

## **An Outlook on PRC Party-Army Relations**

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### **Abstract**

The explicit notion of a relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese military dates to 1938 when, from Yan'an, Mao Zedong wrote, "Every communist must grasp the truth, political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. Our principle is that the party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to control the party." This paper will examine the context, history, and current dynamic of the party-army relationship. It focuses on four often contradictory considerations—professionalization vs. party loyalty, historical party-army relations vs. recent occurrences, revolutionary era vs. post-revolutionary leaders, and economic growth vs. social and political issues—that highlight different elements, trends, and players in the current balance and future outlook of party-army relations. This paper then examines the impact and implications of these considerations for the People's Republic of China. The conclusion is that the issues discussed place considerable pressure on economic performance and push China to a delicate and divergent balance between the party and the army, leaving the historic paradigm increasingly susceptible to change, especially as the Chinese people take on a more assertive role in policy matters. Finally, this paper explores potential outcomes following a hypothetical split in the party-army relationship of the past, with the most favorable outcome, although not the only possibility, being that of a fully professionalized military, which could be accompanied by associated political openings and an ease in Sino-U.S. relations.

**Key Terms:** China, PRC, PLA, Chinese party-army relations, Sino-U.S. relations

### **Background: The Context of Party-Army Relations in the PRC**

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China's military tradition has been that of a party-army. The explicit notion of a relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese military dates to 1938 when, from Yan'an, Mao Zedong wrote, "Every communist must grasp the truth, political power grows out of the barrel of a gun. Our principle is that the party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to control the party."<sup>1</sup> This notion carries through to the present, as was addressed by Hu Jintao in August of 2007. "The PLA [(People's Liberation Army)] is forever at the CCP's command—to follow the CCP's command is the overriding political requirement that the party and Chinese people placed on the PLA and is the unshakable and fundamental principle for the PLA."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mao Zedong, "Problems of War and Strategy," *Selected Works of Mao Tse Tung*, November 6, 1938, [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2\\_12.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_12.htm).

<sup>2</sup> "Beijing Displays 'Peace' Troops on 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," *Taipei Times*, August 2, 2007, pg.1.

## Susceptible to Change: An Outlook on PRC Party-Army Relations

In the PRC, as in other communist-led states, the party and military have a relationship distinct from Western notions of professionalized militaries. The military, in these cases, is an institutional and armed instrument of the party.<sup>3</sup> This varies from fully professionalized, or national, militaries in the sense that these militaries are loyal to the communist party in power and in particular, its leader, rather than to a constitution or body of laws.<sup>4</sup> While communist party-army relationships are undoubtedly different from the Western norm of civil-military relations, the concepts of a party-controlled military and professionalism are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts<sup>5</sup> an idea that will be examined below.

In China, the PLA is structurally linked and subordinated to the Chinese Communist Party in order to ensure absolute PLA loyalty. Several mechanisms ensure this link, but perhaps none is as important as the CCP's Central Military Commission (CMC). The CMC places control of the PLA under the command of the CCP's Politburo Chairman, currently Hu Jintao. Thus, as chairman of the CMC and secretary general of the CCP, Hu represents both the ruling communist party and the military.<sup>6</sup> Beyond the top leadership, several departments of the CMC directly control and enforce military matters. During wartime, the General Staff Department (GSD) of the CMC directly commands PLA forces. The GSD also oversees PLA policy implementation on behalf of the CCP. Another department within the CMC, The General Political Department (GPD), ensures ideological indoctrination, party loyalty, and military justice.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the overarching structural link of the CMC, political commissars infiltrate the PLA and further enforce party loyalty and subordination.<sup>8</sup> Political commissars are CCP representatives embedded within the PLA who serve as instruments of control. However, their roles often go beyond simple representation, and many commissars are professional soldiers with political affairs missions in the PLA on behalf of the party.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the influx of CCP elements in the PLA, the relationship does not flow solely from the party to the army, but also from the military to the CCP. On a micro level, all officers above the rank of senior colonel are party members.<sup>10</sup> On a more macro level, the PLA and military leaders have significant political influence in the PRC. However, as Lt. Col. Thomas E. Johnson notes in his paper for the U.S. Army War College, the PLA is clearly less politically involved today than ever before<sup>11</sup> another issue which will be discussed below.

While China has witnessed a radical economic restructuring and major social changes over the last 30 years, there has yet to be a significant and explicit restructuring of the party-army

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<sup>3</sup> Shambaugh, David. "Civil-Military Relations in China: Party-Army or National Military?." *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 16 (2002). <http://rauli.cbs.dk/index.php/cjas/article/viewArticle/3> (accessed March 4, 2011), Pg 11.

<sup>4</sup> Fisher, Richard D.. *China's Military Modernization: Building for Regional and Global Reach*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2008, pg. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Joffe, Ellis. 1996. "Party-army relations in China: Retrospect and prospect." *China Quarterly* no. 146: 299. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 26, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Fisher, pg. 15-18.

