2. Commentary on Civil-Military Relations in China: The Search for New Paradigms

By David Shambaugh

With the exception of Chinese military expenditure, there is probably no area of PLA studies more enigmatic and less transparent than civil-military relations. Insufficient data has, however, not deterred scholars and other analysts from producing dozens of articles and book chapters and a handful of books on civil-military or Party-army relations in the PRC. Presented with a lack of hard data, analysts are forced into time-tested tea leaf reading, biographical analysis, and a large dose of conjecture. Hong Kong and Taiwanese newspapers provide fodder for such conjecture, but more often than not prove to be faulty guides to empirical understanding.

Tom Bickford has provided an admirable survey and critique of this literature in his chapter. His grasp of the voluminous secondary literature is impressive and his paper represents a significant investment of time and effort. Bickford offers a comprehensive and thought-provoking overview, as well as providing his own critical judgments of work produced in this subfield of PLA studies over the past 20 years. I can only commend it with little emendation. I find myself in agreement with many of his observations and judgments—particularly his conclusion and recommendation that “PLA scholars have taken current ideas as far as they can go and it is increasingly important to tap into the wider civil-military literature outside of Chinese studies.”

A Subject in Search of New Paradigms

Bickford’s analysis, and a re-reading of key studies in recent years, leave this observer persuaded that the sub-field of civil-military relations in

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contemporary China and PLA studies is at a juncture in its analytical development, as past paradigms have lost much, if not all, of their explanatory power. This is not because they were theoretically inadequate, as in fact they were very helpful constructs to depict civil-military relations in earlier periods. They have lost their explanatory efficacy because PLA and CCP elites have evolved in such a way in the 1990s that the earlier “models” are no longer empirically substantiated by the composition of new Party and military elites, and a number of other new developments associated with modernization, specialization, regularization, and professionalism.

As a result, the rules of the civil-military game are changing and there exists a new empirical dynamic in Party-army relations. As noted below, the new dynamic is characterized by a number of emerging tendencies. Among these is the bifurcation of Party and military elites. The emergence of the current generation of top Party leaders who have not a day of military experience, and the vast majority of senior military leaders who have no experience in politics and do not come from GPD backgrounds (Chi Haotian and Wang Ruilin being the exceptions to the rule), have extinguished the utility of the “interlocking directorate” argument, the “symbiosis thesis,” the Party “control” argument, and coalition/factional analysis. With generational change and retirements, the field army thesis is also no longer capable of explaining military allegiances (although it retained some efficacy as late as the early-1990s and pre-Deng succession).135 Personal allegiances in the military today largely derive from shared geographical assignments, service loyalties, and professional military education (PME), such that the promotion ladder in the PLA today has become remarkably de-politicized.136 Patron-clientalism remains important, as is evident in the Zhang Zhen and Zhang Wannian networks, but promotions have become largely de-personalized. Some identify a “Shandong network” of senior officers who hail from the province, but this is a questionable basis for affiliations and loyalties.

On the civil side of the civil-military dynamic, the new CCP elite also displays a number of new avenues of career advancement and political allegiance: university and overseas training (e.g., Qinghua University and time spent in the Soviet Union in the 1950s); service in the Shanghai Party apparatus; functional ministerial service in the engineering and heavy industrial sectors; intra-

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136See “China’s Post-Deng Military Leadership,” in James Lilley and David Shambaugh, eds., *China’s Military Faces the Future* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1999); and James C. Mulvenon, *Professionalization of the Senior Chinese Officer Corps* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1997).
ministerial client networks; and work in Central Committee departments (particularly the Propaganda and Organization Departments). Like the military, but perhaps even more so, patron-client networks continue to characterize upper-elite mobility as Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and Zhu Rongji all have groomed and promoted their protégés.

In addition to elite turnover, I note a number of other “professional” characteristics below, which cumulatively suggest that a new era of civil-military relations has dawned in China. This opens up new potential paradigms for analysis, some more familiar in the comparative civil-military literature: corporatism, praetorianism, neo-institutionalism, statism, interservice resource competition, socialization theory, technocracy theory, interest group theory, organization theory, cohort analysis, and so forth.

