

# The Symbiotic relationship of China's People's Liberation Army with the Communist Party of China

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**Abstract**—This article examines the historical evolution and enduring symbiotic relationship between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), a rare case of a national army owing allegiance to a political party rather than the state. Tracing its origins to the 1927 Nanchang Uprising, the PLA has remained under the CPC's absolute leadership through institutional mechanisms such as the Party committee system, the political commissar system, and extensive political work regulations. Successive leaders—from Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping—have reinforced the principle that “the Party commands the gun,” adapting the PLA's structure, doctrine, and missions in line with political objectives and national strategies. Under Xi, sweeping anti-corruption campaigns, organizational reforms, and the pursuit of informatized warfare have deepened the Party's control while modernizing the PLA into a force aimed at supporting China's rise as a global power. Despite institutionalization, challenges persist, including corruption, dual-command inefficiencies, Western influences, and questions about Party-army relations in a possible future multiparty system. The PLA's ongoing reforms emphasize the “Three Warfares,” informatization, and cultivation of political officers with both ideological and technical expertise to sustain the Party's absolute leadership. Ultimately, the article argues that Party-army relations in China have been central to both military development and CPC's political dominance, and their evolution will shape China's future trajectory as a major power.

**Index Terms**— People's Liberation Army (PLA); Communist Party of China (CPC); Party-army relations; Political commissar system; Military modernization; Informatized warfare; Central Military Commission (CMC).

## I. INTRODUCTION

*“Party commands the gun, while the gun shall never be or must never be allowed to command the Party” – Mao Zedong.*

It is rather rare for a political party to have an army against the norm of a nation to have one. In this context, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) is an exception, owing to its allegiance to the Communist Party of China (CPC). To understand the nature of the transformation in the Chinese military and the belligerent behaviour of the Communist leadership, it is essential to understand the symbiotic relationship between the PLA and CPC.

## II. BIRTH, STRUCTURE AND EVOLUTION OF PLA AND ITS SYNERGETIC RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CPC

The origins of the PLA can be traced to the 1927 Uprising at Nanching, when the Communists led by proponents like Mao, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De rebelled against the nationalist forces. Mao coined the simple, vivid, and famous thesis that “all political power (*zhengquan*) grows out of the barrel of a gun”. In the following month, he articulated for the first time the principle of the “Party commands the gun, while the gun shall never be or must never be allowed to command the Party” (*dang zhihui Qiang*).

In December 1929, the army-building principle, which included the political commissar system, was officially accepted by the CPC, while in September 1932, the CPC declared “absolute leadership” over the PLA. Eventually, the PLA, in 1949, played a decisive role in the successfully curtailing the Communist revolution. It was eventually culminating in the CPC coming to power.

Mao and Deng Xiaoping, PLA's first and second-generation iconic commanders, led the People's Republic of China (PRC) for almost half a century. Compared to Mao, Deng, however, looked for reliability and stability, which manifested in many senior PLA officers being promoted in 1988. Primarily based on the caveat, all subscribed to the principle that

the CPC should command the gun. In June 1989, post-Tiananmen massacre, Deng abhorred that PLA had preserved the best good traditions and characteristics of the old Red Army and was the “Iron Great Wall” of the CPC and the country.

