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Changes in Chinese Civil-Military Relations

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TRADITIONAL analysis of Chinese civil-military relations assumes that the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is "symbiotic". What this means is that such a relationship is fused due to the lack of functional differentiation and clear institutional boundaries between the party and the military.

Such symbiosis has been attributed to Mao's reliance on a strategy of mass mobilization, rather than on functional and technical expertise and administrative efficacy. Being a product of civil war and revolution, the PLA was naturally an integral part of Mao's strategy. Such symbiosis was further evidenced in the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, during which the PLA was fully mobilized to promote Mao's revolutionary values, run China's numerous working units, and participate in leadership power struggles in the party.

The party-army "symbiosis" did not, however, imply any lack of political dynamics. On the contrary, political rivalries and alignments were rampant. But such dynamics were not defined by the party-army institutional boundaries. Instead they were driven by hostilities and allegiances based on highly personalised leadership factions, which cut across the party-army boundaries. The symbiosis model also implies that Chinese civil-military relations have largely been dominated by politics, which has distracted the PLA from its military tasks. Nonetheless, such a model is unable to account for the steady implementation of a military modernization programme in China.

Shifts in civil-military relations

There have actually been quite substantial changes in Chinese civil-military relations in the post-Mao period of the past two-and-a-half decades. As a consequence, Chinese civil-military relations have shifted from the old model of party-army symbiosis/factional rivalries to a new model of clearer civil-military institutional boundaries. This also means the emphasis in Chinese civil-military relations has shifted from politics to military tasks. This shift is reflected in the substantial changes in three major indicators of civil-military relations: firstly, scope of military politics; secondly, cross-boundary circulation of higher-level civilian and military elites; and thirdly, the role of party and political work system (PPWS) in the military.

Scope of Military Politics

During the Cultural Revolution, largely due to the collapse of the party-state authorities, the PLA was fully mobilized from the barracks into societal politics under a policy of "three

supports (supporting the left, workers/industry, and peasants/agriculture) and two militaries (military control and training)". This led to an expansion of the military's involvement in politics. This policy required the PLA to provide manpower and material support to the "leftists" to "seize power" from the old party-state apparatus that took the "capitalist road," and to assist in establishing the new "revolutionary power organs". The PLA was also required to restore social order and stability; assist in industrial and agricultural production; impose military control on vital institutions and areas; and conduct political and military training among China's numerous university and school students. By the end of 1970, some 2.8 million PLA men were mobilised from the barracks to implement the policy of "three supports and two militaries".

The withdrawal of the PLA from the "three supports and two militaries" began as early as 1972, when the party and government authorities began to be gradually reconstructed. But it was not until Deng came to power in 1978 and had consolidated his base through ideological and organizational changes in subsequent years that the PLA withdrew more extensively from societal politics. The process of withdrawal was completed by the middle 1980s when the PLA was significantly downsized from about six million men in the mid-1970s to about three million. Since then, military politics has been largely confined to resolving issues associated with institutional development and routine military administration, rather than with issues such as societal mobilization, civil administration, and factional rivalries within the party leadership.

Movement of Elites Across Boundaries

With the expansion of military politics in the Cultural Revolution, cross-boundary circulation or movement of elites had become frequent and extensive. PLA officers, for instance, occupied about 80 percent of the leading government and party positions at the provincial level. At lower levels, military officers took between 78 to 98 percent of such positions. Military share of the membership of the CCP Politburo and Central Committee produced by the CCP 9th Congress in 1969 reached as high as 50 percent. In the meantime, non-military party officials (such as Hua Guofeng, Wang Dongxin and Ji Dengkui) and Maoist radicals (such as Zhang Chunqiao and Wang Hongwen from Shanghai, Wang Xiaoyu from Shandong, and Pan Fusheng from Heilongjiang) had also secured membership in the Central Military Commission (CMC), the leading organ of the PLA.

A demilitarization process began in the mid-1970s with the return of large numbers of rehabilitated civilian bureaucrats to the party and government institutions. Military personnel began to return to the barracks. Demilitarization accelerated after Deng came to power and consolidated his position and was largely completed by the mid-1980s. As a result, all leading positions of major party and government institutions at the central, provincial and local levels are now occupied by civilians.

Similarly, PLA membership in the CCP politburo had declined to 8 percent (two out of 25) by the 16th Politburo of 2002. Also, since the 15th Politburo of 1997, uniformed members have been excluded from the powerful Politburo Standing Committee. Furthermore, PLA membership in the CCP Central Committee had declined to between 18 and 22 percent and has stayed at that level since the early 1990s.

Finally, the CMC has also been systematically downsized since 1982. Except for the chair, the CMC has largely been dominated by the uniformed members, including the most senior

officers of the PLA and heads of the PLA general departments.

These institutional changes have largely stopped the cross-boundary circulation of elites that characterized the political-military symbiosis/factional rivalries of the Cultural Revolution. This has contributed to the development of civil-military boundaries. By staying homogenous within its own area of functional specialisation, but heterogenous and differentiated in relation to one another, it is now possible to achieve a semblance of cooperation among specialised units based on interdependence.

Role of PPWS (military's party and political work system)

During the Cultural Revolution, guided by the principle of “giving prominence to politics”, the PPWS was projected as an agency that promoted Mao's revolutionary values and “class struggle” both within and outside the PLA. PPWS became the “headquarters and leaders” that waged campaigns against “bourgeois military line and ideology”. These led to attacks on, and the removal as well as persecution of, a large number of professional and technical experts and officers who were critical of “giving prominence to politics,” as well as those with “bad class backgrounds”. Also, more than 50 percent of the work time was allocated to political and ideological indoctrination. The promotion of extraneous values and politics by the PPWS contributed significantly to the erosion of the institutional boundaries, severe factionalism within the PLA and the decline of military capabilities.

The post-Cultural Revolution period, however, witnessed the integration of the PPWS with the military tasks, particularly in its new role of enhancing the cohesiveness and morale of the units. Among other things, this is done by mastering technical skills; improving material and cultural life; and handling well relations with society. In the meantime, the PPWS has been substantially downsized.

Conclusion

These three changes – the reduced scope of military politics, the decline in cross-boundary circulation of elites, and the internalization of the PPWS - have restored the boundaries between the civilian leadership and the military. The clearer civil-military boundaries make it more difficult for cross-boundary mobilisation for factional rivalries. Such boundaries also allow for more institutional autonomy for the PLA so that it can concentrate on enhancing its professionalism and on technological development.

The PLA was however remobilized into domestic politics when it intervened in Tiananmen in June 1989. But this remobilization was relatively brief and limited. With the lifting of the martial law in early 1990, the military had largely returned to the barracks. Evidence of revived factional rivalries among the higher-level political-military elites had been sketchy.

The Tiananmen intervention was an aberration; it was certainly not a qualitative shift away from military tasks. Indeed, the post-Mao period on the whole has been marked by a significant shift in Chinese civil-military relations from politics to military tasks.

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