The underlying dynamic catalyst is professionalization. As Bickford notes, professionalism has long been a feature of civil-military studies in the PRC (as exemplified in the work of Joffe and Jencks)—but it has always been professionalism within an environment of institutionalized politics (via the General Political Department, Discipline Inspection Committees, Party Committees, Party membership for all officers, the “interlocking directorate” in the Central Committee, provincial Party committees, and National People’s Congress [NPC]). Politics and professionalism have never been mutually exclusive in the PLA. Rather the PLA has been, as Ellis Joffe so aptly described, a “Party-army with professional characteristics.”137 I do not want to overstate the changes of recent years, as these institutions all still function and serve simultaneously as the bridge between Party and army as well as the Leninist methods of penetration of the military by the Party. As such, we cannot fully pronounce the symbiosis thesis dead (or even moribund)—as it will always exist by the intrinsic nature of communist militaries (this is also true in those developing countries, like Mexico and Indonesia, where “hegemonic” ruling parties have co-opted their militaries).

But the nature of symbiosis is changing and is under strain, as Party and army elites have cleaved apart and the military as an institution has carved out more autonomous corporate space for itself. After 70 years of Party-army symbiosis, this organic relationship is unmistakably changing. Yet it would be a mistake to proclaim the death knell of the symbiosis thesis, particularly in a premature rush to proclaim the “victory of professionalism.” If there ever was a false dichotomy in Chinese civil-military relations, it is that between symbiosis and

professionalism. As Joffe’s observation above captures, and I have also argued, they are two sides of the same dialectical coin in the PLA. Bickford also notes this with his observation that “... symbiosis and professionalism are not alternatives, but complementary.” Unfortunately, attempts to too literally apply Huntington’s criterion of apolitical professionalism to the PLA have caused some observers to falsely juxtapose the two and thereby underplay the importance of the other (depending on which of the two elements one is more partial to). Symbiosis and professionalism have coexisted in the PLA since the 1950s, although each has been ascendant at different times. Recognizing this dialectical interaction over time, I would argue that today we are witnessing a more linear evolution from symbiosis to the key elements of Huntingtonian professionalism:

- the decoupling of the “interlocking directorate” at the central and provincial levels;
- firm subordination to civilian authority without regularized military involvement in civilian policy making;
- the emergence of a more technocratic, cohesive, and professionally educated officer corps;
- a more pronounced corporate esprit de corps in the armed forces generally and in each service particularly;
- increased functional specialization;
- meritocratic promotions;
- declining time spent on “political work” in the military, with greater attention to political allegiance to the CCP than to a political ideology;
- the prohibition of commercial involvement for the military and paramilitary forces;
- greater attention to codifying the roles of the military through laws and regulations; and,
- nascent moves toward building (at least legislating) a statist “national army.”

These developments are definite signs of movement toward Huntington’s three principal criteria for military professionalism: expertise, responsibility, and corporateness.
Toward Greater Autonomy and a National Army?¹³⁸

These changes also indicate greater relative institutional autonomy for the military. Since the mid-1990s we may be witnessing increased military autonomy from the Party-state in general, as well as nascent signs of increased state (i.e., government) control of the armed forces.¹³⁹ This would suggest a more linear evolution from symbiosis (pre-1989) to control (post-1989) to relative autonomy (post-1997). Increased state control need not imply, ipso facto, the zero-sum displacement of the Party’s relationship with the army. From one perspective, the relationship of the military to the state and Party can be seen as complementary. That is, the state may be increasing its mechanisms of control and lines of authority over the armed forces, while the Party withdraws to a more “elevated” position. This has certainly been the case during the last decade in terms of the Party-state relationship with respect to economic management, whereby the CCP sets forth the broader policy direction (fangzhen) while the state formulates more concretely the policy line (luxian) and implements specific policies (zhengce). Party committees have been largely removed from ministerial, village, and enterprise-level decisionmaking. The issue here for the military is really one of relative autonomy and jurisdictional distinctions between institutional hierarchies and within functional policy spheres (described by political scientists as the “zoning of authority”). As the Party has increasingly “withdrawn” from its former totalistic and monopolistic influence over society and economy, greater “space” and relative autonomy have been created for institutional and civic actors in China (although I would not endorse the view that civil society has blossomed in China). While the tight symbiosis of Party and army was forged early on, it is necessarily one of the later bonds to be broken in the reform process.