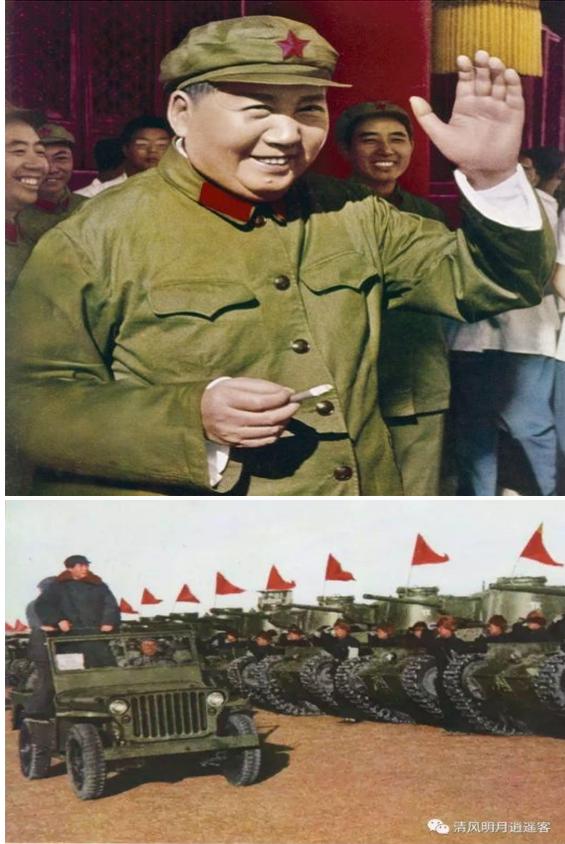


Figure 1: Mao Zedong's and his only military parade in his life after the peaceful liberation of Peiping in January 1949

President Jiang Zemin embraced the power in 1990 while taking Deng’s initiatives further to ensure that the principle of “Party commands the gun” functioned while stressing the prime political norm (*zhengzhi hege*) for control over the PLA. Taking queue from the display of US military power in the 1991 Gulf War, Jiang, tasked the PLA to prepare for “local wars under modern conditions” paving the way for major doctrinal reforms in the Chinese military.

Jiang propounded that ‘the Maoist model for the CPC army was still effective. He ensured that to reconcile differences and reduce tension, contradictions, etc., he relied on “maintaining the dynamic, symbiotic relationship between the CPC and the army” (*weicijunzhong you dang and dang zhong you jun*).

There were many ways of going about this like promoting promising military personnel; conferring (*feng*) a title, such as “Special or First Class Hero-model” or “Martyr of the Republic”; rewarding military personnel by making them full or alternative members of National People’s Congress (NPC) and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), etc. Almost all those promoted or rewarded adhered to the paramount principle of the “Party commanding the gun”.

In 2004, President Hu Jintao revised the mandate for the PLA “To win local wars under informationised conditions”. China's national security that bears Hu Jintao's name is the propagation of a "Historic Missions for the PLA in the New Stage of the New Century". The new historic missions came out of a speech by Hu Jintao gave in December 2004 wherein specifically, the PLA was tasked to:-

- provide an essential guarantee of strength for the CPC to consolidate its ruling position,
- provide a robust security guarantee for safeguarding the period of significant strategic opportunity for China's national development,
- provide powerful strategic support for safeguarding China's national interests, and
- play an essential role in safeguarding world peace and promoting joint development.

Ten years later, Hu repeated history by relinquishing all of his power and positions at once to Xi Jinping, construed by many scholars as a positive step in the CPC's attempt to become a more institutionalised ruling party and could go a long way to help it nurture a more stable party-military relationship.

### III. MILITARY-PARTY RELATIONS UNDER XI JINPING

Although the transition from Hu to Xi was appreciated as a peaceful power transition , a rather rare event in the party's history, Xi faced substantial challenges to his power initially. Threats included Communist Party “princeling” Bo Xilai, and generals Guo and Xu.

On assuming power as China's leader in 2012, President Xi laid down his China Dream (*Chong Meng*): a “powerful and prosperous PRC that would acquire great power status by 2049”. In Xi’s vision,

military reforms were critical to realise the ‘China Dream’, besides achieving key national objectives, namely:-

- stability – unchallenged authority of the CPC;
- modernity – sustained economic progress;
- sovereignty – integration of claimed territories with the motherland.

For decades, the military was known to be rife with corruption starting around the 1980s when military personnel were allowed to run businesses to support their expenses. Such practices were banned in 1998, but corruption was still rampant in the army. After Xi came into power in 2012, he launched a sweeping anti-corruption campaign in the military and smashed the strongholds of many interest groups in the army. In 2015, Xi moved to end the PLA’s profit-making activities and ordered it to focus on transforming into a modern army that could win the wars. Xi also personally headed a commission to shake up the PLA and successfully uprooted the strongholds of vested interest groups by reorganising the headquarters, the troops and the military regions.



