Several general conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis. As in most countries, China’s national security policy leadership, structures, and processes do not function in a highly integrated, systematic, or formalized manner. Parts of the system (e.g., elements below the senior civilian and PLA leaderships) display considerable regularity and structure, while others (e.g., interactions among senior leaders) remain highly informal and personalistic. At the same time, all levels of the system contain both regular and irregular features. Moreover, throughout the system the level of influence in the policy process enjoyed by a specific civilian or military policy organ is often determined primarily by the informal prestige and power of the individual who heads it.

Ultimate national strategic and security decisionmaking authority does not rest with the PBSC as a body. Instead, a collective leadership composed of a small subset of senior party and military leaders determines policy in these areas. Most members of the PBSC, as well as senior leaders of the CMC and FALSG, serve largely as consultants and advisors to this group (and occasionally as advocates on specific issues), while a few remaining retired elders exert sporadic, partial, and largely passive influence. At lower levels, bureaucratic interests play a major role in defining and implementing key components of foreign and defense policy. Indeed, many of the activities in these
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Policy subarenas are on “automatic pilot,” i.e., conducted without the close supervision of senior bureaucratic or party leaders.¹

Linkages among the four subarenas vary considerably. No single subarena operates in a completely independent fashion, including the defense policy subarena. Vertical connections between the national strategic objectives subarena and both the foreign and the defense policy subarenas are relatively close and dense, centering on the formal and informal activities of the PBSC, the CMC, the FALSG, the State Council OFA, and the CC GO. The least formal and arguably weakest linkages are between the defense and foreign policy subarenas. Yet even here, interactions are by no means insignificant and are apparently increasing in number and relevance to the overall national security policy process.

Military involvement is evident in all four policy subarenas, albeit to widely varying degrees, ranging from almost total control over defense policy to limited but significant influence over foreign policy. Overall, the dividing line between military and civilian spheres in the formulation and implementation of national security policy is not as clear and absolute as in the past. The PLA’s role in shaping national strategic objectives and in providing strategic analysis and intelligence to civilian leaders is particularly significant and apparently increasing, even though the avenues for PLA influence over the national strategic objectives subarena remain relatively few. PLA influence over foreign policy is also probably on the rise, as military views are increasingly expressed and military influence exerted on specific issues in this subarena.

The military does not “dictate” policy in any one subarena, however. At the top of the system, senior PLA leaders generally interact in a collaborative, consultative fashion with their civilian counterparts, although their views on certain primarily defense-related issues probably often come close to directives. Senior party leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Li Peng undoubtedly play a complex and nuanced game in their policy interactions with the PLA leadership in the national security arena, seeking to retain the initiative and maintain

¹As a result, a certain percentage of analytical reports conveyed to senior political leaders probably serves primarily informational purposes, rather than to influence critical decisions.
overall flexibility by alternately placating, resisting, or diluting military views and pressures through a mixture of personal persuasion, balancing of bureaucratic interests, and direct control over key organs and policy channels. The outcome of this effort can vary greatly, depending upon the level of unity or agreement among the senior party elite, the specific external policy issue addressed, and the perceived success or failure of the prevailing policy line under discussion.²

Although the above analysis largely presents the features of the system at one point in time, certain hypotheses regarding major trends can be ascertained. As with the entire Chinese political-military system, the national security policy process is becoming increasingly complex and challenging, both internally (as a result of major increases in the number of bureaucratic and individual players involved) and externally (in response to the rapid proliferation of issues and concerns that impinge upon the national security arena, many of which fall outside the traditional boundaries of the foreign affairs and defense policy areas). This increasing complexity is pushing the Chinese national security policy process toward the development of more regularized roles and procedures, more institutionalized bases of authority, increasing interactions within and across subarenas, and an inevitable diffusion of political authority.