As a result, the rules of the game in civil-military relations are changing and evolving. Indeed, really for the first time, there now exist rules that define the military’s functions and roles. These have been codified in several laws, documents, and regulations in recent years. Their promulgation has been instrumental in advancing the twin goals of regularization (zhengguihua) and

¹³⁸ The following discussion is drawn from my Reforming China’s Military (University of California Press, forthcoming).
¹³⁹ Many analysts are dubious that this process is under way, and some—such as Jeremy Paltiel—believe it to be a false dichotomy. Paltiel asserts that “the Chinese armed forces have never faced a choice between loyalty to the state and obedience to the Party.” See Jeremy Paltiel, “PLA Allegiance on Parade: Civil-Military Relations in Transition,” The China Quarterly, No. 143 (September 1995).
professionalization (*zhiyuehua*) of the armed forces. The NPC has passed 12 laws and regulations, including the National Defense Law (NDL), Military Service Law, Military Facilities Protection Law, Civil Air Defense Law, Reserve Officers Law, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Garrison Law, Military Service Regulations, and Military Officers Ranks Regulations. The State Council and CMC have jointly adopted 40-odd administrative laws and regulations, while the CMC has implemented 70-odd on its own, while individual PLA departments, service arms, and military regions have formulated more than one thousand military rules and regulations.\(^{140}\) Taken together, the roles and functions of the PLA are now specified as never before.

Of particular importance to our considerations of civil-military relations, the NDL has significant implications. Adopted as law by the Fifth Session of the Eighth National People’s Congress in March 1997, the new NDL is striking for one notable fact: the subordination of the military to the state. The term for state, *guojia*, is used no less than 39 times in the NDL, while there is only a single reference to the Party. In China, the “state” is operationalized to mean the government, that is, the president of the PRC, the state council and its constituent ministries and commissions, and the NPC. The roles of all three vis-à-vis the armed forces are specified in detail in the NDL.

The effort to delineate the responsibilities of state offices over the military parallels efforts undertaken during the 1980s, when there was a conscious and deliberate attempt to more clearly demarcate the jurisdictional responsibilities of the CCP, state council, and NPC—particularly the policy of “separating party from government” (*dang-zheng fenkai*) in economic policymaking and commercial management. Of course, this general process required the promulgation of numerous laws and regulations, which had the cumulative effect of strengthening the NPC as a fourth institutional pillar of the PRC, along with the Party, army, and government. In the process, the NPC itself gained increased oversight functions vis-à-vis the government. State council policies, budgets, and appointments became at least nominally subject to legislative review by the NPC. However, the Communist Party as an institution has always insisted that it should police itself and its own membership and this remains unchanged. This has included Party members in the armed forces, who are subject to the CCP’s Discipline Inspection Commission system. The CCP accordingly has its own constitution and its own “election” procedures for its leadership, clearly separating the Party from the state. Its relationship to the

The armed forces has always been one of either symbiosis or control, as the Party has institutionally penetrated the military to ensure this relationship.

Thus, the National Defense Law of 1997 suggests some fundamental departures in the relationship of the armed forces (which includes the PAP, militia, and reserves) to the Party and state. Only in a single clause is the relationship of the army to the Party mentioned (Article 19): “The armed forces of the People’s Republic of China are subject to leadership by the Communist Party, and CCP organizations in the armed forces shall conduct activities in accordance with the CCP constitution.” This article presumably refers to Party committees and Discipline Inspection Commission work. Moreover, the article could have been worded in a much stronger fashion, such as the usual use of the term “... under the absolute leadership of the CCP (dang de juedui lingdao).” Everywhere else in the NDL the military’s subordination to the state is made abundantly clear. The NDL clearly stipulates responsibilities for the state and state leaders for national defense matters. The absence of mention of the CCP is striking in this important law, which signals an important shift in civil-military relations. The shift signaled in the NDL was explicated further in the 1998 National Defense White Paper. While the White Paper includes the single clause that “given the new historical conditions the Chinese army upholds the absolute leadership of the CCP . . . ,” greater emphasis is placed on the NPC, state council, PRC president, and CMC as the institutions controlling the PLA.