Figure 2: President Xi Jinping during a military parade in 2016 after being named “commander-in-chief” of the armed forces. Photo: Xinhua via AP

He was named “commander-in-chief” in 2016, establishing command over the country’s ground, naval, air and rocket forces.

In 2017, China amended the party charter to state that all military forces in China were accountable to the CMC chairman, documenting that the PLA and the paramilitary forces must be loyal to the CMC chairman, was currently Xi. The President said the reforms were part of his efforts to turn the world's most

significant armed forces into a modern military on par with its Western counterparts.

Based on its symbiotic relationship with the CPC, the PLA currently has representation in the two apex governing bodies –the Politburo and the Central Committee. The Central Committee elects the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), the highest political body currently composed of seven members.

The PSC, in turn, appoints the PLA top brass to comprise the highest military body, the Central Military Commission (CMC). The chairman of the CMC is the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of the PLA, usually the Secretary General of the CPC, and presently President Xi. While commanders handle operational and training aspects, Political Commissars are responsible for personal matters, propaganda and indoctrination to establish the party's authority over the PLA.

The CMC is now responsible for policy formulation, controlling all the military assets and the higher direction of a war through 15 offices and departments. Three additional Headquarters, namely the Ground Forces, Rocket Force, and Strategic Force, were created to ensure centralised control of these assets at the highest level. In the new command structure, the President, as the C-in-C, exercises direct operational control over the PLA.

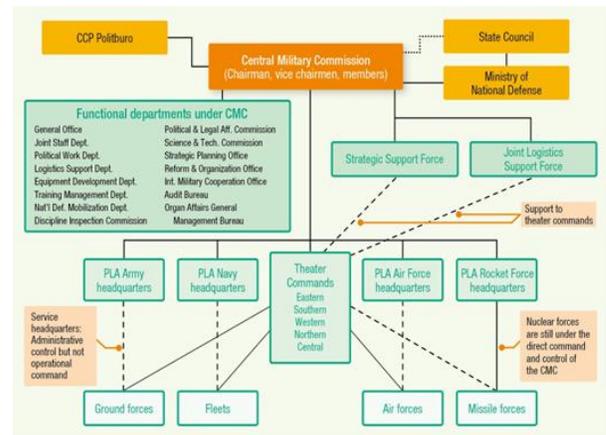
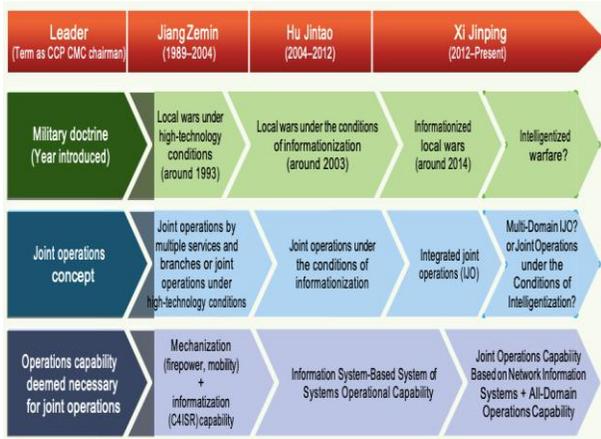


Figure 3: PLA Organization Chart: After the Military Reforms

Source: Based on Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, "Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA," in Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., Chairman Xi

*Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), p. 6.*



**Figure 4: Schematic of the Evolution of the PLA's Operational Concept under different Leaders as CMC Chairmen**

#### IV. TRADITIONAL METHODS BY WHICH CPC CONTROL OVER PLA HAS BEEN EXERCISED

First since 1927, based on a tradition endorsed by Jiang Zemin, the party branch was mandated to be based on company units. They comprised three or more CPC members per company, constituting the core of the CPC in the PLA. Their primary responsibilities were distributing propaganda, executing the CPC's line, and offering guidance on policy, military regulations, rules, etc. Generally speaking, each company had to have a minimum of ten CPC members, up to around 10 per cent of the total number of officers and soldiers.

