

# THE EVOLVING CHINESE CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

REPORT OF A CONFERENCE ORGANISED BY  
THE INSTITUTE OF DEFENCE AND STRATEGIC STUDIES  
(IDSS)



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Traders Hotel, Singapore  
19-20 November 2004





## Introduction



*Professor Wang Gungwu delivering the opening address*

In his opening remarks, **Wang Gungwu**, Director of the East Asian Institute, explained the importance of the conference: whether the relations between the Chinese civilian authorities and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) remain differentiated and stable may determine whether the governance and development of China can proceed smoothly; the degree of civil-military cooperation or conflict over foreign policy may have major implications for China's strategic behaviour; and finally, whether the PLA is mobilised into domestic politics or demobilised from it so that it can concentrate on military modernisation, may determine whether China's national security objectives can be realised, and this may invariably affect Asian security.

Wang went on to say that Chinese civil-military relations had shifted from the old analytical model of party-military “symbiosis/

factionalism” to clearer civil-military institutional boundaries, as Deng replaced Mao's agenda of revolution with a policy of four modernisations (modernising industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defence), which relies on functional differentiation and technical specialisation for it to succeed. This trend, however, was interrupted on June 4 of 1989, as the PLA was remobilised into domestic politics. Some scholars argue that this change represents a qualitative shift of the PLA from military tasks to politics. Others suggest that it is only a temporary aberration, and the professionalisation trend of the PLA continues. Wang then asked the central research questions the conference intends to address: What takes command in civil-military relations in China? Military tasks or politics? What has changed? What can account for the changes? And what are the implications? According to Wang, these issues transcend six areas of interests: the role of the PLA in domestic politics; such role in national security and arms control policy; the relations between commanders and political commissars; the relations between the PLA and society; civil-military dynamics in defence budget and logistics; and such dynamics in defence industry and technologies.

## Panel 1: Civil-Military Dynamics in Domestic Politics



*Professor Ellis Joffe giving his presentation*

The first speaker was **Ellis Joffe**, who spoke on “The Chinese Army in Domestic Politics: Factors and Phases.” Joffe argued that the PLA has never moved into politics on its own initiative. Leadership politics is a major motivating factor: when the political leadership is united, the military stays out of politics; when intra-leadership conflict occurs, the PLA is drawn in. Today, the PLA has stayed out of politics, mainly because the political leadership has no serious conflicts. Although Jiang Zemin did not have the personal charisma and experience of Mao or Deng, he – like Hu Jingtao – did have the institutional power that goes with his position. Under Mao and Deng, however, the compliance of the military to the party was unconditional. Under Jiang and Hu, such compliance is conditional on a mutually satisfactory arrangement: the military supports the political leadership, in return for generous defence budgets and autonomy on military policy issues. The military’s support for the political leadership is dependent on a set of factors: the ethos of military subordination to political authorities, party control, professionalism which makes the

military intervene less in politics, internal security – the military is largely out of this domain unless there is a major civil unrest in society – and external security.



*From left to right, Professor Andrew Scobell, Professor Thomas Bickford, and Dr. Harlan Jencks*

**Andrew Scobell** followed with his presentation on “China’s Civil-Military Relations: Creeping Guojiahua (statisation).” Scobell challenged three dubious assumptions about Chinese civil-military relations: civilian control of the military is firmly entrenched; civil-military relations are synonymous with party-army relations; and professionalism equals depoliticisation. Scobell maintained that full civilian control has yet to be achieved because Hu has yet to fully exert himself as commander in chief. Also, the PLA has a burgeoning relationship with the state, because state institutions such as the National People’s Congress (NPC) have growing power over the purse to finance national defence. Also, many PLA officers believe they should serve the nation, and not just the party. Finally, the PLA is professionalising but not depoliticising. The PLA leaders, for instance, did advocate public support

for Jiang Zemin in the past decade, and aired their hawkish views on the Taiwan issue. There is also a substantial number of PLA deputies in the NPC.



*Professor Paul Godwin making a comment*

**Paul Godwin**, the discussant, commented that while Joffe accepted the view that the PLA is a party army, Scobell assumed the weak institutionalisation of civil-military relations. Godwin challenged Scobell to define what Chinese “institutionalisation” means, and suggested that the party and state constitutions stipulate that the party has the ultimate authority in China. Godwin then opined that professionalism may be a source of strengthening the political leadership, instead of a threat. He asked Joffe why the PLA needs to be “bribed,” if it has developed the professional ethos that keeps it from politics. He also asked if the Central Military Commission (CMC) could possibly not be the real centre of power, but the Politburo instead.

