. In this case, his political vulnerability is offset by this support, as is his need to meet specific demands from the military. In the third situation, the leader is weak politically and in the military. In this case, he is susceptible to political pressure, but cannot rely on unqualified support from the military. To gain such support he has to curry favor with them, which puts the military in a powerful position. How then does Jiang Zemin measure up against Mao and Deng from the vantage point of this connection?

Mao fell into the first category without any reservation. His stature as China's supreme leader was unique. It was accepted like a "mandate of heaven" by all other leaders in their public behavior, and his personal position was unassailable. It derived from a combination of several elements, though their intensity varied over time: his brilliant record as the victorious leader of the revolution; the great success of the new rulers under his leadership in unifying the country politically and rebuilding it economically; and the ties that he had formed over the years. To these must be added Mao's distinction as a social visionary, his skills as a political street-fighter, his charisma, and the respect accorded to the supreme leader in Chinese political culture.

As a result, Mao's personal authority was unparalleled. This enabled him to disregard institutional boundaries, and, like an emperor, to rule everything. He could—and did—intervene in whatever area he chose. Whether his intervention took the form of approving decisions, initiating major policies, or forcing a change of direction, Mao's top colleagues accepted his imperious role—from a mixture of fear, faith, and fidelity.

The most prominent area in which no boundaries existed for Mao was the PLA. And with good reason. As founding father of the Red Army and its leader throughout the revolutionary years, Mao regarded himself as eminently qualified and justified to intervene in military affairs in later years as well, and always acted as an active commander-in-chief of the PLA. Although after 1949 the party and army developed as separate hierarchies, at the apex there was no distinction between Mao's roles as China's paramount political and military leader.

This situation was fully accepted by PLA leaders. To them Mao was not only nominal chairman of the party's Central Military Commission, but China's *de facto* supreme military authority. Their attitude derived from the same qualities that undergirded Mao's political stature, which were augmented by particular ones that bonded Mao and the PLA: his record of successful military leadership, and the connections that he had forged with PLA commanders. The result was a special relationship that was a hallmark of the Chinese communist regime.

This relationship had several implications for the political position of the PLA. The first was that the support of the military leadership for Mao and his policies was given as a matter of course, even when the leadership disagreed with him on specific issues. This meant that he could count on military backing in leadership circles in the pursuit of his policies or in personal struggles, and all players in the system knew that he could. A second implication was that Mao could use the PLA as his personal

power base in elite struggles, confident that his personal authority would ensure its positive response, even if the situation required deeper involvement, including the use of troops. This was demonstrated by the participation of the military in a political conflict against an increasingly recalcitrant party in the prelude to the Cultural Revolution, and by its massive embroilment in subsequent nationwide struggles.

The third implication was that because of Mao's personal authority, the PLA had little leverage to sway him or to dissent from his orders. This does not mean that its chiefs were meek yes-men; indeed, in inner councils they voiced their opposing views. Their resistance to Maoist anti-professionalism campaigns, especially during Peng Dehuai's tenure as PLA chief, is a case in point. However, from the little that has been revealed by disputes that became public, it appears that when Mao made up his mind, he prevailed. Because of his stature, military leaders did not have the power, nor probably the will, to defy him. At any rate, Mao's predominant position was never threatened by opposition from the military. This was demonstrated in several instances.

The first was during the deliberations that preceded China's intervention in the Korean War. Mao stood for sending Chinese troops against U.S. forces, but was opposed by military leaders. Nonetheless, he decided on this fateful step despite their dissent, and they accepted the decision.<sup>3</sup>

Another instance occurred at the Lushan Plenum in 1959, when Mao rejected the criticism of Defense Minister Peng Dehuai, and got the party leaders to remove Peng from his senior posts. Although Peng explicitly criticized Mao for the economic effects of the Great Leap Forward, the confrontation between them was also fuelled by his dissatisfaction with the campaign against military professionalism, which Mao had launched at the same time.<sup>4</sup> Since this dissatisfaction was widespread among professional officers, Peng's dismissal also signaled Mao's rejection of their views. The acquiescence of the officers, who made no move whatsoever against Mao, was a convincing indication of their unquestioned subordination to Mao's commanding position.

The third instance was triggered by the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam in 1965. The Chinese leadership disagreed on the gravity of the threat and on the response. Most concerned was Luo Ruiqing, then chief of staff, who presumably reflected the views of the professional military, and who evidently considered the possibility of an American attack on China far more serious than did the political leaders. To meet it, Luo proposed a linear defense by the PLA, instead of the Maoist strategy of strategic retreat, which would have compelled a reconciliation with the Soviet Union to get vital military aid. However, his view was rejected and he

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<sup>3</sup>Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, especially Part Three.

<sup>4</sup>Ellis Joffe, *Between Two Plenums: China's Intraleadership Conflict, 1959-62*, The University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies, No. 22, 1975, pp. 8-22.

was dismissed.<sup>5</sup> As in the case of Peng Dehuai, the military made no move to support their chief.

The only time military commanders seemingly violated Mao's orders and got away with it was during the Cultural Revolution chaos, when PLA units suppressed the Red Guards they had been told to support. However, this was not outright insubordination. PLA commanders either had received impossible orders, which instructed them to support revolutionary activity and to maintain order at the same time, or received no clear-cut instructions at all. Whatever the case, they chose to support stability, which meant cracking down on riotous Red Guards. However, they did this while proclaiming allegiance to Mao and the Center, and made no effort to use the power that had devolved to them to defy the Center openly. The only exception was the Wuhan commander in 1967, but he was removed by the Center and not backed by his fellow commanders.<sup>6</sup>

The conclusion is that Mao towered over the PLA, whose leaders may have functioned as an interest group on professional military issues, but remained subordinate to Mao's final authority. To the extent that it had gained political influence as an institution—as during the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath—it was by supporting Mao and subject to his leadership. Under Mao, the PLA did not become an independent political player.

Neither did the PLA become a political force under Deng Xiaoping. This was despite the differences between Deng's stature as paramount leader and Mao's. Deng fits the second category—a leader whose political authority was less than complete, but who had strong backing in the military.

As a political leader Deng drew on qualities that resembled Mao's in some respects, but were sharply dissimilar in others. Like Mao, Deng had a record of achievements as a revolutionary leader, a vast network of connections, and a successful party career after the revolution. However, unlike Mao, Deng was a conciliator and arbiter rather than a despot, and his ruthlessness was tempered by collegiality and affability. More important, unlike Mao, he did not completely overshadow all veteran leaders and was not looked upon—and did not behave—as their superior. His return to supreme power in 1978, after the second of two Mao-induced periods in the political wilderness, obviously pointed to his preeminent status, but not to his unquestioned superiority. He still had to prove himself and, unlike Mao, his personal authority also depended very much on the success of his policies.

In this area lies the most striking difference between Mao and Deng as paramount leaders. Mao was eminently successful as a revolutionary leader, and during the first few post-revolutionary years, but after that he started to make monumental mistakes—starting with the Great Leap Forward and culminating in the Cultural Revolution. Although his personal stature was strong enough to withstand these

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<sup>5</sup>Harry Harding and Melvin Gurtov, *The Purge of Lo Jui-ch'ing: The Politics of Chinese Strategic Planning*, RAND, R-548-PR, February 1971.

