



POLITICAL AND  
SECURITY AFFAIRS

The background of the top section of the page is a vibrant, waving Chinese national flag, featuring a red field with five golden-yellow stars in the canton and two horizontal red stripes at the bottom.

## CIVIL-MILITARY “RULES OF THE GAME” ON THE EVE OF CHINA’S 19TH PARTY CONGRESS

Andrew Scobell, RAND Corporation

---

In recent years one routinely hears hyped reports of a “rogue” Chinese military or of “hawkish” generals dictating policy. There is a consensus among many analysts that in the early 21st century the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has become more “assertive” or “aggressive.” Often this is attributed to pressure from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>1</sup> Is the PLA the driving force behind Chinese assertiveness? Is the military the dominant force in today’s China, or is it President Xi Jinping—widely considered the most powerful Communist leader since the late Deng Xiaoping—who commands the PLA as well as managing his country’s domestic politics and foreign policy?<sup>2</sup>

According to conventional scholarly wisdom, the PLA is considered to be firmly under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). How can this recent behavior and reportage be explained? Has the PLA attained greater autonomy from the CCP? Has China’s military become an independent actor? Five years after the 18th Party Congress of November 2012, which witnessed a once-a-decade turnover in civilian and military elites, is an appropriate juncture to assess the state of civil-military relations in China. Not only did a new Chinese

**ANDREW SCOBELL** is a Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation. His publications include *PLA Influence on China’s National Security Policymaking* (2015), *China’s Search for Security* (2012), and *China’s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (2003).

Note: This essay was prepared for the conference “Continuity and Change in the PLA: Evolution, Adaptation, and Reform,” held by the National Bureau of Asian Research, the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, U.S. Pacific Command, and the Department of the Army at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, October 21–23, 2016.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Andrew Scobell, “Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China’s Peaceful Rise?” *Parameters* 39, no. 2 (2009): 4–22.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth C. Economy, “China’s Imperial President: Xi Jinping Tightens His Grip,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2014, 80–91.

paramount leader emerge, but there was significant elite turnover: 15 of 25 Politburo members retired, 7 of 9 Politburo Standing Committee members stepped down, and 8 of 12 members of the CCP Central Military Commission (CMC) retired.<sup>3</sup>

This essay assesses the position of the PLA on the eve of the 19th Party Congress scheduled for October 2017 by challenging conventional assumptions about civil-military relations in the PRC. It identifies commonly agreed on “rules of the game” for military participation in China’s political system, which most players appear to recognize as essential to the stability of the political system.

## CHINA’S RECORD OF CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

The record of civil-military relations in China since 1949 could easily fit one of two radically different interpretations. One interpretation highlights the PLA’s repeated disregard of CCP control and tendency to periodically meddle in Chinese domestic politics. This interpretation would resonate with those observers who have depicted the emergence of a more activist, vocal, and hard-line military in recent years. Yet most of these observers would point to a past where China’s armed forces had once been restrained and moderate. This second interpretation stresses the PLA’s deference to CCP control and willingness to play a circumscribed role in PRC politics. Evidence can be marshalled to support either interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

Most analysts concur that there have been significant changes in civil-military relations during the past seven decades. At least four key trends can be identified. First, civilian and military elites have become more differentiated and distinct. Second, the PLA has become far

more expert and is better trained and better educated than ever before. While political work is still considered important, it is less focused on inculcating the substance of Marxism-Leninism or Mao Zedong Thought than on hammering home the instrumental importance of military obedience to the party. Third, the PLA has adopted a less overtly political, more restricted policymaking role, focusing primarily on military affairs. Fourth, despite this apparent decline in political influence, the resources devoted to national defense have been growing. Perhaps the clearest indication of this trend is that China’s defense budget has been rising consistently at double-digit rates annually for several decades.<sup>5</sup>

But what do these changes mean for the position of the PLA? Does the military remain under control of the party? How do civil-military relations operate in the PRC today? Does the PLA abide by the rules of the political game? If so, have these rules changed and evolved over the years?

Before we can say for sure whether the PLA is following or breaking the rules, we need to be clear on the rules of the political game in the PRC on the eve of the 19th Party Congress. Of course, this begs the question: are there any rules? The answer must be “yes.” There are most certainly rules of the game. Indeed, four decades after the death of Mao, there are more rules than ever—politics in post-Mao, post-Deng China are more regularized and institutionalized than they ever were in Mao’s lifetime. And even then, there were rules of the game.<sup>6</sup> Of course, there was one person who could break all the rules or remake them on a whim. But for all intents and purposes, Mao was synonymous with the CCP, the PRC, and the PLA, and it was difficult for anyone to imagine any of these institutions without him. In other words, Mao’s power was absolute and his

<sup>3</sup> The figures are drawn from Alice Miller, “The New Party Politburo Leadership,” Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, no. 40, January 2013, 1.

<sup>4</sup> For an elaboration of this point, see Harry Harding, “The Role of the Military in Chinese Politics,” in *Citizens and Groups in Contemporary China*, ed. Victor C. Falkenheim (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1987), 212–14.

<sup>5</sup> These trends roughly follow those outlined in Michael Kiselycznyk and Phillip Saunders, *Civil-Military Relations in China: Assessing the PLA’s Role in Elite Politics* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2010), 4–11.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick C. Teiwes, *Leadership, Legitimacy, and Conflict in China: From a Charismatic Mao to the Politics of Succession* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1984), chap. 3.

word was law. And Mao's excesses, abuses, and mercurial nature resulted in suffering and misery for individuals and chaos for the country. Even prominent soldiers, such as Marshal Peng Dehuai, were not immune from persecution and purge. Indeed, it was precisely for these reasons that Mao's successors were in general agreement that a more stable, predictable, and orderly system of checks and balances must be put in place.