## Discussion



*Professor John Wong*

**Nan Li** suggested that the extent of civil-military boundaries institutionalisation can be operationally tested by comparing the changing scope of military politics and changes in cross-boundaries circulation of elites between the Cultural Revolution and the period after it. Li also observed that the premise of personalised factions-based rivalries has dominated the field, dating back to the Cultural Revolution. But Jiang and Hu were cooperating and not competing with each other. It has become increasingly difficult to mobilise support for intra-party leadership rivalries across the civil-military institutional boundaries, and across the bureaucratic boundaries that mitigate the interaction between superiors and subordinates. **You Ji** commented that clear civil-military institutional boundaries do exist. While political affairs fall in the realm of the Politburo, military issues belong to the domain of the CMC. This division of labour was used by Jiang to consolidate his power in the second half of the 1990s. Major military policy

issues have to be cleared by the Politburo meetings. But it is rare to see PLA decisions denied or vetoed by the Politburo, which shows that a clear division of roles exists. **John Wong** proposed that the old Soviet civil-military relations could be used as a basis for understanding Chinese civil-military relations. **Joffe** responded by saying that the military supports the party leader because of the military ethos. But if the post-revolutionary party leader does not deliver the goods, the military would support someone else. For this reason, the party leader will have to be more accommodating to the PLA: this is a compromise, not an arrangement. Joffe then stressed that professionalism is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it removes the military from politics. On the other hand, it makes the military more cohesive and provides solidarity over a particular view point, which potentially makes the military more amenable to intervention. But this may happen only when there is a crisis. Also, as long as China is a state ruled by the CCP, the PLA is a party army. To date, the PLA is not a national army yet.

## Panel 2: Civil-Military Dynamics in National Security and Arms Control Policy



*Professor Jin-Dong Yuan presenting his paper*

**Jin-Dong Yuan** opened this session by presenting on “Deferring to National interest: Arms Control and Civil-Military Relations in China.” Yuan first showed the evolution of the Chinese nuclear arms policy: from 1964 to the late 1970s, China operated outside the parameters of the arms control process; from the late 1970s until the 1980s, China began to participate in the arms control process; in the early 1990s, China signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; from the autumn of 1997 onward, with the establishment of the Arms Control and Disarmament Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China has become proactive in arms control. The PLA has become increasingly interested in arms control as it becomes more professionalised (a contradiction according to Yuan), and has substantial resources in analysing the related issues. The development of state institutions for vetting sensitive arms export has eroded the PLA jurisdiction over this area. On issues of broader strategic interests, the central leadership requires the PLA to make sacrifices, which the latter has done.



*Ms. Kathleen Walsh giving her presentation*

**Kathleen Walsh's** presentation was on the topic "China's Approaching Tipping Point?" She said that it is possible to think of China in the next two decades as a credible supporter of non-proliferation, and as a major arms exporter as well. International outsourcing and research and development are making China the recipient of dual-use technologies as well as associated training programmes. China has been improving its IT technology standards, which contribute to the better quality of Chinese arms. At the same time, China has been improving relations with about 140 countries, and this is largely due to its arms export. Walsh believed that Chinese arms export is mainly driven by the profit motive.

**Paul Godwin**, the discussant, was impressed with Yuan's presentation on how Chinese policy behaviour has evolved over time. Even after the 1972 rapprochement, China's policy was to identify friends and foes and to act accordingly. But today, as Chinese interests have become more complex, Chinese actors have also proliferated, and the influence of the PLA over policy has been more limited. Regarding Walsh's

paper, Godwin believed that China's arms exports have been driven more by the desire for political influence than by the profit motive. Godwin pointed out that China's sale of anti-ship missiles to Iran was clearly a move to increase China's influence in the Gulf.

## Discussion

**Richard Bitzinger** stated that there were no conventional arms sales limitations. Such arms exports are seen as a standard and acceptable part of international trade. But as the international arms market becomes more competitive, it gets increasingly difficult for China to sell more than what it did in the 1980s. **Dennis Blasko** observed that the PLA was no longer selling obsolete weapons to anyone now, and that the old competition between the PLA and the defence sector to sell arms has also disappeared. **Yizhak Shichor** asked to what extent the dependence on Middle Eastern oil is going to affect China's arms proliferation policy. **Ellis Joffe** agreed with Godwin that political influence drives Chinese arms sales. But he wondered how many countries China can actually influence through arms sales, since there are not so many customers around. China has been producing comparatively inferior weapons, and as a result, no countries other than Iran and Iraq wanted to buy Chinese arms. Presently, however, China tries to exploit the arms market, and Burma and Thailand are examples of this trend. **Yuan** responded by saying that Chinese arms sales have shifted from personal whims of key leaders to institutionalised

