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The role of the PLA

Dennis J. Blasko

As communist forces expanded their control of China in the late 1940s, Military Control Commissions were set up in cities to implement the transition to Communist Party rule. Many military leaders served as political leaders until the Party established a governing apparatus. This dual leadership role was not new for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as senior leaders were accustomed to performing both political and military functions in previous decades and most political leaders had military experience. With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the creation of local governments throughout the country, many former soldiers became full-time officials at all levels of government. During the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) units were called upon to restore order and perform governance functions in many parts of the country. This situation continued until 1975, when the PLA was ordered ‘back to the barracks’ and to withdraw from its political functions. At about the same time, as part of the Four Modernizations, the PLA began its long-term modernization programme that has undergone several modifications and adjustments and continues to this day.

Throughout the period of reform and opening the PLA has attempted to be both a ‘Party army’ absolutely loyal to the CCP, and a ‘people’s army’ maintaining a positive relationship with Chinese society. It has sought to balance its military functions of defence against external threats with new non-traditional security missions, including a potential, but declining, direct role in internal security functions, all the while contributing to the primary national objective of economic development.

As the PLA has modernized, it has also professionalized: PLA leaders appear content to focus on their specialized military functions and have little desire to insert themselves once more into a governing or policing role over the civilian populace or to assume responsibility for national economic and social policies. While senior PLA officers have important input to the foreign policy and security decision-making process, they do so in a subordinate position to senior Party and government leaders. Since the retirement of Liu Huaqing in 1997, no uniformed military leader has been included on the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), the Party’s highest-level policy-making body. Moreover, since the transition of power from Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin, the Central Military Commission (CMC), responsible for setting national defence policy, has been led by civilian Party leaders with little or no uniformed military experience and the senior, most active duty PLA officers in subordinate positions.

This chapter examines the PLA’s contemporary role in governance and domestic politics in China. It begins by defining the Party-army relationship and the PLA’s place among the Chinese armed forces and other government and Party organizations. It further explores the
PLA’s contribution to national policy-making bodies. Finally, based on PLA doctrine and assessments of its own capabilities, the chapter concludes with an alternate look at what some have described as examples of assertive policy actions in recent years.

**Party control of the armed forces**

The absolute leadership of the Party over the armed forces is one of the most important organizing principles of the CCP. This precept goes back to Mao Zedong’s essay, ‘Problems of War and Strategy’, whereby ‘every Communist must grasp the truth, ‘political power grows out of the barrel of a gun’ … our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party’ (Mao 1938).

Party control of the military begins in the CMC where the senior civilian Party leader, the CCP general secretary, acts as chairman. A varying number of the PLA’s most senior generals serve as members or vice-chairmen of the CMC, but since 1999 when the Party has groomed a successor to the general secretary/chairman of the CMC, it has made a second civilian (first Hu Jintao in 1999 and then Xi Jinping in 2010) the senior vice-chairman CMC, outranking the generals, until he assumes formal responsibility as chairman. (As noted in Chapter 2, a state CMC provides a government counterpart to the Party CMC. The composition of both organizations is the same, except perhaps during short transition periods when high-level Party and state meeting schedules, at which leaders assume office, are out of sync.)

Party control continues down through every level of command of the armed forces. Nearly all PLA officers and most non-commissioned officers are Party members, ostensibly sharing the Party’s values, world outlook and objectives. The PLA’s General Political Department controls a system of political commissars who share responsibility with commanders in all units from company-size up. Each unit also has a Party committee led by its political commissar and made up of commanders and principal staff officers, which ensures Party policy is understood and consensus is achieved on matters both political and military.

The loyalty of the armed forces to the Party is further reflected in the relationship between military modernization and China’s official national objective of economic modernization. The 2008 White Paper on National Defence states:

> … in the past three decades of reform and opening up, China has insisted that defense development should be both subordinated to and in the service of the country’s overall economic development, and that the former should be coordinated with the latter.  