Deng Xiaoping spoke repeatedly of building or improving "institutions."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, he made great efforts to develop rules and norms of elite conduct. In explaining the resilience of Chinese Communism, some scholars point to the "institutionalization" of the regime through the establishment of rules of elite behavior.<sup>8</sup> Of particular note are the successful implementation of norms of retirement, leadership selection, and promotion mechanisms. The success of these efforts can be gauged by the three relatively smooth generational leadership turnovers: from Deng to Jiang Zemin and the "third generation" (in the 1990s), from Jiang to Hu Jintao and the "fourth generation" (in 2002–4), and from Hu to Xi Jinping and the "fifth generation" of CCP elites (2012–13). Institutionalized leadership succession is perhaps one of the most underappreciated of Deng's legacies.<sup>9</sup>

## PARTY-MILITARY-STATE RULES

Among these rules of the political game are rules for elite interaction, including what constitutes acceptable actions by the most senior leaders, such as members of the Politburo. Senior leaders are expected to be team players and not draw undue attention to themselves. This means avoiding excessive positive or negative individual publicity. China's top leaders tend to be studied in

drabness, dressing alike in conservative business suits and sporting similar jet-black pompadours. Moreover, with the exception of the top two leaders who hold the offices of president and premier, senior leaders rarely make high-profile public appearances alone.

The most newsworthy elite purge of 2012 was that of Politburo member Bo Xilai. His fall from grace was dramatic and clearly related to the scandal surrounding the murder of a British businessman with close ties to the Bo family. But arguably, Bo's cardinal sin was that he drew far too much attention to himself, first positive and then negative publicity. By behaving more like a brash American populist politician than a nondescript CCP apparatchik, Bo raised the hackles of his colleagues. Initially, other senior communist leaders were intimidated by his theatrics, but this concern later changed to embarrassment when the high-profile scandal broke in early 2012.<sup>10</sup> According to Alice Miller, Chinese leaders "now compete for power within increasingly consolidated institutions and according to increasingly established norms of accepted political behavior, making the struggles of the current era a world apart from the ruthless, anti-institutional politics of the later Mao era."<sup>11</sup>

There are also rules for civil-military relations. These are important because they provide a much-needed sense of stability and routine in what would otherwise be a tumultuous and uncertain environment for military politics.<sup>12</sup> The PLA is the CCP's most essential institutional

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, "Answers to the Italian Journalist Oriana Fallaci (August 21 and 23, 1980)," in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (1975–1982)*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), 326–34.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 1 (2003): 6–17.

<sup>9</sup> For more discussion, see Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard," 7–9; and Miller, "New Party Politburo Leadership," 11–13.

<sup>10</sup> There appears to be limited fallout from the scandal for civil-military relations. Two generals who seemed likely to be promoted to the CMC were passed over, possibly because of their ties to Bo: General Logistics Department political commissar Liu Yuan and Second Artillery political commissar Zhang Haiyang. See James Mulvenon, "The Bo Xilai Affair and the PLA," Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, no. 38, August 2012, 1–11; and James Mulvenon, "The New Central Military Commission," Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, no. 40, January 2013, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, "The New Party Politburo Leadership," 13. Nevertheless, there are limits to this institutionalization. See Joseph Fewsmith, "The 18th Party Congress: Testing the Limits of Institutionalization," Hoover Institution, China Leadership Monitor, no. 40, January 2013, 1–9.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of civil-military rules of the game, see Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 52; and Teiwes, *Leadership, Legitimacy, and Conflict in China*, 96, 98, 123–34.

partner. Historically the two have been organically inseparable—intertwined and interdependent throughout their existence.<sup>13</sup> The rules governing civil-military interactions are unwritten—they cannot be found in the constitution of the CCP or PRC. Although not formally enshrined in any document, they are clearly understood by all players. These rules were formulated and widely accepted because they are considered to be in the interests of all individuals—civilian and military—and their respective organizations.

The PLA is the third pillar of regime power along with the CCP and the PRC. The military not only protects the country against external enemies but defends the regime against internal threats. The party came to power as an armed rather than a civilian force, winning a civil war rather than an election. Its claim to legitimacy is rooted in that victory. Mao's regime after 1949 continued to rely on the army, first to establish and then to maintain control. When the Cultural Revolution brought the country to near anarchy in 1967, Mao called on the military. The PLA not only restored order but also took over the administration of every major organization and every level of government—from the county level up to the provincial level—through so-called revolutionary committees.<sup>14</sup> After Mao's death, military leaders supervised the arrest of his radical heirs, backed Hua Guofeng as Mao's immediate successor, and then a couple of years later supported the rise of Deng Xiaoping to power. Deng used the PLA to save the regime during the Tiananmen crisis of 1989. Domestic security remains a key mission

of the Chinese military. In all these ways, the PLA is truly a “party army,” not neutral among political contenders but loyal to a specific ruling group. The Chinese system is best characterized not as a “party-state,” as it is often called, but as a “party-military-state” in which the army is an integral part of a tripartite regime.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these intimate and extended interpenetrations and interlinkages, fears of an autonomous military linger among 21st-century Chinese civilians. Civilian management of the military has been a perennial challenge for Chinese politics over the centuries. Today this fear comes in two varieties. First, is the Soviet disease. Some fear that the PLA might go the way of the Soviet Red Army and lose its will to fight in defense of CCP rule. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 came with a whimper as the Red Army failed to come to the rescue of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The coup of August 1991 was a feeble effort by incompetent elements of the coercive apparatus to revive the regime.<sup>16</sup>

A second fear is that the PLA will become an independent armed force and sever its ties with the CCP. The specter of a military without firm political allegiance or strong civilian control harks back to earlier periods of instability in Chinese history both before and after the establishment of the PRC. The weakness of the Qing Dynasty led to the rise of regional military leaders, and then the weakness of civilian institutions following the 1911 collapse of the imperial system also led to the emergence of so-called warlords. The greatest period of instability in the post-1949 era was the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. While the PLA appeared loyal to Mao and obeyed his instructions to restore order throughout China

---

<sup>13</sup> The relationship between the CCP and the PLA has been characterized as one of “interlocking directorates,” “dual role elites,” or “interpenetration.” The first term is preferred by David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, Prospects* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 12–13. The second term is from Amos Perlmutter and William M. LeoGrande, “The Party in Uniform: Toward a Theory of Civil-Military Relations in Communist Political Systems,” *American Political Science Review* 76, no. 4 (1982): 778–89. The third term was originally used to describe civil-military relations in Yugoslavia and is preferred by this author. See Robin Alison Remington, “Political-Military Relations in Post-Tito Yugoslavia,” in *Yugoslavia in the 1980s*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), 56–75.

