

Observation no: 172

Country-year: 1979

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

But Mao was very worried about the prospect of a coup or assassination attempt, and implemented extensive measures to mitigate his fear.² For more on the various security organs and special units he created within the PLA to provide personal and capitol (Beijing) security, see Question 10.

Furthermore, Mao maintained firm command and control over the PLA, and the army in turn was firmly subordinate to its own high command. Orders emanating from the top leadership flowed down through a highly centralized command and control system. "There are no known cases of large PLA units attempting to operate without or against orders ... When the PLA intervened en masse, it was because Mao or Deng had ordered it" (307). In addition, "the central authorities keep a tight grip over commanders of military regions, the level where the pull of centrifugal tendencies is potentially the strongest. It does this by removing, reshuffling or replacing military commanders down to the regimental level ... and by maintaining mechanisms of political surveillance and control" (307).

Yet despite this level of control over the army, there was an assassination attempt against Mao in 1971. Lin Biao, one of the Gang of Four, attempted a military coup with officers and units under his control. The plot aimed to use heavy firepower to assassinate Mao while he travelled across the country in his custom train car: "The

¹ Email 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 Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 48.

methods canvassed among the plotters included attacking his special train with flamethrowers, 40-millimeter rocket guns, or 100-millimeter anti-air-craft guns, dynamiting a bridge that the train had to cross, bombing the train from the air, or simply face-to-face assassination with a pistol.”³ The attempted coup failed after Mao changed his train route and schedule.

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.⁴

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.⁵

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

³ Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 334-335.

⁴ Richard Evans, *Deng Xiaoping and the Making of Modern China* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1995).

⁵ 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).

major issue, and became “the most important linkage point in the relationships between the army and party.”⁶

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’.”⁷ 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.”⁸ 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.”⁹

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.”¹⁰

⁶ 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.

⁷ Monte Bullard, *China’s Political-military Evolution: The Party and the Military in the PRC, 1960-1984* (Westview Press, 1985), 73.

⁸ Bullard, 74-75.

⁹ Bullard, 82.

¹⁰ 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.

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

The PLA intervened to repress internal dissent and restore order during a period of acute social and political chaos throughout China. The Cultural Revolution lasted from 1966 to 1976. At the outset, a cadre of elites dubbed the Gang of Four created a ruthless paramilitary organization from students and other zealous youth. These 'Red Guards' were unleashed upon the country with instructions to purge and execute anyone suspected of opposition from the left or right. Anarchy erupted as townships and provinces were stripped of leader, administrators, and human capital.

By the end of 1966, the PLA intervened to restore order. Resistance from the Red Guards resulted in massive internal stability and systemic violence. The PLA and Red Guards began to engage in continual combat, but were eventually beaten back, disbanded, and banished by 1968. The PLA then 'purged the class ranks' to eliminate any remnants of opposition. Special PLA units targeted suspect party and government officials, and even purged elite members of the CCP core cadre.¹¹

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

Yes

The intervention of the PLA in the Cultural Revolution resulted in the militarization of the Chinese government and political system. During the Cultural Revolution, "the PLA was being assigned a double role. On the one hand, it had to maintain security and some semblance of law and order. Simultaneously it played a crucial role in the success of the early power-seizures ... But this power carried penalties. The PLA could not act simply as a *dues ex machina*. It was inevitably sucked into the maelstrom, with profound political and institutional consequences."¹² As a result, the PLA governed the country throughout the Cultural Revolution until Deng was able to restore order at the upper echelons of the political elite after Mao's death. At this point, though, the PLA gave up its political power and returned governance

¹¹ Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 253.

¹² Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 175.

functions to the party. Thus, “the remarkable feature of PLA intervention is not simply that it was catapulted to power and held on to it [during the Cultural Revolution], but that eventually it gave up this power. The process took a long time. It could only be completed after the final downfall of the radicals and the rise of Deng Xiaoping ... Hence, after its long intervention the PLA disengaged from politics.”¹³

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).¹⁴

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.

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).¹⁵

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

Yes

¹³ Ellis Joffe, “Party-Army Relations in China: Retrospect and Prospect.” *The China Quarterly* no. 146 (June 1, 1996), 308.

¹⁴ Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 49-51.

¹⁵ Shambaugh, 535.

The PLA and its officer corps were not directly targeted during the purges of the Cultural Revolution. In fact, as Questions 8 and 9 point out, the PLA and special purge units were used to systematically execute, torture, or otherwise eliminate suspect individuals. Furthermore, the political commissar system ensured continuous ideological loyalty from both the officer corps and rank and file soldiers. In this sense, any suspect individual in the military was automatically 'purged' from the system (see Question 5 for more on the commissar system). But at the end of the Cultural Revolution, key generals and officers were purged as Deng restored political control over the government and eliminated rival military elites with loyalty to Gang of Four members. The most prominent generals were put on public trial along with the Gang of Four and received long prison sentences.¹⁶

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."¹⁷

¹⁶ Macfarquhar and Schoenhals, 454-456.

¹⁷ Ellis Joffe, "Party-Army Relations in China: Retrospect and Prospect," 305.