The promulgation of the NDL and publication of the White Paper (in itself a significant step in transparency) together provide new and important evidence that the PLA is being placed squarely under state control with the concomitant removal of Party controls. To be sure, ambiguities remain. For example, it is unclear if references to the CMC mean the state or Party CMC. This may be a moot point given that the membership composition of these two bodies is currently identical (many Chinese refer to the two CMCs as “one organization with two signs”: yige jigou, liange paizi), although the language describing the CMC strongly suggests that its relationship to the armed forces is either one of joint administration with the state council or merely “line authority” to implement decisions, whereas broad decisionmaking authority seems to rest ultimately with the state council, NPC standing committee, and president of the republic. But here, ambiguity exists insofar as Jiang Zemin concurrently holds the offices of president, CCP general secretary, and CMC chairman. Only when the president no longer heads the Party but directs the CMC will we know for sure that the Party-army link has been fully severed. Another sign would be when the CMC becomes a body solely composed of military officers (similar to the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and the minister of defense is a civilian.
While one should have little doubt that the CCP and its leadership remain the ultimate source of political power and authority in China, it does seem clear that these steps taken in 1997 and 1998 are efforts to disentangle the military from Party control. While the 1975 and 1978 constitutions both explicitly subordinated the armed forces to the command of the CCP and its chairman, that is no longer the case. Even much of the ambiguity of the early-1990s is being clarified.\footnote{For excellent and learned discussions of the legalities during this period see Jeremy Paltiel, “PLA Allegiance on Parade: Civil-Military Relations in Transition,” op. cit., and “Civil-Military Relations in China: An Obstacle to Constitutionalism?” The Journal of Chinese Law (September 1995), pp. 35–65.} Of course, it is difficult to determine the extent to which these reforms are taking root normatively and psychologically in the army, state, and society. Interviews with PLA officers in the late-1990s still suggest substantial ambiguity over the issue of state versus Party control (in fact, to many it remains a non-issue).

### The Need for Comparative Perspectives\footnote{This section also draws on chapter 2 from my Reforming China’s Military.}

Changes in the interrelationship of Party, army, and state in contemporary China must also be viewed in the context of emerging patterns of civil-military relations across Asia. This is another place where I fully concur with Bickford’s analysis and recommendations.

With few exceptions (North Korea, Vietnam), civil-military relations in East, Southeast, and South Asia have been fundamentally redefined in recent years in the process of democratization. In a number of countries that have known harsh authoritarian and military rule (South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, and Pakistan), the armed forces have been removed from political power and influence, made accountable to sovereign legislatures, and returned to the barracks. Soldiers in mufti have been replaced by democratically elected civilians. In all of these countries, the emasculation of political power and praetorian tendencies of militaries have been a crucial element in establishing democratic institutions and rule. The trend in Asia follows that of Latin America and Africa. The experiences of these countries, but particularly Taiwan, are poignant for the future of civil-military relations in China. Thus far, the emerging literature on the process of democratic transition in Asia has paid relatively minor attention to the civil-military dimension,\footnote{See Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., Democracy in East Asia (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, Yun-han Chu, and Hung-} although it is viewed as an important variable in the comparative literature.\footnote{For a detailed discussion of the impact of civil-military relations on democratic transitions see Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., Democracy in East Asia (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).}
More comparative research needs to be done on Asian militaries and civil-military relations. Certainly there is a large comparative literature on civil-military relations in developing countries that could be instructive and insightful for PLA specialists. An interesting and potentially very pertinent literature has also begun to address civil-military relations in democratizing Taiwan. Scholars of the PLA and Chinese politics also need to place the recent changes in civil-military relations in the PRC outlined above in this broader regional context, while comparativists need to look more closely at the China case. The current state of politics in the PRC certainly does not suggest that a creeping transition to democracy is silently taking place, as the CCP retains its grip on power, but at the same time we must not mistake the potential significance of the legislative attempts to subordinate the PLA to state control.