<sup>6</sup>Harvey Nelson, *The Chinese Military System: An Organizational Study of the Chinese People's Liberation Army*, Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1977, pp. 27–43.

catastrophes, Mao's political power declined as a result. On the other hand, Deng's personal stature as he entered the final phase of his career was not unshakable, but it grew and gathered strength as his daring policies reaped remarkable successes. Mao's policies eroded his stature, Deng's raised it.

In this process, Deng's own special relationship with the PLA played a crucial part. This relationship was forged during the Sino-Japanese War, when Deng served as the respected political commissar of what later became the PLA's Second Field Army. After the establishment of the communist regime, he became a key figure in the administration of the southwest region that had been established by that army, working closely with military leaders who would later move to the capital with him.<sup>7</sup>

Deng's PLA years gave him the necessary credentials to qualify as a military leader and to obtain permanent entry into the inner councils of the military hierarchy. More important, they enabled him to form the personal connections with senior military leaders which provided the basis for his invaluable support in the PLA. Although he moved into civilian posts in later years, Deng continued to maintain close ties to the PLA—as vice-chairman of the National Defense Council before the Cultural Revolution, as PLA chief-of-staff in the second half of the 1970s, and as chairman of the Central Military Commission until 1989—and was always looked upon by PLA commanders as one of their own.<sup>8</sup>

This bond accounts for the protection he received from PLA commanders when he was hunted by Red Guards in the mid-1960s; for the backing he got from PLA commanders when he made his bid for power in the late 1970s; and for their reluctant readiness to intervene in the Tiananmen crisis of 1989 and to fire on the demonstrators. It also accounts for the steady support of PLA leaders for Deng's reforms, which he could take for granted as an invaluable asset in his unyielding efforts to implement the new policies.

Deng's standing in the PLA was likewise vital in toning down the sectoral demands of its commanders. Even though Deng placed military upgrading as one of the nation's "four modernizations," it came last on the list, which meant that, despite the PLA's dire needs, precedence would be given to economic development. As a result, the military budget was more or less frozen for the decade of the 1980s, and declined by about 10 percent as a share of national expenditure. Although there was some compensation in the form of massive manpower cuts, efficiency campaigns, and involvement in profit-making enterprises (as yet limited), allocations to the PLA were far from adequate for its daily requirements, let alone for weapons upgrading. This situation could have been fertile ground for PLA alienation from Deng. But although there were periodic complaints about the low level of military financing, PLA leaders did not make any move that could weaken Deng, such as publicly withdrawing its support or aligning with rival leaders. They would not do this to one of their own.

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<sup>7</sup>David S. G. Goodman, *Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Revolution: A Political Biography*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 37–48.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 117–125.

Jiang Zemin's position, when he was thrust to power in 1989, was completely different. Although it has improved over the years, it is still incomparable to that of his predecessors. Jiang falls squarely into the third category—a leader over whose political and military standing there are big question marks.

When Jiang became paramount leader, his personal qualities were hardly notable. His greatest disadvantage was that he lacked the three most important sources of personal authority on which Mao and Deng could draw: personality, past achievements, and a network of connections. As a member of the post-revolutionary generation, he inevitably missed out on the years of struggle during which illustrious records were created and long-lasting loyalties formed. According to most observers in China, his presence did not inspire much awe or respect, either.

Jiang's political career had been relatively short. Before ascending to the top, he had been mayor of Shanghai, and prior to that a nondescript technical administrator. As mayor, he was reportedly known as a "flower pot"—ornamental but ineffective. This was widely believed to have been the chief reason for his appointment: various factions agreed on it because Jiang had not made serious enemies in his inconspicuous path to the peak.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Mao, he had not articulated a grand vision and, unlike Deng, he had no original blueprint for China's development. When this void was added to his unproven leadership abilities, his personal authority appeared shaky at best. For this reason, support for Jiang did not come naturally from members of China's ruling elite. It had to be granted, and Jiang was decisively dependent on their readiness to accept him as leader. This dependence has been reduced somewhat over the years, but it is still critical. To remain in power, he needs the support of the principal personalities who head the vast hierarchies which make up the Chinese power structure. The most important are the armed forces.

Their importance stems from the basic fact that military backing is indispensable to the survival of a paramount leader in China. The most obvious reason is that they command the forces which may be used to oust him. However, this is hardly an ever-present concern for Jiang, since the possibility of a coup is remote in the Chinese scheme of things. What is not so remote is that he may have to call upon the armed forces for support in less extreme situations. For example, they may be required to intervene in a leadership conflict, as they had on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. They may be needed to maintain public order in a time of turmoil, as they had been during the Cultural Revolution. They may be used to remove a rival leadership group, as they were in the case of the "gang of four." They may be employed to put down major anti-government demonstrations, as they were in the Tiananmen crisis. They may be used to suppress a rebellious provincial figure, a possibility that is not entirely unrealistic, given the growing power of China's local leaders.

Aside from specific crisis situations, Jiang has to be confident that the armed forces are on his side in his political dealings and the pursuit of his policies, and that they

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<sup>9</sup>Tai Ming Cheung, *An Eye on China: Jiang Zemin*, Hong Kong: Kim Eng Securities, November 1994, pp. 4-5.

will come to his aid if the need arises. Without such confidence, his position will be unstable, and even if he is able to plod along, he will not be able to rule effectively.

Military support has to be manifested in various ways. The critical point is that all the players in the political system have to be fully aware of its existence. This the military can do by frequently praising the leader and his policies in statements by military chiefs, and in the organs of the PLA; by prominently showing him respect—according him the central place in viewing military maneuvers is one example; by educating the troops accordingly, and making such efforts public; by avoiding any action that might undermine his position, such as criticizing his policies; and most important, by refraining from showing any support for a rival leader.

Under Mao and Deng, such support was axiomatic; under Jiang it is not. It was axiomatic because they had enjoyed the utmost respect and complete confidence of the military. In contrast, Jiang does not. His command of the armed forces derives first of all from his chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, but unlike Mao and Deng, he clearly lacks the personal qualifications to hold this position. Even by his own admission, Jiang was not fit to assume the top post in the Chinese military establishment.<sup>10</sup> The reason was glaring: he had no military record, no military experience, no particular knowledge of military affairs, and no connections in the armed forces. He came to the PLA position only by virtue of his elevation to paramount leader, and Deng reportedly had put pressure on the veteran PLA chiefs to give Jiang the essential backing.<sup>11</sup> This backing did not come naturally and has remained conditional.

From this fact derive two essential features of Jiang's rule and relations with the military, as they had shaped up in the first few years of his rule. First, because he cannot rely on the automatic backing of the military, Jiang's political position cannot be secure, since other players know that in a major crisis it may not be forthcoming. Second, he has to gain such backing by making concessions to PLA leaders. This puts them in a position to exert unusual political influence. However, these features have been losing some of their initial force. As a result, the influence of the military is limited by several factors.

## **JIANG ZEMIN'S SOURCES OF STRENGTH**

Although not as obvious as those highlighting Jiang's shortcomings, these factors partially offset the weaknesses stemming from his personality and past experience. They extend both to his political position and to his standing in the military.

The first factor is institutional. As paramount leader, Jiang occupies pivotal positions—since 1992 he has been general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, chairman of the Central Military Commission, and president of the People's Republic of China. The first two mean that he stands at the apex of the two most

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<sup>10</sup> David Shambaugh, "China's Commander-In-Chief: Jiang Zemin and the PLA," in C. Dennison Lane et al. (eds.), *Chinese Military Modernization*, Washington, DC: The AEI Press, 1996, p. 216.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

important hierarchies in the Chinese political system, while from the third he gets luster and international exposure.

