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**China's Political Commissars and Commanders:
Trends & Dynamics**

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ABSTRACT

Political Commissars and Commanders in the Chinese military played a significant role for more than seven decades. Several commonalities, differences and relative influences of these two in the military hierarchy existed, though both were tasked to pursue political and strategic goals set by the Communist Party in the internal matters or external dimensions of China. Even as the Commanders' role remained vital in the current phase of military modernisation, professionalism and power projection, the role of the Political Commissars is expected to be enhanced with the launching of "three wars" - media, legal and psychological warfare - from 2003.

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“China’s Political Commissars and Commanders:Trends & Dynamics”

Introduction

The People’s Liberation Army of China (PLA), with its predecessor the Workers and Peasants Red Army, has evolved over a period of time into a comprehensive politico-military organization with an ideological and professional system since its inception in 1927. In this system, military commanders (*silingyuan*) and political commissars (*zhengzhi weiyuan*) play a significant, if complex, role.

In general, the military commander is tasked to further the political objectives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the state - the People’s Republic of China (PRC) - whereas the political commissar is tasked to further the CCP political objectives in the PLA. While the commander is tasked with military combat issues of commanding and directing troops in war and peacetime, evolving and enhancing necessary combat capabilities, the institution of political commissars is geared up for disseminating the CCP’s perspective in the PLA and strived to maintain ‘absolute control of the Party over the army’.

The exigencies of the PLA wars with the Nationalist Guomindang army or the Japanese army meant greater stress on the commanding officers. Several well-known commanders of the PLA, like Zhu De, Peng Dehuai, Lin Biao, Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Nie Rongzhen, He Long, Liu Bocheng, Xu Xiangqian, and others have successfully commanded hundreds of thousands of troops to help the CCP seize state power in 1949. On the other hand, political commissars like Mao Zedong and others were able to steer the PLA through the maze of domestic political and military situations

successfully, which often involved not only the assessment of strategic equations but also the shaping of military campaigns. The role of the political commissars then, became important, and at times decisive, in the events of the 1940s as exemplified with the slogan that the party should control the “gun”.¹ A complex, if inter-related, dynamics emerged between the political commissars and commanders in this period prior to the 1949 establishment of the PRC, that has continued until the present given the vagaries of the country’s political situation.

Several well-known scholars have analyzed the role of the political commissars or commanders of the PLA.² Yet little is known about the inter-relationships between the political commissars and commanders in the PLA over a period of time. This paper attempts to analyze the dynamics of this complex relationship between the commanders and political commissars in the PLA in a broader outline and charts the differences and meeting-points between the two. However it should be emphasized here at the outset that several in the PLA have changed their roles from being

¹ Su Chin-chiang and Shen Ming-shih have argued that the political work system in this period, or more precisely, a lack of it among the Guomindang army which reverted to ‘American-style Press System’ in the Civil War and departed from its political warfare system as developed and perfected from the Eastern Campaign in 1925, Northern Expedition in 1927, was decisive in the loss of power of Guomindang in 1949. See Su Chin-chiang and Shen Ming-shih, ‘Taiwan’s Political Warfare System and Civil-Military Relations: Evolution and Prospect’ in **Taiwan Defense Affairs** (Taipei) vol.1 no. 2 Winter 2000/2001 pp. 39-63 (see pp. 43-44)

² Among these mention should be made of William Whitson and Chen-Hsia Huang, **The Chinese High Command: A History of Communist Military Politics 1927-71**, New York: Praeger Publications, 1973 (pp. 436-57); Ellis Joffe, ‘The Chinese Army after the Cultural Revolution’ **The China Quarterly** No. 55 (July-September, 1973); John Gittings, ‘Army-Party relations in the context of the Cultural Revolution’ in John Wilson Lewis ed. **Party Leadership and Revolutionary Power in China**, London: Cambridge University Press, 1970; Ellis Joffe, **Party and Army: Professionalism and Political Control in the Chinese Officer Corps, 1949-1964**, Cambridge: Mass: Harvard University Press, 1965; David Shambaugh, ‘The Soldier and the State in China: The Political Work System in the People’s Liberation Army’ in Brian Hook ed. **The Individual and the State in China**, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996 pp. 104-48; Harlan W Jenks, ‘The Red-Expert Balance’ in his **From Muskets to Missiles: Politics and Professionalism in the Chinese Army 1945-81**, Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1982; Jane Price, **Cadres, Commanders and Commissars**, Boulder: Westview Press, 1976; Ying Mao Kau *et.al.* eds. **The Political Work System of the Chinese Communist System: Analyses and Documents**, Providence: Brown University East Asia Language and Research Center, 1971

commanders to political commissars or vice versa. Another caveat is that the paper emphasizes on the political commissars, as the role of the commanders in any armed force is relatively well known. Additionally, in general, the PLA publications do not advertise, or discuss at length, the relative importance of commanders at the expense of political commissars or vice versa. The concrete dynamics between the two is also missing in the available PLA literature and so one has to infer such aspects as the relative roles of each one of these, differences, prospects and the like.

Political work system, departments & commissars

The overall system of the political commissars and commanders in the PLA differ from each other.³ While the military command system is relatively well known, reflecting, as it were, the main features of such systems elsewhere in the world armed forces, the political commissar system is complicated but has been highlighted in the PLA history. At the political level, the PLA is governed by a system that is in many respects unique in terms of its large scale and extent. While the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Taiwan and other armed forces have had similar systems, they have since undergone a change. For instance, the word ‘political commissar’ was dropped from the Soviet parlance, and given up after the collapse of the USSR.

The Chinese political organizational system is composed of CCP committees (*dang weiyuanhui / dangwei*), political departments (*zhengzhi bu*) and political commissars

³ A recent National Defense University publication distinguishes higher-level personnel system in the PLA as military officers, political officers, logistics officers, armaments officers and professional technical officers, but does not enlist the differing roles, functions of these political and military officers. See Wu Jieming chief ed. *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* [**Guide to study of theory of military political work**], Beijing: National Defense University Publication, 2003 [hereafter *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan*] p. 170

(*zhengzhi weiyuan / zhengwei*).⁴ The CCP has established committees in all the PLA services and organizations above the regimental level. The political commissar system is traced to the decision taken at the 6th CCP Congress in 1928.⁵ The status, composition, relative influence and functions of the political commissars in the history of the PLA have varied considerably.⁶ In general, the functions of the political commissars may be listed in a simple form as follows:

- Overseeing a military unit
- Ensuring the loyalty of troops to the CCP's rule
- Carrying forward CCP's current political line, policies and principles⁷
- Overseeing civilian matters, personnel affairs, education
- Enhancing the morale and entertainment of troops⁸
- Studying closely the military personnel's thinking processes and conduct towards rules and regulations and enhancing their political consciousness (*sixiang juewu*) and comprehension⁹
- Reporting, conducting cadre meetings, investigation, study sessions, observing the three democracies [in the spheres of politics, military and economic affairs], and personnel responsibility system [*gangwei zerenzhidu*]¹⁰

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, information on these aspects is from Zhou Keyu, *et al.* eds. *Dangdai Zhongguo Jundui Zhengzhi Gongzuo* [**Contemporary Chinese Military's Political Work**], Beijing: Contemporary China Publications, 1994 2 vols [hereafter *Dangdai Zhongguo Jundui Zhengzhi gongzuo*] vol. 2 pp. 333-62; and *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* pp. 84-86. David Shambaugh has argued that these party committee systems are more important than the commissars. See *op.cit.*, pp. 112n and 125

⁵ See *Dangdai Zhongguo Jundui Zhengzhi Gongzuo* vol. 2 pp. 355-59 for the history of the political commissar system in the PLA.