<sup>7</sup> Fisher, pg. 21

<sup>8</sup> Shambaugh, pg. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Finkelstein, David M., and Kristen Gunness. *Civil-Military Relations in Today's China: Swimming in a New Sea..* Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006. Paper "Sorting out the Myths about Political Commissars" by You Ji.

<sup>10</sup> Shambaugh, pg. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Lt. Colonel Johnson, Thomas E.. "From Party-Army to Civil-Military Relations in China." *Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College* n/a (2009). <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA500644> (accessed March 4, 2011), pg. 22.

relationship described above.<sup>12</sup> This is likely due to the sensitive political nature of the topic, which is linked to the efficacy and legitimacy of the Chinese system of governance<sup>13</sup> as well as the benefits of the system to both the CCP and PLA.

The party-army relationship in China has proven to be advantageous for both the PLA and the state. This mutually beneficial relationship is particularly evident through a look at China's military modernization over the last 30 years. Since the early 1990s, China has engaged in a sustained force modernization effort in which military spending has increased by double digit percentages nearly every year for the past 20 years, putting current estimated military expenditures at 20 times the 1989 levels.<sup>14</sup> The modernization has taken place on three fronts – organizationally, operationally, and technologically – and has significantly transformed the People's Liberation Army into a modern, highly capable military force.<sup>15</sup>

Several recent programs and advances by the PLA have gained substantial media attention in the West, as several of China's recent high profile advances appear to have come earlier than expected by U.S. officials.<sup>16</sup> These recent examples of China's military modernization include the J-20 stealth fighter, China's first 5<sup>th</sup> generation fighter, unveiled in January of 2011<sup>17</sup> – China's aircraft carrier program,<sup>18</sup> the development of an anti-ship ballistic missile,<sup>19</sup> the "carrier killer" and anti-satellite weapons.<sup>20</sup> While these programs have gained particular media attention in recent years, China is actively advancing several other advanced weapons, technologies, training methods, tactics, and doctrines as a part of its current wave of military modernization.<sup>21</sup>

Such advances are due in large part to the alliance between the CCP and PLA. As Richard Fisher, president of Pacific Strategies, Inc. and respected author of several PLA studies, notes in his latest book, *China's Military Modernization*, the relationship between the party and the military in China is the "essential alliance that made possible the transition from military backwater to rising superpower." Fisher elaborates that this relationship is the main reason that

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<sup>12</sup> Shambaugh, pg. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Shambaugh, pg. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense. "Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2009." *Annual Report to Congress* 1 (2009). [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_Report\\_2009.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/China_Military_Power_Report_2009.pdf) (accessed April 16, 2010), Pg. 30 – 31.

<sup>15</sup> *National Geographic Atlas of China*. Washington DC: National Geographic, 2009, pg. 70 - 71

<sup>16</sup> Levine, Adam. "Gates: Chinese further along than thought on stealth fighter ." CNN. [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-09/politics/china.fighter.jet\\_1\\_stealth-fighter-radar-evading-capability-f-22?\\_s=PM:POLITICS](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-09/politics/china.fighter.jet_1_stealth-fighter-radar-evading-capability-f-22?_s=PM:POLITICS) (accessed April 27, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Capaccio, Tony. "China's J-20 Meant to Counter F-22, F-35, U.S. Analysis Says." Businessweek. <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2011-01-06/china-s-j-20-meant-to-counter-f-22-f-35-u-s-analysis-says.html> (accessed January 7, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Lim, Benjamin Kang. " Factbox: China's aircraft carrier ambitions." Reuters. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/12/23/us-china-defence-carriers-factbox-idUSTRE6BM0YG20101223> (accessed February 11, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Erickson, Andrew S.. "China's Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM) Reaches Equivalent of "Initial Operational Capability" (IOC) – Where It's Going and What it Means." Andrew S. Erickson | China analysis from original sources . <http://www.andrewerickson.com/2011/04/china%E2%80%99s-anti-ship-ballistic-missile-asbm-reaches-equivalent-of-%E2%80%9Cinitial-operational-capability%E2%80%9D-ioc%E2%80%94where-it%E2%80%99s-going-and-what-it-means/> (accessed January 6, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Kan, Shirley. "China's Anti-Satellite Weapon Test." *Congressional Research Service* RS22652 (2007). <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS22652.pdf> (accessed April 8, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense. "Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2009." *Annual Report to Congress* 1 (2009). [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_Report\\_2009.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/China_Military_Power_Report_2009.pdf) (accessed April 16, 2010).

China has been able to attain such military and economic success under the CCP and a main reason that the CCP has been able to retain power.<sup>22</sup> Other scholars on PRC party-army relations further emphasize the importance of this link to China's government and military system.