<sup>14</sup> For more on the PLA in this tumultuous period, see Fang Zhu, *Gun Barrel Politics: Party-Army Relations in Mao's China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998); and Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, chap. 5.

---

<sup>15</sup> This discussion draws from Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 56–57.

<sup>16</sup> Chinese assessments of the reasons behind the collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union include consideration of the weakened links between the party and the Red Army. See, for example, David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 59, 72–73.



in the late 1960s, the threat of a disloyal military was highlighted by the alleged coup attempt by Marshal Lin Biao in 1971.<sup>17</sup>

To ensure a more stable political environment with a well-behaved military, certain rules of the game were established. Together these rules amount to a system of what the late Ellis Joffe dubbed “conditional compliance,” a concept outlined by James Mulvenon.<sup>18</sup> The term seems entirely apt because compliance is conditional on certain expectations of civilian commitments to the military. In other words, PLA deference to CCP-PRC authority is not unqualified. While a number of scholars have identified specific rules for civil-military relations in elite politics, there has been no attempt to produce a more comprehensive treatment. What follows is an elaboration of some of the most important rules.

*Rule 1: The army will obey the party, but the CCP will not tell the PLA what to do.*

The army will kowtow to the sacred principle of party control, but the CCP will not actually physically lay a hand on the gun. This rule may sound too pithy or tongue-in-cheek. After all, the abstract concept of party control of the army is widely considered inviolable. Indeed, the PLA reportedly embraces the political legitimacy of CCP rule.<sup>19</sup> Mao’s oft-quoted dictum is frequently invoked to emphasize that the army is always obedient to the party: “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. The party commands the gun and the gun must never be allowed to command

the party.”<sup>20</sup> While there is virtual unanimity that this is an unshakable principle, there is a tension between the civilian leadership’s pressing need to sustain the backing of the military elite for CCP policies and the desire to firmly control the gun. Put bluntly, civilian leaders are reluctant to incur the displeasure or ire of military leaders. This means that they tend to tread very carefully where the PLA is concerned.<sup>21</sup>

As a practical matter, civilian CCP or PRC leaders do not issue direct orders to the armed forces. Orders to the PLA come from the CMC, which is officially led by the civilian chair of the body. What this means is that senior civilian CCP leaders essentially play a hands-off or aloof role where matters of defense policy are concerned. Orders do not come from the Politburo. Thus, in practical and ceremonial terms, civilian leaders—all but the paramount leader (see rule 2)—are expected to keep their distance from military affairs, both in terms of the nuts and bolts of the day-to-day running of the PLA and in terms of being a visible civilian presence at military events. Heaven forbid if another member of the Politburo attempts to give instructions to someone in uniform. During relief operations after the Sichuan earthquake in the spring of 2008, Premier Wen Jiabao attempted to co-locate the separate headquarters of the State Council and the PLA. But CMC vice chair general Guo Boxiong reportedly resisted the directive because it came from a civilian whom he did not consider to be in his chain of command (his commander-in-chief was CMC chair Xi Jinping).<sup>22</sup>

In its own area of responsibility, the PLA operates with a high degree of autonomy. Overall defense expenditures have been set by the state,

<sup>17</sup> For detailed analysis of this episode, see Jin Qiu, *The Culture of Power: The Lin Biao Incident in the Cultural Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *Riding the Tiger: The Tragedy of Lin Biao and the Cultural Revolution* (Manoa: University of Hawaii Press, 1996). For an assessment of whether this episode counts as a possible military coup d’état, see Andrew Scobell, “Military Coups in the People’s Republic of China: Failure, Fabrication, or Fancy?” *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1995): 25–46.

<sup>18</sup> See Ellis Joffe’s concept described in James Mulvenon, “China: Conditional Compliance,” in *Coercion and Governance: The Declining Political Role of the Military in Asia*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 317–35.

<sup>19</sup> Most experts assert that this is so. See, for example, Mulvenon, “China: Conditional Compliance,” 317.

<sup>20</sup> Mao Tse-tung, “Problems of War and Strategy (November 6, 1938),” *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1968), 274.

<sup>21</sup> This tension is succinctly captured by Teiwes: “civilian control of the military” is a “normative rule,” whereas “maintain PLA support” is a “prudential rule.” Teiwes, *Leadership, Legitimacy, and Conflict in China*, 96.

<sup>22</sup> Michael S. Chase et al., *Chinese Incomplete Military Transition: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015), 45–46.

but military officials decide how to spend the money among competing needs. Civilian leaders in conjunction with military leaders lay down a vision of likely enemies and probable focal points of future world tension. But the PLA leadership alone decides how to equip and train the armed forces for future contingencies, handles military tensions with other countries, and conducts military diplomacy. The civilian leaders decide when to go to war, but the military manages the war. Such a division of labor stands in sharp contrast to the way the U.S. system works, in which civilians in the Pentagon, the intelligence community, and Congress play key roles in deciding how to prepare for and wage war.<sup>23</sup>

*Rule 2: The paramount leader is commander-in-chief of the military but defers to PLA leaders in defense matters.*

The senior civilian leader is formally in charge of national defense but in practice always accepts the recommendations of his senior military leaders. The key mechanism of civilian control of the military in China is sometimes identified as the CMC.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the CMC is a body dominated by men in uniform. As of mid-2017, it consists of ten military men and one civilian.<sup>25</sup> Certainly on paper, the civilian member occupies the most senior position; but in reality the most knowledgeable and influential people in the room in mid-2017 are the two military vice chairs, one individual expected to be named minister of national defense, and directors of the seven main bureaucratic entities of the PLA: the General Staff Department, the General Political Department, the General Logistics Department, the General Armaments Department, the PLA Air Force, the PLA Navy, and the PLA Strategic Rocket Force

represented on the CMC. In practice, the real mechanism of civilian control is the paramount leader. The top civilian leader is a powerful man who holds the troika of top posts. In addition to chair of the CMC, Xi Jinping is the general secretary of the CCP and the president of the PRC (formally elected by the National People's Congress session held March 2013). The PLA accepts the legitimacy of this paramount leader.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the crucial channel for high-level civilian control over the military is a narrow one: the chairmanship of the CMC.<sup>27</sup> Civilian control is exercised "by the paramount leader through the military generals on the party CMC." Technically, there are two such commissions, one within the party apparatus and, since 1982, a second within the state. In reality, they are the same body. The commission's chairmanship has been occupied successively by Mao, Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao. The CMC's civilian leader appears to have few civilian staff to advise him on his work in the commission (except that Hua, Jiang, Hu, and Xi served as CMC vice chairs in their capacities as heirs apparent); rather, the civilian chair is assisted by a staff in uniform, beginning with the generals who serve as CMC vice chairs and moving down the ranks from there.<sup>28</sup>