These posts give Jiang substantial power. Despite the supreme importance of personal authority in Chinese political culture, official position is also highly significant. This is because traditional culture emphasizes the centrality of hierarchy and subordination to power-holders in line with their standing in it. Those at the top command much symbolic prestige, which in itself is a source of power. Jiang has capitalized on his formal posts in an effort to bolster his prestige by maintaining high public visibility that spotlights his role as national leader—for example, in the ceremonies surrounding the Hong Kong handover.

Symbols aside, Jiang's official posts have given him the invaluable advantage of placing trusted officials in key posts. The loyalties and obligations stemming from this advantage have always been a core component of power in China's authoritarian political system, which is still moved above all by personal ties between the leader and his supporters. They are absolutely crucial to a leader like Jiang, whose personal authority is not upheld by charismatic leadership traits or connections that reach far into the past. Personal traits cannot be created, but connections can.

Jiang began to create connections shortly after ascending to the top post. Most of Jiang's appointees are old colleagues from Shanghai, prompting observers to term them the "Shanghai clique." Here are some examples. One of its leading members is Zeng Qinghong, Jiang's personal assistant of many years, who, as head of the party Central Committee's Central Office, manages the work of the party's most important committees and supervises its vast bureaucracy. Another is Zhang Qianjing, who controls the party's all-powerful Organization Department. Through these aides Jiang has gained a vital foothold at the core of the party apparatus—the inner wheel that turns all the other wheels in China's ruling mechanism. Two additional members are Ding Guan'gen, head of the party's Central Propaganda Department, and Shao Huaze, chief editor of the party's chief organ, the People's Daily. They—together with minister of Television and Radio, Sun Jiazheng, and director of the PLA's Liberation Army Daily, Sun Zhongtong—have ensured that Jiang's activities receive widespread laudatory coverage in the media.<sup>12</sup>

More important, Jiang has made every effort to build up his own power base in the military by steadily appointing trusted officers to important posts. Unlike the sprawling party and government organizations, which consist of numerous bureaucratic domains and are difficult to control, the unified structure of the military guarantees that the insertion of reliable officers in key posts goes a long way in magnifying Jiang's influence.

As a novice overshadowed by veteran officers, Jiang could not do much at the beginning of his administration. However, his opportunity came after the removal of the two dominant figures in the PLA. Masterminded by Deng in 1992, this removal

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<sup>12</sup>Tai Ming Cheung, *An Eye on China: China Under Jiang Zemin*, Hong Kong: Kim Eng Securities, April 1997, pp. 3–8.

forced out the veteran party leader Yang Shangkun, vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission, and his younger half-brother, Yang Baibing, secretary-general of the Commission and director of the PLA's General Political Department. Yang Shangkun had been the point man of the party "elders" in the Tiananmen crisis, and Yang Baibing was their hatchet man in purging the PLA after the massacre. Together they had a tight grip on movement of personnel in the armed forces. Despite this, and apparently because of it, they lost their positions when Deng and his colleagues reportedly decided that they had become overly powerful and ambitious.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, Admiral Liu Huaqing and General Zhang Zhen were brought out of semi-retirement by Deng and appointed to the two top posts in the military as vice-chairmen of the Central Military Commission. As veteran leaders enjoying great prestige in the PLA, their task was apparently to ease Jiang's way into the top military echelons in the face of suspicious commanders, and to oversee its transition to a new generation of commanders. Their relationship with Jiang could hardly have been an easy one. While towering over him in military stature, they have treated Jiang publicly with the respect due their senior in his capacity as chairman of the Central Military Commission, and have supported him without reservation. However, as chairman, Jiang presides over meetings of China's foremost military leaders, and has probably had to defer to them on matters concerning the PLA and beyond.

As long as the two old veterans remain in office, Jiang's standing in the military will be overshadowed by their presence. For this reason, he has reportedly tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to ease Liu and Zhang into retirement.<sup>14</sup> If he succeeds in attaining this at the 15th party congress in the autumn of 1995, his position in the PLA will be strengthened considerably. This will result not from Jiang's sudden transformation into a military leader, but from the ascension to top posts of military leaders who belong to his generation, and who will not be able to pull revolutionary rank on him. Furthermore, they will have been appointed by Jiang and will owe their allegiance to him, or at least be in his debt.

Presumably with this in mind, Jiang has shown utmost concern for overseeing personnel shifts in the PLA. He began doing this immediately after the downfall of the Yangs. First to fall were generals who had been associated with them. These changes were presumed to have had Deng's blessing, since working closely with Jiang in the housecleaning was General Wang Ruilin, Deng's military secretary and confidante (who was later promoted by Jiang to the rank of full general).

In the next stage, he installed new leaders in key positions throughout the PLA. At the uppermost level, in October 1995 he moved two allies into the top echelon of the Central Military Commission as vice-chairmen: defense minister General Chi Haotian and former PLA chief-of-staff General Zhang Wannian. Chi and Zhang are obviously set to take over from Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen as the two top PLA commanders when the old veterans retire. Further down the hierarchy, under the

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<sup>13</sup>Shambaugh, pp. 221-226.

<sup>14</sup>*New York Times*, February 23, 1997.

popular slogan of advancing leaders “younger in average age and more professional,” Jiang has removed or retired senior officers who owed no allegiance to him and replaced them with younger ones. These have included the directors of the three General Departments in the PLA Headquarters—General Staff (whose head is the chief-of-staff), Logistics, and Political Departments—commanders of Military Regions, Military Districts, and Group Armies, commandants of military academies, commanders of the People’s Armed Police and the Central Guards Bureau (charged with the protection of the central leadership), commander of the Navy, the chief of the People’s Armed Police, and the director of the Commission for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense.<sup>15</sup>

Such sweeping changes could not have been carried out without the close cooperation of Liu, Zhang, and other senior commanders, and not all the new appointees could have been Jiang’s personal choice. In fact, given Jiang’s short familiarity with the inner workings of the PLA, it is a safe bet that most shifts were primarily the work of senior professional commanders, especially Zhang Zhen. Still, it is unlikely that Jiang would have sanctioned the advancement or retention of senior officers not favorably disposed towards him. Whatever the role of senior commanders in the reshuffles, the ultimate responsibility, and credit, for the appointments and promotions lie with Jiang. After Liu and Zhang retire, he will stand alone as the leader who had brought them about.

In addition to weaving a network of supporters, Jiang has gone out of his way to cater to the interests of the PLA—in itself an indication of the military’s extraordinary stature. He shows great respect to military leaders and to the PLA as a whole. He has cultivated the retired leaders—the “elders”—of the PLA who continue to exercise influence over their former subordinates, some of whom have risen to top commands. He has been unusually generous with promotions—in one fell swoop in May 1994 Jiang promoted to the rank of full general eighteen lieutenant and major generals who held key posts. He makes frequent and well-publicized visits to military units and reportedly shows personal concern for their well-being. He pays great respect to the traditions of the PLA. He makes all the right statements about the need for military modernization and the PLA’s requirements. He chairs meetings of the Central Military Commission. And he consults with PLA leaders on critical issues such as Taiwan.<sup>16</sup>

Nothing that Jiang has done has been more important to mobilizing PLA support than the increase of its budget, which has risen every year since 1988. In part, this should be attributed to the pressing needs of the PLA, not only for purchasing new weapons, but also for improving the plummeting living standards of the troops. In part, it stems from the economic upsurge of the 1990s and the obligation of the leaders to make good on their promise that the PLA would also benefit from it.