⁶ Liu Mingzhi, 'The Political Work System in the CCP Army' **Trend** (Hong Kong) January 1997 pp. 26-29 as excerpted in **Inside China Mainland** (Taipei) April 1997 pp. 35-38.

⁷ See 'Military of China' at <http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Political_commissar> [accessed on 11 October, 2004] and "Air Force Political System" at <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1991/plaaf-ch22.htm>> [accessed on 11 October, 2004]

⁸ See 'General Political Department' at <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/gpd.htm>> [accessed on 11 October 2004]. A system of model cadres was identified by the political commissars for emulation among the rank and file with Lei Feng as a classic example in the PLA, the latest being Li Xiangqun, who succumbed to the flood relief work. See Li Shiyuan, "Zhang Wannian Speech Honors Li Xiangqun" **Xinhua Domestic Service** April 16, 1999 in United States Department of Commerce, **Foreign Broadcast Information Service-China Daily Report** [hereafter **FBIS-CHI**] **FBIS-CHI-1999-0421** April 22, 1999

⁹ See Chinese Academy of Military Science ed. *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junyu* [**Military Terminology of the Chinese People's Liberation Army**], Beijing: PLA Publications, 1982 [hereafter *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junyu*] pp. 175-98

- Overseeing the public relations of the military unit¹¹

An article in the PLA Daily in early 2003 noted that the PLA should promote a ‘contingent of cadres to ensure the guns are always in the hands of people who are loyal to the party’. It stated:

In the practice in revolutionary struggle and construction over a long time, our party has set up a complete set of fundamental systems for exercising leadership over the armed forces. This is expressed in a concentrated manner by the implementation of the party committee system, the political commissar system, the political department system, and the system of setting up a party branch in each company. This has closely integrated the party's organizations with the organizational system of the armed forces. These systems are the unique political advantages of our armed forces and they fundamentally guarantee the nature and combat effectiveness of our armed forces. Under no circumstance can these systems be abandoned. We must more consciously and strictly implement a series of fundamental systems for the ‘party to command the gun’...¹²

The system of the Party controlling cadres in the PLA was used for the first time during the War of Liberation (August 1945- September 1949). Subsequently, this system was consolidated to make the CCP paramount in the decision-making of the PLA. According to a PLA document the implications of such a set-up are that

Every cadre (with Party membership) must participate in Party life and accept Party leadership; promotion, transfer, reward and punishment of cadres must be discussed by the Party organizations at the grassroots or the appropriate

¹⁰ See, for details, Zhu Yida, ed. *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junguan shouce: Haijun fence* [**Chinese People's Liberation Army Officers Manual: Naval Forces Part**] [hereafter, *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junguan shouce: Haijun fence*], Qingdao: Qingdao Publications, 1991 pp. 626-27. On political and ideological education see Zhang Aiping *et.al.* eds. *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun* [**Chinese People's Liberation Army**] 2vols, Beijing, Contemporary China Publications, 1994 pp.607-18. On cadre work *Ibid.*, pp.627-33. The Party committees are responsible for the resettlement of the demobilized soldiers and officers of the PLA.

¹¹ Lo Wang-chang, ‘Naval Units of New Generation’ **Ta Kung Pao** (Hong Kong) 16 July, 1998 in **FBIS-CHI-98-197** 17 July, 1998.

¹² Fu Wen, ‘Upholding Absolute Party Leadership Is the Fundamental Task in Ideological and Political Construction’ **Liberation Army Daily** 8 January, 2003 **FBIS-CHI-2003-0108** 6 February, 2003

levels and reported to the Party committee at a higher level for examination and approval¹³.

Relatively, definitions of the political organizational system by different PLA publications have been either similar or have incorporated new trends and demands. The 1982 Academy of Military Science (AMS) dictionary on military terminology, for instance, defined military-political work in terms of the CCP's political and organizational work in the PLA and described it as 'lifeline' [*shengmingxian*]. The main features included:

- Spreading Marxism-Leninism- Mao Zedong Thought among the rank and file
- Enhancing political consciousness
- Guaranteeing CCP's absolute leadership over the PLA
- Abiding by CCP's line, policy
- Strengthening unity internally and externally
- Enhancing combat capability of the troops¹⁴

The three major principles in political work, according to the AMS, are in terms of ushering unity among officers and soldiers, civil-military unity and disintegrating the enemy forces.¹⁵

According to Xu Yongli, writing in 1987, the system of the military's ideological-political work, instituted by the CCP in the PLA, is geared towards the goal of socialist modernization and military modernization in politics, ideology and organizational issues. The five guarantees demanded from the PLA include the following:

¹³ See for the above quotation 'The Cadre management system of the Chinese People's Liberation Army' edited and translated by Dong Lisheng in **Chinese Law and Government** (Armonk) July-August 1995 Vol. 28 No 4 p 22

¹⁴ See *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junyu* p.175

¹⁵ See *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junyu* p. 176

- Party's absolute leadership [*juedui lingdao*];
- Maintaining PLA's character [*xingzhi*];
- PLA's socialist spiritual civilization construction
- PLA's internal unity and unity among the civil and military components;
- Military combat capabilities with Chinese characteristics with modernization, regularization and revolutionization.¹⁶

According to Article 19 of the National Defense Law passed in March 1997, the "armed forces of the People's Republic of China are subject to leadership by the Communist Party of China. CPC organizations in the armed forces shall conduct activities in accordance with the CPC Constitution."¹⁷

More crisp, if repetitive, is the definition offered most recently. In 2003, the National Defense University (NDU) publication on the subject mentioned PLA's political work system as ideological and organizational work, for maintaining the absolute leadership of the party, enhancing combat capabilities, striving for unity among ranks and countering the enemy.¹⁸

The PLA has spread its political work in all its armed services and (land, navy, air, and the Second Artillery forces) the military educational system; through military exercises, construction, wartime, and recent counter-terrorism efforts, or even during emergency relief measures.¹⁹ Unlike the land forces (for example infantry troops), other services and units have relatively hi-tech components. Political work by the

¹⁶ Xu Yongli, *Xinbian sixiang zhengzhi gongzuo cidian* [A new dictionary of ideological political work], Beijing: China Economics Publications, 1987 p. 13. See also *Zhongguo Dabaikē Quanshu: Junshi* [Chinese Encyclopedia: Military Affairs] 2 vols. Beijing: Chinese Encyclopedia Publications, 1989. vol. 2 pp. 1286-88

¹⁷ 'PRC Law on National Defense' *Xinhua Domestic Service* 18 March, 1997 in **FBIS-CHI-97-055** 24 March, 1997