Second, to eliminate "mountain-topism" (or shantou zhuyi), the PLA's military regions have periodically been restructured, specifically post 1949, after the creation of the PRC. Any officer who did not conform to the reorganisation of the military regions faced severe trouble.

Third, the PLA has periodically conducted "rectification campaigns" (or zhengfeng). For instance, the CPC conducted a "Three-antis campaign": anti-corruption, anti-waste, and anti-bureaucratisation (or sanfan yundong). Another instance was the "Ten bans", such as banning overstaffing, banning public funds for entertainment,

and banning bank accounts for a military unit's use were introduced throughout the armed forces.

Fourth, by the mid-1990s, Jiang Zemin instigated middle and high-ranking military officers to "talk about politics" to remind the PLA to observe the rules and regulations.

Fifth, the formal articulation of the PLA as the "Party's Army" in the CPC Constitution and National Defence Law of China. The PLA has remained the "Party's Army" of the CPC since its predecessor, the Red Army, was founded in 1927. Of particular importance in understanding, Party-Army relations is the principle of "the Party's absolute leadership over the PLA," which is enshrined in the CCP Constitution and the National Defence Law of the People's Republic of China. The details are discussed below:-

- "Political work" is the method for infiltrating the party's will into the army based on this principle. Article 5 of the "Political Work Regulations of the PLA" defines political work as "the ideological and organisational work of the CCP within the army, an important component of the army's combat power, a fundamental guarantee for the Party's absolute guidance over the PLA and for the army to fulfil their role and mission, and the lifeline of the PLA."
- The content of political work is wide-ranging, encompassing ideological and political education; cadres contingent building (appointment of cadres); Communist Youth League of China construction and youth work (unifying and educating young soldiers); democratic systems construction (holding of Party meetings); discipline inspection and supervision; public security, and judicial work (military prosecutions and trials); security work (counter-intelligence); military publicity work (propaganda); scientific and cultural education; cultural and sports work; mass work (military-civil co-operation, national defence education, ethnic issues, etc.); liaison work (intelligence); and the "Three Warfares" (public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare).
- The organisational systems for accomplishing this political work consist of the Party committee of the PLA (Party committee system), the political commissar system, and the system of the

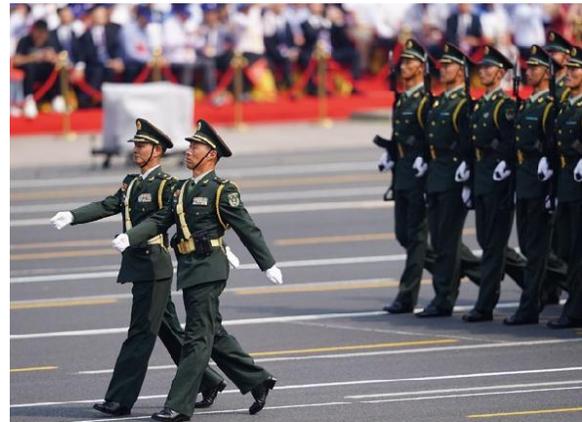
leading political organ. The three are positioned as systems that play a decisive role in political work.

- With regards to the Party committee system, Article 8 of the "Political Work Regulations" stipulates, "The CCP shall establish committees in units of regiments and above of the PLA and their corresponding units, establish grass-roots Party committees in battalions and their corresponding organisations, and establish Party branches in companies and their corresponding organisations." "The Party committees at each level (branches) are the core of the unified leadership and unity of the unit." The Party committees at each level are the central organ for the party's absolute leadership over the PLA. In particular, the party's standing committees are the supreme decision-making bodies of the units.

- Concerning the political commissar system, Article 9 of the "Political Work Regulations" stipulates, "The PLA shall have political commissars in units of regiments and above, political directors in battalions, and political instructors in companies." A political commissar must have been a CPC member for five years or more, a political director must have been a CPC member for three years or more, and a political instructor must be a member of the CPC. The political officers of the former Soviet Union army after World War II and the Republic of China army after the defeat of Taiwan served the unit commanders and had limited operational authority. However, the political commissars of the PLA are of the same rank as the military command officers, and both signatures are required for the operational actions of units. Typically, the political commissar concurrently serves as the secretary of the Party committee at each level, and the military command officer the deputy secretary.