*(IOSC 2009b)*

Economic modernization is first and defence modernization must follow and support national economic goals. For the first decade and a half after reform and opening, this relationship resulted in minimal defence budgets as the economy grew rapidly. Even as the defence budget began to grow at double-digit rates in the 1990s, the amount of resources dedicated to the military did not impede other elements of China’s economic development programme. Currently the military and civilian sectors aim to work in conjunction with each other in economic and security functions, but always under the command of the civilian Party leadership. Civil-military integration was described in the 2010 White Paper as:

> … the state takes economic development and national defense building into simultaneous consideration, adopts a mode of integrated civilian-military development. It endeavors to
establish and improve systems of weaponry and equipment research and manufacturing, military personnel training, and logistical support, that integrate military with civilian purposes and combine military efforts with civilian support.

(IOSC 2011)

This policy requires close co-ordination and good relations among the uniformed military and civilians in the Party and the government at all levels. However, as with any matter that is dependent upon individual personalities, there may be differences in how official policies are implemented from area to area.

The PLA and the Chinese armed forces

According to the National Defence Law of 1997, the PLA is one of three elements of the Chinese armed forces, which consist of the PLA, the People’s Armed Police (PAP), and the militia. The tasks of all the armed forces are to ‘strengthen national defense, to resist aggression, to defend the motherland, to safeguard the people’s peaceful labor, to participate in national construction, and to serve the people wholeheartedly’ (Xinhua 1997). Participating in national construction and serving the people means that all elements of the armed forces may be called upon to conduct a wide variety of disaster relief missions and contribute manpower and resources to civilian projects. Official Chinese sources state that the active duty PLA consists of 2.3 million personnel, the PLA reserve force of 510,000, the PAP with 660,000, and the militia with 8 million personnel. Official sources do not provide personnel numbers for the individual services in the PLA. According to some sources and analysis, the PAP may number nearly 1 million personnel.

Both the active and reserve units of the PLA are the first component of the armed forces and have a primary mission of defence against external enemies. However, according to the 1997 National Defence Law, ‘when necessary (the PLA) may assist in maintaining public order (as a secondary mission)’ (Xinhua 1997). The CMC commands the PLA through the four General Departments and service headquarters in Beijing down to units distributed throughout the country in seven Military Regions (MR). The four General Departments are the General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department and General Armaments Department. The four General Departments act as the national-level service headquarters for the Army, while also providing policy guidance for the other services. The PLA Navy and Air Force are services while the Second Artillery, responsible for the PLA’s nuclear and conventional ballistic and cruise missile arsenal, is technically an ‘independent branch’, but is usually treated as a service on par with the Navy and Air Force.

The Ministry of National Defence is not in the chain of command from the CMC to operational units, but is primarily responsible for relations with other government agencies, foreign militaries and international organizations. The Minister of National Defence is a member of the CMC, giving him a role in national-level military decision making. He is also a State Councillor and member of the State Council.

Four levels of local headquarters are found below the MRs: provincial-level Military Districts (MD), Military Sub-Districts (MSD) in prefectures or prefecture-level cities, People’s Armed Forces Departments (PAFD) at county level, and grassroots PAFDs in townships. In addition to obeying orders from the military chain of command up to the CMC, each level of local PLA headquarters is also a department of the local Party committee and an organ of the government for the corresponding level of government from province to township (IOSC 2006). Significantly, at each level of government, the senior CCP leader (Party secretary) is assigned as
the ‘first secretary’ of the Party committee for the local PLA headquarters. This Party-army/government-army relationship reflects a subordinate position of the military to both the Party and government at all levels.

The second component of the armed forces, the People’s Armed Police (PAP), has the mission of ‘safeguarding security and maintaining public order’ and is under the dual leadership of the CMC and the State Council, exercised by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). As such, the PAP works closely with the civilian MPS police force, the principal domestic law enforcement agency of the Chinese government. The 2008 White Paper states that regular PAP guard ‘missions are assigned by the Ministry of Public Security, and the temporary ones are assigned by local Party committees, governments or public security organs’ (IOSC 2009b). This arrangement indicates that the PLA is not directly responsible for domestic security or law enforcement decisions and actions at either the national or local level of government. In practice, since early 1990 after the lifting of martial law imposed prior to the violent quelling of protest centred on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the PLA has been in the third line of defence for domestic security functions, with the civilian MPS police force in the lead and the PAP in the second line. However, as part of the organizational structure at all levels of government, PLA leaders have a voice in decisions concerning domestic security made by larger Party and government leadership organizations and committees.