But an important reason has doubtless been Jiang’s desire to show his goodwill towards the PLA in the most concrete way. Even then, although official spending has

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<sup>15</sup>Shambaugh, pp. 211–232.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

almost doubled since 1986, the increase, when adjusted for inflation, has only been about 4 percent. However, the real budget of the PLA, according to the best estimates, is 4 to 5 times the official figure,<sup>17</sup> given the hidden allocations and the PLA's earnings from commercial enterprises, research institutes, and weapons sales. Thus, under Jiang the money at the disposal of the PLA has increased significantly.

All these moves have both reflected and complemented the growth of Jiang's personal stature. Despite his anemic image, he has demonstrated substantial political skills—first of all, by the mere fact of survival at the top in the treacherous alleys of Chinese politics, initially with the backing of (an increasingly feeble) Deng, and then without it. For someone who had started out from an inordinately weak base, this is a remarkable feat, which could hardly have been achieved by a political weakling. That could be seen, for example, in the anti-corruption campaign of 1995, which Jiang Zemin used to purge the Beijing party chief and his supporters for criticizing Jiang's appointment of close colleagues to top posts.<sup>18</sup>

While Jiang will never be a model of a charismatic leader, he obviously did not turn out to be—despite universal predictions to the contrary—the exact opposite either. His leadership style may be low-keyed and colorless, but perhaps this is what the Chinese system needs after the turbulent leadership of Mao and the dynamic one of Deng, and is not entirely a disadvantage. While he has not lighted fires, he has managed to create a stable coalition behind his moderate policies, which has not been seriously threatened by opposing alignments. As he continues to consolidate his position, Jiang is not likely to be challenged by a rival leader in a bid for power that is not ignited by major policy failures. Thus, Jiang's political future will depend primarily on the success of his policies, not his personality.

Aside from the specific steps that Jiang has taken, he has also benefited from sources of strength that are inherent in the nature of the PLA. At bottom, the PLA is a party-army with professional characteristics, and both components work in Jiang's favor. As a party-army, the PLA has a long and strong tradition of subordination to the party leadership. It has never deviated from this tradition as an institution. Although the first reason for its subordination was the personal authority of the paramount leader, it also stemmed from the traditional supremacy of the party over the military. As leader of the party, Jiang commands the obedience of the army at least to some extent by virtue of his position, regardless of his individual traits.

Strengthening obedience is the growing professionalism of Chinese officers as the armed forces continue their long march to modernization. In this context, the significance of military professionalism is threefold. It instills the ethos of compliance with orders emanating from higher levels without which no modern army can function effectively. It turns officers away from political pursuits that interfere with their specific tasks, as these become more and more complex. It makes them particularly opposed to intervention in political struggles, which can only end

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<sup>17</sup>David Shambaugh, "China's Military in Transition: Politics, Professionalism, Procurement, and Power Projection," *The China Quarterly*, No. 146, June 1996, pp. 287–288.

<sup>18</sup>Tai Ming Cheung, *China Under Jiang Zemin*, p. 8.

up by splitting the commanders of the PLA and jeopardizing its existence as a national army. As every senior Chinese officer knows from personal or recounted experience, the PLA's intervention in the Cultural Revolution—the antithesis of professional behavior—had almost destroyed it.

On balance, the new potential of the military for political influence does not imply that Jiang is under constant threat that the military will withdraw their support in some form—somewhere along the entire spectrum from backing a rival to intervening with force. Far from it. The combination of his growing strength and their long-standing style guarantees military support for Jiang as established leader under ordinary circumstances. For his leadership, ordinary circumstances mean, in a nutshell, that China's economic performance is successful enough to ensure social stability, and that foreign policies stay within the nationalistic consensus on such key issues as Taiwan and relations with the United States. What this combination does not guarantee for Jiang is what it did for Mao and Deng—that military support will be forthcoming under any circumstances. Since it is not likely that Jiang—or his successor—will get such a guarantee, they will be dependent on the military in a way that, for all its limitations, is new in Chinese politics.

## **THE MILITARY AND POLICYMAKING**

Below the paramount leader, the influence of the military has increased in the nation's highest policymaking bodies—the Politburo and its Standing Committee. Also a by-product of China's new politics, this increase has brought the military into the center of an arena that until now had been dominated by party leaders. However, as on other levels, its influence has been contained by countervailing trends.

The reason for the increase is twofold: one part has to do with the ruling style of the paramount leader, the other with policymaking procedures. Under Mao, policymaking was a one-man show, less on internal issues and more on foreign policy and security. In the first few years, he was more receptive to the views of other leaders, but from the late 1950s Mao became despotic. What went on in deliberations of the Politburo is not known, but it is known that in larger party forums Mao's colleagues avoided direct confrontations. After the collapse of the Great Leap Forward had convinced them not to respond to Mao's revolutionary exhortations, they chose subtle and roundabout ways to resist implementation—a tactic that fuelled Mao's anger and culminated in the Cultural Revolution. From the early 1960s, Chinese leadership politics were dominated by a series of conflicts. In this environment, there were few set procedures for open deliberations on policies.

Under Deng, policymaking was a much more open process. For political expediency and by personal inclination, he tended to bring his senior colleagues into the process. In formal and informal meetings, as well as in written communications, Deng solicited the opinions of senior colleagues and presumably took those opinions into account in formulating the Politburo's decisions. Still, Deng had the stature to

be the ultimate source of such decisions, especially on sensitive foreign and security issues.<sup>19</sup>

Things are different under Jiang. The policymaking process under his chairmanship is undoubtedly more diffused among members of the Politburo and its Standing Committee, and final decisions are much less the sole prerogative of the top leader. This is because Jiang is essentially an arbiter and consensus builder rather than an initiator and leader.<sup>20</sup> Since his standing does not endow him with the privilege of claiming final wisdom on all affairs of state, he apparently does not freely intrude into areas that are the responsibility of his colleagues. And since he does not tower above them, the process of making decisions is more collective and open to influence by other leaders than ever before.

The military are in the strongest position. Not only do they have leverage over a paramount leader who is critically dependent on their support, they are also in an advantageous position in relation to other members of the Politburo. In contrast to Mao's time, and to a lesser extent Deng's, these members do not have their own constituencies in the PLA going back to revolutionary days but need the PLA's support for their own interests. In these circumstances, they will surely try to placate the PLA's leaders.

Does this mean that the PLA has gained a dominant voice in national policymaking? The answer encompasses three separate areas. The first pertains to national affairs that lack a particular military dimension, such as the economy, regarding which it is not likely that army chiefs carry more weight than other Politburo members. The second relates to the internal development and activities of the PLA, regarding which military chiefs virtually have a free hand in setting policy. The third concerns foreign affairs, which are of direct or indirect interest to the military, and regarding which they have gained greater influence.