However, the longstanding CCP-PLA link sometimes presents issues and contradictions which raise questions with respect to the current relationship's sustainability and outlook. Several developments in the PLA, CCP, and broader Chinese society set the stage for tension between opposing forces that impact the party-army dynamic. David Shambaugh, the director of the China Policy Program at George Washington University, points out that certain changes, such as the newly focused mission of the PLA, suggest that the relationship between the party and army is changing.<sup>23</sup> This statement recognizes that the PLA's mission is now almost entirely externally focused, rather than the combination of internal and external security of the pre-Tiananmen era. Indeed, since the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, the People's Armed Police (PAP) has been considerably strengthened in order to deal with internal security concerns, enabling the PLA to place even greater focus on external missions and national security.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, there has been a clear trend towards the separation of party and army elites, creating greater political separation between the two entities.<sup>25</sup>

While these changes do not represent a fundamental shift in party-army relations, they certainly represent a move in the direction of professionalism. Shambaugh suggests that this may be an intermediate stage in the transition between party and national armies.<sup>26</sup> Ellis Joffe, a pioneer in the field of Chinese military politics, further characterizes the situation as a possible push for limited autonomy on issues important to the military, such as training matters, with which the PLA does not benefit from CCP intervention.<sup>27</sup>

These issues, as well as several other political, military, and societal contradictions (that will be discussed below) amid the PLA's push for professionalization and modernization, are driving a divide in party-army relations, placing significant pressure on continued economic growth to maintain the core of the relationship. This increasingly delicate balance could certainly be transformed in the event of a major change in the status quo in China. While such an outcome is unlikely while China still enjoys its current rate of economic growth, the possibility exists for a fundamental shift towards a fully professionalized military, which would be in line with U.S. interests in the region.

The remainder of this paper will look at four major contradictions and potential sources of divergence surrounding the status quo of party-army relations. The contradictions addressed are professionalization vs. party loyalty, historical party-army relations vs. recent occurrences, revolutionary era vs. post-revolutionary leaders, and economic growth vs. social and political issues. This paper will then attempt to draw conclusions as to where this leaves China and whether this military tradition is sustainable. Finally, it will venture into the implications for the United States.

As with any scholarly writing on China, there are inherent difficulties in addressing this topic. Many of China's capabilities and doctrines are highly secretive and the non-transparency of the Chinese government often forces speculation rather than concrete evidence. This issue is

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<sup>22</sup> Fisher, pg. 213.

<sup>23</sup> Shambaugh, pg. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Lt. Col. Johnson, pg. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Shambaugh, pg. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Shambaugh, pg. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Joffe, pg. 17.

particularly true given the politically charged nature of the CCP-PLA relationship and any notion of a lessening of the hold by the communist party.

### **Contradictory Considerations With Respect to Party-Army Relations:**

#### **Professionalization vs. Party Loyalty**

As previously stated, a fully professionalized military can be defined as a military that is entirely loyal to a state, body of laws, and / or constitution rather than a certain leader or ruling party. A trend towards this notion of professionalism is taking place in the PLA on several levels. Often, these professionalizing characteristics stem from and relate to China's push for military modernization over the last 20 years.

A major element of the PLA's professionalization is the army's shifting focus towards almost entirely external missions, vice the dual mission of internal and external security seen throughout the Mao and Deng eras.<sup>28</sup> This does not suggest that the CCP is less concerned with internal security matters. Rather, the party has simply found another vehicle to conduct such a mission—the People's Armed Police (PAP). Indeed, notes Lt. Col. Johnson, since the Tiananmen Square incident (discussed in more detail below), the PAP has been strengthened significantly, allowing the PLA to focus overwhelmingly on external missions and national security while the PAP deals with internal security matters.<sup>29</sup> This slight shift in the amount of emphasis placed on the internal / external security balance carried out by the PLA presents a change in the dynamics of the CCP-PLA relationship.<sup>30</sup> The CCP can no longer count on domestic action on behalf of the PLA to reinforce the subordination and loyalty of the PLA.

Military modernization has gone hand in hand with increased competency of PLA personnel.<sup>31</sup> Cheng Li, a director of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, notes the rapid increase of officers who possess educational credentials. Further, the PLA has seen the emergence of a technically proficient Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) corps and a trend towards merit-based promotions.<sup>32</sup> Education of the officer corps pushes the PLA towards professionalism as PLA leaders become aware of civil-military relations beyond the PRC and require less assistance from CCP officials to conduct the missions of the military.

The very nature of professionalism requires a departure, at least in some sense, from the norm of military subordination to the CCP in China. Lt. Colonel Johnson rightfully suggests that as the PLA continues to adopt professional characteristics, it will inevitably come into conflict with the CCP.<sup>33</sup> There exists a clear trend towards education, modernization, and an almost entirely external mission, all of which suggest an accelerated transition away from a symbiotic party-army relationship. The current trend, as previously discussed, appears to be toward the direction of limited, but increasing, autonomy for the PLA as a result of professionalization.

