

Strategic Insight

China's Upcoming Leadership Changes and the PLA

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Later this year, Beijing will host an important convocation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that will bring about a major turnover of China's top political and military leadership. The upcoming leadership changes will elevate civilian party leaders who have little or no military experience and military leaders whose political experience is increasingly limited. The creation of increasingly separate civilian and military leaderships in China will have profound consequences for civil-military relations and for command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Leadership Changes Ahead

The party convocation will be the CCP's Sixteenth National Congress, expected to open in late September. Party congresses are constitutionally mandated to meet every five years to perform several key functions. Among these is changing the membership of the CCP's top decision-making bodies. These include the party's Politburo (composed of China's top 20-25 political decision-makers), the Politburo's smaller core group (the Politburo Standing Committee), and the party's military decision-making body, the Central Military Commission. The congress will also appoint or re-appoint the party's top leader, the party general secretary.

The present CCP general secretary is Jiang Zemin, who has served in that post since 1989, when his predecessor Zhao Ziyang was removed in the midst of the Tiananmen crisis. Jiang has also served since 1989 as chairman of the Central Military Commission and since 1992 as PRC president, making him concurrently China's top party, military, and government leader. Jiang will turn 76 this year and, although Beijing has never stated so publicly, he is widely expected to retire from some or all of his top leadership posts at the Sixteenth Party Congress this fall and at a meeting of China's parliament, the National People's Congress, in the spring next year. Jiang's replacement is presumed to be 60-year-old Hu Jintao, who has assisted Jiang over the past decade in running the Communist Party apparatus and who has clearly been groomed in recent years to succeed Jiang.

The party congress will see other changes at the top. Aside from Jiang, nearly half--10 of the remaining 22--members of the Politburo are expected to retire, including both military representatives. On the Central Military Commission, aside from Jiang, 6 of the remaining 10 members may retire on grounds of age. It is expected that they will be replaced on both bodies by members of what China calls its "fourth generation" of leaders, a group whose international experience, professional training, career paths, and political outlooks differ significantly from those of earlier generations--especially the two founding "generations" led by Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, respectively.

In recent months, rumors in Beijing have fueled speculation in Hong Kong and the West that Jiang in fact may not step down from all of his positions immediately, but rather cede authority incrementally, giving Hu the post of PRC president next year and giving up the posts of party general secretary and Central Military Commission chairman two or three years after that. Whichever is the case, the installation of the

new "fourth generation" leadership, whether sooner or later, will have far-reaching consequences for civilian command of the PLA.

China's Evolving Civilian and Military Leadership

The relationship between the civilian political leadership and the military leadership in China is different than in most other communist countries. In contrast to the Soviet Union, where the Red Army was created after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the People's Republic of China's (PRC) military forces were created before the communist revolution. Thus, the PRC was created in 1949 out of a political revolution achieved by military force. The military forces of the Chinese Communist Party--established as the "Red Army" in 1927 and renamed the "Chinese People's Liberation Army" in 1948--defeated the armies of the reigning Republic of China in the 1946-1949 civil war. From the time of its creation in 1927 down to the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the PLA was the military arm of the CCP, not subordinate to any government. Through most of those years, military decision-making rested in the CCP's Central Military Commission and its chairman, Mao Zedong.

This close relationship between the PLA and the CCP continued after the establishment of the PRC regime. Even though China's first socialist constitution in 1954 made the PRC president commander of the PLA, that post was occupied by Mao himself until 1959, and actual top military decision-making remained in the Central Military Commission over which he continued to preside even after 1959. Throughout the years of Mao's leadership until his death in 1976, Mao remained the foremost political and military decision-maker. He relied on the PLA as an important base of power, imposing his own ideological cast on its operations and frequently embroiling the PLA in political struggles, such as the 1966-1976 Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

After a brief power struggle following Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping emerged as China's paramount leader at the end of the 1970s, and he assumed the post of chairman of the Central Military Commission in 1981. Beginning in the late 1970s, Deng introduced a series of sweeping changes--the Deng "reforms"--that dismantled Mao's revolutionary approach to domestic and foreign policies and made China a rising presence in the international economy and a potential military power. These included:

- Dismantling the system of Stalinist planned economy in favor of an increasingly market-based economy;
- Opening the PRC to foreign investment and to foreign trade;
- Regularizing China's political processes in both party and government institutions;
- Normalizing relations with all three of the great powers that had posed security threats to the PRC--Japan (1978), the United States (1979), and the USSR (1989); and
- Launching a sweeping program of military modernization designed to transform the PLA into a smaller, more technologically proficient force no longer oriented toward fighting Maoist "people's war" on the continental expanse of China itself, but rather to fighting "limited, local wars" on China's immediate periphery.