Under Mao and Deng, the civilian-military imbalance may have been less important because both had served in the military, understood the military technology of their day, and commanded deep personal loyalty among the officers. Subsequent CMC chairs, however, had no military background, and at the same time China's strategic problems and military technology had become more complex. Later chairmen, therefore, have been increasingly captive to the PLA for expertise in military matters. The civilian chair's chief tool

<sup>23</sup> This discussion draws from Nathan and Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, 57–58.

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 175.

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of the membership of the CMC appointed at the 18th Party Congress, see Mulvenon, "New Central Military Commission."

<sup>26</sup> Experts agree. See, for example, Mulvenon, "China: Conditional Compliance," 317.

<sup>27</sup> Shiping Zheng, *Party vs. State in Post-1949 China: The Institutional Dilemma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 115.

<sup>28</sup> See also Nathan and Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, 58.

of influence has been his jealously guarded control of senior promotions. Mao frequently purged and replaced top military officers. Deng, Jiang, and Hu consolidated power by rotating their own appointees into positions as commanders of the central staff departments, service arms, military regions, and the Central Guards Bureau that handles security for the top leaders. This process generated some degree of personal loyalty to them in the most senior ranks.<sup>29</sup>

The current party leader, Xi, as the son of a one-time Communist guerilla leader and having served as secretary for a senior military official in his twenties, has slightly deeper roots in the military than Jiang or Hu. However, his extensive and very high-profile anticorruption campaign within the ranks of active duty and recently retired military officers has engendered considerable animosity within the PLA. It amounts to a sweeping purge of the armed forces, the likes of which has not been seen since the Mao era. While there is significant support within the PLA for weeding out corrupt soldiers, doing so in such a public way besmirches the reputation of all Chinese soldiers.<sup>30</sup>

There were likely multiple reasons that Hu gave up his chair of the CMC at the same time that he vacated the position of general secretary at the 18th Party Congress. One of these was almost certainly an effort to keep the PLA happy: allowing Xi to assume this position promptly was likely to be popular with the armed forces because it underscored that there was no ambiguity as to who was the PLA's commander-in-chief. During the previous leadership transition a decade earlier, Jiang remained as chair of the CMC for almost two years while Hu took over as chief of the party and head of state. The result was apparent frustration among the ranks regarding an unclear chain of command with "two centers."<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> This discussion draws from Nathan and Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Zi Yang, "China's Anti-corruption Campaign: Cleaning Up the PLA's House," *Diplomat*, November 21, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> See Andrew Scobell, "China's Evolving Civil-Military Relations: Creeping Guojiahua," *Armed Forces and Society* 31, no. 2 (2005): 230.

*Rule 3: All seats on the Politburo Standing Committee will be filled by civilians, but soldiers will always have major influence.*

The PLA understands that a general will never hold the most powerful political positions in the CCP and the PRC, but it expects that generals will always have major input on the issues that matter most to them. In modern Chinese history, military men have held positions of great power and influence, but few see this as a desirable state of affairs. These men have usually held power at times of great crisis or turmoil. These periods correspond with low points in Chinese history when mainland China was weak and divided (e.g., the "warlord era" of 1916–26 and the rule of Chiang Kai-shek from 1927 to 1948).

Nevertheless, some top CCP leaders could be defined as soldiers, and considerable effort was made to make them appear more civilian.<sup>32</sup> Mao could make a very good claim to being a military man—he was certainly a gifted strategist and military thinker. Significantly, however, he never thought of himself as a mere soldier and demurred when it was suggested that he be awarded the rank of marshal in 1955.<sup>33</sup> So while Mao was the undisputed commander-in-chief of the PLA, he was never considered a general. Similarly, Deng Xiaoping had extensive military experience as a political commissar in the Second Field Army, and he served as director of the General Staff Department in the mid-1970s. And yet he refused to be labeled as simply a soldier. Subsequent paramount leaders have been much more clearly civilians because of little or no military experience. Moreover, formal PLA representation on the Politburo Standing Committee has been phased out. Indeed, since 1997, no soldier has occupied a seat on the committee. Admiral Liu Huaqing was the last military man to be a member of China's most powerful body.

---

<sup>32</sup> Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 55–56.

<sup>33</sup> Zheng, *Party vs. State*, 111.

In exchange for accepting this rule of military exclusion from the apex of political power, the PLA expects to be given substantial input on key matters of national security and afforded considerable respect. The armed forces are depicted as the defender of national interests and guardian of national honor. The PLA considers itself to have a sacred duty to protect China's national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Thus, it believes it possesses a special responsibility to stand firm on disputes over Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea and expects to have a major say in how these issues are handled. The official declaration in November 2013 of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea is a prime example of PLA pressure having an impact. From Beijing's perspective, the Japanese government's purchase of three of the islands in 2012 amounted to nationalizing the issue and threatened to dramatically alter the status quo. As such, this action required a firm response from China. Since at least 2008, the PLA Air Force had advocated the establishment of an ADIZ.<sup>34</sup>

*Rule 4: The army will stay in its lane; in return, the party-state will ensure that the military is adequately resourced (but this lane keeps widening).*

The unspoken contract between the three pillars of regime power is that the PLA will know its place and in return will be adequately funded by the PRC and properly appreciated by the CCP. The military will also retain extensive autonomy over its own affairs. In return the PLA will accept a "more circumscribed role within the Chinese system largely staying out of nonmilitary policymaking areas."<sup>35</sup>

The army believes that it sacrificed for the greater good during the first decade of reforms.