At the top of the system, the character and extent of PLA influence over China’s national strategic objectives could change greatly as the last of the elders pass from the scene and the successor generation of post-revolutionary bureaucratic technocrats assumes greater power. As with supreme political power in general, the formulation and revision of national strategy will likely become increasingly subject to a leadership system marked by the absence of a paramount leader and hence the need for greater consultation, coordination, and agree-

²The 1995-1996 mini-crisis over Taiwan provides an example of the civilian leadership’s failure to insulate the military from a particular national-security-related event. Most observers believe that the military successfully pressed for a more active role in Taiwan policy in response to the perceived failure of the previous diplomatic strategy toward Taipei crafted by Jiang Zemin and the MoFA. Moreover, the military will likely use the ongoing concern over Taiwan’s alleged search for independence to argue for increased funding for a wide array of weapon systems and related capabilities mentioned above. Hence, its stake in Taiwan policy will probably increase beyond its already high level.
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ment among senior party and military heads to deal with a growing array of problems and concerns. At the same time, lower-level bureaucratic leaders could exert increasing influence over the national security policy agenda, as organizational interests become more influential in the context of a diffuse and fragmented pattern of authority at the top. The emergence of complex, multiple personal and bureaucratic voices in the upper reaches of the policy process could result in constantly shifting, ambiguous, or contradictory policy directives from above.

Such a diffusion (and confusion) of power might provide the PLA with increasing leverage over the national strategic objectives subarena, as contending civilian leaders seek to curry favor with potential PLA supporters. Some observers speculate that, in such an environment, one or more senior PLA officers (e.g., the heads of the GSD, GPD, or MND) would eventually hold “slots” as regular PBSC members. Such a move would undoubtedly increase greatly PLA influence in this subarena. However, other observers (including many knowledgeable Chinese) insist that control over the national security policy process will become almost totally civilianized under a postelder regime, given the weak political resources and more professional outlook of the emerging PLA leadership, which is allegedly more concerned, on balance, with internal institutional development than external policy issues.3

In general, the level of PLA assertiveness within the national strategic objectives subarena will depend to a great extent on the unity and stability of the top party elite and the outlook, relationships, and intentions of individual members of the emerging senior PLA leadership. If the party elite is severely divided politically or uncertain in its handling of critical domestic or external problems, the military could feel increasingly compelled to intervene in civilian leadership politics, to preserve regime stability or avert anticipated shifts in policy against its interests. Such political intervention could easily lead to greater PLA involvement in the national strategic objectives subarena. However, the specific features of the senior PLA officer corps will likely prove critical in any scenario of political intervention at the

3The fact that no serving PLA officer was placed on the PBSC at the 15th Party Congress of September 1997 suggests movement toward such civilianization of ultimate control over the national security policy process.
Unfortunately, little information is available on the political relationships and policy views of these individuals. What can be said is that they seem to be less interested in exercising ultimate power over the entire politico-military system and individually wield much weaker political resources than their predecessors. Such features severely limit the ability of the military elite to organize and act in a concerted fashion, especially if the party elite remains reasonably unified, in command of the party control system within the PLA, and responsive to at least some of the key concerns of a professionalizing officer corps. However, the critical importance of national security policy to the military suggests that senior officers will probably not remain entirely aloof from developments in that arena and could be motivated to decisively influence the formulation or revision of certain national strategic objectives.4

As in the case of the national strategic objectives subarena, the foreign policy subarena is undergoing significant changes in its composition and pattern of leadership interaction. The absence of a single dominant leader with the authority of Deng Xiaoping suggests that future military challenges to critical elements of China’s foreign policy will probably increase in number and significance. This could lead to lengthy deadlocks or messy compromises acceptable to no organization, civilian or military. Over time, such confrontations could precipitate more concerted efforts by the PLA to control large parts of this subarena. An increasing number of key issues associated with the foreign policy subarena (e.g., those territorial concerns that involve foreign powers, such as the Taiwan issue, and other defense-related issues, such as relations with the United States) might become subject to a PLA veto or to significant revision by the military. Alternatively, the lack of a strong leader at the top and the absence of an assertive PLA leadership could result in increased de facto control over many parts of this subarena by the civilian foreign policy bureaucracy, as more and more policy issues are placed on “automatic pilot.” However, if Jiang Zemin is able to consolidate power and appoint a close associate or follower as premier and

4Those fundamental national strategic principles and objectives most subject to military influence obviously include the relative priority accorded to the development of military over civilian economic capabilities and related assessments of China’s threat environment.
hence the principal leader of the foreign policy subarena, his contacts with the PLA might serve to insulate foreign policy more successfully from direct military influence and provide greater coordination between this subarena and the defense policy subarena.