In the first area, as professional military men, PLA leaders probably do not claim a singular prerogative to make decisions on matters in which they have no particular expertise. In any case, it is not likely that other Politburo members would passively accept such intrusion. Furthermore, in the history of political-military relations at the highest level in China, PLA leaders are not known to have had special influence on decisions outside their professional sphere. To the extent that they did, it was in their capacity as national leaders who saw themselves as standing above strictly institutional concerns. Since these concerns grow increasingly complex and constantly demand higher levels of expertise and attention, and since the generation of military leaders who could intervene in other areas as national figures has passed from the scene, the likelihood of inordinate military intervention in matters that do not directly bear upon the armed forces is remote.

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<sup>19</sup>Michael D. Swaine, *The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policymaking*, RAND, MR-782-1-OSD, 1998, pp. 11-12.

<sup>20</sup>Shambaugh, "Jiang Zemin and the PLA," p. 215.

With one major exception. If the leadership's economic policies falter badly, causing widespread and prolonged social instability, there is every possibility that the military will not remain on the sidelines. The most likely form of intervention will be transfer of support from Jiang to a rival who holds out the promise of rectifying the situation. Here lies another difference that divides Mao and Deng from Jiang, or whoever succeeds him.

Mao, because of his stature, could withstand a horrific catastrophe like the Great Leap Forward. No rival emerged to challenge him (Peng Dehuai tried to effect a change of policy only, and was careful not to criticize Mao personally), and military intervention was never in the cards. The only major crisis faced by Deng was the Tiananmen Affair, but the military intervened on his side, and the rise of a rival was inconceivable. In the case of Jiang, such a scenario cannot be ruled out, since his stature will not protect him from the effects of an economic crash, and the same will most likely apply to his successor. This vulnerability is another feature of the new politics.

In the second area, the military chiefs have more autonomy to run the PLA than they did under Mao or Deng.<sup>21</sup> Under Mao, after the PLA embarked on its first period of modernization in the early 1950s, a de facto division of labor inevitably developed to some extent at the highest level, and the military chiefs took charge of the PLA's daily work. However, Mao remained the real supreme commander, and when he chose to intervene, he did so with impunity. The PLA's fateful shift from professionalism to Maoist military doctrine under his aegis in the late 1950s is the most striking example. Deng was also an active commander-in-chief, and although he was much more considerate of professional military sentiments, he still made the final decisions. The setting of priorities between economic and military development and the allocation of resources to the PLA accordingly throughout the 1980s attest to his supremacy.

In contrast, Jiang has neither the qualifications nor the authority to be an active commander-in-chief who is deeply involved in guiding the PLA. Professional decisions are made by PLA leaders in the Central Military Commission or in other organs, depending on the decision, while Jiang follows their lead and gives his approval.<sup>22</sup> Since Jiang has no pretense to effectively command the PLA, and since he surely does not want a confrontation with its leaders, this arrangement is satisfactory to both sides and seems to be working smoothly.

In foreign affairs, the military have not only acquired a new capacity to exert influence,<sup>23</sup> but are also driven to do so as never before. This drive derives from two factors—one visceral and one strategic—which did not carry the same force in earlier periods.

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<sup>21</sup>Swaine, *The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policymaking*, Chapter 4.

<sup>22</sup>Swaine, *The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policymaking*, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup>Swaine, *The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policymaking*, Chapter 3.

The first factor is nationalism. Always the most powerful factor in Chinese foreign policy, nationalism acquired new force after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of communist ideology. These developments changed the preoccupation of Chinese leaders in two ways: they confronted the Chinese as never before with the question of their role in the world as a rising superpower, and not as a secondary player in the political game between two superior powers; and they shifted the emphasis entirely away from China's defunct global revolutionary mission to an exclusive concern with its role on the world scene.

The new nationalism is a direct result of this single-minded preoccupation. It is driven by the view, whether genuine or affected, that China is again subjected to encroachments on its independence, which are reminiscent of past imperialist humiliations, and which obstruct the pursuit of its rightful place in the world. It is shared by all Chinese leaders but has particular relevance for the military.

The reason is that the military see themselves as chief protectors of China's territorial interests and national honor. This self-image is inseparable from the pride and patriotism that are universal hallmarks of the military profession. In the PLA, nationalism has a particularly sharp quality because Chinese officers function in an intense patriotic milieu, which continuously inculcates them with nationalistic values and imbues them with a sense of mission as protectors of these values.

This sense of mission is strengthened by Jiang Zemin's as yet inadequately proven revolutionary credentials. Under Mao or Deng, the military would hardly venture to claim a unique role in defense of nationalistic objectives. Jiang, however, still has to demonstrate that he is a worthy standard-bearer of Chinese nationalist aspirations. Until he does, the military will tend to view him with some suspicion and presumably consider it necessary to keep a close watch on foreign policymaking so as to ensure that Jiang does not compromise China's core principles. On territorial questions, of which Taiwan is by far the most important, nationalistic aspirations and the means for achieving them coalesce—a combination that invests the military with a central role.

The second factor propelling the military into foreign affairs is the international situation that has emerged after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. This has caused changes in China's strategy and has placed new responsibilities on its military leaders.

During the Cold War, the overriding concern of Chinese leaders was the perceived threat from the superpowers—the United States in the 1950s, both the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1960s, and the Soviet Union until the late 1970s. During this period, the sole mission of the PLA was to defend China against an invasion. This was to be accomplished by relying on the Maoist doctrine of "people's war": drawing the invading forces into China's vast interior, grinding them down by a protracted guerrilla war of attrition, and then driving them out with a full-scale counterattack. The essence of this strategy was that the war would be fought on China's territory, and its conventional armed forces were developed (or undeveloped) accordingly—as a massive, technologically backward but highly motivated and well-led force. Given the limited nature of the PLA's primary mission and its stark deficiencies in power

projection capabilities, it did not expect to fight far from China's borders, and then only in dire contingencies for China's defense.

The PLA's mission began to change in the mid-1980s, when the Chinese officially acknowledged what had already been their operational belief for several years: that China no longer faced the threat of a major war. If war did break out in the future, they said, it would be limited and local. This momentous change signaled the virtual abandonment of Maoist doctrine—except in the unthinkable eventuality of a full-scale ground invasion of China—and a recognition that the PLA had to prepare for war outside its borders. For this, a new force-building policy was formulated: the development of rapid reaction units that were more mobile, better trained, and better equipped than the rest of the army. This policy was accelerated in the 1990s, with emphasis on the navy, air force, and elite ground force units.<sup>24</sup>

These concepts acquired even broader and more direct relevance after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The elimination of a threat that had constrained them for years, together with a reduced U.S. presence in the Pacific, presented the Chinese with fresh opportunities for pursuing a vigorous foreign policy in their neighborhood. Combined with the new nationalism and the PLA's improved capabilities, this pursuit has raised the possibility that it might eventually draw in China's armed forces. In these circumstances, the military have a direct interest in influencing decisions that might force them to fight. Although such a possibility remains remote, there is one striking exception.

That is Taiwan. On this issue, core questions of China's territorial integrity, national honor, and international stature come together in an explosive mix which catapults the military straight to the center of the policymaking arena. On this issue the military see their full participation as essential to ensuring China's firm nationalistic stand towards Taiwan and the United States, as well as to deciding on actions that might lead to armed conflict. Their role in the crisis of 1995/1996, which was reportedly decisive and encompassed both diplomatic and military moves, demonstrates the centrality of the military on the Taiwan issue.