- Concerning the system of leading political organs, Article 10 of the "Political Work Regulations" stipulates, "Political departments shall be established in units of brigades and above, and political divisions shall be established in regiments." The Political Work Department of the CMC is at the top of the political organs. The main functions of the organs are to support the work of the Party committee and political commissars, to guide the political work of the units, and to ensure that this is carried out thoroughly. The political organs at each level must not only follow the guidance of the Party committees and political

commissars at the same level but also follow the guidance of senior political organs, carry out their instructions, and report and make recommendations.



*Figure 5: A military command officer and a political officer marching side by side at China's 70th-anniversary military parade (October 2019) (Photo: Xinhua News Agency/Kyodo News Images)*

## V. CHALLENGES SURROUNDING PARTY-ARMY RELATIONS

The emergence of a Multi-Party Political System. A question emerges whether or not the PLA will be able to remain a part of the CPC. The reason behind this question is that the CPC might not be able to cope with the emergence of a multi-party political system (as opposed to the existing multi-party co-operation system) or that it could decay and lose its position as a dominant ruling party. Both situations are possible, given that the living standards of mainland China have improved considerably since the late 1970s and that the Chinese people have become more assertive in what they do and say. In such an eventuality, would the PLA still be able to be identified as a Party army? If the CPC could accept an army in a multi-party system, would other political parties equally lay claim to their respective armies?

A Modern recruitment system in PLA. A trend will continue to emerge whereby not all officers and soldiers will be members of the CPC. However, to diminish the probability of the "gun commanding the CPC", the CMC would have to use other methods to control non-CPC officers and soldiers. For example, in the present system, any deployment involving a

company would require the prior approval of the top level of the military establishment, i.e. the CMC. This means that if a division commander wanted to take a company out on a field exercise, even though it was not far away, he or she would first have to get the permission of at least four levels up via the army commander, the military region commander, the general staff department and, finally, the CPC and the state CMC. The efficacy of this system has the potential to be a cause for internal conflicts.

The Western influence on PLA. Several external and internal forces are trying to Westernise the PLA. Many professional PLA officers have also attended classes at Harvard University or the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in Hawaii. How much by way of Western approaches to civil-military relations and democratic control of armed forces they will bring back to the PRC, not to mention how many of them could be recruited as "consultants" of United States "agencies" is a matter for speculation.

Challenges of the Political Commissar System. The political commissary system has several challenges. For example, suppose the military command officer or political commissar were wounded or killed. In that case, it is unclear how the roles would be divided between the political commissar and the deputy military command officer or between the deputy military command officer and the deputy political commissar.

Challenges to PLA concept of Informatised Warfare and Joint Operations.

◆ Following reforms, the PLA strengthened the joint operations structure with informalised warfare. There is a concerted view that this effort will suffer a setback from the traditional system for maintaining Party-Army relations. The PLA retains characteristics of a Leninist military even after the recent reforms, such as the political commissar system and the Party committee system. This may be why the PLA cannot have a Command and Control system like the western armies since these systems reduce the flexibility and autonomy of commanders, especially at the operational level. Decision-making could be slowed vertically, as commanders and their subordinates seek approval from party committees at higher echelons, and horizontally, insofar as there

might be disagreements between commanders and political commissars.

- ◆ In a dual-command system, the commanding officer potentially has less autonomy in his or her ability to act because of Party control which specifically may include:-
  - administrative and operational delays due to a formal process with a hierarchy of authority;
  - the political commissar's ability to vote and change military decisions made by a PLAN command officer;
  - limited flexibility and crew initiative under a dual-command system; and
  - mistakes in communication between the commanding officer and political commissar.