Related to domestic security, maritime coast guard and law enforcement responsibilities in China’s territorial waters and exclusive economic zone are performed by at least five separate Chinese government agencies: 1 elements of the PAP Border Security Force (using vessels marked as ‘China Coast Guard’ and ‘Maritime Police’); 2 the China Maritime Surveillance force subordinate to the State Oceanic Administration under the Ministry of Land and Resources; 3 the Maritime Safety Administration subordinate to the Ministry of Transportation; 4 the China Fisheries Bureau under the Ministry of Agriculture; and 5 the China Customs Anti-Smuggling Bureau under command of both the General Administration of Customs and Ministry of Public Security. The activities of these organizations may be co-ordinated with PLA Navy operations, but the PLA does not exercise direct control over the daily actions of these law enforcement agencies. (The Maritime Surveillance force was formed in 1998 and became part of PLA Navy reserve force in 2008, but even as such it does not come under the routine, daily command of the PLA.) Arguably, the creation and expansion of these organizations indicate a preference on the part of Party and government leaders to lessen the military’s profile in these functions, which often involve interaction with foreign vessels in sensitive maritime areas.

The militia, the third component of the armed forces, can assist in both defence against external enemies and maintaining public order. Militia units are under the direct command of grassroots PAFDs that respond to both the PLA chain of command and local government leaders. Personnel assigned to township and sub-district-level PAFDs are not active duty members of the PLA, but are civilians (who wear PLA-like uniforms with distinctive rank insignia) who work full time for the local government. They are also responsible for military service (conscription and demobilization) and mobilization issues for the local government (IOSC 2006). The PAP and militia are classified as paramilitary organizations. The PAP has sometimes been incorrectly referred to as ‘military police’, though the correct term ‘paramilitary police’ is now being used more frequently by outside observers. Garrison units in the PLA perform ‘military police’ duties within the PLA itself; however, under normal circumstances, these troops do not have authority over Chinese civilians.

Party, government and military leaders at all levels routinely consult on matters related to national defence and internal security. Joint military-civilian communications systems and
command posts have been established and exercised throughout the country (though progress may vary from city to city or region to region). A system of National Defence Mobilization Committees (or Commissions) was created in 1994 with the mission to:

... carry out the military strategy of active defense, organize and implement the state’s defense mobilization, and coordinate the relations between economic and military affairs, the armed forces and the government, and manpower and materials support in defense mobilization, so as to enhance national defense strength and the ability to shift from a peacetime to a wartime footing.

(IOSC 2000)

This system is led by civilian government and Party officials, but has a different structure than the Central Military Commission:

... at each level of the people’s government from the county up to the state, there is a national defense mobilization commission, which has under it, offices and coordinating bodies responsible for the mobilization of the people’s armed forces, national economy and transportation, civil air defense, and national defense education. The premier of the State Council takes the position of chairman of the State National Defense Mobilization Commission, and vice-premiers of the State Council and vice-chairmen of the CMC are vice-chairmen. Other members include heads of relevant ministries and commissions under the State Council, leaders of the general headquarters/departments of the PLA and heads of their subordinate offices. The chairman of the local national defense mobilization commission is the principal leader of the local government at the same level. The vice-chairmen are the deputy leaders at the local government of the same level and principal leaders of the military organ at the same level.

(IOSC 2002b)

This structure gives a leading role to the premier (as head of the Chinese government), in co-ordination with the CMC, in matters that relate to the mobilization of the national economy to support military and non-traditional security missions, as well as in civil air defence and education of the civilian populace in defence subjects. The system conducts regular meetings at all levels (including at the regional level for each MR), but there may be variations in its effectiveness throughout the country, perhaps related to the interaction of personalities in the various committees.

