



China's People's Liberation Army

The politico-military nexus

by Juliette Genevaz

Chinese President Xi Jinping's ongoing anti-corruption drive has, so far, targeted 16 high-ranking military officers, as well as thousands of civil servants. The attention paid to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by the president ever since he became Chairman of the Central Military Commission in 2012 highlights the PLA's importance as a political actor in its own right. However, China also has an effective system of civilian control over the military, which works, unlike in the West, not because the armed forces are deemed to be apolitical, but, on the contrary, because they are thoroughly politicised.

With over 2 million active service personnel, the PLA is the world's largest military. Modernisation efforts began in 1985 with successive cuts in the number of personnel and the establishment of the National Defence University. Growing professionalism and centralisation will not, however, affect the PLA's role in supporting the political agenda of the Communist Party, which pervades the military establishment at all levels.

The PLA therefore remains tightly linked to governments at county level, wherever its troops are stationed around the country. Though this could hamper the PLA's internal coordination and potentially its wartime effectiveness, the party is prepared

to pay this price in order to guarantee the military's political loyalty. And the system will not change in the foreseeable future: Xi's leadership is likely to strengthen the ties between the party and the PLA even further.

Professionalisation under party control

At an elite level, the army and the party are connected through located in two agencies: the Central Military Commission, comprised of ten generals and chaired by President Xi Jinping; and the National Security Commission, created by Xi in 2013 to take charge of policymaking. Compared to these bodies, the ministry of defence is almost an empty shell, mainly dealing with ceremonial matters.

Directly under the Central Military Commission is the General Political Department. It has a dual function: managing human resources within the military establishment (promoting and demoting servicemen) and overseeing a network of political commissars whose responsibilities are now similar to those of an executive officer in the US army.

Commissars are military officers who specialise in 'political work' such as indoctrinating recruits



and designing motivational programmes for them. They are in charge of the external relations of their respective units, liaising with county-level party cadres, economic players, and foreign counterparts.

In 2004, Hu Jintao, then president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, explained how his ideology of “scientific development” applied to the military. He defined the PLA’s missions afresh as ensuring the rule of the Communist Party at home and promoting China’s interests abroad.

The regime also maintains close links with the troops through party committees which are the decision-making bodies of each unit. This ‘collective leadership’ is a trademark of the party. By bringing together the officers of a unit in this collective structure, the party guarantees the control of leadership positions within the PLA. It is an unwritten rule, moreover, that party membership is required to secure promotion in the Chinese military.

Understanding the political system of the PLA is essential for interacting effectively with the Chinese military. This is of growing importance as military-to-military exchanges have proliferated since 2000 and Xi has committed to further strengthening this area of cooperation. In military academies, for example, foreign military attachés deal regularly with PLA officers who are also members of the party.

Local integration

The enormous size of the PLA, despite successive efforts at curbing its numbers, explains why it has taken so long to modernise. Geographically, the PLA is divided into seven military regions, each with a commander and a political commissar at their head, which respond directly to the Central Military Commission. While Chinese officers themselves believe that there are too many military regions to ensure efficient centralised command, recent discussions over reducing the number from seven to five have not led to any change.

Resistance to this reduction in the number of military regions is due to the strong local integration of garrisons. Stationed troops answer to their People’s Armed Forces Department, which is part of local government. These departments control the resources necessary for military training, and the

troops’ political cadres regularly liaise with them to ensure that funds are made available.

A 2005 National Defence Education Law further strengthened links between a province’s garrisons and military academies, on the one hand, and civilian universities and party schools, on the other. It stipulates, for instance, that PLA officers and cadets must conduct military education courses for undergraduate students in civilian universities.

Linked to this law, an entrenched ‘defense education’ campaign tasks political commissars with organising events such as exhibitions and fairs in coordination with the local party committees and governments, and training party cadres in defence matters. To conduct this campaign, garrisons’ political commissars work closely with the civil administration department of the local government.

The PLA also takes part in national poverty-alleviation programmes run by the party, and political commissars at the grassroots level can access financial and other state resources to fund developmental projects. Garrisons in poor rural provinces such as Anhui, Yunnan and Hubei support county-level governments financially and logistically to provide food and development programmes. In deprived areas, a local PLA political bureau is typically involved in road repair, electricity provision and even commercial joint-ventures with foreign investors. The PLA’s once-extensive business activities have been greatly reduced since the Mao period, but some still exist.

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Finally, one last area of local cooperation between civilian and military authorities is disaster relief. Since the Yangtze River flood of 1998, the legal mechanisms for cooperation have been reinforced and disaster relief operations, which involve high numbers of troops, are now entirely run by local authorities.

