

Observation no: 183

Country-year: 1986

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No

That said, after Mao Zedong died in 1976, an internal power struggle erupted among rival Chinese elites. Deng's military background, and that of his main backer, Ye Jianying, clearly helped him ascend to power, but the transition was not a case of military takeover. Rather, it is best viewed as an instance of intra-party conflict in which both military and party leaders supported Deng (who had not been active in the military since 1949, and even then in mainly political roles).¹

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

No

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

No

But Deng Xiaoping was a uniformed Political Commissar of the 2nd Field Army, and had participated in many military campaigns during the Japanese invasion of China, and the subsequent Chinese civil war.²

4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader's ethnic or sectarian background?

No

Entry into the officer corps of the PLA was determined primarily by ideological fealty and party loyalty, not ethnic background.³

¹ Interview with Taylor Fravel, May 7, 2014; Monte Bullard, *China's Political-military Evolution: The Party and the Military in the PRC, 1960-1984* (Westview Press, 1985); Ellis Joffe, "The Chinese Army in Domestic Politics: Factors and Phases." In *Chinese Civil-Military Relations: The Transformation of the People's Liberation Army*, edited by Nan Li (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 14; Roderick Macfarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 450-451.

² Richard Evans, *Deng Xiaoping and the Making of Modern China* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1995).

³ Ellis Joffe, *Party and Army: Professionalism and Political Control in the Chinese Officer Corps, 1949-1964* (Cambridge, MA: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University Press, 1965).

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes

Loyalty to the Party (CCP) and adherence to Mao's blend of Marxist ideology were essential requirements for advancement in the Army (PLA), especially in the immediate aftermath of the Chinese civil war.

In revolutionary and civil war environments, the problem of military loyalty becomes quite acute. During the Chinese civil war, Communists and Nationalists often found it difficult to distinguish friend from foe, and military commanders faced difficult situations in which orders required they neutralize and destroy their own people. The *political commissar system* developed within the PLA to deal with this major issue, and became "the most important linkage point in the relationships between the army and party."⁴

The primary mission of the PLA's political commissar system was to ensure that strict ideological and loyalty requirements were met throughout the *entire* Chinese military. More specifically, commissars were charged with ensuring that the "PLA understands party policy and that it implements that policy properly. This is often stated in terms of 'the Party controlling the gun'."⁵ In addition, the political commissar was responsible for "*nearly all personnel actions to include promotions and assignments ... He indoctrinates them, tests them to see that they understand the substance of indoctrination and he monitors compliance ... The political commissar is also responsible for civil-military relations.*"⁶ As a result, the political commissar was "perhaps the most powerful single position" in the PLA, and within the general structure of civil-military relations. The commissar's "access to information about all members of the unit, control over personnel assignments and promotions; responsibility for counterintelligence, indoctrination ... and concurrent position in the parallel party structure and direct contact with the next higher level political commissar, all serve to make him a powerful individual."⁷

All this said, training in the 1980s had begun to de-emphasize ideology in favor of apolitical professional military topics.⁸

⁴ Monte Bullard, *China's Political-military Evolution: The Party and the Military in the PRC, 1960-1984* (Westview Press, 1985), 65; see also Amos Perlmutter and William LeoGrande, "The Party in Uniform: Toward a Theory of Civil-Military Relations in Communist Political Systems," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 76, No. 4, December, 1982.

⁵ Monte Bullard, *China's Political-military Evolution: The Party and the Military in the PRC, 1960-1984* (Westview Press, 1985), 73.

⁶ Bullard, 74-75.

⁷ Bullard, 82.

⁸ A. James Gregor, "The People's Liberation Army and China's Crisis," *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 18, no. 7 (fall 1991), pp. 7-28.

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes

The Army (PLA) and the Party (CCP) are closely integrated in China. As the discussion of the political commissar system makes clear (*see question 5*), promotion in the Army and advancement into the senior officer corps depended heavily on party loyalty and ideological fervor, especially in the years after the Chinese civil war. To put it more explicitly, “All military leaders and senior commanders are also members of the party. Together with their military tasks, they are expected to inculcate the armed forces in the party leadership’s ideology and to maintain political control over them. Mao established this system in the early days of the Red Army, and it has remained essentially intact.”⁹

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

Yes.

(See questions 5 and 6)

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

No.

It is hard to find definitive proof that the Chinese military did nothing domestically in this era, but generally speaking Deng sought to reduce the military’s domestic role at home as part of the recovery from the Cultural Revolution. There was a sense that the military should focus on professionalization and external missions, and “return to the barracks.” This is one of the reasons that the military’s later involvement in putting down protesters at Tiananmen was such a surprise, and it should be recalled that the PLA went in only after the PAP had failed to put down the uprising. All of this suggests, again, that suppressing internal dissent was not the military’s main role in the 1980s.¹⁰

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years?

⁹ Ellis Joffe, “The Chinese Army in Domestic Politics: Factors and Phases.” In *Chinese Civil-Military Relations: The Transformation of the People’s Liberation Army*, edited by Nan Li (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 19.

¹⁰ Scobell, chapter 7; and Gregor.

No.

China's top leadership consisted of "dual role elites," that is, people with both military and civilian backgrounds that were "inextricably intertwined."¹¹ But the country was not a military dictatorship, and the military as an institution clearly remained subordinate to civilian political authority.

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

Yes

Mao created a series of special units to provide capitol security over Beijing and personal security against assassination attempts (e.g. the Beijing Garrison, the Chinese Public Security Force, and the Ministry of Public Security).¹²

The Gang of Four also created the infamous Red Guards as a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military with orders to purge opposition from the countryside, but also provide security to the rebel leaders.

Later, the People's Armed Police (PAP) were formed to assist with internal security.¹³

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

Yes

The political commissar system serves this function (*see question 5*). The more specific institutional structure begins with the Central Military Commission (CMC), which is the military command and control organization at the core of the Party (CCP). The General Political Department (GPD) is directly subordinate to the CMC and is the "locus" of political control over the military since 1949. Various sub-departments within the GDP deal with indoctrination, propaganda, and internal security. The latter task involves internal intelligence and counterintelligence operations over the regular military (PLA).¹⁴

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

¹¹ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 145.

¹² Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 49-51.

¹³ Scobell, p. 74.

¹⁴ Shambaugh, 535.

Yes

China experienced a major Politburo reshuffle in 1985, which involved the “retirement” of 10 members, including seven PLA officers. Deng also worked actively throughout the 1980s to weed out older officers and bring up a newer, more professional generation of military officers who would owe their careers to his regime.¹⁵

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

Yes

At the uppermost levels of decision-making, the political (party) and military (army) elite was closely integrated under the leadership of Mao. As discussed in question 11, the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the CCP was the key institutional forum in which civilian party leaders and military officers (also party members) would exchange information.

Through the CMC forum, however, the CCP maintained a firm system of political control over the PLA. In the most ideal form, the institutional framework “consists of Party committees, political commissars and political departments which run parallel to the military chain of command, and are activated through supervision, education and campaigns.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Terrence Lee, “Military Cohesion and Regime Maintenance: Explaining the Role of the Military in 1989 China and 1988 Indonesia,” *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 32, no 80 (October 2005), p. 89.

¹⁶ Ellis Joffe, “Party-Army Relations in China: Retrospect and Prospect,” 305.