The premier is also at the top of the government structure that establishes policy for, and oversees, the Chinese defence industrial sector, which produces military weapons and equipment for the PLA and foreign buyers. This sector comprises 10 large civilian enterprise conglomerates divided among the nuclear, aerospace, aviation, shipbuilding, ordnance and electronics industries. In 2008 the State Administration of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defence (SASTIND) was created within the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) and assumed most of the responsibilities previously assigned to the now defunct Commission of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defence (COSTIND) (Mulvenon and Tyroler-Cooper 2009: 10). While the PLA assigns personnel to Military Representative Offices in many defence factories and research institutes to perform liaison functions, the civilian leadership of the enterprises themselves makes production and management decisions concerning the manufacture and sales of weapons and equipment according to guidance set out by SASTIND, MIIT and the State Council. When contracting for weapons,
the PLA acts as the buyer (specifying technical requirements and numbers to be produced) and the defence industries as the producer and seller. In co-ordination with the PLA, defence industrial enterprises conduct most of the preliminary research, development and testing of new weapons, but at some point (which is not clearly defined and may vary among weapons systems), PLA organizations under the General Armaments Department system or the Armaments Departments in the services conduct operational testing and evaluation of new systems.

The PLA and the national leadership decision-making process

As an institution, the PLA has several official channels to make its interests known within the collective leadership structure of the Party and government. It does so, however, only on a limited number of topics, such as military and national security issues, foreign affairs, Taiwan, and some domestic security matters, and within the context of consensus building among Chinese senior leaders and policy-making organizations. The PLA appears to have a fairly free hand on operational and tactical military matters and there is evidence that a lack of interagency/inter-ministerial co-ordination within the overall government structure may result in inconsistent and counter-productive actions. Over the past decade or so, some PLA officers, taking advantage of more open internal and foreign media access, have communicated their ‘personal opinions’ that may explicate or complicate outside understanding of the Party and government’s official positions on a number of issues. While these pundits may reflect the thinking of some other active duty officers and cater to the nationalist impulses of some civilians (especially as expressed on the internet), the degree to which such unofficial commentary actually influences national decision making is unclear.

At the top of the national-level decision-making apparatus is the CCP Central Committee’s PBSC. Since 2002 the PBSC has been composed of nine members out of the full Politburo’s 24 or 25 members. During this time period no uniformed military officer has served on the PBSC (the last being Liu Huaqing, who retired in 1997), and only two senior PLA officers have served on the full Politburo. In fact, since 1987, PLA representation on the Politburo has been limited to two or fewer members (Miller 2011: 6). Within the PBSC, the civilian chairman of the CMC (and perhaps his civilian senior vice-chair) represents the military’s equities while the uniformed senior PLA officers on the CMC and their staffs work within a consensus-building process to inform the chairman of the military’s position on relevant matters. The amount of informal influence senior military officers may have upon other members of the PBSC is not known openly, but any such unofficial influence is variable and subject to change according to personalities, circumstances and subject matter.

Below the Politburo a number of ‘leading small groups’ advise members on policy and help to co-ordinate implementation of decisions. Under Hu Jintao seven or eight small groups have been active: 1 Finance and Economy; 2 Politics and Law; 3 National Security; 4 Foreign Affairs; 5 Hong Kong and Macao; 6 Taiwan Affairs; 7 Propaganda and Ideology; and 8 Party Building (note: the National Security leading small group was established in September 2000 with a membership that appears to be identical to that of the Foreign Affairs leading small group) (Miller 2008: 6–11). PLA membership can be found on the National Security, Foreign Affairs and Taiwan Affairs leading small groups, and some amount of PLA participation seems likely in the Politics and Law leading small group owing to the PLA’s secondary mission of domestic security. However, the leaders of each small group are senior civilians on the PBSC with military members in secondary positions. Outside of its leadership role over the Chinese armed forces, the CMC also functions as a leading small group providing policy advice and...
recommendations on key military-related foreign policy topics to the PBSC (Swaine 2011b: 7–8).

A major Party and government leadership transition is scheduled to occur beginning in 2012, as Hu Jintao steps down and presumably Xi Jinping steps up to take his place as CCP general secretary, state president, and chairman of the CMC. It is possible that the number of members of the full Politburo and PBSC may be adjusted, along with the composition and portfolios of the various leading small groups. None the less, it is unlikely that uniformed military officers will be thrust into new, high-level Party or government positions, and Deng’s policy of limiting senior Party leaders from using the armed forces as a power base will continue (Miller 2011: 5–6). As professional soldiers, senior PLA leaders understand that directing the PLA’s modernization process requires their full-time efforts and would probably consider any civilian governance tasks a distraction from their primary focus.