#### **Historical Party-Army Relations vs. Recent Occurrences**

Mao Zedong's success in taking and maintaining power for the CCP was undoubtedly a result of the early relationship between the party and army. Given the military roots of the party

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<sup>28</sup> Finkelsteien, Gunness, You, pg. 167.

<sup>29</sup> Lt. Col. Johnson, pg. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Finkelsteien, Gunness, You, pg. 167.

<sup>31</sup> Fisher, pg. 24-25.

<sup>32</sup> Finkelsteien, Gunness, Li, 48-58.

<sup>33</sup> Lt. Col. Johnson, pg. 2.

in the Chinese Civil War, army involvement in domestic political and security affairs was not considered interventionist, but rather, normal and legitimate.<sup>34</sup> While there are many examples of party-army relations under the first and second generation PRC leaders, likely the two most significant are the use of the PLA during the Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong and the Tiananmen Square incident under Deng Xiaoping.

The Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution was a political and social movement that took place in China from 1966 to 1976 under the leadership of Mao Zedong. Following Mao's slight withdrawal from the policy arena after the massive famine resulting from the Great Leap Forward, he launched the Cultural Revolution to combat bourgeois elements that Mao determined were infecting Chinese government and society. The resultant Cultural Revolution was designed to remove the emergent capitalist and rightist elements that Mao identified and replace them with renewed socialist ideals. The struggle involved often violent means designed to eliminate counter-revolutionaries. Such violence was often headed by the Red Guards, a youth response to Mao's calls for action that turned into a cult-like following and infiltrated Chinese society.<sup>35</sup> However, as the movement began to get out of hand, Mao eventually had to declare martial law to quell the movement he had spawned. The PLA was called on to implement the martial law and control the chaos that had engulfed the country. By 1971, PLA officers controlled 50% of civilian leadership positions and as much as 70% of provincial leadership positions.<sup>36</sup>

Thirteen years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the PLA was again called on by the government to suppress Chinese citizens, but this time with the whole world watching. What would soon become the Tiananmen Square Massacre began on April 15, 1989, with a series of protests and demonstrations in and around Tiananmen Square. The protesters, comprised of over 100,000 Chinese, including many students, sought greater market liberalization and eventually pushed for political reform and opening in China.<sup>37</sup> In response to the protests, Deng Xiaoping, the paramount leader and chairman of the CMC at the time, as well as other high level CCP officials ordered the PLA and police units to prepare for a crackdown. Military preparations began on April 25, 1989, and several weeks later, on May 20, martial law was again declared. The PLA carried out its most violent military operations in the culmination of the incident on June 3-4, 1989. PLA troops pushed into and eventually cleared Tiananmen Square of the remaining protesters. Protesters leading up to and within the square were crushed by armored PLA vehicles and fired upon with live ammunition, leaving nearly 3,000 dead according to Red Cross estimates, and more than double that according to NATO intelligence estimates.<sup>38</sup>

Richard Fisher, among other PLA scholars, notes the impact of this event on the CCP-PLA alliance, which, according to Fisher, "strengthened the party-army alliance and profoundly influenced China's domestic and foreign policy direction."<sup>39</sup> Given that the PLA opened fire on thousands of protesters in response to an order by CCP leaders for the PLA to clear the square,

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<sup>34</sup> Shambaugh, 17.

<sup>35</sup> "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, 1966-1976." San José State University. <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/cultrev.htm> (accessed January 7, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, "Always Faithful: The PLA from 1949 to 1989," in David A. Graff and Robin Higham, eds., *A Military History of China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), pg. 256.

<sup>37</sup> "Tiananmen Square incident." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/594820/Tiananmen-Square-incident> (accessed January 8, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Fisher, pg. 23-24.

<sup>39</sup> Fisher, pg. 24.

Fisher's assessment certainly holds true. The People's Liberation Army chose the orders of the CCP over the lives of the Chinese people. As a result of the incident, a new wave of political crackdowns was launched, and many Chinese who were sympathetic to the Tiananmen cause were imprisoned.<sup>40</sup> The event instilled in many Chinese a renewed fear of the CCP, and there was no question as to where the loyalty of the military lay.

Recently, however, a lack of major PLA intervention at the direction of the CCP as well as incidents suggesting a potential disconnect between CCP and PLA leadership suggest a narrative contrary to the historical examples above. Three incidents in particular, the 2007 test of an anti-satellite (ASAT) missile, the 2009 confrontation between Chinese vessels and the USNS Impeccable, and the recent flight test of the J-20 fighter during U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates's visit to China in January of 2011, while certainly falling far short of suggesting a change in the military's loyalty, do raise considerations with respect to the degree to which the CCP directly controls PLA actions.