## VI. EFFORTS TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES

The PLA aims to overcome the above challenges by developing the erstwhile archaic systems through its reforms in order to strengthen Party-Army relations, which was evidenced by the reorganisation of the General Political Department into the Political Work Department wherein the PLA aims to strictly implement the Party committee system, political commissar system, and system of a leading political organ in order to uphold the principle that the party commands the military through constant endeavours out of which three prominent methods are discussed below:-

- Method 1: Evolution of Wartime Party Committee System.
  - ◆ The PLA "system of division of the leader's responsibilities under the unified collective leadership of the Party committee," articulated initially at a conference of senior Party cadres in the national military system held in 1954, consisted of three principles comprising of Unified Leadership, Collective Leadership and Division of Responsibility System.
  - ◆ At the Political Work Conference of the PLA in October 2014, Xi Jinping criticised the lack of understanding and ambiguity of the "system of division of the leader's responsibilities under the

unified collective leadership of the Party committee" and instructed its thorough implementation. This paved the way for wartime Party committee, which usually consists of a military command officer, political commissar, deputy military command officer, deputy political commissar(s), deputy chief of staff in each department under the headquarters, and military command officers and political commissars of lower grade units. The Party Central Committee and the CMC appoint the secretary and deputy secretary. Once the policy is decided, military command officers, bear responsibility for operational actions, while the political commissars are to concentrate on wartime political work, except for signing orders of the military command officers.

- Method 2: Emphasise the "Three Warfares" and the Promotion of Informatization in Wartime Political Work.

The 2020 edition of *Science of Strategy*, edited by NDU, added wartime political work as a new item and pointed out the need to revamp wartime political work through informatisation. Among wartime political work, the "Three Warfares", considered a single holistic, interconnected concept, have been particularly emphasised in recent years to be a necessary means by which political work directly exerts its operational function and are fundamental components of Systems' operational capability.

- Method 3: Cultivation of Political Officer Focusing on Military Expertise and Scientific and Technical Knowledge.

In cultivating political officers, the PLA emphasises not only ideological and political competence, political work, and grounding in the humanities and social sciences but also modern military competence, grounding in scientific and technical knowledge, and physical and psychological competence. A modern military background requires an understanding of informatized warfare theory and joint operations theory at the strategic, campaign, and tactical levels; the ability to command operations conducted in co-operation with military command officers; and the ability to execute public opinion, psychological, and legal warfares. Against this backdrop, the PLA places

importance on selecting and cultivating highly educated and talented personnel based on a strict set of criteria, especially cadres with a strong background in intelligence, and developing them into political officers.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The task of analysing the relationship between PLA and CPC is not easy. An intriguing aspect is how CPC members who carry no guns can command many military officers and soldiers and maintain control over the military. Looking at the issue from the perspective of the historical evolution of the PLA from the Red Army, its role in the Cultural Revolution in China and its recent efforts towards modernisation in sync with the Chinese Dream under Xi, it emerges that the symbiotic relationship of PLA with the CPC has been omnipresent since inception. A study of this relationship mandates looking at how military institutions of the PLA, such as the Central Military Commission (CMC), the Field Armies, the Group Armies, the Military Regions, etc., come into play. Indeed, the task has been further complicated by the fact that the CPC army has undergone different stages and phases of development that can best be characterised as having experienced numerous twists and turns wherein a myriad of phenomena relating to the military has taken place since the late 1920s.

The PLA has constantly felt the need to reorganise traditional systems to maintain and strengthen Party-Army relations. Specifically, it sought to ensure the "system of division of the leader's responsibilities under the unified collective leadership of the Party committee", give weight to military expertise and scientific and technical knowledge in selecting and cultivating political officers, and emphasise the "Three Warfares" and promote informatisation in wartime political work. While it is difficult to determine the result of these efforts, the promulgation of the "Chinese Communist Party Regulations on Party Building in the Military" and the revision of the "Political Work Regulations" are regarded as moves to institutionalise outcomes of some kind. This article is a humble attempt to understand the Party-army relations in China as they have evolved until the present in order to create a basis for speculation about their possible courses in the future.

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