management – including sales of missiles. China hoped to work with Russia against the US missile defence in a strategic partnership but this failed. Then it decided to focus on the Taiwan issue and continued to sell conventional arms to Asian countries. This trend shows that China wants to expand its influence in Asia. But it would be cautious in selling weapons of mass destruction. **Walsh** agreed with Bitzinger that China may not be able to sell its weapons as successfully because the market is highly competitive. She proposed that China needs a credible export-control system in order to play a role in sharing technologies. She added that civilian policymakers have been in the driving seat in determining arms sales issues, and the PLA has been relegated to a secondary role in influencing these decisions.

### Panel 3: Dynamics between Commanders and Political Commissars



*From left to right, Professor You Ji and Professor Taeho Kim*

**You Ji** presented his paper on “Sorting out the Myths about Political Commissars.” You argued that there are two types of political commissars. One consists of party representatives that are externally imposed on the military for political surveillance, a copy of the Chinese imperial tradition of dispatching jianjun (supervisor of the military) to the front to watch the commanders. This type tends to cause conflicts between the political authorities and the military. The second type, which is the primary form in the PLA, refers to those selected internally through the chain of command. This type works to enhance unit cohesion and argues for the interests of the PLA. Also, in number, rank, and status, they are fewer and lower in comparison with the commanders. Therefore, the conventional wisdom that political commissars and political departments in the PLA are the concrete institutional guarantees of party control of the military is problematic.



*Dr. Srikanth Kondapalli pondering*

**Srikanth Kondapalli** followed with a presentation on “China’s Political Commissars and Commanders: Trends and Dynamics.” Kondapalli observed that over time, the PLA has exhibited the complex inter-changing roles of the commanders and political commissars. Political commissars also play the role of preparing the soldiers to abide by party policies (which also change over time) and boosting morale. More recently, political commissars have been tasked to prepare the PLA for psychological warfare, legal warfare, and media warfare, those that are associated with the Revolution in Military Affairs.

**Taeho Kim**, the discussant, commented that the trends identified by the two speakers are compatible with the statistics that he found on the educational backgrounds of the PLA higher-ranking officers. But he believed that the PLA is more political than the military in other countries. He also asked what would be the role of the political commissars in a military conflict with Taiwan.

## Discussion

**Ellis Joffe** commented that the PLA is without doubt more political than other militaries, but far less so than it was in the late 1950s through to the 1970s. Nowadays, political commissars are mostly soldiers and do not interfere in the work of the commanders, unlike in the past when they interfered extensively. This undoubtedly increases the professionalism of the military. **Harlan Jencks** added that the shifting importance of the commanders and political commissars may depend on the changing political environment (technical expertise or politics dominating party policy) and on personalities (those more outspoken and aggressive may take command). **Arthur Ding** asked whether the principle of collective leadership embodied in the party committee system contradicts the commander-dominated centralised command. **You** responded by saying that at lower-level units, there are two commanding officers. But in the more important higher institutions such as the CMC and the General Staff Department, only one centre exists. Regarding Taiwan, political commissars would work to enhance the morale and confidence of the troops to overcome overwhelming odds. **Kondapalli** suggested that political commissars would wage psychological warfare in a Taiwan conflict. He also stressed that the time allocated to political education in the PLA has been in decline over time.

## Panel 4: Dynamics between the PLA and Society



*Col. Dennis Blasko*

The first speaker, **Dennis Blasko**, spoke on “Servant of Two Masters: The PLA, the People, and the Party.” Blasko began by saying that the primary role of the PLA is external defence while the primary role of the People’s Armed Police (PAP) is internal security. The PLA, however, does get itself involved in “supporting the people”. It supports economic construction by building national infrastructure; it also works through the national defence mobilisational committees to resolve mobilisational issues and coordinate related exercises; and it gets involved in emergency and disaster relief operations. Besides improving somewhat its institutional image, these endeavours have also benefited PLA personnel recruitment and retention as well as logistics.



*From left to right, Professor Yitzhak Shichor and Col. Dennis Blasko*

**Yitzhak Shichor** followed with his talk on “Company Province: Civil-Military Relations in Xinjiang.” Shichor examined the role of Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), the paramilitary organisation, in civil-military integration in Xinjiang. He found that XPCC fulfils the multiple functions of compensating for the shortage of regular troops for border defence, of internal security, of economic development, and of shifting the demographic balance of Xinjiang.

