

Nov. 10. Session 7, The PLA and Chinese Foreign Policy

The People's Liberation Army forms a key institution and hidden dynamo in the evolution of China's foreign policy-making structure. The authors here demonstrate the utility of the principal-agent framework and case studies of critical junctures where deviations from expected behaviour occur, in particular CCP/PLA communication breakdowns, for discerning the structural dynamics and balance of civil-military under/over sight in China. The review here focuses on Xi's 2015 reforms which back-end the publication of the key text - PLA Influence on China's National Security Decision-Making. The review here further highlights how foreign policy research does not live in a vacuum but often affects its subject of inquiry in time-dependent, context-specific seriation. The biography of earlier/later works, and geographical position of the researcher might also be an important, if under-researched field, of how civil/military relations are framed, whether structurally or through an agency model of the paramount leader.

The publication of PLA Influence on China's National Security Decision-Making emerged at a critical juncture in 2015 when Xi Jinping as Chinese Military Commission Chairman and CCP General Secretary announced 'the most wide-ranging restructuring of the PLA since 1949.' Saunders and Wuthnow succinctly frame Xi's PLA reform agenda (2015-2020) as driven by a centralising impulse to 'tighten civilian political control over the PLA, deal with rampant corruption inside the military and its promotion system and an imperative to enhance the military's ability to carry out modern joint operations.'¹ Saunders and Wuthnow's cross-comparative lens of observing Chinese PLA reforms relative to U.S. military reforms in 1986 offers a novel inquiry that might be added to from a diverse literature of inter-service rivalry and reforms in the U.S. military in 1960s. Pomeroy in *An Untaken Road: Strategy, Technology and the Hidden History of America's Mobile ICBMs* (2016) for one explores the U.S. intercontinental ballistic missile program under Kennedy with possible cross-comparative elements to understanding inter-service and civil-military personnel rivalries in Xi's establishment of the PLA Rocket Force and new Strategic Support Force in the "information domain" of space, cyber, and electronic activities.

Nan Li, an Associate Professor in the Strategic Research Department of the U.S. Naval War College and a member of the China Maritime Studies Institute, draws a comparative lens between Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping distinguishing between two approaches: "currying favour" by catering to PLA interests and "imposing will" by forcing the PLA to do things it would not otherwise want to do. Nan speculates that Xi like Jiang is likely to curry favour initially to consolidate power, but then to impose his will, an argument which finds support in Xi's PLA reforms in the subsequent years from Nan's publication. The methodology - currying favour / imposing will - is perhaps too coarse for further analytical utility suggesting too simplistic an evolution in leadership style over time. Nan does however raise an important point on the lack of empirical evidence available into Chinese decision-making on national security or crisis management decisions. From Nan, we might generate new research that delineates how a crisis management issue such as the China-India border dispute might hold quite different foreign policy and military decision-making dimensions than the Philippines-China South China Sea Arbitration.

¹ In *Xi Jinping in Command: Solving the Principal-Agent Problem in CCP-PLA Relations?* Chien-wen Kou (2017) takes Saunders and Wuthnow's analysis further exploring the large-scale personnel shuffles during which Xi's trustees have gradually come to occupy key military posts while his rivals have been removed. In *A Few Good Men: A Quantitative Analysis of High-Level People's Liberation Army (PLA) Promotion Patterns under Xi Jinping*, J.Z. Zhang statistically analyses how age, personal connections, education, professional experience, and foreign experience are associated with the promotions of 275 high-level PLA officers under Xi.

The hidden dynamo element of the PLA is expanded on by Tai Ming Cheung who explores the structure of the Central Military Commission and the central role of the CCP General Secretary in his role as CMC chairman coordinating the PLA as a party-army. Cheung notes how the CMC vice-chairmen have direct access to Xi in an arrangement that provides ‘considerable institutional independence, since the PLA does not report to the premier (who is in charge of civilian ministries).’ Furthermore, ‘the PLA’s professional expertise, monopoly on classified military information, and ability to develop military plans, doctrine, policy options, and draft-policy guidance give it considerable autonomy. Tai Ming Cheung’s 2015 analysis might be updated to explore the key personnel shifts within China’s Central Military Commission such as the promotion of General Zhang Youxia, Xi’s ‘sworn brother’ who grew up with Xi to the Vice Chairman role in the CMC alongside Air Force General Xu Qiliang.²

What is interesting to note is Cheung’s curriculum vitae (https://gps.ucsd.edu/_files/faculty/cv-only/cheung_cv.pdf) which stresses his move toward exploring the technological complexity of the PLA, Cheung today leads the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (IGCC)’s Minerva project on “The Evolving Relationship between Technology and National Security in China: Innovation, Defense Transformation, and China’s Place in the Global Technology Order” and in 2018 published *The Gathering Pacific Storm: Emerging US-China Strategic Competition in Defense Technological and Industrial Development*. In this capacity, Cheung’s biography suggests that theoretical lenses such as the principal-agent framework or Huntington’s subjective-objective control model must move toward an integrated theory of Xi’s leadership personality, the new CMC structure, new civil-military channels and resistances; inter-service and inter-leading central small group rivalries, and the vastly novel emergence of new technologies and informatised systems and modes of behaviour to alter the sight-lines and balance of civilian oversight in military affairs and economic foreign policy. The work of Pierre Bourdieu on habitus, fields and the intergenerational structure of power might add a powerful sociological lens here.