As a personal honour and reward for outstanding service, about 300 members of all ranks of the PLA and PAP are designated as delegates to the roughly 3,000-member National People’s Congress (NPC). PLA and PAP delegates take part in NPC sessions, work groups and investigations as an additional duty over and above their normal duties. Though the NPC is commonly denigrated as a ‘rubber stamp’ body, it does pass laws for the PRC and approves the budget for the government. The PLA’s role in the national budget process is led by the General Logistics Department and is an example of PLA functional co-ordination with other elements of the government. According to the 2006 Defence White Paper:

… the General Logistics Department, working with the relevant departments of other general headquarters/departments, analyzes, calculates and verifies the annual budget requests submitted by all the military area commands, the Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery Force, and draws up the defense budget. After being reviewed and approved by the CMC, the defense budget is submitted to the Ministry of Finance. The latter, on the basis of medium- and long-term fiscal plans and the estimated revenue of the year, puts forward a plan for military expenditure appropriations after consultation with the General Logistics Department, and then incorporates it into the annual financial budget draft of the central government. Upon approval by the State Council, the annual financial budget is submitted to the Budget Work Committee of the NPC Standing Committee and the Finance and Economic Committee of the NPC for review before it is submitted to the NPC for review. After the budget of the central government is approved by the NPC, the Ministry of Finance informs in writing the General Logistics Department of the approved defense budget.

(IOSC 2006)

Thus, while the PLA proposes a defence budget, the Ministry of Finance, State Council and NPC all have a role in the final numbers. Other elements of the four General Departments and the Ministry of National Defence perform similar co-ordination roles with their functional counterparts in the Chinese government—for example, in disaster relief efforts, peacekeeping missions, special security missions (such as Olympic Games protection), and the PLA’s component of China’s overall foreign policy efforts.

However, in some cases, the routine inter-governmental communication process does not appear to operate as seamlessly as required with all agencies sharing information in a timely manner and acting in a co-ordinated manner. This predicament is exacerbated in fast-moving and complex situations, particularly during crises with foreign countries. Bad news may not be accurately and completely reported up the chain of command in order to avoid any
appearance of wrongdoing or bad judgement. Further complicating the issue is the degree of independence the PLA apparently has in operational matters over the deployment of military ships and aircraft in unilateral exercises at sea, especially near territories in dispute with other countries, and in the conduct of intercepting foreign aircraft and ships in the waters and airspace of China’s exclusive economic zones (EEZ). According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘we hold a consistent and clear-cut stance on the issue. We oppose any party to take any military acts in our exclusive economic zone without permission’ (quoted in Tang 2010); this includes military reconnaissance and surveillance activities.

The details of any routine inter-governmental co-ordination that occurs for these operations are not known, but there seems to be little or no senior Party or government civilian oversight in the process as practised by the US National Security Council, despite the existence of a National Security leading small group in Beijing (Swaine 2011b: 9–10). As a result, the PLA may be given more latitude in determining the timing, routes and areas of operation for exercises in international waters than the governments of other countries may deem appropriate. One function of the Strategic Planning Department established in the General Staff Department in November 2011 might include greater inter-agency co-ordination within the government. One of its responsibilities is ‘coordinating efforts for addressing issues concerning different general departments of the military’ (Ouyang 2011). It is possible that such a co-ordination effort could be extended outside the military.

Likewise, though rules of engagement undoubtedly exist for PLA conduct in intercepting foreign vessels and aircraft operating in China’s EEZs, these guidelines are not made public and limits on command and control capabilities may allow for rash actions of individuals operating on their own or with the approval of only lower-level authorities. Similar co-ordination problems also may exist with agencies responsible for the China Maritime Surveillance force, the Maritime Safety Administration and the China Fisheries Bureau, to say nothing of the problems that often result from commercial fishing and other civilian vessels operating at sea which undertake ‘patriotic’ activities beyond the control of the government in sensitive areas. The numerous governmental and civilian entities operating beyond the country’s borders that may have an impact on China’s international relations often work at cross-purposes with each other and may result in unco-ordinated signals inconsistent with official government policy.