¹⁸ *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* p. 3

¹⁹ *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* Parts 3 and 4 on these aspects

PLA in these services is more demanding and specific in orientation.²⁰ For instance, according to the Naval Officers Manual, the contents of the political work system of the Chinese Navy were broadly divided into 13 aspects, to include political education, party building, cadre work in training, enforcing discipline, raising professional standards, etc.²¹ In addition, naval political work in the recent period included inculcating regard for the equipment, islands and oceanic features; studying and applying laws related to maritime aspects; overseeing “safety first” principles in naval training, etc.²²

A similar picture was painted by the Air Force Officers Manual on the political work to be followed in the Air Force, albeit to include the specificities of the service.²³ According to Jiang Zemin, during the 9th Party Congress of the Air Force in Beijing in February 1999, the PLA Air Force should

...earnestly carry out education in the three stresses - stresses on studying theory, increasing political consciousness, and cultivating healthy trends - among party committees and leading cadres at and above the regimental level

²⁰ *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* pp. 328-49 for work in the navy, air force, 2nd artillery, armaments and scientific establishments

²¹ For an elaboration of these thirteen points see *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junguan shouce: Haijun fence* p.627. In addition to the ‘purely’ political demands of the Navy, the cadres are also expected to fulfill certain socio-cultural aspects in what is termed as ‘one use, four abilities’ [*yiyong sihui*] for their overall development. One use refers to improving reading ability and the ability to use newspapers and periodicals, improving the ability to clip newspapers, put up newspapers and use newspapers. The ‘four abilities’ refers to the ability to read music and conduct a chorus, the ability to serve as a basketball referee, the ability to write calligraphy, and the ability to play a type of musical instrument. See Editorial Committee of Inside Mainland China, **A Lexicon of Chinese Communist Terminology** 2 vols, Taipei: Institute of Current China Studies, 1997. vol.2 pp.164-65 [hereafter **The Lexicon**] vol.2 p.5

²² *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* pp. 329-31

²³ See Xin Ming chief ed. *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junguan shouce: Hangkong fence* [**Chinese People’s Liberation Army Officers Manual: Air Force Part**], Qingdao: Qingdao Publications, 1991 pp 568-618 (especially pp.568-69) and Liu Shun Yao chief ed. *Kongjun Da Cidian* [**Air Force Dictionary**], Shanghai: Cishu Publications, 1996 pp. 193-243.

so as to strengthen the building of party organizations at the various levels and improve the education and management of leading cadres.²⁴

A recent account on political work in the Chinese air force emphasizes on safety records, besides linking wartime and peacetime missions.²⁵

Given the traditional emphasis of the Chinese leadership that its strategic forces are meant to counter imperialist and hegemonic influences - i.e., more as a political weapon rather than a weapon to be used in ordinary circumstances - the political work in the 2nd Artillery appears to be more crucial and explicit. This meant demands on the political commissars in terms of a comprehensive understanding of the ethos of the country but also of the strategic, political and diplomatic aspects and the dissemination among the rank and file with watchwords of ‘protect oneself, eliminate the enemy’.²⁶ More forthcoming on this aspect of relative importance of the political commissar over commander is the following statement from a commander himself. Zhang Aiping, then deputy secretary-general of the CMC, underscored the linkage between ‘individualism’ and the threat it can pose to the PRC’s security. He told the 2nd Artillery’s party committee enlarged meeting on October 14, 1985 that

²⁴ Jiang cited by Sun Maoqing and Luo Yuwen, ‘Jiang Addresses Air Force Party Congress’ **Xinhua Domestic Service** 1 March, 1999 in **FBIS-CHI-1999-0302** 13 March, 1999

²⁵ *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* p. 332

²⁶ *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* pp. 336-37

Modern weapons should be controlled by highly political conscious people. Influenced by various nonproletarian ideas, some people have indulged in seeking pleasure, fame, personal gains, and practicing individualism²⁷.

Likewise, the aim of political work in military exercises in the PLA is to integrate personnel and equipment, personnel and tactical technology, and in general enhance the troop's combat capabilities.²⁸

Overall, the contents of the political work system of the PLA stressed on aspects that are dear to the CCP's political ethos. In general, these included Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping's Theory, Jiang Zemin's 'Three Represents' and the like.²⁹ The PLA disseminated these ideas through its various publications including the PLA Daily, the PLA branch within the Xinhua news agency, magazines, the military arms of the radio and TV broadcasting stations, films, museums, etc. On the Taiwan issue, such propaganda included publicity of the reunification policies of the CCP through peaceful means or even by use of force, that 'all patriots belong to one big family, whether early or late they rally to the common cause', enhancing understanding on 'three links', 'united front' policies with the Guomindang, and the like.³⁰

²⁷ See 'Zhang Aiping speaks at Artillery Corps Meeting' **Beijing Domestic Service**, 14 October, 1985 in **FBIS-CHI-85-204** 22 October, 1985 p. K 12. Taking a cue from him, the **Liberation Army Daily** in the same month condemned on its front page 'bourgeois individualism' among the ranks of the PLA. It stated: 'Individualism, a serious charge, was once abused and became one of the means to persecute people during the days of the pernicious left guiding ideology. In spite of past abuse of individualism, it is obviously wrong to avoid mentioning the harm done by individualism, or ignore an individual indulging in such speech or behavior, as if individualism, the core of bourgeois outlook on the world, no longer exists'. See 'Jiefangjun Bao condemns 'Bourgeois Individualism'' **Beijing Domestic Service** 23 October, 1985 in **FBIS-CHI-85-206** 24 October, 1985 p. K 3.

²⁸ *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* p. 259

²⁹ *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* pp. 12-17

³⁰ This is based on *Dangdai Zhongguo jundui de zhengzhi gongzuo* vol. 2

The political work missions of the PLA changed given the changing policies of the CCP through the last several decades. The Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee in 1978 is generally considered to have ushered in major changes in the political work system of the PLA, in conjunction with the beginning of reform initiated by Deng Xiaoping. Deng advocated that the PLA should observe ‘five revolutionary spirits’, viz.:

- The revolutionary and death-defying spirit;
- The spirit of observing strict discipline and making self-sacrifice;
- The spirit of being selfless and putting others' interests ahead of one's own;
- The spirit of overwhelming all enemies and surmounting all difficulties; and
- The spirit of upholding revolutionary optimism and surmounting every difficulty³¹

These were credited to have made the PLA withstand the tests of reform and opening up, and raised the morale of the troops. Similarly, Yu Qiuli was recognized as having introduced new practices into the PLA’s political work during his tenure as the Director of the General Political Department. Prior to this post he had held the position of political commissar of different PLA units in different areas. Yu’s recommendations included striving for unity between combat soldiers and intellectuals who joined the PLA; political commissars participating in combat operations; raising the morale of the troops with self-sacrifice; recruiting soldiers through mass contact prior to 1949; improved training of soldiers through a system of ‘joint consultations’; encouraged new recruits to ‘pour grievances on old society’ and thus raise their consciousness towards the CCP; promoting ‘socialist spiritual culture’; accommodating cadres affected by the Cultural Revolution; and encouraging production responsibility system in the reform period.