Regarding Blasko’s presentation, **Taeho Kim** commented that in contingencies such as Tiananmen and SARS, the PLA intervened as a cohesive and disciplined force. He then asked about the impact of civil-military cooperation on the rise of nationalism in China. On Shichor’s paper, Kim questioned whether the model of XPCC can be replicated in other provinces.

## Panel 5: Civil-Military Dynamics regarding Defence Economics and Logistics

### Discussion



*Dr. Leonard Sebastian making a statement*

**Nan Li** asked whether there are conflicts between the military units and the civilian authorities over the distribution of costs and benefits in cooperative programmes. **Leonard Sebastian** questioned whether roles such as internal security, disaster relief and peacekeeping should be included in the definition of professionalism. **You Ji** asked whether the decision to retain the XPCC as a paramilitary organisation was driven more by personal reasons than strategic considerations. **Blasko** replied that national defence mobilisation committees serve to mitigate civil-military differences over the distribution of costs and benefits. He went on to say that as long as the civilian tasks are done only occasionally and they contribute to the enhancement of military functions, they can be parts of professionalism. **Shichor** stated that strategic considerations such as the volatile nature and the difficult logistics of Xinjiang underlie the decision to retain the XPCC as a paramilitary organisation.



*Professor Wang Shaoguang*

The first speaker was **Wang Shaoguang**, who discussed “China’s Expenditure for Militia and PAP.” Wang explained that China’s armed forces include the PLA, militia and the PAP. He believed that the view that China’s defence budget has omitted expenditures for the militia and the PAP is incorrect, because as required by law, the formal budget includes spending for militia as well as for R & D. The expenditure for PAP is listed as a separate item in the state budget. The local expenditures for the militia and the PAP are not particularly significant, and levels are somewhat related to the sizes of the local population and economy.



*Dr. Thomas Bickford delivering his talk*

**Thomas Bickford** spoke on “The PLA and its Changing Economic Roles: Implications for Civil-Military Relations.” Bickford noted that the PLA has largely divested from its business activities since 1998. This is accompanied by a policy of “socialisation,” which refers to outsourcing to civilianise some logistical tasks. PLA may become more tied to the state and less to the party because “socialisation,” though at a lower pace, means that the PLA may be more dependent on the state and society for covering costs and replenishing supplies.



*Dr. Harlan Jencks commenting on the presentations*

Discussant **Harlan Jencks** commented that the spending on defence science and technology is not completely covered by China’s defence budget. He noted that this discrepancy does not only apply to the PLA, but to budgetary processes of other militaries. On Bickford’s paper, he believed that political and social factors may drive the PLA toward the state more than the economics. Jencks also stated that outsourcing is largely associated with fixed installations but not mobile units, and as a result, “socialisation” has limits.

## Discussion

**Richard Bitzinger** questioned the openness of China’s defence budget. The lack of transparency can be shown in the contrast between the detailed phone book-sized budget produced by the Pentagon, and the brief press releases of the Chinese government. Over time, however, China has probably subsumed extra-budgetary items into the formal budget, because the latter has increased by 250 percent since 1997. **Paul Godwin** agreed that it is likely to see new items in China’s defence budget as the rule of law progresses. An example is the inclusion of manoeuvre damage spending. **Wang** replied that detailed budgets had not been standard practice in China until 1999. Today, detailed budgets exist at all levels. He stressed that he had only used open sources, and encouraged others to consult this publicly available information. **Bickford** remained convinced of his argument of economics as the main driver.

## Panel 6: Civil-Military Dynamics regarding Dual-Use Technologies and Defence Industry



*Mr. Richard Bitzinger speaking on his paper*

The first speaker, **Richard Bitzinger**, spoke on “Dual-Use Technologies, Civil-Military Integration (CMI), and China’s Defence Industry.” Bitzinger noted that China regards the CMI as a way to achieve self-sufficiency for its defense industry in the future. The spin-on effects (converting civilian technologies into military applications) had remained modest till the mid-1990s, when they became more noticeable in information and ship-building sectors. However, he was surprised at the low level of spin-on effects in sectors such as aviation. But he suggested that this may change in the future.



*From left to right, Professor Wang Shaoguang, Dr. Jin-dong Yuan, and Dr. Arthur Ding*

**Arthur Ding** followed on “Civil-Military Relationship in China: Rising Market Influence on Defence Industry Sector?” Ding explained that market economic reform in China has impacted on defence industry reform. Defence items are now considered commodities. Market forces facilitate the opening of supplies, and allow non-state enterprises to produce defence items. He went on to say that such reform has been driven mainly by a consensus among the political-military decision-makers.

