

Civil-Military Relations and Domestic Power and Policies

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This paper begins with an overall assessment of the evolution of civil-military leadership relations in China since the mid-eighties. It next examines three specific areas of domestic policy that illustrate different aspects of civil-military or party-army leadership relations during the reform era. The paper concludes by speculating on the future impact of civil-military relations upon domestic policy issues and leadership relations.

The Changing Civil-Military Relationship and Intra -elite Politics

During the past two decades, China's civil-military leadership structure has evolved significantly, from a closely interrelated cohort of party-army leaders with extensive interpersonal ties and experiences, to a largely separate pairing of professional civilian and military leaders largely connected through a shared interest in regime survival and an increasingly formalized set of institutions and processes. Until the late eighties and early nineties, senior civilian and military elites shared common experiences as party-army cadres in the struggle to build the communist movement, to defeat external and internal foes, and to establish a strong, party-led regime committed to social transformation, economic development, and the search for international stature and respect. Senior party leaders had extensive military knowledge and experience as former or current military officers while senior party and state institutions contained significant numbers of active-duty military leaders.

In this system, a party leaders' ultimate power relied to a great extent upon the strength and breadth of his personal links to the military, whereas a military leader's ultimate political leverage usually derived from his personal relationships with key party leaders. Overall, the military's historical involvement in elite policy-making served as an

important mechanism to advance the military's institutional interests, while also playing an arbiter role between competing civilian groups. The former role was most evident when the Chinese party-state was strong and the society stable; the latter role became evident when the party-state was weakened.

As China's market-led, outward-oriented reform program deepened, the objective of social transformation was jettisoned in favor of a virtually sole focus on economic development and great power status. This process produced higher levels of functional and professional specialization, more formalized, separate patterns of recruitment, education and training, and thus increasingly distinctive sets of responsibilities and perspectives among and between civilian and military leaders. It also resulted in the removal of military leaders from the most senior organs of political power. In addition, during the nineties, most of the retired senior civilian and military cadres who had exerted significant behind-the-scenes influence left the political stage entirely, replaced by younger leaders who themselves were being replaced at increasingly regular intervals on the basis of formal regulations.

Within this new system, with few exceptions, leadership power and authority over policy issues increasingly derive from institutional positions, regularized decision-making processes, and individual professional expertise and political acumen. Thus, the pattern of civil-military leadership interaction has become more formal and bureaucratic, less personal and charismatic, and, in most policy arenas, far more consultative and consensus-oriented than in the past. Moreover, by and large, civilians exercise virtually exclusive control over non-military or defense-related policy arenas, while military leaders are more focused on policies directly relevant to their responsibilities, e.g., ensuring national defense, preserving territorial integrity, attaining reunification, achieving great power status, and maintaining domestic social order.

Overall, senior civilian and military leaders are individually less powerful than their predecessors of the pre-1949 revolutionary generation and more dependent upon institutional forms and processes in exercising power. Equally important, given their

greater professionalism, their detachment from the most powerful organs of party and state rule, and their lack of informal, personal contact with their civilian colleagues, military leaders today are less willing and able to intervene in elite politics, barring severe cases of internal political and/or social chaos that threaten regime survival.

Of course, many foreign and some domestic policy arenas involve both civilian and military interests. In such arenas, senior party leaders undoubtedly play a complex and nuanced game in their policy interactions with the military leadership, seeking to retain the initiative and maintain overall flexibility by alternately placating, resisting or diluting military views and pressures through a complex mixture of personal persuasion, balancing of bureaucratic interests, and direct control over formal 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 policy issue addressed, and the perceived success or failure of the prevailing policy line toward the issue under discussion. Significant jostling and debate can occur.