The PRC conducted its first successful direct ascent anti-satellite weapons test on January 11, 2007. A kinetic kill vehicle attached to a medium range ballistic missile was launched from a mobile launcher near the Xichang Space Center in Sichuan Province. The missile successfully destroyed a PRC weather satellite in Low Earth Orbit, marking the first successful test of what the U.S. designated the SC-19 (ASAT weapon).<sup>41</sup> Following the test, the Bush administration confronted the Chinese government about the test, but did not receive a substantive response. One week later, Washington decided to make the Chinese test public, likely in order to increase pressure for a response from Beijing. Despite the pressure, the Chinese Foreign Ministry continued to dodge questions and the Chinese Defense Ministry claimed to be unaware of the test. Finally, on January 23, 2007, the Chinese Foreign Ministry confirmed the test had taken place and attempted to reassure onlookers that the test was not meant to be threatening.<sup>42</sup>

Following the test, the nearly two week period of silence from Beijing raised significant discussion about civilian control of the PLA. While the internal politics and knowledge within Beijing surrounding the test are not openly known, James Mulvenon, director of Advanced Studies and Analysis at Defense Group, Inc., raises three possible hypotheses in his paper published in the *China Leadership Monitor* that accurately encompass the range of possibilities. Mulvenon suggests that 1) The civilian leadership, including Hu, was entirely unaware of the ASAT test, 2) Hu was generally aware of the program but did not know specific details or dates surrounding the test, and 3) CCP leadership was aware of the test but did not anticipate a strong international reaction either because they did not necessarily anticipate a successful test or they did not anticipate that the U.S. would make the test public.<sup>43</sup>

Mulvenon concludes, based on limited evidence given the lack of internal Beijing-centric insight, that the second option of general awareness is likely the most accurate characterization. In reality, it was probably a combination of his second and third hypothesis. CCP leadership was likely generally aware of the program, but due to a lack of specific oversight and details, they were likely caught off guard by the successful test and international response. Regardless of the actual internal knowledge of the event, the result was certainly a perception by many onlookers

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<sup>40</sup> Fisher, pg. 24.

<sup>41</sup> Kan, Shirley. "China's Anti-Satellite Weapon Test." *Congressional Research Service* RS22652 (2007). <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS22652.pdf> (accessed April 8, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> Mulvenon, James. "Rogue Warriors? A Puzzled Look at the Chinese ASAT Test." *China Leadership Monitor* 20 (2007). [http://www.defence.org.cn/aspnet/vip-usa/uploadFiles/2007-04/20070415093803\\_\\_\\_\\_kZR0e4.pdf](http://www.defence.org.cn/aspnet/vip-usa/uploadFiles/2007-04/20070415093803____kZR0e4.pdf) (accessed February 25, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> Mulvenon.

of at least a slight divide between civilian and military leadership. Whether or not this perception is entirely accurate is questionable; but it does seem conclusive, even if only on a communicative level, that the 2007 ASAT test did not display coherent and direct CCP control of a specific PLA program.

Two years later, civilian control was again brought into question during the USNS Impeccable incident. On March 8, 2009, five Chinese vessels aggressively harassed the United States ocean surveillance vessel, the Impeccable, while conducting routine collection in the South China Sea. The Chinese vessels included a navy intelligence ship, a government fisheries-patrol vessel, a state oceanographic patrol vessel, and two small fishing vessels, all of which engaged in coordinated and reckless harassment of the USNS Impeccable. Chinese crew members within 50 feet of the Impeccable waved Chinese flags and told the Impeccable to leave the area. The Pentagon also reported that two Chinese vessels forced an emergency stop of the Impeccable in order to avoid a collision with the Chinese vessels and attempted to throw debris in the path of the U.S. vessel.<sup>44</sup>

Beyond the subsequent political and legal debate surrounding the Chinese actions, speculation as to CCP leadership's awareness of the harassment circulated. The incident took place amid a push from both nations for improved bilateral relations marked by high level diplomatic visits from China and the United States. A centrally directed harassment would obviously undermine these diplomatic efforts. Further, as soon as Beijing leadership was contacted about the harassment, the incident ended swiftly and decisively. This suggests that the CCP did not direct the harassment in the first place given that once high level CCP officials were engaged, the incident was stopped.<sup>45</sup>

The implications of the Impeccable incident are very similar to those of the ASAT test. It displays, at a minimum, that a military-oriented activity likely took place without the direct consent or control of CCP leadership.