<sup>34</sup> Shinji Yamaguchi, "The Foreign Policy of Xi Jinping's Administration and the Establishment of China's Air Defense Identification Zone," Japan National Institute for Defense Studies News, Briefing Memo, September 2014, 1–2.

<sup>35</sup> Mulvenon, "China: Conditional Compliance," 317.

The priority was jump-starting China's economy, and the PLA initially received little in the way of funding to help modernize the backward and bloated entity. Deng Xiaoping, by dint of his prestige and popularity within the armed forces, was able to persuade soldiers to be patient. As an interim measure, the PLA was allowed to engage in commerce across a wide range of operations, including hotels and night clubs, and retain the profits. But by the late 1990s these business activities were perceived by many top soldiers and civilians as having an adverse impact on the military. The most notable problem was corruption, which was seen as corroding discipline and undermining combat readiness. As a result, in 1998 the military was instructed to get out of business. But this was not a CCP diktat to the PLA; rather, it was a consensus decision arrived at by senior soldiers and civilians. In exchange for discarding its for-profit activities, the PLA received a sizeable lump sum and the promise of larger defense budgets in the future.<sup>36</sup>

During the past two decades the PLA has expected to receive funding sufficient to modernize weaponry, and by and large this has happened. In the 1990s, defense spending began to increase by double digits every year. These funds permitted approximately 3,500 "obsolete aircraft" to be retired between 1990 and 2010—about 70% of the PLA Air Force's inventory—and by 2010 "almost one third of the PLAAF's fighter-bombers were fourth generation jets."<sup>37</sup> Budget increases also enabled the PLA Navy to acquire destroyers from Russia, move forward with its aircraft carrier program, and expand its subsurface fleet to approximately 50 diesel submarines, several nuclear-attack submarines,

<sup>36</sup> On this process, see Mulvenon, "China: Conditional Compliance," 328–31. See also James C. Mulvenon, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise and Fall of the Chinese Military-Business Complex, 1978–1998* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2001); and Andrew Scobell, *Going Out of Business: Divesting the Commercial Interests of Asia's Socialist Soldiers* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2000).

<sup>37</sup> David Shlapak, "Equipping the PLAAF: The Long March to Modernity," in *The Chinese Air Force: Emerging Concepts, Roles, and Capabilities*, ed. Richard P. Hallion, Roger Cliff, and Phillip C. Saunders (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2012), 192–93.



and a handful of ballistic missile submarines. The strategic rocket force was able to significantly upgrade its nuclear arsenal and dramatically increase the number of conventionally armed short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. Less high-profile but still significant was the extensive modernization of ground-force equipment and armaments, including the gradual fielding of third-generation Type 99 main battle tanks and new armored personnel carriers.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the General Armaments Department advanced its manned space program. When Senior Colonel Yang Liwei completed an orbit of the earth in 2003, China became only the third country to put a human into space.

But along with increased funding and greater resources, the PLA has been saddled with an expanding array of responsibilities. The core mission of the PLA is warfighting, but peacetime duties are increasingly being emphasized and overseas responsibilities are ever-expanding. According to authoritative pronouncements of Chinese military doctrine, the central function of the PLA is to be prepared to fight and win a local war under conditions of informatization.<sup>39</sup> However, this is not all that the armed forces are expected to do. In addition, the PLA is directed to actively deter potential adversaries in wars and crisis situations. If taken seriously, this mission is particularly challenging. More recently, a third element has been added: “diversified military tasks.”<sup>40</sup> This element was only added in 2008 to clarify the place of the “new historic missions” articulated in 2004.

All this serves to highlight that the most important day-to-day responsibilities of Chinese soldiers are the non-warfighting ones. Many of these are domestic duties, but an expanding number of overseas missions have been added to

the PLA’s portfolio. The new historic missions are to (1) guarantee CCP rule, (2) safeguard national development, (3) defend national interests, and (4) protect world peace. Invoking the phrase “diversified military tasks” appears to be an attempt to make these missions appear more concrete and tangible. The focal point of these military duties became “military operations other than war” (MOOTW).<sup>41</sup>

The formulation and evolution of military doctrine appears to be very much an in-house PLA effort. While the new historic missions have been closely associated with Hu Jintao in his capacity as chair of the CMC, the genesis of these missions and other doctrinal innovations is an intra-military business.<sup>42</sup> Thus, these expanding duties are not being foisted on the military by civilian leaders; rather, they come from within the PLA.

Most of the discourse on how to understand and interpret diversified military tasks and MOOTW represents dialogue within China’s military. Prior to 2008, the main strategic direction and consuming operational focus of the PLA was unquestionably the Taiwan Strait. With the dramatic improvement in cross-strait relations following the election of Kuomintang candidate Ma Ying-jeou in March 2008, China’s armed forces experienced drift. Certainly, no one could pronounce “mission accomplished” where Taiwan is concerned; however, the sense of urgency in preparing and planning for Taiwan scenarios was gone. Although the diversified military tasks and MOOTW offered the promise of greater clarity on the new challenges for which the PLA should prepare, this also created a lack of focus.<sup>43</sup>

The absence of focus posed at least two major challenges that threaten to overwhelm the PLA.

<sup>38</sup> For a recent overview of these changes, see Nathan and Scobell, *China’s Search for Security*, chap. 11.

<sup>39</sup> “Prepare for military struggle.” This is articulated in the 2015 defense white paper.

<sup>40</sup> Diversified military tasks were first identified early in 2006 and then discussed in the 2006 defense white paper.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Scobell, “Discourse in 3-D: The PLA’s Evolving Doctrine, Circa 2009,” in *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China’s Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2010) 99–133.

<sup>42</sup> Scobell, “Discourse in 3-D.”

<sup>43</sup> Scobell, “Discourse in 3-D”; and Andrew Scobell and Gregory Stevenson, “The PLA (Re)Discovers Nontraditional Security,” in *Not Congruent but Quite Complementary: U.S. Chinese Approaches to Nontraditional Security*, ed. Lyle J. Goldstein (Newport: U.S. Naval War College, 2012), 41–50.