The Chinese media and internet also provide a forum for many PRC citizens to express opinions that are not co-ordinated by the government and Party. Over the past 10–15 years a number of PLA officers (still on active duty or retired) have become visible on television and radio programmes or in print offering their commentary on national security issues. Some of these opinions may represent aspects of debate underway in the government about certain defence matters, while other statements may be made simply to garner ratings and reflect the hyper-nationalistic fervour seen on some internet and other media sources. Most of these PLA officers come from the National Defence University or Academy of Military Science. Many of them, indeed, are scholars, well-versed in military affairs, who speak English, have contact with foreigners, and are free to travel abroad. Yet few, if any, of the well-known pundits have been commanders or staff officers responsible for the operational readiness of PLA forces. Very few of these media personalities have had any recent operational experience in frontline PLA units. In today’s China, their controversial opinions may attract viewers or readers, but their influence on policy makers and the actual policy-making process likely is tentative and variable among personalities, if it has any impact at all. On the other hand, many PLA leaders with operational responsibilities provide insights into the status of the force in writings and interviews they do with the official military media. The views of personnel who actually are tasked with
maintaining PLA readiness often are quite different from the blustering of those with no responsibilities that extend beyond the edge of their own desks.

**Official assessments of PLA capabilities**

Continuing in the footsteps of Deng Xiaoping, the PLA leadership, up to and including CMC chairman Hu Jintao, has been ‘forthright in recognizing the problems’ (Vogel 2011: 524) that China faces in its military. As a main element of PLA doctrine, China expects in most situations to be the technically weaker force on future battlefields and the PLA must develop methods ‘to defeat the superior with the inferior’. Despite the amount of new equipment that has entered the force since 2000, most units are still assigned a mix of older and more modern equipment. According to its own definition of ‘modern’, the US Department of Defense judges that in 2010 about 56% of the PLA’s submarine force was modern, while only about 26% of naval surface forces, 25% of air forces and 40% of air defence forces were modern (US Office of the Secretary of Defense 2011: 53).

Internal PLA newspapers and journals consistently carry articles that include evaluations of the state of PLA personnel quality, command and control, organizational structure, training and logistics, which identify deficiencies to be overcome. Many articles describe training as in an experimental phase where through practice, problems in tactics and techniques are discovered and then overcome by subsequent study and additional trial and error. Such articles represent a realistic, professional approach to the long-term modernization process that has been underway since the late 1970s and is scheduled for completion midway through this century. The 2006 White Paper defined the final stage of the PLA’s three-step modernization strategy as ‘to basically reach the strategic goal of building informationized armed forces and being capable of winning informationized wars by the mid-21st century’ (IOSC 2006).

Senior PLA leaders openly acknowledge shortfalls and point out the distance the force must travel in order to be considered a modern military. For example, during the visit of the US Secretary of Defense to China in January 2011, Minister of National Defence Liang Guanglie stated that he firmly believed ‘in terms of the level of modernization of the PLA, we can by no means call ourselves an advanced military force. The gap between us and that of advanced countries is at least two to three decades’ (quoted in US Department of Defense 2011a). Likewise, during a visit to the USA in May 2011, Chief of the General Staff Chen Bingde told a US National Defense University audience, ‘although China’s defense and military development has come a long way in recent years, a gaping gap between you and us remains. China never intends to challenge the US’ (quoted in Burns 2011).

Specifically, PLA operational leaders understand the value of modern combat experience, which the PLA has not had in a quarter of a century. In 2009 Lieutenant General Zhang Youxia, commander of the Shenyang Military Region, observed that ‘today, the Chinese military hasn’t been in live combat for many years now, yet the fires of war are burning throughout the world. In this area, the gap between the Chinese military and foreign militaries is growing by the day. This is an actual problem’ (quoted in Renmin Ribao 2009). A wide variety of similar evaluations can be found in the PLA literature almost always in Chinese and intended for internal consumption as a reminder to the troops that despite the progress of recent years, much work remains ahead.