³¹ Jia Yong, Xiao Pu and Jing Shuzhan, ‘March on in High Spirits Toward the New Century - Sidelights on All-Army Senior Cadres' Study of Deng Xiaoping Theory and Jiang Zemin's Important Expositions’ **Xinhua Domestic Service** 19 May, 1998 in **FBIS-CHI-98-139** 23 May, 1998

According to Yu,

The requirement that the ranks of cadres must be made more revolutionary, young, better educated and more competent professionally put forward by Comrade Deng Xiaoping is a general policy for work concerning cadres during the new period. It is also a strategic issue with an important bearing on the whole situation in army building. Only by building such a contingent of cadres can we be sure to open new dimensions in various tasks of the army...We must accelerate the solution of the changeover between old and new cadres...³²

On December 11, 1986, an enlarged meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC) adopted the 'Decision on the Strengthening and Improvement of Political Work in the Army During the New Period'. While the leadership of Deng Xiaoping had decided on continuing the modernizing trends of the PLA, the benefits that would accrue through the political commissars have been recognized.³³ That is, under Deng's regime, as the system of the political commissars allows them to exercise enormous powers throughout the PLA, there was a subtle change as a result of the modernization drive. The events associated with the Tiananmen incident in 1989 and the subsequent changes from 1989 to 1992 when Yang Baibing tried to usher in a predominant role for the political commissars was changed after the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1994.³⁴ In June 1992, the 'Military-wide Political Work Conference'

³² Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian, 'His Fine Example of Openness and Innovation Lives Forever - Profoundly Cherish the Memory of Comrade Yu Qiuli' **People's Daily** 5 June, 1999 in **FBIS-CHI-1999-0611** 14 June, 1999

³³ See General Office of the Central Military Commission ed. *Deng Xiaoping guanyu xinshiqi jundui jianshe lunshu xuanbian* [**Expositions of Deng Xiaoping concerning army building in the new period**], Beijing: August First Publications, 1993. ch. 10 pp. 222-276 on Deng's stress on political work and CCP as having an important position in the PLA, to follow Marxist principles, strengthen socialist spiritual civilization and explore new studies in this field. See also Wang Chengbin *et.al* eds. *Deng Xiaoping xiandai junshi lilun yu shijian* [**Theory and Practice of Deng Xiaoping's Modern Military Affairs**], Nanchang: Jiangxi People's Publications, 1993. ch. 7 parts 3-4 pp. 337-370

³⁴ On the 1989 events and PLA responses see, Andrew Scobell, **China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003 ch. 7 pp. 144-67 and You Ji and Ian Wilson, "Leadership Politics in the Chinese Party-Army State: The Fall of Zhao Ziyang" **Working Paper No. 195**, Canberra: Australian National University, The Research School of Pacific Studies, 1989.

called by the CMC in Beijing outlined ‘five difficulties’ [*wunan*] encountered during the political ideological work by the PLA units. These included areas related to propaganda, education, work, acceptance and ineffectiveness of the political work program.³⁵ The CMC in 1995 formulated the ‘four educations’ [*sige jiaoyu*] policy as a part of the politico-ideological construction of the PLA. It included education to instill notions of patriotic sacrifice, a revolutionary outlook on life, respect for cadres and love for soldiers and arduous struggle.³⁶

Jiang Zemin's ‘five words’ speech on April 16, 1996 became important watchwords in the PLA’s political work.³⁷ Termed also as ‘Five First Rate’s’ [*wuge yiliu*], PLA cadres are expected to be first-rate soldiers, and they must attain the level of ‘being politically qualified, having military excellence, well trained in their duties and upright in their personal behavior’. There is the need to establish national defence education, military training, and fronts for daily activities that are adapted to a market economy. Furthermore, there is also the need to have military usefulness, economic usefulness and social usefulness. Accordingly, leading organizations must have a first-rate level of work. They must move towards systematizing, normalizing and standardizing militia and reserve recruitment work. Additionally, infrastructure construction must reach a first-rate level. In participating in local ‘two civilizations’ construction, militia and reserve personnel must play a first rate role, so as to influence and lead the masses, and promote economic development and social advancement.³⁸

³⁵ **The Lexicon** vol.2 p.174

³⁶ **The Lexicon** vol.2 p.216

³⁷ See *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* pp. 47-48. While this speech is made in 1996, such trends are traced to December 1990. Ibid. p. 47

³⁸ This is based **The Lexicon** vol.2 pp. 163-64

The political work mission for 1997 unveiled an education campaign known as the ‘*shuang si yi huodong*’ [double fours-and-ones-program], elaborated as the ‘Four Knowings and One Keeping Pace, Four Reports and One Reliance’. Here the ‘four knowings and one keeping pace’ refers to the need for superiors and cadres to know the whereabouts, activities, mentality and thinking processes, and needs of subordinates and soldiers, to keep pace with work. Conversely, the ‘four reports and one reliance’ refers to the need for subordinates and soldiers to take the initiative in reporting to their superiors and cadres on their whereabouts, activities, needs, etc; and the need to rely on the organization to resolve conspicuous problems³⁹. In March 1997, Jiang Zemin called for an across-the-board implementation of the ‘two armings’ [*linage wuzhuang*] policy in the PLA units. These two refer to arming the minds of soldiers and officers with the Deng Xiaoping’s theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and high-technology.⁴⁰

Jiang Zemin was reportedly concerned with two aspects of the PLA as cited by then CMC vice-chairman Zhang Wannian, on ‘how to win and how to avoid degeneration.’⁴¹ Both of these are related to the ban on the PLA’s involvement in commercial activities and the need for focus on improving combat qualities.⁴²

³⁹ See for this terminology, **Inside China Mainland** (Taipei) July 1997 p 88

⁴⁰ **The Lexicon** vol.2 p.275

⁴¹ ‘Zhang Wannian Awards Honor Title to PLA Company’ **Xinhua Domestic Service** 1 November, 1999 in **FBIS-CHI-1999-1213** 14 December, 1999

⁴² On this topic see James Mulvenon, **Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise and Fall of the Chinese Military-Business Complex, 1978-1998**, Armonk, New York: M.E.Sharpe, 2001

The political commissars' role in the PLA's mid-1998 divestiture of commercial activities is a significant one. While such measures attracted stiff resistance, as some unit commanders at times ran such business enterprises, the following quote from the Party Committee of the Nanjing Military Region reveals the process of implementing CCP's policy in this respect. It stated:

While the concerned department wanted to keep it at first, the MR Party Committee made a strict demand that it all be firmly turned over. Meanwhile, the MR also sent out four task forces, which went from individual sites to the overall layout, conducting fishing-expedition oversight of conditions such as the business turnover and dissolution, to ensure that the handover of military enterprises went smoothly.⁴³

In 2003, the responsibilities of the PLA's political work system included support for the state's opening up and reform policies - "revolutionization, modernization and regularization".⁴⁴ More importantly, perhaps due to influence from the US war in Iraq in early 2003, the PLA, in its revised regulations on political work in December 2003 prescribed media, psychological and legal warfare as responsibilities. A new stage was then set for the political work of the PLA and its consequent impact on the political commissars.