**Harlan Jencks** commented that both papers noted the important successes of horizontal information-sharing between organisations in China in recent years. But he argued that some state-owned enterprises are still losing money and banks loans to them are unlikely to be paid back.

### Discussion

**Ellis Joffe** questioned whether the so-called “informationisation” of the PLA would live up to its promises. He detected a split between those who would further mechanisation and those who advocate “informationisation.” **Bitzinger** stated that in his opinion, no armed forces in Asia have transformed completely, and some such as China are at best at the stage of experimentation, because they still remain platform-centric. On spin-on effects, he noticed that there are examples at the facilities level, such as co-location in naval construction.

## Conclusion



*Closing remarks by Nan Li*

**Nan Li** concluded the conference by commenting on how to go about revising the papers for inclusion in an edited volume. Ideally, the final draft should include three major components. The first addresses the issue of what has changed over time. This can be operationalised into specific indicators, to be substantiated by either statistical or anecdotal evidence. The second examines the issue of what factors/variables can account for change. Some major factors/variables can be controlled by being held constant, so that the range of explanatory factors/variables can be narrowed down. The third explores the issue of the policy implications. With these final remarks, the conference ended.

Rapporteurs: Morten Hansen and Wong Tze Yung

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# Conference on the Evolving Chinese Civil-Military Relations Traders Hotel, Singapore, 19-20 November 2004

## Programme

### Friday, 19 November 2004

- 08:30 – 09:00 Registration
- 09:00 – 09:15 Opening Remarks  
Professor Wang Gungwu  
Director, East Asia Institute and  
Member, IDSS Board of Governors
- 09.15 – 10:45 **Panel 1 Civil-Military Dynamics in Domestic Elite Politics**
- Chair: John Wong, Director of Research  
EAI, National University of Singapore
- Presenters: Ellis Joffe, Hebrew University, Israel  
Andrew Scobell, Army War College, US
- Discussant: Paul Godwin (Retired)  
National War College, US
- 10:45 – 11:00 Coffee/Tea Break
- 11:00 – 12:30 **Panel 2 Civil-Military Dynamics in National Security and Arms Control Policy**
- Chair: Lee Lai To, Head, Department of Political Science  
National University of Singapore
- Presenters: Jing-dong Yuan, Monterey Institute of International Studies, US  
Kathleen Walsh, Stimson Centre, US
- Discussant: Paul Godwin (Retired)  
National War College
- 12:30 – 14:00 Lunch Traders Café, Lobby Level
- 14:00 – 15:30 **Panel 3 Dynamics between Commanders and Political Commissars**
- Chair: Nan Li, Senior Fellow  
IDSS, Singapore
- Presenters: You Ji, University of New South Wales, Australia  
Srikanth Kondapalli, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, India
- Discussant: Taeho Kim, Hallym University, Korea
- 15:30 – 15:45 Coffee Break

15:45 – 17:15    **Panel 4**        **Dynamics between PLA and Society**

Chair:            Kumar Ramakrishna, Associate Professor & Head of Studies  
IDSS, Singapore

Presenter:       Dennis Blasko (retired), US  
Yitzhak Shichor, Hebrew University, Israel

Discussant:     Taeho Kim, Hallym University, Korea

End of Programme for Day One

**19:00**            **Welcome Dinner**  
Patara Fine Thai Cuisine  
163 Tanglin Road, #03-14, Tanglin Mall, Singapore 247933

**Saturday, 20 November 2004**

09:00 – 11:00    **Panel 5**        **Civil-Military Dynamics regarding Defence Economics and Logistics**

Chair:            Leonard Sebastian, Senior Fellow  
IDSS, Singapore

Presenters:      Shaoguang Wang, City University of Hong Kong  
Thomas Bickford, University of Wisconsin, US

Discussant:     Harlan Jencks, Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, US

11:00 – 11:30    Coffee/Tea Break

11:30 – 13:00    **Panel 6**        **Civil-Military Dynamics regarding Dual-use Technologies and Defence Industry**

Chair:            Nan Li, Senior Fellow  
IDSS, Singapore

Presenters:      Richard Bitzinger, APCSS, US  
Arthur Ding Shuhfan, National Chengchi University,  
Taiwan

Discussant:     Harlan Jencks, Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, US

Closing Remarks

13:00 – 14:00    Lunch            Ah Hoi's Kitchen, Level 4

**Sunday, 21 November 2004**

Departure of Participants

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