These assessments of the level of PLA modernization have been summarized in a statement attributed to Hu Jintao that has been repeated frequently in Chinese internal documents (but not in any of their official White Papers) for several years. In January 2006 the official Army paper (*Jiefangjun Bao*) carried an editorial that identified the urgent requirement to overcome the
“principal contradiction” [that] the modernization level of our armed forces has yet to meet the requirements for winning local wars under informatized conditions, and that the military capabilities of our armed forces are yet to live up to the requirements to fulfill the historical missions [of the Chinese armed forces] (Jiefangjun Bao 2006). This evaluation, which was repeated through 2011, surely was the result of Hu accepting the collective professional judgements of senior uniformed leaders on the CMC, just as the earlier promulgation of Hu’s historic missions in 2004 was the result of extensive consultation within the CMC. (The historic missions of the Chinese armed forces are to: 1 provide an important source of strength for consolidating the ruling position of the Communist Party of China; 2 provide a solid security guarantee for sustaining the important period of strategic opportunity for national development; 3 provide a strong strategic support for safeguarding national interests; 4 play a major role in maintaining world peace and promoting common development. It is noteworthy that the first of the historic missions is to protect the ruling position of the CCP.

The fact that the CMC chairman, who personally had no experience on active military duty, would issue guidance for and assessment of PLA’s modernization programme demonstrates that the consensus-driven decision-making process set in place by Deng is still functioning in the 21st century. It further illustrates that the senior military leadership recognizes that its focus must be on preparing the PLA for its primary mission of external defence along with the challenges of expanding non-traditional security tasks. The PLA leadership is quite willing for the PAP and MPS police force to shoulder the main responsibility for domestic security and stability. It is likely that the new chairman of the CMC will develop new guidelines or slogans for the Chinese armed forces relatively early in his tenure. The new formulae will build upon the military writing of Mao, Deng, Jiang and Hu, but bear the mark of the new leader’s personality and reflect his new position of authority. While attributed to the leader himself, this new guidance undoubtedly will be the result of the collective work of the full CMC and its staff.

None the less, despite the problems it must overcome in its military modernization, should the Party leadership assign the PLA a mission, as the loyal servant of the CCP, the PLA will follow its orders and attempt to accomplish its assigned tasks as best it can with the capabilities available. However, based on their own knowledge of the status of training and readiness in the force, as demonstrated by the statements and writing of numerous senior officers, in their private counsel with senior civilian Party members many PLA leaders may not be as hawkish in their recommendation for the use of force as is the common perception outside of China. Ironically, PLA leaders responsible for conducting military operations may appreciate the ‘cover’ provided to them by the outspoken military media commentators who frequently cater to and represent the extreme nationalistic wing of public opinion.

**Conclusions**

While many procedural details about the inner workings of the military-Party/government relationship are vague, both in theory and in practice, organizationally the PLA is clearly subordinate to the CCP and larger government apparatus in its role in China’s governance and domestic politics. As part of China’s senior collective leadership, the senior PLA leadership has an important voice in matters of national security, foreign policy and, to a lesser extent, domestic stability. It does so mainly as a result of consensus reached within the CMC and is expressed within the PBSC by the civilian CMC chairman and by the military members of leading small groups. Except in operational matters directly related to military readiness, the PLA is not the lead element in formulating and executing national policies. Certainly, private, informal relationships exist among senior PLA officers and other Party and government leaders,
but the extent and influence of these relationships cannot be quantified and should not be over-generalized.