Does this put them in the forefront of hard-line leadership elements advocating confrontation over Taiwan, even at the risk—however far-fetched—of a military face-off with the United States? This is not the case, because of two counter-trends: the past record and present calculus of PLA leaders.

Chinese commanders in the past sent troops into battle only when they calculated that success was assured and that there was minimal risk of escalation—two critical elements that do not exist in the Taiwan situation.<sup>25</sup> For one thing, the PLA does not have the capability to overwhelm Taiwan's defenses in a quick operation. If it brought all its assets to bear, China could probably conquer Taiwan in the end, but

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<sup>24</sup>Paul H.B. Godwin, "From Continent to Periphery: PLA Doctrine, Strategy and Capacities Towards 2000," *The China Quarterly*, No. 146, June 1996, pp. 464–487; and Allen S. Whiting, "The PLA and China's Threat Perceptions," *ibid.*, pp. 596–615.

<sup>25</sup>Ellis Joffe, "How Much Does the PLA Make Foreign Policy?" in David S. G. Goodman and Gerald Segal (eds.), *China Rising: Nationalism and Interdependence*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 66–69.

only after a long war that would destroy the island. In this scenario, the damage to China's global stature, regional relations, and economic development would be incalculable. The PLA would bear the brunt of the blame for the invasion and would be treated as an international pariah. Its modernization would be severely retarded. Until the PLA acquires a capability to take Taiwan quickly—which will not be for at least a decade—China's professional military leaders would have to take collective leave of their senses to sanction a massive invasion.

Short of such an invasion, there is a range of military options the Chinese could choose—from low-level military moves designed to intimidate, as in the crisis of 1995/1996, to various forms of blockading Taiwan. However, given the intensity of emotions surrounding the Taiwan issue, and the high stakes in terms of national prestige, China's military chiefs are surely aware that once they initiate substantial military operations, the risk of escalation is high. This is because they might be compelled to escalate until the leadership can claim to have achieved its objectives, and no one will be able to foresee the consequences. This must be a forceful argument against any significant military action.

If Taiwan declares independence, PLA leaders are likely to support military action, despite the dangers. In such situations, particularly over Taiwan, the political and military leaderships will come together in a nationalistic drive to uphold what they see as China's sovereignty. If this leads to military action, it will not be the result of aggressive PLA influence, but of broad leadership consensus.

While Taiwan and relations with the United States have been of primary concern to PLA leaders, those leaders have also tried to influence other foreign issues—Hong Kong and the South China Sea, nuclear testing and nonproliferation, arms sales, and multilateral security. They have reportedly pressured the Foreign Ministry to resist Japanese calls for increased transparency, have voiced reservations, if not opposition, to multilateral security initiatives in Asia and transparency in China's defense posture, and have taken a firmer stand in favor of arms sales.<sup>26</sup>

## **PARTY AND ARMY**

Although the military can influence the political leadership only at the apex of China's power structure, its potential for doing this has been bolstered by changes in the institutional relationship between the party and the army. The crux of these changes is that the close integration that had existed between them in the Maoist period and, though not as close, under Deng, has given way to an increasing separation. Consequently, the dichotomy between them as two entities with different, and sometimes conflicting, interests is growing.

This does not mean that the army's ultimate subordination to the party and its leader is in doubt, although it is subject to the reservations arising from the new politics.

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<sup>26</sup>Swaine, *The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policymaking*, p. 34; and Eric Hayer, "China's Arms Merchants: Profits in Command," *The China Quarterly*, No. 132, December 1992, pp. 1101–1118.

What it does mean is that political controls in the armed forces have been weakened. This has been manifested most clearly by the declining importance of the hierarchy that enforces these controls, headed by the traditionally all-powerful General Political Department. As a result, the party's presence in army units is less intrusive and army commanders have more leeway to pursue their specialized missions—within the broad framework set by the party, but without undue interference on the ground.

The organizational framework for the exercise of political controls has in theory not changed since the early 1950s. It consists of party committees, political commissars, and political departments which run parallel to the military chain of command, and whose tasks are supervision and education. Ideally, leadership in the armed forces is based on the principle that, except in emergencies, decisions in military units are made by party committees and implemented by commanders and commissars according to their respective functions.

This ideal was never fully realized. Once Chinese officers developed professional attitudes, they resented and resisted this system on the grounds that it was incompatible with combat effectiveness in modern warfare. Their resistance was strongest in the second half of the 1950s, but declined after the reassertion of Maoist doctrine in the armed forces. In subsequent years, officers tended to keep a low profile in the face of Maoist hostility to military professionalism, and voiced their opposition to excessive political controls only when these blatantly interfered with their military responsibilities—as during Lin Biao's politicization of the PLA in the early 1960s—or when circumstances were favorable to redressing the balance between politics and professionalism—as after the downfall of Lin Biao.

When the drive to modernize the PLA was launched by Deng, the intrusive aspects of political control were watered down radically. They were revived briefly after the Tiananmen Affair, when the wavering of some officers prompted the leadership to launch a forceful campaign to ensure the PLA's political loyalty. Led by Yang Baibing, this campaign highlighted the importance of politics in the armed forces and cast suspicion on professional officers. Its shrillness undoubtedly alienated these officers and contributed to Yang's downfall, following which attacks on the professional military ceased and political control reverted to the Deng formula: the leadership views it as important but does not let it interfere with the prerogatives of military commanders.<sup>27</sup>

Since then, this formula has been preserved. On the one hand, party and military leaders have put enormous emphasis on political and ideological education, especially of high-ranking officers, in order to ensure that the army at all levels will follow commands without question. The main themes of education are the importance of upholding party supremacy over the army, supporting its policies, and maintaining PLA traditions, especially under the threat of corrosive forces stemming

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<sup>27</sup> Ellis Joffe, "The Chinese Army: Coping with the Consequences of Tiananmen," in William Joseph (ed.), *China Briefing: 1991*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992, pp. 37–55.

from the market economy.<sup>28</sup> Providing they do not infringe on military duties, these efforts can hardly be opposed by professional officers, especially since one purpose of political education is to improve the combat quality of the troops.

On the other hand, however, little has been heard of the role of party committees as supreme decisionmaking organs in military units, and the division of responsibilities between military commanders and political commissars in carrying out its decisions. Since it was primarily through these two functions of political work that the party had intruded most markedly into the PLA and kept a tight grip on it, their downgrading is a clear indication of the PLA's growing organizational separation from the party and its continued transformation into a professionally oriented institution.

This is hardly surprising, since separation is driven by three powerful factors. One is the drastic decline in the importance of the communist party as the traditional epicenter of the Chinese political system. Although theoretically still occupying this position, under the new politics two developments have greatly eroded its power and legitimacy: the system has become much looser, due to decentralization and the loosening of central authority over bureaucratic and regional power centers; and the party has lost much of its effectiveness, due to the de facto end of ideology, erosion of power, and corruption. The party's decline could not but have undermined the authority of party members in the armed forces, especially the formerly omnipresent political commissars and other full-time functionaries. Since the hierarchy of these functionaries runs parallel to the military chain of command and is supposed to supervise it, its weakening has surely strengthened the distinctive professional identity and insular character of the military organization.