You Ji’s analysis moves closest to a structural realist perspective that observes how the U.S. pivot to Asia in 2010, perceived by the Chinese elite as a substantial incursion on the Asia–Pacific security order led to convergence of CCP-PLA objectives and ‘stimulated an elite consensus on and societal support of increasing financial and material inputs for PLA war preparation in order to narrow the capability gap with the US.’ I find strong resonance with You Ji’s argument here in an article which notably is not part of the *PLA Influence on China’s National Security Decision-Making* book and subsequently may open a different lens onto CCP-PLA reforms under Xi. More research should look at the structural-international determinants of CCP-PLA patterns as opposed to observing Xi’s personality as the driving force. What might also be ripe for further study is how the geographic position of the researcher affects their perception and sensibility to the issue at hand. You Ji, an alumni of Peking University and the Australian National University now based at the School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales and a visiting senior research fellow at East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, perhaps has a very different sense of the world Xi, the Politburo, and Central Military Commission perceive in U.S.–Quad containment as a claustrophobic phenomenon relative to the other

² As part of Xi’s reform agenda in 2015, 15 departments were created to replace the 5 organs of the CMC: General Office (办公厅) Joint Staff Department (联合参谋部) Political Work Department (政治工作部) Logistic Support Department (后勤保障部) Equipment Development Department (装备发展部) Training and Administration Department (训练管理部) National Defense Mobilization Department (国防动员部) Discipline Inspection Commission (纪律检查委员会) Politics and Legal Affairs Commission (政法委员会) Science and Technology Commission (科学技术委员会) Office for Strategic Planning (战略规划办公室) Office for Reform and Organizational Structure (改革和编制办公室) Office for International Military Cooperation (国际军事合作办公室) Audit Office (审计署) Agency for Offices Administration (机关事务管理总局). The current personnel of the CMC are Xi Jinping as Leader of the CMC Leading Group for National Defence and Military Reform, his vice-chairmen Air Force General Xu Qiliang, Member of the 19th Politburo, Executive Deputy Leader of the CMC Leading Group for National Defence and Military Reform, General Zhang Youxia, Member of the 19th Politburo, Deputy Leader of the CMC Leading Group for National Defence and Military Reform General Wei Fenghe, State Councilor and Minister of National Defense General Li Zuoqiang, Chief of Joint Staff Admiral Miao Hua, Director of the CMC Political Work Department General Zhang Shengmin, Secretary of the CMC Commission for Discipline Inspection, also a Deputy Secretary of the CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection

authors based in the U.S.³ From You Ji, further inquiry might also look via historical institutionalism to structural analogs of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the First Gulf War that are driving new convergences of civil-military objectives in China today and also in India and a host of other Asian states.

In *The PLA Role in China's Foreign Policy and Crisis Behavior*, Swaine 'challenges the view of a PLA that wields decisive influence over Chinese foreign policy or crisis behavior and argues that the lack of an effective NSC-like structure raises doubts about adequate coordination and oversight of PLA operational activities such as weapons testing and military actions outside China's borders.' The subsequent creation of an NSC under Xi and reports of civil and bureaucratic resistance to the idea suggest that the spectre of civilian loss of oversight under Hu Jintao (2007 antisatellite test; 2010 General Ma Xiaotian's comments on U.S.-Korea naval manoeuvres relations; 2011 J-20 fighter aircraft flight) still worries a large number of Xi's open critics and silent critics within the Politburo and PBSC. At the time of publication in 2015 *PLA Influence on China's National Security Decision-Making* drew evidence to suggest that 'the PLA does appear to have more influence on purely military issues than in the past — but much less influence on political issues — and to be more actively engaged in policy debates on mixed civil-military issues where military equities are at stake.' In light of more recent critical junctures such as the China-India border dispute, Taiwan cross-meridian line air and naval transgressions and conservative, nationalistic sentiments over the South China Sea, a key question from the readings is to what extent this argument still holds.

Questions

Does the PLA today still have a minimalist position in China's overseas politics? Is Xi's pursuit of China's national rejuvenation, the "China Dream" (中国梦) and a perceived tightening alignment of military modernisation, influence operations, and predatory economics overseas a function of the tightening grip of military decision-making on economic foreign policy?

Should the works of Sun Tzu be integrated into a theory of CCP/PLA relations which in contradistinction to Saunders and Wuthnow's "Goldwater-Nichols with Chinese characteristics" frame might understand Chinese civil-military evolutions on their own terms and through a Chinese strategic lens?

Are there other cross-comparative lenses that might be applied to emerging military inter-agency rivalry and bureaucratic resistance in China such as that of the U.S. Mobile ICBM program in the 1960s? How might a comparative study of military modernisation and civil-military relations in India and other Asian states in the last 40 years generate new structural understandings of the evolution of CCP/PLA relations?

How might the works here of each author be updated through new sources and analytical frames such as historical institutionalism toward an integrated theory of civil-military under/over balance in Chinese foreign-policy making? In terms of sources, what are Chinese military thinkers and writers writing about? With Xi's move toward the primacy of the Rocket Force and Navy, are strains emerging with China's traditional ground force military hierarchy?

³ Two of You Ji's most recent articles: "How Xi Jinping Dominates Elite Party Politics: A Case Study of Civil-Military Leadership Formation", *The China Journal*, Issue 84, 2020. "The Political and Military Nexus of Beijing-Washington-Taipei: Military Interactions in the Taiwan Strait", *The China Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2018, 89-120. (https://muse.jhu.edu/article/702456#info_wrap)

To what extent is outer space a radically new domain that calls for entirely new civil-military channels of communication and effective oversight models?

In *Military Waste: The Unexpected Consequences of Permanent War Readiness* (2019), Joshua Reno explores the opportunity costs of promoting a vast military-industrial complex on domestic social and economic development. To what extent does military waste apply to Xi's China Dream?

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