Though an interlocking system of military and Party/government structure has been created from grassroots to national level, there is considerable evidence of a lack of lateral communication among the vertical hierarchies. Several examples of this may be found in the testing of new equipment developed by the Chinese defence industries. The ‘surprise’ test of the prototype J-20 stealth aircraft during the visit of US Defense Secretary Robert Gates on 11 January 2011 has been characterized as part of assertive behaviour on the part of the Chinese military to send a message to the USA, potentially representing a PLA that is not under control of the Party (Scobell 2011). The test, however, was conducted at a Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group airfield and almost certainly was controlled by the civilian defence industrial sector, not the PLA, though PLA observers apparently were present (Minnick 2011). (The PLA Air Force flight test and training centre is located in Cangzhou, Hebei.) The Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group belongs to the China Aviation Industry Corporation (AVIC) and is part of the civilian-run defence industry sector under the policy oversight of SASTIND, MIIT and the State Council, not the PLA. While the military leadership likely was aware of the general test schedule of the J-20, the civilian defence industry system would be less sensitive to the specific timing of the US Defense Secretary’s visit than the PLA. In the end, Secretary Gates did not interpret the J-20 test as an example of a ‘rogue PLA’; ‘in the larger sense of who controls the Chinese military and who has the ultimate authority, there is no doubt in my mind that it is President Hu Jintao and the civilian leadership of that government’ (quoted in Cloud 2011).

Regarding two other examples of China’s ‘assertive’ behaviour, there is not enough information available to the public to know exactly which organizations were responsible for the 2007 anti-satellite system test (and the debris field created by the successful impact of the warhead on the satellite), and the 2010 ballistic missile defence test, which achieved a mid-course missile intercept of a target (both of these tests occurred on 11 January in their respective years). While the General Armaments Department controls China’s missile launch and tracking facilities, depending on what stage of development each of these two systems was in, the tests themselves could have been under the authority of either civilian defence industrial entities or PLA test units. Theoretically, a national-level security co-ordinating organization would have conducted the horizontal communications necessary to send consistent messages and to avoid an international incident (like the debris cloud in space) or putting the chairman of the CMC in an embarrassing situation, but such a channel apparently is not functioning and similar problems may surface in the future.

Despite the PLA’s preference not to become involved in domestic stability operations, it will obey orders from Party and civilian authorities when required. However, since the violence of June 1989 and the martial law period that followed, there is only one case that can be proven beyond reasonable doubt of the PLA providing direct support to internal stability operations conducted by the PAP and civilian police force. In March 2008, after police and PAP forces subdued riots in Lhasa, Tibet, a PLA infantry regiment stationed in the city and equipped with armoured personnel carriers was tasked to provide transportation support and conduct street patrols and check points to help maintain stability. Contemporary reporting quoted the chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region government saying that the PLA was not involved in ‘dealing with’ the incident, but ‘was only involved after the riots had taken place to clean up the city and help maintain order’ (quoted in Agence France Presse 2008). Additional problems in Tibet and other areas of western China in 2008 through 2011 were handled by PAP and police forces without PLA support.
As the PLA modernizes, much of its advanced equipment and many of its units become increasingly less useful in providing support to domestic security operations. More importantly, its officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers are focused on training to operate, maintain, support and plan for the employment of new equipment and new capabilities and not on the very different skills required for internal stability operations. At the same time, PAP and civilian police forces are being organized, trained and equipped to better handle such incidents. Similarly, other government organizations, like the China Maritime Surveillance force, are being formed and expanded to conduct other types of law enforcement activities. It is likely that this division of labour will continue in future years rather than a reversion to greater PLA involvement in domestic affairs.

The PLA is looking to find ways to attract more highly educated and technically proficient young people into its ranks. To do so, it must maintain and improve its public image to ensure the continued support of the people. It does not seek to insert itself into the lives of the population and in general governance functions as it has been required to do in previous decades. Furthermore, the Party and government have no interest in reversing the trends of the Deng era and allowing the PLA or any of the armed forces to become a ‘base of dictatorial power’ (Miller 2011: 6) as in the later stages of Mao’s life.

Improvements can be made in inter-governmental communications and co-ordination, though the PLA will likely attempt to protect its institutional perquisites and the degree of independence in operations it now enjoys. However, any adjustments to the organizational relationships among the military and Party/government made by a new civilian leadership unquestionably will continue to follow the precept that ‘the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party’. As a professional military, the PLA accepts and supports that premise. Although they may not voice it in public, senior uniformed military officers likely seek to avoid ever having to choose between factions in the Party leadership or to choose between serving the Party and serving the people, as they have had to do in some of the darker days of PRC history.