The first—domestic drag—is an enduring one that promises to retard the military’s development. The PLA has long had substantial internal responsibilities, and the new historic missions re-emphasize these. Protecting the CCP and safeguarding national development require the military to maintain sizeable ground forces and be prepared to employ them domestically. These duties prevent the PLA from focusing all of its efforts on enhancing its ability to project power beyond China’s borders. Indeed, there is a tension between the continued domestic demands on the PLA and the ever-expanding list of responsibilities at and beyond China’s borders that the armed forces are being expected to assume. This produces a second challenge: mission creep writ large, with the armed forces being pulled in many different directions.<sup>44</sup> In particular, Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative, formally launched in 2013, threatens to overstretch the capabilities of the PLA.

Very soon after Xi became CCP general secretary and CMC chair, he began reciting the mantras emphasizing that the PLA must be “prepared for military struggle” and “fighting and winning wars.”<sup>45</sup> During a visit to the Guangzhou Military Region in December 2012, Xi began stressing that the PLA’s primary mission is warfighting, and he has continued ever since. He told his PLA audience that the “China dream” is “the dream of a strong nation; and for the military, it is the dream of a strong military.”<sup>46</sup> This represents a savvy move prompted by at least several factors. First are concerns over the military’s combat readiness. Because the PLA has not fought a significant conflict since 1979, it is

not clear how well China’s armed forces would perform in a war.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps just as important in prompting this move was the knowledge that such a call would be well-received by most men and women in uniform. After the military had been focused on a range of what many in the PLA believed were largely superfluous noncombat duties, greater attention to warfighting would mean a return to what many soldiers firmly believe is their primary mission. Moreover, Xi’s initiative would help counteract the disaffection over the ongoing high-profile anticorruption campaign in the PLA that has generated considerable negative publicity.

*Rule 5: The PLA is a political force but must keep out of politics.*

The PLA is a political instrument and a politicized force but does not act as an overt political entity. Though it has political influence, confirming instances of use tends to be difficult.<sup>48</sup>

The idea of *guojiahua* (nationalization or statification) or *feizhengzhihua* (depoliticization) are regularly condemned by senior leaders and official media commentaries. These are heretical and dangerous ideas because they suggest the severing of the sacred bond between the army and the party. The PLA is the CCP’s army and is by nature a political force. The argument has been made that there is no such thing as a military without politics. In 2001, General Wen Zongren, then the political commissar of the Academy of Military Science, emphasized this point in the academy’s flagship journal. Remarkably Wen did not quote a prominent Communist thinker such as Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, or Mao on the reality of the military as a political entity; instead, he cited one of the most prominent U.S. scholars of civil-military relations—the late Morris Janowitz.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> For more on this point, see Andrew Scobell and Andrew J. Nathan, “China’s Overstretched Military,” *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2012): 135–48.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Yingting Cai and Weiping Zheng, “Shizhong laoqi qiangjun zhiyao; jiajin tuijin junshi douzheng zhunbei” [From Start to Finish, Remember the Demands of a Strong Military; Speed Up and Carry On Preparations for Military Struggle], *Qiushi*, March 1, 2013, [http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201305/201302/t20130225\\_213004.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2013/201305/201302/t20130225_213004.htm).

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Edward Wong, “China’s Communist Party Chief Acts to Bolster Military,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of vulnerabilities to PLA combat readiness, see Chase et al., *China’s Incomplete Military Transformation*, chap. 5.

<sup>48</sup> For a comprehensive overview, see Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, eds., *PLA Influence on China’s National Security Policymaking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Scobell, “China’s Evolving Civil-Military Relations,” 237.

The PLA's relations with the civilian authorities strike a balance seldom seen elsewhere. Military officers sit as symbolic but not powerful presences in the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the National People's Congress. The army holds two seats in the Politburo, enough to exchange information but not to influence outcomes. Since the Deng Xiaoping period, no military officers have been appointed to the most powerful decision-making body, the Politburo Standing Committee. Senior officers serve in the relevant Central Leading Small Groups, where they provide information and coordinate actions, but so far as we know, do not tend to use these positions to lobby for a distinct institutional point of view. Hence, at least overtly, the PLA intervenes little in civilian affairs.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, political turmoil in the CCP unavoidably embroils the PLA to at least some extent. For example, the armed forces were entangled in the 2012 Bo Xilai affair, and the magnitude of this political earthquake even prompted highly unusual rumors of coup plots within the PLA. While these reports were never substantiated and are quite implausible, they do suggest a significant degree of churn in the military and are useful reminders that political crises can also swiftly become military ones.<sup>51</sup>

*Rule 6: Soldiers can speak out loudly, but the PLA must remain silent.*

Unlike some armies, the PLA does not articulate an ideology of its own such as corporatism or military nationalism. It has remained loyal to the civilian regime's conception of socialism, as this conception has evolved under successive leaders, and promulgates the party's instrumental ideology in its ranks through a hierarchy of political commissars.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> You Ji, "The PLA and Diplomacy: Unraveling Myths about the Military Role in Foreign Policy Making," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 86 (2014): 236–54. See also Nathan and Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, 57.

<sup>51</sup> Mulvenon, "Bo Xilai Affair and the PLA."

<sup>52</sup> See also Nathan and Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, 57.

PLA officers, like their counterparts in other countries, are nationalistic, suspicious of potential adversaries, hawkish, and politically conservative, but they tend to operate on a longer leash than their non-Chinese brothers-in-arms. Chinese soldiers have publicly used jarring rhetoric on many occasions.<sup>53</sup> Individual soldiers can and do voice opinions on core national interests and articulate hard-line views. Although the PLA does not speak out as a corporate entity in defense of parochial interests, tough assertive rhetoric by individual military figures—active duty and retired—has long been a staple of PRC foreign policy and efforts at deterrence. Stern warnings by prominent soldiers directed to foreign audiences date back to the early 1950s.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the barrage of harsh rhetoric by PLA leaders in 2010 was reminiscent of the verbal salvos launched by Chinese soldiers during the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis. During that tense episode, PLA figures appeared to deliver scripted inflammatory lines intended to deter Taiwan from moving toward independence by highlighting the military's sacred mission of completing the unification of China and demonstrating the patriotic bona fides of individual soldiers.<sup>55</sup>

North Korea's torpedoing of the Republic of Korea (ROK) Navy corvette the Cheonan in March 2010 received no public condemnation or rebuke from Beijing. By contrast, reports of a planned U.S. and South Korean naval exercise in the Yellow Sea a few months later prompted an unprecedented barrage of indignant rhetoric, much of it by military figures. The initial response of Beijing to the announcement of imminent U.S.-ROK exercises, as expressed through the Ministry of

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Scobell, "Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China's Peaceful Rise?"