Nearly two years after the Impeccable incident, yet another PRC event sparked debate over a possible disconnect in the old paradigm of party-army relations. In early January, 2011, grainy cell-phone images began to hit the internet showing China's new J-20, the PRC's first 5<sup>th</sup> generation stealth fighter, conducting taxi tests. One week later, on January 11, during U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's visit to China to meet with Hu and other PRC officials, Chinese state media published photos of what was reported to be the J-20's first flight testing.<sup>46</sup> According to Gates, when he confronted Hu and others about the test, he was met with blank stares. Gates later stated that there were "pretty clear indications they were unaware of the flight test."<sup>47</sup>

Gates referred to the event as illustrative of a "disconnect" between civilian and military leadership that had been observed over the past several years. Gates also referred to the previous two incidents mentioned above as additional signs of this disconnect. However, while suggesting

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<sup>44</sup> Captain Pedrozo, Paul. "Close Encounters At Sea: The USNS Impeccable Incident." *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 3 (2009). <http://www.usnwc.edu/getattachment/d11a2362-fa30-4742-8ec4-c8bed2025114/Close-Encounters-at-Sea--The-USNS-Impeccable-Incid> (accessed April 8, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> McVadon, Eric A. "The Reckless and the Resolute: Confrontation in the South China Sea." *China Security* 5, no. 2 (2009). <http://www.chinasecurity.us/pdfs/mcvadon.pdf> (accessed February 18, 2011), pg. 3-5.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, Drew. "Hu's Really in Control in China?." *Foreign Policy*. [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/17/hu\\_s\\_really\\_in\\_control\\_in\\_china?page=0,0](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/17/hu_s_really_in_control_in_china?page=0,0) (accessed April 8, 2011).

<sup>47</sup> Dawn. "Gates Warns of Civil-Military Disconnect in China." *Dawn.com*. [www.dawn.com/2011/01/14/gates-warns-of-civil-military-disconnect-in-china.html](http://www.dawn.com/2011/01/14/gates-warns-of-civil-military-disconnect-in-china.html) (accessed March 25, 2011).

a possible lack of communication between the PLA and civilian leaders, the Secretary of Defense stated that he nonetheless felt President Hu was firmly in command of the PLA.<sup>48</sup>

The J-20 flight test again implies a very similar outcome to the previous two examples. All three indicate a probable lack of communication and a lack of detailed civilian knowledge of timing and specifics regarding military undertakings. While these incidents do not necessarily suggest a new paradigm of party-army relations, they do underscore an important distinction from the tight party-army subordination and absolute control invoked during previous decades, such as during the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square incident. Perhaps the best way to characterize this deviation between the historic norm of a tight party-army symbiosis and the apparent current context of relations is indeed, as Gates suggests, a disconnect.

### **Revolutionary Era vs. Post-Revolutionary Leaders**

The first two generations of PRC leaders, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, can be considered revolutionary leaders since both came into leadership positions during the revolutionary period in which the CCP formed modern China. Lt. Col. Johnson remarks that these revolutionary leaders not only possessed institutional power over the PLA, but also power derived from their individual fame and stature accumulated during the revolutionary period. This, in addition to the military tradition of the formation of the PRC, allowed them to naturally and easily cross boundaries between political and military leadership and issues.<sup>49</sup> Further, it allowed for greater legitimacy and credibility of the party-army relationship and strict PLA subordination to the CCP.

Post-Deng PRC leaders, including current president Hu Jintao, have not enjoyed the same type of relationship with the PRC.<sup>50</sup> In fact, most of the CCP's current leadership has not even served in the military.<sup>51</sup> Falling short of the revolutionary leadership credentials of early PRC leaders, current leaders turn to money and resources to boost their military image. Richard Fisher points out that consistent double digit military budget increases and significant resource allocation to the PLA are attempts to display "military leadership" by post-revolutionary leaders.<sup>52</sup> Hu Jintao, in the same August, 2007, speech previously cited, verbalizes this notion: "In turn [for the PLA's loyalty to the CCP], we will gradually increase spending on national defense as the economy grows and continue to modernize national defense and the armed forces."<sup>53</sup> As Fisher notes, this clearly constitutes an effort to supplement institutional CCP-PLA framework in the midst of an absence of the revolutionary legitimacy enjoyed by Mao and Deng.

Several considerations, which have been noted by numerous scholars and studies relating to PRC party-army relations, arise from this generational shift to post-revolutionary leaders. The most obvious consideration is a credibility issue, although, as mentioned above, this issue is "solved" by increasing military spending and resources. Beyond credibility, the post-revolutionary leadership has invoked a transformation from a "symbiotic revolutionary guerilla

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<sup>48</sup> Gienger, Viola. "Gates Says Hu Seemed Unaware of China Stealth Jet Flight, Causing 'Worry'." Bloomberg. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-01-14/gates-says-hu-seemed-unaware-of-china-stealth-jet-flight-causing-worry-.html> (accessed March 11, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Lt. Col. Johnson, pg. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Scobell, Andrew, and Larry M. Wortzel. *Civil-Military Change in China: Elites, Institutes, and Ideas After the 16th Party Congress*. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, 2004, pg. 12.