At the same time, one should not overemphasize the extent of civil-military contention. At the most senior levels, both sets of elites remain unified by a common commitment to regime survival and increasingly institutionalized norms of policy formulation and conflict resolution. They also commonly support pragmatic, development-oriented policies designed to sustain or expand social order, regime unity, prosperity, and national power and prestige. In general, the military tends to support---or at least does not oppose---the policies of the senior civilian leadership as long as that leadership stands sufficiently firm in the defense of national honor and territory and continues to support military modernization.

Three Areas of Domestic Debate

In the domestic policy arena, those issues that have apparently generated the most debate---and at times tension---between senior civilian and military leaders in recent years include: 1) military involvement in economic affairs (in particular, business

activities and defense spending levels); 2) the extent of party or political interference in military affairs (as reflected in the advocacy of a national army not controlled by the party); and 3) the military's involvement in domestic disasters or emergencies such as the SARS crisis.

Defense Modernization and Military Commerce

During the early reform period under Deng Xiaoping, an agreement was apparently reached in which military modernization would proceed on the basis of the prior (or in some cases simultaneous) development of China's civilian economic and technological capabilities. This understanding was made possible no doubt due to Deng's prestige within the military, the absence of urgent security threats requiring rapid military modernization, and a common recognition among all elites of the logic of developing a civilian base upon which to build a more capable military. It was also compelling given the significant constraints that existed on China's GDP growth at the time.

However, military spending began to increase in the early nineties, partly in response to changes in these conditions; in particular, Deng passed from the scene; China's real GDP growth accelerated and the civilian economic base strengthened; the Taiwan issue emerged as an increasingly serious security issue for the regime; and relations with the United States became far more problematic following the Tiananmen Incident. Under these conditions, Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin, strongly supported greater defense spending. Such increases were also no doubt intended to strengthen Jiang's relationship with the military and to reward the PLA for its loyalty on June 4th 1989. However, the transition to steadily increasing levels of military spending was not entirely smooth and conflict-free. In the early/mid-nineties, pressure for greater levels of military income (including higher salaries for military personnel) came up against budgetary constraints, contributing to a leadership decision to permit the PLA to expand significantly its existing involvement in business activities.

This decision eventually created significant tensions both within the military and between military and civilian leaders. Many military professionals and some civilian leaders became increasingly concerned that PLA commercial activities were fuelling corruption within and outside the military, undermining military discipline and morale, and distracting the military from its increasingly urgent need to modernize its force structure and operations. This discontent grew as income from business ventures declined and incidents of corruption and tax evasion grew. Those in favor of divestiture included senior military leaders and combat units and senior civilian officials charged with fighting corruption and strengthening the tax and financial system. Those opposed to ending the PLA's foray into business included some senior military officers responsible for logistics and enterprise management, the commanding officers of military regions and districts (both of which received considerable supplemental income from business activities), and lower-level military entrepreneurs.

The decision to close down, sell off, or buy out most military enterprises was eventually made by corruption-weary senior party and military leaders in 1998, but not without considerable foot-dragging and resistance, especially among lower-level and regional PLA officers. The catalyst for the divestiture order was reportedly provided by a series of major PLA smuggling cases that incurred the wrath of Premier Zhu Rongji. Zhu's criticism of these PLA activities in internal meetings prompted anger and resentment from senior PLA officers. But Jiang Zemin eventually intervened in support of Zhu, thus clinching the decision to divest. Overall, both civilian leaders pushed divestiture to reduce corruption, to strengthen support among military professionals, and to facilitate a greater PLA focus on the growing Taiwan problem. The actual divestiture decision was implemented (with a non-military enforcement unit) by Hu Jintao.

The divestiture process itself also produced considerable civil-military tensions. The civilian party leadership apparently had to strike a deal with the military leadership in order to ensure the latter's strong support for divestiture. The PLA was to receive a generous compensation package in return for its lost business revenue. This would include further increases in the annual defense budget. However, considerable wrangling

occurred over subsequent assessments of PLA assets and related levels of government compensation. PLA budget increases were apparently less than anticipated and created continued tensions throughout at least 1999, with some officers apparently concluding that the military had been “duped” by the civilian leadership. Some observers believe that a serious civil-military split over this issue was only avoided as a result of the May 1999 U.S. bombing of the PRC embassy in Yugoslavia. That event led to even larger, long-term defense budget increases. Civil-military tensions were also exacerbated by the aggressive pursuit by the government of military corruption cases, which some in the PLA saw as harmful to the military’s reputation.