Nothing has strengthened this identity more than the second factor—the modernization of the PLA, which is geared to preparing it “to fight a modern war under hi-tech conditions.” After laying the groundwork in the 1980s, the Chinese embarked on an accelerated program of upgrading in the early 1990s and have pursued it in a sustained and comprehensive fashion. They have closed the long-standing gap between doctrine and operations by abandoning Maoist concepts of “people’s war” and preparing for realistic limited engagements that will employ modern forces and conventional strategies. They have improved their rapid deployment forces, air force and navy, by buying small quantities of new weapons from Russia, mainly modern aircraft, submarines, and air defense systems. They have advanced their logistics, force structure, training procedures, and joint service operations. And they are increasing and refining their missile delivery systems.<sup>29</sup>

All these efforts have not yet brought the PLA much closer to the level of the most modern armies. The PLA continues to suffer from major deficiencies which will take

<sup>28</sup>See, for example, *Jiefangjun bao*, March 22, 1996, in *FBIS*, April 17, 1996, pp. 22–24; and *Jiefangjun bao*, June 8, 1996, in *FBIS*, June 20, 1996, p. 35–37.

<sup>29</sup>See, for example, Godwin, “From Continent to Periphery”; Ron Montaperto, “China as a Military Power,” *Strategic Forum 56*, Washington, DC: National Defense University, Institute for Strategic Studies, December 1995; *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, May 12, 1997; and “Selected Military Capabilities of the People’s Republic of China,” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense Report to Congress, April 2, 1997.

years to rectify.<sup>30</sup> But the Chinese leadership is determined to modernize in order to build armed forces commensurate with its long-term aim of gaining preeminent status in East Asia and a pivotal global role. To this end, it will have to mount a steady long-term effort that will transform the PLA into an ever more complex and effective fighting force. The condition for success is the continuous cultivation of an officer corps that is competent professionally and preoccupied completely with its specialized missions. The military leadership is well aware of this condition and has put its fulfillment at the top of the PLA's priorities.<sup>31</sup> The result is that the professional officer corps, which under Deng began to emerge from two decades of Maoist stagnation, has entered a period of flowering under Jiang. At the same time, the party is wilting and its representatives in the armed forces have lost much of their vigor. The party still "commands the gun," but the gulf between them has never been as large.

The third factor fostering this gulf is the PLA's massive involvement in economic pursuits. Growing rapidly since the late 1980s, this involvement has given rise to a huge empire that embraces every major profit-making activity. Its potential effects on furthering the erosion of party control are wide-ranging. These are some of the possibilities: an attachment of military units to economic projects at the expense of political activities; the participation of party functionaries in financial undertakings to the neglect of their duties; the disregard of party directives by officers who put profits first; the disintegration of revolutionary *elan* in the money-making climate of a modernizing China; the erosion by corruption of the ethic of duty and devotion; the formation of alignments among officers based on common economic interests; the gaining by the military of income independent of government allocations.<sup>32</sup>

Some of these effects are equally detrimental to military professionalism. The leadership is clearly aware of this, and has taken steps to curb the excesses of economic involvement and to insulate elite units from potentially damaging economic activities. However, it is questionable whether they have been able to insulate the party from such effects. Given its uncertain state in the era of reforms, it is likely that the PLA's economic ventures have further loosened the ties that had bound the party to the army.

The loosening of these ties has not cast doubt on the subordination of army units to the party leadership. Orders are transmitted by the leadership to the military high command and then passed down to the PLA. The compliance of the PLA depends on two conditions: that PLA chiefs themselves follow orders, and that the military

<sup>30</sup>*New York Times*, December 3, 1996; *International Herald Tribune*, January 29, 1997; Michael D. Swaine, "Don't Demonize China," *The Washington Post*, May 18, 1997; and Eric McVadon, "Strait Shooter," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 16, 1997.

<sup>31</sup>James Mulvenon, "Professionalization of the Senior Chinese Officer Corps: Trends and Implications," RAND, MR-901-OSD, 1997.

<sup>32</sup>James Mulvenon, "Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise of the Military-Business Complex in the Chinese People's Liberation Army, 1978-1998," Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1998; Tai Ming Cheung, "China's Entrepreneurial Army: The Structure, Activities, and Economic Returns of the Military Business Complex," in Dennison Lane et al. (eds.), *Chinese Military Modernization*, pp. 168-197; and Ellis Joffe, "The Chinese Army and the Economy: Effects of Involvement," *Survival*, Summer 1995, pp. 24-43.

command and control system is effective. As long as these conditions are met, the obedience of the army to the party leadership is assured.

Nonetheless, the loosening of these ties has reduced the capacity of party controls to perform what ideally had been its most crucial function in the past. This was to guarantee that military units not only obeyed orders from above, but that these orders were implemented by their commanding organs in line with party policy and spirit. It was, furthermore, to guarantee that if military imperatives did not conform to party preferences, priority would be given to these preferences. Finally, it was to instill in officers and men the belief that such choices were proper and unquestionable.

The inability of the party to perform these functions has enhanced the freedom of the PLA to conduct its affairs according to military imperatives alone. This, in turn, has two implications for its political position. First, by downgrading the latent conflict between professionalism and politics, it has strengthened the internal cohesion of the armed forces. Second, by highlighting the role of the military chiefs as leaders of an institution with distinct and specialized interests, it has strengthened their hand in dealings with the party leadership.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

The political role of the military in the transition to the post-Deng period is shaped by two factors: developments outside the PLA, which have given rise to Chinese politics with new characteristics; and developments inside the PLA, which are gradually changing its old characteristics. This combination has increased the capacity of the PLA to exert political influence, but has also set limits on it. The balance between these trends will not be finally worked out until these two factors settle into fixed patterns, and this is a process that will take years to unfold. Until then, the PLA as a political force will be pulled in different directions in line with the circumstances of changing situations.

## **EPILOGUE**

This paper was completed in the summer of 1997. Since then, the trends and counter-trends discussed here have been brought into sharper focus by developments in both the PLA and the political arena. Highlighted by two major events—the 15th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in September 1997 and the Ninth National People's Congress in March 1998—these developments indicate that the various trends noted in the paper have coalesced into a new mode of party-army relations. This mode is defined by several features that may seem contradictory but that, in fact, complement each other.

The first is that the Chinese military have gained an unprecedented potential for wielding political power. However, this potential is tempered by a growing military professionalism and by countervailing political factors. It is manifested mainly in the military's new capacity to influence high politics and policies, not in routine

involvement in political or administrative affairs. The military's imprint on policymaking is unprecedented but selective.

This new mode stems from the vast changes that have occurred on the Chinese political scene and in the PLA, beginning in the twilight of the Deng period and accelerated under Jiang. Before discussing the implications of these changes, it will be useful to review them briefly.

The first change stems from Jiang's relationship with the military. Lacking the ingredients that had given Mao and Deng enormous personal authority—charisma, achievements, and connections—Jiang cannot count on the unconditional support of the military in possible crisis situations as Mao and Deng could during the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen demonstrations.

Normally, Jiang can get the military's support by virtue of his institutional position, concessions to the military, and newly woven political ties. This probability has been strengthened after the long-delayed retirement at the 15th Party Congress of the two senior military commanders, Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen. As revolutionary veterans, Liu and Zhang had towered over Jiang in military stature and, having been put in their positions by Deng Xiaoping, owed Jiang no political debts. The new PLA chiefs, Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian, belong to Jiang's generation and owe their appointments to him, as do numerous other new commanders.