<sup>54</sup> See the classic studies by Allen S. Whiting: *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968); and *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975).

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, You Ji, "Making Sense of War Games in the Taiwan Strait," *Journal of Contemporary China* 15, no. 6 (1997): 287–305; and Andrew Scobell, "Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen and the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis," *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 2 (2000): 227–47.

Foreign Affairs (MFA), had been mild—urging all involved parties to “maintain calm.” But, according to a Hong Kong newspaper, the PLA insisted that China should take a more strident tone toward the exercises, and the MFA’s verbiage soon adopted a more explicit anti-U.S. posture. As a result of the military’s lobbying, the MFA declared that China “strongly opposed” the exercises.<sup>56</sup>

Shortly thereafter, a series of active duty and retired PLA officers made hard-line public statements condemning U.S.-ROK exercises as provocative and threatening to both North Korea and China. Then PLA deputy chief of general staff General Ma Xiaotian declared in a July 2010 interview with a Hong Kong television station that China “strongly opposes the drill in the Yellow Sea because of its close proximity to Chinese territorial waters.”<sup>57</sup> Two weeks later, retired major general Luo Yuan of the Academy of Military Science stated:

[The] Yellow Sea is the gateway to China’s capital region and a vital passage to the heartland of Beijing and Tianjin....The aircraft carrier U.S.S. George Washington dispatched to the Yellow Sea has a combat radius of 600 kilometers and its aircraft have a radius as long as 1,000 kilometers. Therefore, the military exercise in the area has posed a direct security threat to China’s heartland....[T]he joint military exercise by the United States and South Korea on the Yellow Sea has created a new crisis.... [and] China strongly opposes [it].<sup>58</sup>

Another prominent soldier, Major General Zhu Chenghu of National Defense University, stated publicly on July 19, 2010, that such a drill would be the “wrong exercise conducted at the wrong time in the wrong place.” He went on to note that the drill “would hurt both China’s security interests and the dignity of the Chinese people.”<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Cary Huang, “PLA Ramped Up China’s Stand on U.S.-Korea Drill,” *South China Morning Post*, August 6, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> “PLA Deputy Chief of Staff Opposes U.S.-ROK Drill,” Phoenix TV (Hong Kong), July 1, 2010.

<sup>58</sup> Luo Yuan, “Why China Opposes U.S.–South Korean Military Exercises in the Yellow Sea,” *People’s Daily Online*, July 16, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Ouyang Kaiyu, “PLA Major General Characterizes the U.S.-ROK Military Exercise as Wrong Exercise Taking Place at the Wrong Time and in a Wrong Place,” *Zhongguo Xinwenshi* (in Chinese), July 19, 2010.

Nevertheless, even PLA leaders must be mute once Politburo decisions have been made. In late 2010, for example, military figures were silenced when State Councilor Dai Bingguo issued an authoritative public statement. Initially the posting made on December 6, 2010, on the MFA website was only in Chinese. Titled “We Must Stick to the Path of Peaceful Development,” it reiterated that the fundamental direction of Chinese foreign policy was unchanged and hence signaled that all public discourse should cease.

*Rule 7: The PLA is the party’s army, but it is beholden to the state and serves the people.*

The primary function of the PLA is to protect the CCP against all enemies, both foreign and domestic, but if propaganda is to be believed, it is also the “people’s army” and must fight to defend the PRC. While the power of appointment lies with the party, the power of the purse lies with the state. Officially the power of the purse is held by the National People’s Congress—“the highest organ of state power,” according to the PRC’s constitution. Defense budgets are now approved annually by the national legislature. The PLA at one time was responsible for raising some of its own budget from farms and enterprises, but by the 21st century the military had been divested of its independent sources of income. Since then, military expenditures have been allocated by the state, mostly but not exclusively within the official defense budget.

Unlike most parliaments, China’s National People’s Congress has delegates in uniform. Chinese parliamentarians frequently speak out in public, and parliamentarians in uniform also routinely comment on issues, almost always defense-related. Thus, the annual meetings of the congress provide a high-profile venue for soldiers to express themselves publicly. However, their views are portrayed as expressing individual opinions rather than representing the corporate or official views on the PLA.



Historically the military has had close ties to society—first as an insurgent force operating from rural base areas where the support of the local people was vital to its survival and ultimate victory. In post-1949 China, this relationship continued, with the PLA serving multidimensional roles within society. Soldiers engaged in agriculture, industry, infrastructure projects, and more both to help the people and to provide for the needs of the rank and file. The PLA was supposed to be a new kind of military—not a parasitic force that exploited and mistreated the people.

In normal circumstances, multiple military allegiances to party, state, and people are conflated or at least blurred and hence nonproblematic. However, in special circumstances these different fidelities can be tested and even come into conflict. The PLA's image was put to the test during the Cultural Revolution when widespread abuses occurred. The image was also challenged in the spring of 1989 when the so-called people's army fired on the people.<sup>60</sup>

Since then, the PLA has seized numerous opportunities to redeem itself by playing high-profile roles in relief efforts following floods, snow storms, earthquakes, and other natural disasters.<sup>61</sup>

## CONCLUSION: KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

Perhaps the overarching rule of civil-military relations in the PRC concerns keeping up appearances. Appearances require that the CCP pretend to be in charge of the PLA, while the armed forces pretend to obey. But behind these appearances the military maintains substantial autonomy over defense matters and influence on core national interests, and individual soldiers are permitted to express opinions on all these issues. Nevertheless, the PLA's power has not increased

substantially in the post-Deng Xiaoping era; rather, the modes of military influence have evolved, with more occurring in the public eye, unlike in the past when such influence was mostly exercised behind closed doors.<sup>62</sup>

The military is playing by the rules set by the party, in conjunction with the army, in what amounts to a situation of conditional compliance. While the principle of civilian control of the military is considered sacrosanct, at least at the apex of political power the mechanism of party control is under-institutionalized. This means heavy reliance on two elements: a single narrow conduit (the paramount civilian leader) and a tacit understanding (mutual acceptance of rules of the game). To date the organizational interests of the PLA and CCP have largely coincided. But is this situation sustainable?