As with the other subarenas, the defense policy subarena is undergoing significant internal changes in the composition, interactions, and influence of key players. Currently, the continued presence (albeit “behind the scenes”) of senior PLA elders Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen provides stability and direction. However, their passing, along with the death of Deng Xiaoping and the other remaining elders, could produce an important leadership vacuum in the PLA, despite the formal ascension of Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian to top posts. As in the national strategic objectives and foreign policy subarenas, the absence of strong policy arbiters or enforcers at the top of this subarena could result in prolonged and more severe bureaucratic disputes and hence weak or confusing defense policies. Such a problem could become critical over the longer term, as it becomes more urgent for the PLA to make key decisions regarding a variety of modernization and force structure issues, such as the development of one or more aircraft carrier task forces and further reductions in the size of PLA ground forces. Such indecisiveness might also be exacerbated by growing pressures within the PLA to address a wider range of institutional concerns unrelated to defense policy per se, such as the future role of commissars, and the effect of the PLA’s involvement in business ventures. Ultimately military policy (and defense policy in particular) could become an important source of leadership strife. Alternatively, as in the national strategic objectives and foreign policy subarenas, weakness, indecision, and conflict within the senior civilian leadership could eventually prompt future PLA leaders to overcome their internal differences and play a highly assertive role in shaping defense policy. A similar outcome could also occur as a result of the increasingly common interests of a professionalizing officer corps.

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5 For further details on such institutional concerns, see Swaine (1995), pp. 25-30.
6 One indication of PLA unanimity on certain defense issues was provided in early 1994. Over one hundred military deputies to the March 1994 meeting of the National People’s Congress signed a proposal requesting that China’s defense budget be fixed as a specific proportion of GNP. See The Liberation Army Daily, March 17, 1994, p. 1.
Finally, as noted above, military research, analysis, and intelligence play a far more important role in the overall national security policy process than most observers assume. Moreover, the importance of these activities will likely grow significantly in the future, as a function of the military’s increasing force capabilities, especially if the military’s role in national security policy and elite politics expands greatly. This could produce greater problems of central control over and coordination between the military and civilian sides of the strategic research, analysis, and intelligence subarena.

The uncertainties and potential dangers presented by the above trends have led to repeated calls, by many Chinese strategists and some political leaders, for the formation of an organization similar to, but even more powerful than, the U.S. President’s National Security Council (NSC). The State Council Office of Foreign Affairs (OFA) is increasingly taking on various NSC-type functions, as noted above. However, these functions are primarily, although not exclusively, administrative in nature (e.g., involving the supervision and coordination of document flows and bureaucratic interactions among the components of the FALSG and, to a lesser extent, between the foreign and defense policy subarenas). Hence, the OFA at least partly resembles the NSC staff, but not the NSC proper. It certainly does not serve as the premier body charged with leading the foreign and defense policy subarenas in the development and articulation of national security policy and hence as “the primary focal point for all national security planning, coordinating, decisionmaking and supervision,” as did the NSC during its heyday under Richard Nixon.7

According to its proponents, a Chinese-style NSC would bring together, into a single powerful organization, the political and bureaucratic leaders of the national strategic objectives, foreign policy, and defense policy subarenas and thereby presumably concentrate control over the entire national security apparatus at the top. Such an organization would thus clarify vertical and horizontal lines of authority, facilitate communication and interaction throughout the national security policy bureaucracy, and thereby provide better coordination among and control over the different components of national security policy, both civilian and military. For a variety of rea-

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sons, however, this idea has yet to take hold within the senior leadership and the bureaucracy. For example, by placing virtually all elements of the national security policy process more fully under the control of the supreme political leadership, a U.S. NSC-type organization would likely diminish the existing personal and institutional prerogatives of various individuals and agencies in charge of either foreign or defense policy. It would especially reduce the considerably high level of control over the defense sector currently enjoyed by the military. Moreover, it would also probably greatly diminish, if not eliminate, any influence over national strategy exerted by those PBSC members who were not formally included in any such NSC-type organization.8