The following two statements, which are generally considered to be the 'domains' of the commanders, point towards an active role of the political commissars.⁴⁵

According to the political commissar of the Navy's South Sea Fleet, Vice Admiral

⁴³ Jin Weixin, 'The Jiangsu Forces in the Nanjing Military Region Turn Over All Army-Run Enterprises, Stressing Politics, Considering the Overall Order, and Acting in Line with High Standards and Strict Requirements' *Xinhua Ribao* (Nanjing) 10 February, 1999 in **FBIS-CHI-1999-0222** 23 February, 1999

⁴⁴ *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* pp. 3-4

⁴⁵ Whitson and Huang argued that it is possible that commissars role may increase if the PLA depends on Sun Zi's dictum that victory can be achieved not by military combat but by deception and other means. See W. Whitson and C.H.Huang, *op.cit.* p. 438

Zhao Yingfu, who was attending a reorientation course for the armed forces in late 1998, three 'senses' are needed for the PLA. These are a sense of crisis, a sense of urgency, and a sense of responsibility. He said, 'by studying knowledge of high technology, I have seen where I am lagging behind, boosted my confidence, and become clearer about the direction of strengthening the Army through science and technology.'⁴⁶ Separately, the 2nd Artillery's party committee reportedly presented a 'Feasibility Report on Tapping the Potential and Increasing the Firing Range of a Certain Missile Type' to the CMC.⁴⁷ Troops in remote areas in Xinjiang and Tibet continued to be enthusiastic because, according to a political commissar of the Gansu provincial Military District,

...they have received an ideological education with the stress on acquiring a revolutionary outlook on life and values. The spirit of being particularly able to bear hardships, to exercise patience, and to fight, which has been fostered by the plateau PLA units in defending the country and garrisoning the frontiers over a long time, is a tremendous impetus to officers and men of one generation after another in bearing hardships as an honor and doing arduous, pioneering work.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, the party committees' role in the logistics work is not unknown. For instance, in 2000, the 'leadership team' of the party committee of a combined corps in Chengdu Military Region had found problems related to the maintenance of equipment. It then suggested the principle of 'setting a standard with wartime in mind, laying a foundation in peacetime, showing good logistic support capability in time of

⁴⁶ Yang Jian and Xi Qixin, 'Knowledge Is Power - A Report on Army-Wide High-Technology Training Course for High-Ranking Cadres' **Xinhua Domestic Service** 26 November, 1998 in **FBIS-CHI-98-330** 30 November, 1998

⁴⁷ Zhang Jiajun, Zhang Xuanjie and Guo Jia, 'China's Sharp Sword - A Record on Strategic Missile Force Marching Toward Modernization in big Strides' **Xinhua Domestic Service** 11 September, 1999 in **FBIS-CHI-1999-0917** 21 September, 1999

⁴⁸ Jia Yong, Xiao Pu and Jing Shuzhan, 'March on in High Spirits Toward the New Century - Sidelights on All-Army Senior Cadres' Study of Deng Xiaoping Theory and Jiang Zemin's Important Expositions' **Xinhua Domestic Service** 19 May, 1998 in **FBIS-CHI-98-139** 23 May, 1998

need.’ Consequently, the PLA Daily reported that the unit’s weapons and equipment of the unit were maintained in good condition during the mobile drills in October 2002.⁴⁹

Commanders

Commanders have played a significant role in the PLA’s history before and after 1949. The successful campaigns prior to 1949 and in the Korean War of 1951-53, border clashes with India in 1962, operations against the Soviet Union in 1969 and Vietnam in 1979 were significant and relatively large in scale. Several military academies, especially the one at Nanjing, were meant for training commanders. Mao Zedong himself was quick to emphasize the commanders’ role soon after the formation of the PRC. Addressing the first batch of graduates of the Military Academy on July 10, 1952, he observed:

The kind of situation that in the past placed emphasis exclusively on political work and neglected staff work must be resolutely changed around (it is correct to emphasize political work, and there should still continue to be this emphasis from now on). In the past some weaker people, people who lacked organizational ability, or even people who had committed some mistakes and did not have a high level of activism, were chosen to work in the commanding organs, and this caused some commanding officers to be reluctant to serve as staff officers or chiefs of staff. This situation must be radically turned around. From now on we must select quality commanders who are rich in organizational and commanding abilities to serve in the commanding organs at all levels, and thus create a new work-style and a new atmosphere in the commanding organs⁵⁰.

⁴⁹ Jin Weixin and Jiang Xinghua, ‘Certain Combined Corps Under Chengdu Military Region Is Always on the Move During Long-distance Drill With Weapons and Equipment in Good Condition’ **Liberation Army Daily** 4 November, 2002 in **FBIS-CHI-2002-1104** 2 January, 2003

⁵⁰ Mao Zedong, ‘Address to the First Graduating Class of the Military Academy’ July 10, 1952 in *Dahai Hangxing* translated in **The Writings of Mao Zedong 1949-1976 Volume I September 1949-December 1955** Michael Y M Kau & John K Leung eds, M E Sharpe, Inc. Armonk, 1986. pp. 272-273. Cited on p 273.

Concepts related to ‘early war, major war, nuclear war’ in the 1960s meant heavy emphasis on the combat readiness of the commanders. Lin Biao’s ‘regional superiority’ further added to the influence of the commanders. Indeed, during Lin Biao’s time as the Minister of National Defense, the content related to military training increased as compared to political education, though it must be added that the role of the political commissars did not decline in the PRC.

Of late, the role of PLA commanders is gradually changing given the ever-increasing demands of modern warfare with its stress on hi-tech components. The modern campaigns and the requisite strategies demanded from the commanding officers have become more subtle and complex, requiring more specialization and strict emphasis on division of labor. This means that the interchanging of roles between the commanders and political commissars may no longer occur in future local warfare under hi-tech conditions or under ‘informationized conditions’. Indeed in such wars more specialization and devotion are demanded from the commanders. According to Chen Xianhua, as there are no clear demarcation lines in future campaigns, victory or defeat would depend on the firm and considerate decisions of the command mechanism, accurate assessment of information, logistics, etc.⁵¹

While the political commissars are tasked to keep up the CCP’s political line in the PLA, the military commanders performed combat duties entrusted by the CCP/PRC. Within the military command system in the PLA, down to the unit level, there has been a perceptible change in the last seven decades. The 36 Field Army structures

⁵¹ See Chen Xianhua, ‘*Xiandai tiaojian xia zhanyi siling jiguan zuzhi zhihui zuozhan ying bawo de qige wenti*’ in National Defense University Military Command Research Section ed. *Jundui zhihui lilun jijin* [A collection on the theory of military command], Beijing: National Defense University, 1992 [junnei faxing] pp. 42-53

were cut to 24 and then to the current 21 Group Armies (with a prospect of being further reduced to about 19); Military Regions were reduced from 13 to 11 to the current seven, with a future move towards theatre command posts that could mean higher roles for the commanders and integration of different services. PLA modernization meant more professionalism with its technology-orientation, Non-Commissioned Officer system and gradual rise in the educational levels of the commanders. Yet overall, it appears that the military commanders continue to follow the CCP's orders.⁵²

While the relationship between the commanders and political commissars is complex, and while under the CCP's control there was no open hostility, it can be easily surmised that tensions did exist between the two. In the relationship dynamics between these two as shown in the over-simplified annex, there are indications that they both came to loggerheads and exhibited differences over who was higher in the hierarchy⁵³.