The Concept of a National Army and the Depoliticization of the PLA

Few observers of China’s civil-military relationship would contend that the military is not under firm party control. However, at least some senior civilian leaders (and perhaps an unknown number of lower-level military officers) have at times advocated the idea of reducing party intervention in military affairs while placing larger components of the military under state or government supervision. This heterodox notion first emerged in the mid/late eighties, in response to efforts to increase professionalism and downgrade the role of political work in the PLA, and as part of a larger attempt to increase functional specialization within and between the party, state, and military structures of rule. Some notable proponents of the concept in the late eighties apparently included advisors to former Premier Zhao Ziyang. At times, various unofficial Hong Kong and Taiwan journals and magazines also reported that small groups of both civilian and military cadres would meet to discuss this and other concepts during informal, unsanctioned “salons” held during the same period.

Confirmation of such radical notions was particularly evident in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Incident. In the early nineties, leading party, state, and military organs launched a series of campaigns and propaganda blitzes to combat the idea of a “National Army” and to strengthen party control over the military. As part of this effort, the presence and responsibilities of PLA party committees were enlarged and strengthened,

the role of political commissars was revitalized, and a renewed emphasis was placed on ideology and indoctrination. Moreover, this effort was associated with broader campaigns against so-called “peaceful evolution” and “bourgeois liberalization” activities by outside “counterrevolutionary” forces (read: Western powers, led by the United States).

This hard-hitting campaign to repoliticize the PLA was used as a tool in the last notable instance of PLA involvement in elite factional politics at the senior level. In 1991-92, The head of the PLA General Political Department (Yang Baibing) and his supporters (possibly including his elder half-brother Yang Shangkun) used the campaign to strengthen party control over the PLA in order to enhance both their position within the military and the military’s overall position within the party structure. This move generated intense resentment and resistance, not only among civilian leaders such as Deng Xiaoping’s putative successor Jiang Zemin (a target of Yang’s maneuvering), but apparently also among many senior military professionals, who opposed the renewed emphasis on the politicization of the PLA and its involvement in elite politics. The Yang’s were subsequently removed from power by Deng, partly at the behest of such military professionals.

For some observers such as David Shambaugh, this incident marked a turning point in civil-military relations, toward a more corporate, professional, autonomous and accountable military. By the mid-nineties, military professionals had reasserted greater control over the PLA, with strong support from Jiang Zemin, for reasons noted above. While some level of political indoctrination and ultimate party control over the military remained in place, professional criteria became paramount in the modernization of the armed forces. As part of this process, the government (i.e., the National People’s Congress and the State Council) also gradually increased their oversight of the military, especially in administrative areas.

At the same time, party-led attacks on the concept of a National Army have continued---with ebbs and flows---up to the present. According to at least one observer,

Hu Jintao's military speeches and various notable party and military editorials since spring 2005 have "...become increasingly shrill on the subject of the military's 'absolute loyalty to the party,' and warning (sic) of attempts by 'hostile forces' to undermine this loyalty through calls for 'depoliticization' (*feizhengzhihua*), 'de-partification' (*feidanghua*), and 'nationalization' (*guojiahua*).

Such "hostile forces" are never identified. Indeed, since at least the Tiananmen Incident, there has been no evidence of opposition by specific civilian or military cadres to the party-led attack on the concept of a National Army. "Proponents" of this concept almost certainly reside primarily, if not solely, at lower levels of the party-army-state structure and within society at large. Moreover, this viewpoint probably constitutes an attitude or tendency in thinking among a diverse array of individuals, rather than a "policy stance" among a coherent group of advocates. In short, this perspective is most likely a manifestation of a systemic weakening of support for party-induced norms and ideological standards that has occurred as part of the inevitable impact of market-led reform, opening up, and functional specialization / professionalization within the PLA.