Overall, in the near to medium term, much will depend on Jiang Zemin’s ability to wield more effective authority over the party leadership, and over the PLA. The former will depend on whether Jiang can use his substantial formal positions of power as the official leader of the state, party, and military apparats, along with the informal influence derived from his selection by Deng as the “core” of the successor leadership, to build up his informal relationships and power throughout the upper levels of the system. If these efforts fail, Jiang will likely be forced to cede increasing amounts of power to other successors. This, in turn, could eventually lead to intense leadership conflict and policy disarray. The latter will depend on Jiang’s ability to maintain apparent supporters such as Chi Haotian in top posts in the CMC, and on his success in building his authority within the PLA by successfully handling many of the policy issues and institutional concerns mentioned in this report. His success in these efforts will depend, in turn, on the outlook of the emerging successor

8Many Chinese proponents of a NSC-type organization believe such a body should be under the direction of the CCP secretary general and not the Premier, the PBSC or a subset of that body. However, such an arrangement would likely prove unworkable if supreme decisionmaking power in China further fragments, creating a larger collective leadership. The resulting devolution of authority would likely lead to endless struggles among the powerholders at the top for control over such a powerful body. Because of this problem, some proponents argue that a Chinese-style NSC should function largely as a national security policy body for the entire PBSC, directly overseeing and coordinating both the CMC and the FALSG. Yet this arrangement could also lead to control problems, especially if the military were not strongly represented on the PBSC.
generation of PLA leaders and their commitment to supporting a more civilianized defense policy process.9

Over the longer term, the role of the PLA in China’s national security policy process will be heavily influenced by the broader changing relationships between the party “core,” the senior party leadership, and subordinate government and military leaders and institutions. The relations among these leading actors will in turn be heavily influenced by the growing challenges to the regime produced by a rapidly changing society and economy. If the senior leadership structure is able to avoid major threats from within or below to its relative unity and stability, political authority in China will likely continue to fragment. Eventually, increasingly open forms of competition will likely emerge, as part of an overall process of rationalization and institutionalization of the political system. The Chinese leadership structure could thus evolve from an open-ended, highly personalistic, secretive, and informal competition for supreme political power to a more formalized, open, and pluralistic political process in which all major players agree to share the reins of power at the top, to preserve the system as a whole. In this transition, informal political groupings would become increasingly oriented “not merely to the maximization of power and the minimization of risk, but to the promotion of policies designed to enhance their bureaucratic interests.”10

Under such a process, the military could eventually become merely one institution among many vying for influence in a wide range of policy arenas, including national security policy. Yet the PLA will probably prove key to the success or failure of this transition. As the example of other developing societies suggests, political maturation

9For a more detailed analysis of alternative scenarios of leadership succession and related patterns of military involvement, see Swaine (1992, 1995).

10Lowell Dittmer, “Chinese Informal Politics,” China Journal, No. 34, July 1995, p. 34. Dittmer points to at least three basic reasons why political conflict in the Chinese system will likely not be suppressed, but instead increasingly openly aired: (1) The decline of ideology renders more options legitimate, more arguments open to articulation; (2) the growth of the market and the existence of extra-budgetary revenues will provide ample resources to contending forces while focusing factional behavior more exclusively on political transactions; and (3) a national leadership increasingly dependent on international capital, commodity, and service markets will have a growing interest in avoiding international ostracism and sanctions (p. 32).
often occurs (or is indefinitely stalled) through the direct action of the military, often the strongest and most cohesive institution within such societies. This is arguably the case in China. Given the relative absence of political interest groups in Chinese society and the increasing interest of the officer corps in promoting a state-centered nationalism to replace the regime’s delegitimized socialist ideology, the PLA could be drawn into this process at an early stage and decisively shape its course over the long term. This possibility points to the need for further, more detailed, studies on the role of the PLA in China’s policy process, especially in the national security arena.

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