The China case must also be placed in the comparative context of former socialist states led by communist parties. The literature on former Soviet civil-military relations has always been particularly useful for PLA specialists. It is interesting in reading this literature to see that scholars of Soviet civil-military relations have adopted and argued exactly the same tripartite typology as those in PLA studies: Timothy Colton argued the symbiosis/participation thesis,

mao Tien, eds., Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

144 See Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., Civil-Military Relations and Democracy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

145 A promising effort is under way at the East-West Center under the direction of Muthiah Alagappa. See the draft papers presented at the conference on “The Soldier and the State in Asia,” Honolulu, Hawaii, October 1998.


148 For one view to the contrary see Minxin Pei, “‘Creeping Democratization’ in China,” in Diamond, Plattner, Han, and Tien, eds., Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies, op. cit., pp. 213–227.

Roman Kolkowicz the control thesis, and William Odom the autonomy thesis. Broadly speaking, the experiences of the former Soviet and East European militaries suggest that professionalization and Party control are by no means mutually exclusive, but in not a single case were these militaries consciously placed under state control via legislative means. Indeed, in many cases they fought, unsuccessfully, to save their ruling communist parties. The problem for the Chinese military has never been to subordinate itself to civilian authority, but rather to state control. Also, unlike the Soviet and East European experiences, the PLA has exhibited a long-standing tension between professionalization and attempts at politicization by the CCP. In both of these respects, the reforms noted above suggest that the Chinese military is moving—or rather being moved—into an entirely new era of civil-military relations and corporate professionalism. As such, one would surmise that the PLA will not shirk the task of defending national security against external enemies—but will it do so again against internal enemies that may threaten the rule of the Communist Party? This will be the ultimate test of the redefined relationship of the army to the Party and state in China.

Toward a New Century of Analysis

These are some possible comparative areas for scholars and analysts of civil-military relations in China to pursue. Professor Bickford’s paper suggests others as well. While the sub-field may be at an analytical juncture and in need of infusion of new theoretical and comparative perspectives, it is hardly an intellectually impoverished research sphere. There are good minds at work on it, inside and outside of the Academy and government. Moreover, it continues to have important relevance for the future direction of China, as the military remains the one institution ultimately capable of holding the country together and keeping the Party in power.

There are important changes taking place that need to be tracked, particularly the new generation of military officers taking commands in the regions and

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152 In the large literature on this subject, see in particular Harlan Jencks, *From Muskets to Missiles: Politics and Professionalism in the Chinese Army*, 1949–1981, op. cit.
central departments. How these individuals, and their civilian counterparts in the Party, think about national security and domestic security is not well known or understood. Much basic research needs to be done in trying to explore the interrelationships of their training and socialization with their world views and attitudes about politics. Do the strong insularity, parochialism, and ardent nationalism apparent in the current High Command also characterize the current crop of major generals and senior colonels—who will be running the PLA in five to ten years—or do they exhibit a more cosmopolitan and sophisticated view of the world and security matters? How does the next generation of Party and state leaders view China’s security and what are their views of the PLA as an institution? Will the trends toward relative institutional autonomy for the PLA continue, or will there be attempts to re-subordinate the military to the Party? Will there be further movement toward subordinating the military to the state? What will be the principal arenas of institutional interaction for civilian and military elites? Will military elites attempt to influence other policy domains, particularly foreign policy? How will the military, and particular service arms, attempt to influence budgetary and resource allocation decisions? What happens when (not if) there again occurs substantial domestic unrest—how will the PAP and PLA respond?

These and other questions suggest themselves—but answers or even educated guesses are not apparent. The continuing dearth of empirical knowledge about the arena of civil-military interaction in China is distressing; indeed it seems worse than ever before. Efforts must be redoubled to mine the available published data that may provide clues and answers to these and other questions, and efforts must be strengthened to interact with Chinese military officers whenever possible through “Track II” and other avenues. Civil-military study in China remains a potentially rich, if frustrating, field of research endeavor—but for it to advance in the twenty-first century new paradigmatic and comparative perspectives are needed.