The SARS Crisis

The short but intense crisis induced by the unexpected outbreak of an epidemic of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 provided a case study of how civilian and military authorities interact in handling a potentially catastrophic event with both domestic and foreign repercussions. The incident illustrated the military's ultimate subservience to civilian authority, despite signs of partial resistance to civilian directives. However, it also showed that the military can become drawn into high-level elite maneuvering, albeit under rather special circumstances.

The first SARS cases in China appeared in military hospitals in Beijing. However, the PLA did not initially report those cases to the civilian authorities. Only after a courageous PLA doctor publicly "blew the whistle" did PLA (and civilian) organs respond significantly. At various times during the crisis, PLA hospitals even resisted

intrusive inspections by WHO personnel, and the military reportedly continued to limit information on SARS within its ranks. These actions, which in some instances contradicted civilian directives, occurred in part because of the compartmentalism of civilian and military bureaucracies and, perhaps equally significant, because of a deep-seated desire by the military to defend its reputation and to preserve its tradition of secrecy vis-à-vis the outside. However, military resistance was primarily passive in nature. In general, the PLA did not openly defy nor reject outright civilian orders during the SARS crisis. As long as the epidemic did not represent a major threat to the country's national security, the military was willing to take a subordinate role in decision-making.ⁱ

On the other hand, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin apparently used the military's involvement with SARS in maneuvering against one another within the civilian leadership. Some observers speculate that Hu might have criticized or challenged parts of the slow-responding PLA as a means of indirectly challenging Jiang Zemin, since the latter was still leading the party's Central Military Commission (and hence arguably responsible for PLA behavior) during the crisis. In general, Hu used the SARS crisis to force greater governmental transparency, while Jiang conceivably opposed Hu's transparency policy and sought to utilize his CMC position--and the military media---to balance or perhaps undermine Hu's efforts.ⁱⁱ While keeping a low profile during the crisis, Jiang made it clear that he was responsible for overseeing the military response and that the military listened to him first and foremost.

Concluding Remarks

Thus far, domestic policy during the reform era has not been a major source of contention between civilian and military elites. Differences have most often reflected institutional or (to a lesser extent) regional interests. Moreover, on some issues (e.g.,

ⁱ Although some civilians reportedly called for a strengthening of civilian oversight over the military in response to PLA behavior during the crisis, it is unclear if this has had any effect. And no military officers appear to have been punished for their role in the initial cover-up.

ⁱⁱ The PLA media at times seemed to extol Jiang over Hu in discussing the SARS epidemic. However, military statements were supportive of both leaders.

divestiture of PLA enterprises and the concept of a National Army), senior civilian and military leaders have displayed a significant level of agreement and a growing acceptance of institutional norms of debate and conflict resolution. These features will probably continue over the near to medium term, as long as China's economic growth rates remain high enough to sustain social stability and reasonably robust levels of military modernization.

Over the long term, political and bureaucratic competition over domestic and foreign policy will likely exhibit increasingly open forms of competition, as part of an overall process of rationalization and institutionalization of the political system. 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 domestic policy. However, unlike many developing states, the Chinese military is not a self-conscious, internally cohesive, insular interest group that thinks and operates as a separate entity distinct from an often ill-disciplined and diverse civilian elite. It is thoroughly penetrated by party control structures and its leading members are highly coopted by the regime, accepting many of its values and perspectives. The PLA would be capable of acting as a true arbiter of elite conflict or could intervene decisively to determine policy or to wield ultimate power in the political system only if the party structure fell into enormous disarray, or continuously strove to undermine military interests over a long period of time.