Deng's reforms had immediate and profound significance for the type of civilian political leaders to be promoted to the top of the political system, for the type of military leaders who were needed to guide a reoriented and modernized PLA, and for the manner in which civilian political and military leaders would interact.

- With respect to civilian political leaders, Deng sought younger leaders who could replace the aging revolutionaries of his generation and who had the technical and professional backgrounds to advance China's economic modernization under the leadership of the CCP. Throughout the 1980s and on into the 1990s, Deng promoted civilian leaders who had university educations, mostly in engineering and other technical fields, and who rose to the top through the institutional hierarchies of the PRC as managers and administrators. By the 1990s, the impact of these changed emphases was evident in the top leadership. In contrast to the party Politburo appointed

around Deng himself in 1982, among which none of its 25 members held a university degree in any field, a majority of the Politburo members appointed around Jiang Zemin in 1997 (17 out of 24) held university degrees; among those 17, 14 were engineers and another two had degrees in scientific fields.

- In the PLA, Deng restored criteria for promotion that emphasized professionalism, military academy training, and technical expertise rather than Mao's highly politicized promotion criteria. Along with these new emphases, Deng reduced the PLA's numbers by one million in 1985, restored ranks to the PLA in 1988 (Mao had abolished them in 1965), and revived and expanded China's system of military academies, frequently drawing on American models. By the 1990s, through successive turnover of PLA officers down to division level, Deng's reforms were beginning to transform the PLA in a significantly modernized direction.

These parallel transformations in civilian and military leadership have had profound consequences for how the two groups interact with each other. On one hand, the emerging civilian leaders have virtually no military experience, either in personal military service or in working in PLA bureaucracies, in peacetime or at war. On the other hand, the emerging military leaders lack the long-term political relationships with civilian party leaders that their predecessors had enjoyed with Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping. Mao and Deng both had extensive relationships with the PLA brass, stemming from decades of service in military posts. It would be misleading, in fact, to characterize either Mao or Deng as purely civilian or military leaders—they were both. So, in fact, were many of their Politburo colleagues in the party leadership. Among the 25 members of the 1982 Politburo around Deng, 20 had military experience. In the Mao and Deng years, when PLA leaders wanted some issue addressed by the top party leadership, they could always rely on personal ties to "Uncle Deng" or others on the Politburo, in addition to institutional channels.

This is no longer possible, given the virtual absence of military experience among the post-Deng leadership. Now the PLA brass must work largely through institutional channels and routines to bring issues they want addressed to the attention of the party leadership. Meanwhile, the Central Military Commission chairman—a civilian without military experience—and the PLA brass need to establish comfortable working relationships from scratch. This takes time and effort, as Jiang Zemin's tenure as Central Military Commission showed. Jiang, like almost all of his Politburo colleagues in the 1990s, lacked military experience. Following his appointment in 1989, under Deng's tutelage Jiang visited military bases, presided over Central Military Commission meetings, and presided over successive rounds of PLA promotions, all to establish influence and credibility within the PLA. On his presumed appointment, Hu Jintao will already have served as Central Military Commission vice chairman since 1999. But he will have to repeat the process of building ties in the PLA that Jiang followed. At the same time, around the table at Central Military Commission meetings, Hu will face PLA leaders who themselves will have been only recently promoted to the top level of military decision-making.

Implications

The creation of separate civilian political and military leaderships in China is thus a direct and intended product of Deng Xiaoping's reforms. It was designed to address the problems of modernizing China's economy and society on one hand and of building a modern military force to defend China and advance its foreign policy agenda on the other. At the same time, the creation of separate civilian political and military leaderships introduces potential uncertainties into military and security decision-making and into civil-military relations generally in China. Will the lack of military experience among China's top civilian leaders force an unacceptably high reliance on advice from military leaders whose own perspective may be narrow and untempered by political considerations, especially in times of crisis and war? Will civilian leaders have sufficient credibility among the PLA to ensure that their authority is honored? In the years ahead, American decision-makers and analysts will need to bear in mind these and other issues stemming from the evolution of Chinese civilian-military leadership relations.

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