Nonetheless, if Jiang falters badly, the military might back a rival. Since such a switch was inconceivable in earlier years, the military now has a greater capacity than ever before to influence the fate of the paramount leader, which makes him more amenable to military views.

This capacity also extends to national policymaking. Under Mao, policymaking was a one-man show; under Deng it was much more collegial, but Deng still had the stature to make major decisions. Jiang, in contrast, does not tower over his colleagues, and his standing does not endow him with supreme authority in all affairs of state. As a result, the policymaking process is spread among members of the ruling group.

The military are well placed to influence this process. They have leverage over a paramount leader who needs their support. They also have leverage over other top leaders. In contrast to their revolutionary predecessors, these leaders do not have their own constituencies in the army going back to the old days, but they too need the army's backing for their special bureaucratic interests, which makes them receptive to its influence.

This influence is increased by the separation between the party and army organizations, which is driven by three powerful forces. One is the decline in the importance of the communist party as the epicenter of the Chinese political system and its concurrent weakening in the armed forces. Another is the modernization of the armed forces and the flowering of military professionalism at the expense of political intrusion. The third is the involvement of the military in economic pursuits and the consequent loosening of the party's organizational grip over military units.

This separation has not cast doubt on the subordination of the army to party leadership, but it has fostered the freedom of PLA leaders to conduct their affairs in accordance with military imperatives, and has all but terminated the long-standing conflict between politics and professionalism. This, in turn, has solidified the internal cohesion of the army and has strengthened the position of its chiefs in relation to the party leadership.

These changes account for the extraordinary potential that the military now has for intervention in the political arena. However, this is only one side of the new party-army relationship. The other is that the PLA's actual participation in politics is limited and declining. Its commanders have backed away from political entanglements and have focused more than ever on professional concerns. There are several reasons for this.

One is Jiang's dependence on military support, which ensures that he will not stray too far from their preferences, and does not require their close involvement in policy areas that do not impinge directly on their interests. The removal of a military representative from the Standing Committee of the Politburo at the 15th Party Congress reflects both the trend toward military detachment from nonmilitary affairs and their confident acquiescence in this detachment. Undergirding this acquiescence is the presumed belief of the military that Jiang as chairman of the Politburo's Standing Committee will not go against PLA views on matters that had previously been discussed at the Central Military Commission, of which he is also chairman. On the contrary, Jiang can be expected to advocate the adoption of these views.

In any case, the military can do this themselves through their representatives on the Politburo—the two senior military leaders Chi Haotian and Zhang Wannian. At the 15th Congress they replaced Liu Huaqing, who retired, and Yang Baibing, who had been kept on the Politburo for reasons of face even after he was dismissed as director of the General Political Department and secretary-general of the Central Military Commission in 1992. Since Yang had had no influence since then, his replacement by a top PLA leader has, in fact, increased the weight of the military on the Politburo. With these representatives watching out for its interests, the PLA can focus on its professional pursuits.

Also facilitating this is a generational change which has been going on for several years and was formalized by the Party and National Congresses. In the PLA, this change has elevated professional commanders whose primary concern is to oversee the long-term transformation of the Chinese army into a modern force. Most have risen through the ranks of the ground forces, have (limited) combat experience, have stayed out of politics, are familiar with the imperatives of modern warfare, and have displayed professional competence in their careers. The party and government have brought into top positions leaders whose sole concern is the development of the economy. Most are technocrats who are university-educated and have worked their way up in the economic and technical bureaucracies.

These leaders are oriented towards their bureaucratic specializations. In contrast to the founding fathers who, as national figures, did not respect institutional

boundaries and blurred the distinction between military and political spheres, they will tend to stick to their particular bailiwicks and to sharpen this distinction.

This distinction is augmented by the growing importance of economic leaders in the party's top policymaking organs, which will increase in coming years under the premiership of Zhu Rongji and the weight of China's economic problems. This does not necessarily point to a contest for influence between military and economic bureaucracies. Their relationship is based more on a convergence of interests than on rivalry. Both want the economic reforms to succeed, and PLA leaders are neither qualified nor inclined to interfere in their management, provided the reforms produce results and the armed forces get appropriate allocations.

For these reasons, the military has used its new power selectively. In the political arena, it has provided crucial support to Jiang Zemin during the final years of the Deng period and since then, but has stayed out of politics. In economic affairs, its imprint has been minimal. In foreign affairs, the military has apparently limited its involvement to issues that relate directly to its concerns, most notably Taiwan. In running the PLA, the military has gained unprecedented autonomy.

The new party-army relationship has largely obviated the relevance of approaches used in the past to explain aspects of this relationship. The symbiosis approach was based on the notion that the political leadership had co-opted the military into the policy process in order to neutralize them, but now political and military leaders are going their separate ways. The political control approach was based on the notion that the party had exercised complete control over the military, but now such control is limited by the new freedom of the military. The professionalism approach was based on the notion that there had been an enduring conflict between professional and political priorities, but now this conflict has been resolved by the supremacy of professionalism.

The PLA after Mao and Deng is different and more complex. It is still a party-army relationship, but is increasingly professional and autonomous; it is still loyal to the party as an institution, but is not unconditionally subservient to a particular paramount leader; it is still committed to non-intervention in the political arena, but has vast potential power to do so. Will it stay in or out of politics?

The answer will be determined by specific circumstances. Unlike Mao and Deng, Jiang cannot count on the unqualified support of the military in all circumstances. Mao retained the support of the PLA despite the colossal disaster of the Great Leap Forward and the dismissal of defense minister Peng Dehuai. Deng retained the PLA's allegiance—exemplified in his waning days by PLA support for his chosen successor, Jiang Zemin—despite the deleterious effects of the unwanted Tiananmen intervention that Deng had forced upon it.

Jiang does not have this invaluable advantage. He will retain the PLA's support as long as he delivers the goods: economic advance and social stability, which in the military translates into funds and conditions for modernization. However, if there is a sharp and prolonged economic downturn followed by widespread unrest, the PLA might withdraw its support from Jiang.

This could be manifested anywhere along the spectrum from backing a rival to intervening with force. However, since resort to force is a remote possibility in top-level Chinese leadership conflicts, military intervention could conceivably commence with pressure for drastic policy changes and culminate in the transfer of support to a rival. Since no political leader after Deng can survive without such support, this scenario adds a novel dimension to the potential power of the military in Chinese elite politics.

Also novel is that the PLA is less likely than ever before to be used in political struggles. Mao and Deng had used it despite the reluctance, and even resistance, of PLA leaders. For Jiang or his successor, this will be immensely difficult, if not impossible. The PLA never moved in force into the political arena on its own initiative, but only because Mao or Deng had ordered it: Mao during the turmoil of the Cultural revolution, and Deng during the Tiananmen demonstrations. Mao and Deng could do so because of their personal stature on the Chinese political scene and in the PLA, even though senior commanders opposed the interventions.

The new commanders are less political than their predecessors and will be even more reluctant to intervene, while the successors to Mao and Deng do not have the stature to force intervention upon them. Consequently, China's leaders will be circumspect in calling for PLA intervention and PLA commanders will not respond to such calls automatically. Only an extreme emergency can change this—for example, if the regime is threatened by mass demonstrations that are provoked not by policy failures but by demands for rapid political change, which the People's Armed Police is unable to handle. In that case, the army will most probably protect the party.