

Observation no: 93

Country-year: 1949

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

No

But the regime did come to power through protracted civil war. Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party came to power through victory in an extended civil war with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists from 1945 to 1949. The Nationalist suffered decisive defeats against Mao's People's Liberation Army (PLA), which caused their government and army to collapse. Mao established the new People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949, while the defeated Nationalists retreat to Taiwan. Over the next year, the PLA eliminated the remaining Nationalists forces from the Chinese mainland.¹

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

No

Mao had just founded the PRC in October 1949. But as the answer to question 1 indicates above, the fledgling PRC was birthed from civil war between the Nationalists and Communists.

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

Yes

Mao Zedong was the military leader of the PLA throughout the Chinese civil war. After the war, Mao became the nation's 'paramount leader': he controlled political decision-making within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but was also the 'supreme and active' commander of the PLA. "Mao, in short, dominated the PLA completely, and although its leaders presumably provided advice, and even voiced reservations, they accepted Mao's final authority. In the rare cases of resistance, they were removed without noticeable dissent from the PLA."² As a result, the political (CCP) and military (PLA) elite leadership under Mao was closely integrated.³

¹ Odd Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946-1950* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

² 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.

³ Ellis Joffe, "Party-Army Relations in China: Retrospect and Prospect." *The China Quarterly* no. 146 (June 1, 1996), 301.

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

No

Mao organized the PLA during the Chinese civil war around Marxist principles to fight a protracted guerilla-style war against the Nationalists. Until the first modernization process of the PLA in the mid-1950s, Mao's Marxist guerilla army lacked the sort of traditional rank system characteristic of other modern fighting forces at the time. Nonetheless, the equivalent of the military officer corps at the time was determined primarily by ideological fealty and loyalty, not ethnic background.⁴

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."⁵

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'."⁶ 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*

⁴ 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 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.

⁶ Monte Bullard, *China's Political-military Evolution: The Party and the Military in the PRC, 1960-1984* (Westview Press, 1985), 73.

commissar is also responsible for civil-military relations.”⁷ 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.”⁸

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?

Yes

Mao used the PLA to eliminate Nationalist fighters and purge political and civil opposition on the Chinese mainland after the civil war ended.¹⁰

⁷ Bullard, 74-75.

⁸ Bullard, 82.

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 Odd Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War, 1946-1950* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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

No

The military was not used to directly govern the country in the aftermath of the Chinese civil war. The Party maintained firm political control over the Army (*for more see question 13*). At the apex, Mao decided ultimate questions of governance and military policy (*see question 3*). However, two factors complicate the answer to this question. First, the close integration between the PLA and CCP at the top levels blurred the distinction between civil and military governance of China. Second, “the PLA has been politicized from its inception ... [through] administrative control by a single political party (the CCP) and the intensive propagation of that party’s political line and values within the military ranks.”¹¹ As a result, “an essential symbiosis existed between revolutionary soldiers and Party members in pursuit of state power.”¹²

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

No

But note that Mao created a number of specialized units within the military structure to provide personal security and to secure Beijing. For more on the evolution of these units during the peak of Mao’s use of the Army during the Cultural Revolution, see *Observation 172 China 1979*.

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).¹³

¹¹ David Shambaugh, “The Soldier and the State in China: The Political Work System in the People’s Liberation Army,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 127 (September 1991), 527.

¹² Shambaugh, 530.

¹³ Shambaugh, 535.

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

No

But note that the political commissar system ensures continuous ideological loyalty from both the officer corps and rank and file soldiers. Any suspect individuals are automatically 'purged' from the army. See Question 5 for more on the commissar system.

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."¹⁴

¹⁴ Ellis Joffe, "Party-Army Relations in China: Retrospect and Prospect," 305.