<sup>51</sup> Lt. Col. Johnson, pg. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Fisher, pg. 16.

<sup>53</sup> "Beijing Displays 'Peace' Troops on 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," *Taipei Times*, August 2, 2007, pg.1.

generation to a technocratic pairing of bifurcated military and civilian elites.<sup>54</sup> This separation of military and civilian elites is especially noteworthy as it may help explain the disconnect exemplified through the historical vs. current examples in the previous section of this paper. Such a separation also gives the military more leverage over the CCP-PLA relationship since civilian leadership must compensate for a lack of traditional military legitimacy. Finally, new generations of *military* leaders who are increasingly separate from civilian leaders and who are also more experienced in modern warfighting methods are more inclined to military modernization, professionalization, and doctrinal evolution than revolutionary CCP / PLA leaders.<sup>55</sup>

### **Social and Political Issues vs. Economic Growth**

Since the introduction of market reforms and liberalization to China's economy in 1979, China has enjoyed sustained and rapid economic growth that now places the PRC economy second in the world, only behind the United States. In the 30 year period since economic reforms began, China's real GDP has grown at an average annual rate of nearly 10%. Between 1980 and 2008, China's economy grew 14-fold, and real per-capita GDP grew 11-fold.<sup>56</sup> In 2010, China also became the world's largest exporter and boasted an impressive 10.3% real GDP growth rate for the year. In U.S. dollars, China's per capita GDP in 2010 rose to \$7,400, still relatively low compared to similarly industrialized nations, but up from \$6,200 just two years earlier.<sup>57</sup>

While such economic growth and modernization is clearly the most important national priority in China, it does not come without consequence. Along with China's breakneck pace of growth have arisen several social and political issues. This section will highlight *some* of these issues by looking at employment pressures, increased inequality, demographic trends, environmental issues, and weakening political legitimacy. Such problems, if not properly addressed by the Chinese government, may lead to social instability and thus indirectly affect the PLA<sup>58</sup> and serve as a catalyst for change to the existing political / military structure in China, including the party-army relationship.

China's massive population (1.3+ billion people) creates unique social and economic pressures.<sup>59</sup> Given such a large population, employment generation is a constant problem that is exacerbated by certain trends in China. A clear rural to urban trend requires constant job generation as many peasants leave their work in the fields in search of better economic opportunities in cities.<sup>60</sup> Anthony Saich, the director of the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, points out that China's future population will only continue to become more and more urbanized, and the question of whether employment can be generated quickly enough to keep pace with this urbanization will be a key factor in preventing or enabling

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<sup>54</sup> Scobell, pg. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Mulvenon, James. *Professionalization of the Senior Chinese Officer Corps: Trends and Implications* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1997).

<sup>56</sup> Morrison, Wayne M.. "China's Economic Conditions." *Congressional Research Service* RL33534 (2009). <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33534.pdf> (accessed March 18, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> CIA. "The World Factbook." Central Intelligence Agency. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html> (accessed April 8, 2011).

<sup>58</sup> Finkelstein, Gunness (eds), Saich, pg. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Fisher, pg. 29.

<sup>60</sup> Fisher, pg. 29.

social unrest.<sup>61</sup> An additional consideration in employment pressures is the increasing number of college graduates in China, of whom an increasing percentage is unable to find jobs.<sup>62</sup>

Despite China's economic rise, per capita GDP remains low, and many Chinese are not reaping the benefits of China's new wealth.<sup>63</sup> The urban-rural gap creates enormous income discrepancies and inequality between China's newly urbanizing population and rural Chinese. The urban / rural income gap in China at the start of economic reforms in China was 2.6:1. After an initial drop, the income gap rose to 2.8:1 by the end of the 1990s and continued to grow in the 2000s.<sup>64</sup> By 2009, the ratio had hit 3.33:1 and was projected to continue to rise.<sup>65</sup> In addition to income disparity, urban-rural inequality also exists with the respect to unequal distribution of resources and spending priorities.<sup>66</sup> China's leaders see such inequality as a major source of concern for political and social unrest.

Demographic trends, specifically China's aging population and increasing gender imbalance, also strain China's social status quo. China is one of the most rapidly aging countries in the world. The average age of China's population is estimated to increase by 13.8 years between 2000 and 2050.<sup>67</sup> Such a rapid aging is largely due to population control policies, such as the one child policy, which significantly stunted China's population growth leaving a much larger percentage of pre-population control Chinese. As the single child generation comes of age, the result is often what is termed the 4:2:1 phenomenon. Given a lack of adequate pension coverage as well as reliance by 70% of elderly Chinese on their offspring for old-age financial assistance, one couple is left to provide for four grandparents and their one child. This creates a 4:2:1 pyramid that puts significant financial strain on working couples.<sup>68</sup> Further, there is significant social and family pressure placed on the only child to excel as the family's only hope for future income.