The 1930-32 'Regulations' of the Red Army had envisaged, for instance, a predominant role for the political commissars in the army. According to these regulations, divided into 34 parts, the political commissar is the representative of the CCP in the army, and is sent to the army in order to supervise and expedite all military actions and orders and implement 'revolutionary law' among the ranks. In the

⁵² The cases of Peng Dehuai at Lushan Conference or Lin Biao's alleged coup and other events may be viewed differently than as a challenge to the CCP itself.

⁵³ See Ellis Joffe, **Party and Army: Professional and Political Control of the Chinese Officer Corps 1949-1964**, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1965 p 114 and Dong Lisheng's edited and translated version of the PLA document, 'The Cadre Management System of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (I)' [Part 1] in **Chinese Law and Government** July-August 1995 Vol. 28 No 4; and [Part 2] in **Chinese Law and Government** September-October 1995 Vol. 28 No. 5.

case of disputes between the two in a unit, the political commissar was accordingly entitled to overrule the Commander's orders. Of course, the commissar in such a case has to report the dispute to the higher authorities⁵⁴. These regulations also enjoined the 'necessity' of the Red Army in 'accepting the leadership of the proletarian's vanguard'⁵⁵. According to Peng Dehuai, there is a certain demarcation line between the powers of the political commissars and the Commanders. According to his speech to the Eighth National Congress of the CCP,

...military commanders are responsible for the implementation of orders and directives issued by higher authorities and decisions made by the Party committees of the same level so far as they concern military affairs, while political commissars are responsible for the implementation of those concerning political work⁵⁶.

The debate in the PLA over the relative importance of the political commissars and the commanders continued. Given the fact that the PLA in the 1950s adopted Soviet military principles, organizational structures, equipment, training manuals and the like, leading to emphasis on modernization and the consequent enhancement in the role of the commanders, a 'two-line' struggle in the PLA emerged. Mao Zedong was critical of those who wanted to diminish the influence of the political work system, party committees and political commissar system as a result of the modernizing trends within the PLA. He said,

...they assert that the system of Party committees will impede the better judgments and concentration of command. They even openly advocate liquidation of the system of Party committee leadership. Further, they

⁵⁴. See J Chester Chang "'Party Versus Gun": The Rise of Communism in China' **Issues & Studies** (Taipei) Vol. 25 No.12 December 1989 pp. 105-21. See p 119

⁵⁵. See J Chester Chang *ibid.* pp. 118-19

⁵⁶ See Peng Dehuai's speech to this Congress at **Eighth National Congress of the Communist Party of China** Vol. II ,Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1956 p 33

liquidated and restricted the activities of Party committees in leadership and political work.⁵⁷

As a consequence, after the Lushan Conference in 1957, the 1963 Regulations provided a predominant role for the political commissars in the affairs of the PLA by the provision, among others, that the operational orders, to be binding, normally had to be countersigned by the political commissar. These 1963 Regulations contended that:

On handling all important questions ... except during a state of emergency when responsible persons may act on their own discretion, the Party Committee must hold a full discussion of the question and arrive at a decision in accordance with the system of democratic centralism of the Party; if it concerns military matters, the troop commander should be responsible for carrying it out. Both the political commissar and the military commander are leading officers of the unit; they are mutually responsible for the work of their unit. Under ordinary conditions, the political commissar is in charge of the daily routine of the Party committee⁵⁸.

Generally speaking, these provisions remained unaltered for a long time, even as there were tensions over the relative powers of these two leaders in the PLA. While modernizing trends needed the predominant role of the commanders in combat and in peacetime preparation, the imperatives of the Party's perspective in the PLA demanded a higher role for the political commissars. While differences persisted between the two, these may have been minimized at the personnel level by interchanging the roles of the political commissars and commanders at various levels and times. At another level, the clash may have been at the tactical and personality level as both are tasked with similar strategic duties- i.e., furthering the CCP's perspectives in military and political spheres.

⁵⁷ Mao's speech carried by the **Liberation Army Daily** 1 July, 1958 as cited by Frederick C Teiwes **Politics and Purges in China : Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms 1950-1965** (second edition), New York: M E Sharpe, 1993 pp. 294-95

⁵⁸ Regulations cited in Glenn G Dick 'The General Political Department' in William Whitson ed. **The Military and Political Power in China in the 1970s**, New York: Praeger, 1972 pp. 171-83. See p 173 for the quotation.

According to Lieutenant General Cao Huichen, attending an all-PLA units conference in April 1999 that discussed the Kosovo bombings, viewed that ‘in carrying out the new period of military strategy, the crux lies in updating the concept; when we have mastered some hi-tech knowledge, we will be able to observe and consider problems more clearly’.⁵⁹

All political commissars and commanders are not a homogeneous lot in the PLA hierarchy. There are gradations among them that differentiate them sometimes into higher and lower level cadres and commanders. The institution of ranks and grades in 1956, and later in 1988, contributed to an extent towards this trend of differentiation among the troops.⁶⁰ According to a critique from some of the higher level cadres, any departure from the CCP’s ideals inherited from the halcyon days of revolutionary struggle would start a decline in standards of the political commissars. The higher-level political commissars then were urged to set higher moral standards so as to be emulated by the rank and file. The following quote from a few PLA officers, attending a National Defense University conference in 1998, make such points amply clear. Generals Geng Xinghua, Wang Shien, and Yuan Yajun argued that:

Some leading cadres are dispirited, do substandard work, have their revolutionary zeal waned, put partial and personal interests above everything else, and even seek a life of pleasure and go after fame and wealth. The main causes for all these are that something has gone wrong with their world outlook and their outlook on life and that they cannot stand the test of the

⁵⁹ Xi Qixin and Zhao Yongxin: ‘Advancing Toward High Technology - High-Ranking Military Cadres Attending a Hi-Tech Training Course’ **Xinhua Domestic Service** 13 June, 1999 in **FBIS-CHI-1999-0615** 16 June, 1999

⁶⁰ Ranks and gradations may also lead to tensions between the commissars and commanders. For instance, in a scenario of a political commissar with a higher rank than the commanding officer, the tension between the two in a military unit may be discernible.

powers in their hands. The generals deeply realized that in the course of accelerating the development of the socialist market economy, only by stepping up the remolding of leading cadres' world outlook and their outlook on life and raising their ideological level will it be possible to increase their ability to resist the corrosive influence of decadent capitalist ideology and culture and to ensure the success of the party and the people's cause.⁶¹

In general, it can be surmised that those Commanders who were elevated to the position of General in the armed forces after rigorous processes of evaluation and testing in combat duties, move away from the mundane chores of the military. At these levels, except for the reorientation courses and training in higher military institutions (given the hi-tech RMA trends), these commanders are tested mainly for their loyalty to the civilian leadership. This may also be the case with the political commissars. Therefore, it can be inferred that at higher levels of the commissar and commander positions, loyalty becomes the common denominator. That perhaps explains the interchanging roles of these two positions in the PLA hierarchy. This is illustrated in the following cases. Qin Jiwei became the Commander of the Beijing Military Region in 1980-87 after he served as the political commissar of the same region in 1975-80, and commander of the Chengdu Military Region from 1973-75. By 1988, Qin became the Minister for National Defense. Chi Haotian was the political commissar of the Jinan Military Region in 1985-87, and was later promoted to the Chief of General Staff in 1987-90 and the Minister for National Defense in 1990. In the 1960s, Xiao Jingguang served both as the commander and the political commissar of the naval forces, with Du Yide as deputy commander and deputy political commissar.