Decentralised authority

The PLA is split into multiple decision-making bodies. Consequently, the army, navy and air force do not coordinate well with one another when compared to other large militaries. The failure to conduct joint operations is the PLA’s main weakness, something which stems from the fact that the force looks inward, rather than outward.

PLA military regions



Source: US Department of Defense

In peacetime, the strongest ties exist not between the various arms of the military, but between the political commissars and government cadres. Stationed garrisons have closer relationships with local governments – organising military training, structuring community life etc. – than with the central military command.

Although these divisions may damage operational efficiency, it bolsters the position of the single-party regime. The party prevents the build-up of regional military strongholds by rotating personnel, and frequent contact between local party cadres and PLA officers has created an institutional culture which emphasises national defence among party-state officials.

The interests of the military and the party are thus combined, in a culture which is spread through

professional training and incentives for cooperation at the local government level. Beyond the party's direct access to military command through the Central Military Commission, it is this strong connection at the local level which ensures continued control over the PLA.

As a result of its decentralised nature, the PLA deals with various agencies of the Chinese state on a day-to-day basis. In the South China Sea, where a string of crises has occurred, the PLA's navy has been only one of at least three agents dealing directly with territorial disputes. Since 2005, the Chinese Fisheries Administration and the State Oceanographic Administration have also sent vessels to the disputed waters. The variety of actors deployed has allowed the central leadership to pursue territorial claims without making it a military issue, thus avoiding a direct confrontation with the US military,

which backs most of the other claimants (Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Taiwan, and the Philippines).

Keeping peace – in and around Africa

In all of its high-profile international deployments, the PLA has demonstrated its commitment to non-traditional security issues. Its most visible operations since the early 2000s have taken place under the umbrella of the UN, as part of peacekeeping forces. Today, China is the largest contributor of troops to the UN peacekeeping programme among the five permanent members of the Security Council. It has continued to send more peacekeepers at a time when Western powers such as Canada are cutting back, despite retaining most of the command posts.

The geographical focus of the PLA's peacekeeping deployments is Africa, where seven out of ten missions in which China participates are found. This is only to be expected, given that nine of the current sixteen UN Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) are located in Africa. China has claimed, however, that its military commitment to these African UNPKOs is part of a policy of South-South international aid. A case in point is Liberia: China established diplomatic relations with the country shortly after the UN mission began in 2003, and has steadily increased the number of its blue helmets there ever since.

Another area of international military intervention has been high-profile anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. These operations to protect the sea lanes have provided an opportunity for the PLA to test its new naval equipment in foreign seas. However, China has also shown the limits within which it is willing to deploy its forces under a multilateral framework. Although the fight against pirates in the Gulf of Aden is a cause shared by China, NATO, and the European Union, the Chinese government has not conducted joint operations with other navies, and the PLA navy systematically intervenes autonomously.

China's West: the main threat?

The main danger to China's national security today appears to be a domestic one. The most pressing threat is posed by extremists in China's westernmost province Xinjiang, where the Turkistan Islamic Group, a terrorist outfit, is active.

The PLA has long been present in this province, particularly through its special force called the 'Xinjiang production and construction corps'. This unit is engaged in economic activities, as well as border

control and social stabilisation tasks. In 2014, the Communist Party celebrated the 60th anniversary of the corps' formation and reiterated its role in ensuring social stability and economic development in the far-flung region.

The PLA's only form of alliance with foreign counterparts is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), established in 2001 and bringing together Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The SCO is not a binding alliance, however, which means that the extent of cooperation between China and other members of the organisation has extended only to joint military exercises. China has not used the SCO to draw the Central Asian republics out of Russia's orbit, and Beijing has increased its commercial exchanges with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan bilaterally rather than within the organisation's framework.

That said, the SCO remains an important instrument through which China can establish influence in the region and in this respect, the politico-military nexus remains crucial.

Otherwise engaged

The Chinese military is a political actor not only at home, but also abroad. Thanks to an increase in international military-to-military exchanges, American, European and African officers now spend ever more time with their PLA counterparts, either as military attachés in Beijing, or within the framework of international conflict resolution and anti-piracy operations. For those based on Chinese soil, all contacts are filtered through the PLA's General Political Department.

The PLA's 'new missions' outlined by Hu Jintao now significantly overlap with the kind of operations which European militaries are involved in abroad. Indeed, PLA doctrine now emphasises the importance of non-combat operations such as peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance for Chinese troops to gain useful operational experience.

One problem remains for the PLA: although it has focused on nonconventional security both at home and abroad, it has failed to upgrade its command structure. The complex mechanisms which bind it to the ruling party, both locally and centrally, have created multiple centres of authority, thus lengthening any decision-making process.

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