Four questions arise as to whether the rules of civil-military conditional compliance can continue undisturbed. First, at a time when the PLA's capabilities are expanding and its regional role is growing, are the enduring structures of CCP and PRC control robust enough to coordinate China's military actions with national policy and grand strategy? Second, will the PLA continue to accept the rules of the game? Third, will organizational changes in the balance of power within the PLA force changes to the rules of the game? Fourth, will civilians remain relatively content with these rules? The answer to each question is far from clear.

First, civil-military coordination is an ongoing problem that is likely to become increasingly challenging. Poor or nonexistent coordination between civilian and military leaders and bureaucracies is evident in a series of incidents: the collision between a Chinese fighter plane and a U.S. EP-3 surveillance aircraft in 2001 in the vicinity of Hainan Island, an unannounced antisatellite test in January 2007, Chinese harassment of the USNS *Impeccable* in 2009, and various clashes and near clashes with U.S. ships

<sup>60</sup> On the events of 1989, see Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, chap. 7.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, the section titled "Participating in National Construction, Emergency Rescue, and Disaster Relief" in *Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, China's National Defense in 2010* (Beijing, March 2011).

<sup>62</sup> Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 65–66.

and aircraft in the East and South China Seas. During each incident, decisions were quite possibly made within the military chain of command without input from civilian decision-makers. Moreover, China's behavior in some cases showed that civilian authorities had difficulty regaining control of crises once they were in the hands of the military. In 2001, for example, a stove-piped command-and-control structure apparently made it difficult for the top civilian leaders to get information and make decisions on a timely basis about the collision between the Chinese fighter and the U.S. surveillance aircraft and the latter's subsequent emergency landing on Hainan Island.<sup>63</sup>

Second, the PLA is likely to continue to abide by the rules of the game, especially if it continues to benefit from the arrangement. However, if some of these benefits are curtailed or put at risk, it is unclear what the PLA's response might be. One conceivable scenario would be an economic crisis that pushes CCP leaders to freeze or even trim the defense budget. The last serious "guns versus butter" debate occurred at the very outset of the reform era: the military was in a terrible state, but economic modernization was determined to be the most pressing priority. At that time, Deng was able to enforce the decision with the PLA. If this debate were to resurface in a future economic downturn, there would be no latter-day Deng with unparalleled credibility and stature within the military to adjudicate matters.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps the PLA would observe another unwritten rule: that defense funding proceeds at a rate commensurate with the rate of economic growth. By this logic, if the economy stagnates or shrinks, so does military spending. Much might depend on the degree of unity or division within the PLA (as discussed in the next point).

Third, the balance of power within the PLA is gradually shifting, which could alter how

the military approaches the rules of the game. Intra-PLA relationships are likely to emerge as increasingly important dynamics. Interservice rivalries can be expected to become more significant, especially if different branches of the military are jockeying for influence and competing for limited resources. Traditionally the ground force has been the dominant service within the PLA, and this is likely to continue for some time. However, the locus of power is shifting, and the navy, air force, and strategic rocket force have increasing influence and are attracting greater resources. Aside from larger budgets and more modern weapon systems relative to the ground force, these other services have increased their representation at the highest echelon of civil-military power. Since 2004, the commanders of the PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, and the PLA Strategic Rocket Force all have seats on the CMC. Moreover, as of mid-2017, two air force generals—Xu Qiliang and Ma Xiaotian—sit on the committee, which is unprecedented. The former holds his seat by virtue of his appointment as one of two vice chairs, while the latter—the first air force general officer to hold such a prominent position in the reform era—was selected because of his position as commander of the PLA Air Force.

Fourth, there is some question as to whether civilians will be content with the rules of conditional compliance. Some civilian analysts have expressed disquiet over the state of civil-military relations in China. One frequently identified matter of concern is that at the apex of power CCP control of the PLA is quite thin and dependent on the individual who holds the office of paramount leader. When Hu Jintao occupied the position of CMC chair, civilian control was considered weak, but when Xi Jinping assumed the position, this control strengthened. But no matter which civilian is commander-in-chief, civilian supervision has remained modest because the PLA maintains a high degree of autonomy.<sup>65</sup> Civilian analysts suggest that interpretations of

<sup>63</sup> See Nathan and Scobell, *China's Search for Security*, 59–60.

<sup>64</sup> See also David M. Lampton, *Following the Leader: Ruling China from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 190.

<sup>65</sup> See also Lampton, *Following the Leader*, 188.

international affairs offered up by Chinese military figures are motivated by personal ambitions and institutional interests. Nevertheless, the topic of civil-military relations is a sensitive one, and civilian dissatisfaction is likely to be muted for the foreseeable future.

A review of the past three decades reveals mostly continuity in civil-military rules of the game, but the potential for change is real. Will Xi prove to be a “game changer”? What transpires at the 19th Party Congress and during the remainder of his tenure as paramount leader will serve to answer this question. If the rules of the game do change, it will be illuminating if these changes provoke any reaction from soldiers or civilians. Indeed, 30 years of adherence and the absence of vocal protest imply support or at least tacit acceptance of these rules; therefore, voices of dissent or opposition would be significant. ~

**THE NATIONAL BUREAU OF ASIAN RESEARCH (NBR)** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institution headquartered in Seattle, Washington, with a second office in Washington, D.C. For more information about NBR, please visit [www.nbr.org](http://www.nbr.org).

Media inquiries may be directed to [media@nbr.org](mailto:media@nbr.org) or (202) 347-9767.

Join the NBR community:      [Facebook.com/NBRnews](https://www.facebook.com/NBRnews)      [Twitter: @NBRnews](https://twitter.com/NBRnews)



**THE NATIONAL BUREAU of ASIAN RESEARCH**

1414 NE 42ND STREET, SUITE 300  
SEATTLE, WA 98105 • 206-632-7370

1819 L STREET NW, NINTH FLOOR  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 • 202-347-9767

[WWW.NBR.ORG](http://WWW.NBR.ORG)      [@NBRNEWS](https://twitter.com/NBRNEWS)