⁶¹ Jia Yong, Xiao Pu and Jing Shuzhan, 'March on in High Spirits Toward the New Century - Sidelights on All-Army Senior Cadres' Study of Deng Xiaoping Theory and Jiang Zemin's Important Expositions' **Xinhua Domestic Service** 19 May, 1998 in **FBIS-CHI-98-139** 23 May, 1998

At another level of analyses, it may not be out of context to enlist a different view from within the PLA about the political commissars and commanders- together as officers - and their relation to the soldiers. Indeed there were tensions in this equation as well in the PLA. Due to changes in the economy in recent years and spread of several ideas, the PLA, as with other sectors, is in transition. The tensions between the commanders and political commissar's work style, in certain aspects, are being questioned as not valid, or even harmful to the soldiers. Formalities, bureaucracy, and the harsh treatment of soldiers, etc. were frowned upon. Reflecting such sentiments, a PLA commentator said:

Some officials responsible for leading troops are used to applying the old ways when looking at new problems, regarding the new characteristics of soldiers [like relatively higher educational levels and comprehension and aspirations for material progress] as their shortcomings. The more they look, the more they feel unpleasant and find more "problems."... they have failed to make efforts to rely on soldiers to carry out democratic management. Some grassroots level cadres regard it as an honor to have the final say, considering their subjective assumption and "one person having the say" as a manifestation of resoluteness. Some others believe in "those responsible for leading troops should not be softhearted," scolding and even meting out physical punishment against soldiers at every turn.⁶²

According to former Logistics Department Director Wang Ke, there is much left to be desired in the relationship between the soldiers and officers of the PLA. He attributed the recent tensions between them to the shift towards reform policies. For,

....being in peace for a long time, especially following the development of reform, opening up, and the socialist market economy, some new situations and problems have emerged in the internal environment of the Army and in the relationship between officers and men. Negative impacts of the market economy have brought about, among some comrades, the unhealthy tendencies of treating ideological work as administrative work, oversimplifying management work, and even commercializing contacts between comrades....The democratic rights of officers and enlisted men

⁶² Wang Zeru, 'Correct Basic Attitude Toward Soldiers Is Key to Maintaining Close Internal Relationship' **Liberation Army Daily** 16 January, 2003 in **FBIS-CHI-2003-0116** 12 February, 2003

should be honored, and the masses should be allowed to fully voice their opinions.⁶³

Another dimension to the dynamics between these two positions in the PLA is the underlying suspicion that some commanders are becoming more ‘apolitical’. The following are a few statements regarding this phenomenon. While stressing the principle of the CCP’s ‘absolute leadership’ over the PLA, a recent PLA article alluded to transitions that were taking place in terms of professional trends, and the political implications such trends have on the party’s loosening hold over the PLA. It warned the rank and file of consequences of following, and giving logical extension, to the western paradigm in building the armed forces and instructed them to ‘overcome political liberalism’. Ordering that the PLA should ‘resolutely support’ the CCP Central Committee, CMC and Jiang Zemin, ‘no matter how the situation may change, how the troops may be updated, how the structure and size of the armed forces may be readjusted, and how reform and construction may develop’, it stated:

To realize their schemes of "westernizing" and "disintegrating" our country, western hostile forces have gone all out to advocate "separating the armed forces from the party, separating the armed forces from politics," and "nationalizing the armed forces" in their attempt to divorce our armed forces from the party and change the nature of our armed forces. Besides, the corrosive influence of various kinds of decadent ideology and culture as well as erroneous trends of thought... continue[s].⁶⁴

The Chengdu Military Region political commissar, in his speech at Chengdu at the 10th enlarged plenary session of the eighth party committee, instructed that the PLA ‘should be highly vigilant on hostile forces’ political schemes of “westernizing” and

⁶³ Wang Ke cited by Cui Yaozhong and Zhang Dongbo, ‘Congress on Relationship Between Officers, Soldiers’ **Xinhua Domestic Service** 17 January, 1998 in **FBIS-CHI-98-017** 23 January, 1998

⁶⁴ Fu Wen, ‘Upholding Absolute Party Leadership Is the Fundamental Task in Ideological and Political Construction’ **Liberation Army Daily** 8 January, 2003 in **FBIS-CHI-2003-0108** 6 February, 2003

“splitting” our armed forces’.⁶⁵ There are other differences between them as well. For instance, for commanders, contiguity to Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and visits abroad may expose them to the professional trends and expand their combat horizons; for the political commissars, such contact may corrupt the thinking processes of the troops, specifically in terms of ‘political liberalism’.

Conclusions

The above analyses indicate that in the dynamics between the political commissars and commanders in the PLA there have been several dimensions. These two positions have had a chequered past in PLA history. Each of the overarching policy frameworks for the PLA as set by the CCP in the last seven decades were of subjective importance to either of these two personalities in the PLA, with perhaps differences or even competition between them. Conversely, at another level, both political commissars and commanders were tasked with certain responsibilities by the CCP leadership that acted upon by both – the commander tasked with the CCP/PRC’s objectives and the political commissar that of the CCP’s political line in the PLA. Thus the overall framework of seizing state power prior to 1949, modernization imperatives as set by Peng Dehuai and others in the 1950s, Lin Biao’s regional superiority phenomenon in the 1960s in conjunction with the prevailing Cultural Revolution trends, modernization of the 1970s and 1980s but reverting back to political rhetoric in the events following Tiananmen Square incident, and the current phase of modernization

⁶⁵ See Yin Jun, ‘Eighth Party Committee of Chengdu Military Region Holds 10th (Enlarged) Plenary Session’ **Sichuan Ribao** 7 January, 2003 in **FBIS-CHI-2003-0109** 6 February, 2003

again have all influenced the relative importance of the political commissars and commanders in the PLA.

Important differences did exist between the roles of these two in the history of the PLA, as these affected not only the day-to-day events but also the department's specific ethos, which has been a universal phenomenon not only in the PLA but also with its international counterparts in terms of 'service unilateralism'. Other tensions between the two can be seen in terms of specific personality traits, legal provisions, CCP directives and accepted practice, relative military ranks and problems of adjustments, specific objectives, training, etc.

Thus, the PLA has exhibited not only the complex inter-changing roles of the commander and political commissars, but has also tasked the political commissars in recent years with enhancing combat effectiveness of troops. While the role of the commanders is enhanced through the modernization drive and professional trends sweeping the armed forces of the country, the political commissars, in addition to their role of enhancing morale and preparing the rank and file to abide by the changing CCP's policies, have also been tasked to prepare the PLA for psychological warfare and other aspects that are part of the recent trends in Revolution in Military Affairs. While the political commissars were tasked to propagate four modernization programmes from the late 1970s, with its stress on quality and in conjunction with the Third Plenum of the 13th CCP Congress resolutions, they were also tasked to publicize not only the 'Three Represents' policy but also the late-2002 16th CCP Congress resolve on 'mechanization and informationisation' of the armed forces and in building a 'well-off society'. The late 2003 revisions of the PLA's political

regulations is bound to add to the recent trend – that of psychological warfare, legal warfare and media warfare. Taking a cue from the psychological warfare methods as practiced by the US forces in the 2003 Iraq War, the PLA has been emphasizing on these methods.⁶⁶ The political commissars were specifically tasked to carry out this kind of warfare, which perhaps could be used first on Taiwan to a great extent.⁶⁷ The 2003 December amendments to political work regulations of 1995 further enhanced the political commissars' role in the PLA, though the April 2004 regulations, being implemented in a trial basis, are meant to further 'refine' this system. All of these dynamics indicate that the CCP's perspectives on armed forces building would be retained and furthered in the coming future.

Given this context, the dilemmas that the CCP and PLA leadership would have to contend with in the near future is on evolving a fine balance between defence modernization and enhancing professionalism. This may generally increase the role of the commanders and perhaps set in motion trends of 'political liberalism' among the PLA rank and file on the one hand, while on the other creating conditions for the 'absolute leadership' of the CCP over the PLA. It will also work to reduce, or preferably eliminate, 'political liberalism' among the ranks that is perceived to be a threat to the ethos and very survival of the CCP. The evolving dynamics between the commanders and political commissars in the PLA, then, are expected to have a major impact on the PLA.

⁶⁶ According to Li Xuanliang: 'The Iraq War Opens the Door to the Use of Information Technology for Psychological Warfare' **Xinhua Domestic Service** 13 May, 2003 in **FBIS-CHI-2003-0513** 15 May, 2003, the main reason for the success of the US in the Iraq war is the extensive application of psychological warfare techniques through information technology through propaganda that included 20 million copies of leaflets; television, radio, e-mail, mobile phones and satellite frequencies.

⁶⁷ *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo lilun xuexi zhinan* p. 289

Annex
Role of the Political Commissars and Commanders in PLA history

Period	Events	Political Commissars	Commanders
1927-35	Agrarian Revolutionary War	Political work system established, expanded and consolidated	Huangpu Military Academy trained several commanders including Lin Biao, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian while Zhou Enlai was the instructor
1931-35	Five Encirclement Campaigns	Participated along with Commanders; propaganda.	Participated with the first four successful and losing in the last campaign, Elaboration of People's War
1944	'Great Production' campaign	Convinced the reluctant soldiers to take part; launched 'movement to support the government and respect the cadres and love the soldiers'	Participated
1936-45	Anti-Japanese War	Guaranteeing the 'absolute leadership of CCP on PLA'; 'disintegrating enemy troops	Guerrilla war implemented
Before and during the Civil War	Battles at Shanhaiguan, Xiushuihezi, Benxi, Changchun, Siping; Liao-Shen, Peiping-Tianjin, Huaihai; Wuhan, Changsha, Heng-Bao, Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan campaigns	Mobilization; consolidation, 'democracy' movement; mutual aid; disintegrating GMD troops and 'reforming' them. Peng Zhen, Luo Ronghuan, and others in mobilising popular support for the war, implementing 'three great disciplines' and 'Eight points for attention' 1947-49 Northeast: mobilizing 3 million civilian laborers to support the front and transport 4.5 million tons of grain Central south: people transported 1,700 truckloads of materials, including 22,500 tons of grain. Hainan Island campaign: people provided 2,000 boats in support of the army	Zhu De, Lin Biao, Peng Dehuai, others in strategic offensive and decisive campaigns with large formations. The 4 th Field Army defeated 1.88 million GMD troops and killed 1.35 million local bandits. It captured over 16,000 artillery pieces, 52,000 machineguns of all types, 690,000 rifles, 270 tanks, 6,900 motor vehicles, 86 aircraft, 35 warships

1949-56	PRC consolidation	PLA as a fighting and political force; consolidating CCP rule in the country; recovery of economy; resisting “bourgeois ideology”; ‘Depending on correct policies for walking and eating’ in Tibet	PLA as fighting and political force; ‘mopping up campaigns’; modernisation; training; ranks and grades
1951-53	Korean War	Political propaganda, morale, Aid to the Korean Front, etc.	Peng Dehuai and others in 5 major campaigns
1957-66	PRC construction	Improving Government-PLA; Officers and soldiers relations; learn from Lei Feng; For ‘Good Companies’ and ‘Five Good’ Soldiers; ‘Politics in Command’	Modernisation, Training, mobilization
1958	Taiwan Straits	Anti-US and anti-Taiwan propaganda	Shelling Qinmen
1962	India-China War	Propaganda on the ‘Dalai clique’, critique of Nehru	Mobilization, clashes on the border
1966-76	Cultural Revolution	‘Three Supports and Two Military’s’; Criticize Lin Biao	Mobilization, Training, ‘Aid Vietnam’; capture of Paracels,
1969	Sino-Soviet Border clashes	Propaganda on countering Soviet “social imperialism”	Mobilization, clashes on the border
1971	Alleged Coup	Divided between the Lin Biao faction and others in PLA	Commander Lin Biao’s alleged attempted coup on Mao failed
1978-present	Reform and opening up	Criticize Gang of Four; Stress Four Cardinal Principles; Four Requirement Policy of cadres; spiritual civilization	Structural reorganization; Quality; Professional education, training,
1979	Sino-Vietnam War	Propaganda	Mobilization, clashes on the border

1995-96	Taiwan Straits	Propaganda on reunification and use of force	Mobilization, missile exercises, blockade plans
July 1998	Banning the PLA in commercial activities	Political commissars 'not [to] compete with the state for profits, not [to] throw off the burden onto the state, and not [to] fear personal losses'	Reluctantly participated as many of them tended to lose lucrative commercial ventures
1998	Floods in different parts of China	Participated with 'heightened awareness' and followed Jiang Zemin's 'forging unity between servicemen and civilians, protecting embankments at all costs, and scoring a final victory in the decisive battle'	Participated in the airlift operations, search & rescue PLAAF officer Gao Jiancheng honored with 'flood combating hero'
1999	Kosovo Conflict/Belgrade bombings	Anti-US propaganda, countering 'neo-interventionism'	Military preparation for 'three attacks, three defenses'
16 th Party Congress 2002	Three Represents	Disseminating 16 th Party Congress agenda	Mechanization and IT applications- RMA more prominent after the 2003 Iraq War
Present	Taiwan Straits	Psychological war	Military preparation
Present	South China Sea	Political propaganda	Military preparation
Present	India	Imperatives of Normalization	Military logistics preparation

Note: This is an oversimplified tabular representation of functions and roles of the political commissars and commanders which is by no means exclusive in nature

Source: Various as in the notes

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