In addition to concerns and burdens surrounding the aging Chinese population, another result of population control policies has been the favoring of male offspring. The stipulations of the one-child policy vary greatly based on geographic location, gender of the first child, and other factors, but the overall trend is a clear preference for male offspring.<sup>69</sup> As a result of infanticide and sex-selective abortions, the male to female ratio at birth as of 2010 was 119 males for every 100 females, according to a Chinese population official.<sup>70</sup> The social consequences of the imbalance include the inability for millions of Chinese men to marry and have families, potentially enabling socially disruptive behavior. Further, there has been an increase in kidnapping and trafficking of women for marriage and prostitution.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Finkelstein, Gunness (eds), Saich, pg. 5.

<sup>62</sup> Fisher, pg. 29.

<sup>63</sup> Fisher, pg. 29.

<sup>64</sup> Finkelstein, Gunness (eds), Saich, pg. 5-11.

<sup>65</sup> Jing, Fu. "Urban-rural income gap widest since reform." China Daily. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-03/02/content\\_9521611.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-03/02/content_9521611.htm) (accessed March 4, 2011).

<sup>66</sup> Finkelstein, Gunness (eds), Saich, pg. 5-11.

<sup>67</sup> Finkelstein, Gunness (eds), Saich, pg. 5-11.

<sup>68</sup> Hesketh, Therese, Li Lu, and Zhu Wei Xing. "The Effect of China's One-Child Family Policy After 25 Years." *The New England Journal of Medicine* n/a (2005). <http://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJMp051833> (accessed April 15, 2011).

<sup>69</sup> Hesketh, Therese, Li Lu, and Zhu Wei Xing.

<sup>70</sup> Xinhua. "China sees sex ratio at birth slightly down." Chinadaily US Edition. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/03/content\\_9931879.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/03/content_9931879.htm) (accessed March 25, 2011).

<sup>71</sup> Hesketh, Therese, Li Lu, and Zhu Wei Xing.

## Susceptible to Change: An Outlook on PRC Party-Army Relations

Amid China's economic push lies another consequence with social implications—environmental deterioration. 65% of China's energy consumption comes from coal—a very dirty source of energy.<sup>72</sup> This, as well as rapidly increasing private vehicle use, among other factors, causes China to lay claim to 16 of the world's 20 most polluted major cities, according to the World Health Organization.<sup>73</sup> China's pollution and poor environmental standards lead to numerous health issues, including issues with unsafe drinking water across China. Further, many Chinese lack sufficient healthcare, especially in rural areas where access to modern healthcare is scarce.<sup>74</sup>

These social problems, in combination with widespread corruption, especially at the local level, as well as a general lack of government accountability lead to widespread anger in China and diminished CCP political legitimacy.<sup>75</sup> While statistics vary greatly based on the source of the numbers, the *Economist* reported that 90,000 mass incidents took place in 2006, which is similar to other estimates. In 2004, when 74,000 protests were reported, 3.5 million protesters were involved, largely protesting the lack of governmental response to the above social issues.<sup>76</sup> Of note is that, in 2010, reports cite as many as 180,000 incidents across China, suggesting a doubling since 2006 and a clear trend throughout the 2000s toward more frequent occurrences.<sup>77</sup> These numbers suggest a clear trend towards public discontent with the government. However, despite the huge number of protests across China, the protests stop far short of challenging CCP control. The government keeps a tight lid on protesters and makes sure that disaffected groups are not able to coordinate or unite.<sup>78</sup> China learned their lesson with Tiananmen, and CCP leadership identifies and addresses any potential source of unrest far before it is able to affect significant public action. This was clearly evident in the "Jasmine Revolution" protests that attempted to rally support in China in 2011 following the democratic movements and protests in North Africa and the Middle East. Despite internet calls for action, police often outnumbered protesters responding to the calls.<sup>79</sup> Thus, while many Chinese recognize corruption and a lack of government accountability as major problems, their protests pose little direct challenge to the CCP.

All of the political and social issues discussed in this section, from job generation to environmental concerns to government corruption, as well as numerous other issues not discussed in this paper, have the potential to create social unrest in China. Although the government keeps a tight hold on any potential dissent, as these issues continue to become larger problems and affect more and more Chinese, the government will have to allocate resources to combat these impending social problems. This will force China to make decisions about where to allocate resources, and if such decisions come at the expense of the PLA, there would

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<sup>72</sup> McGregor, Richard. "750,000 a Year Killed by Chinese Pollution." *Financial Times*, July 2, 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Zissis, Carin. "China's Environmental Crisis." *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 9, 2007. [http://www.cfr.org/publication/12608/chinas\\_environment.html?breadcrumb=%2F](http://www.cfr.org/publication/12608/chinas_environment.html?breadcrumb=%2F).

<sup>74</sup> Fisher, pg. 30.

<sup>75</sup> Fisher, pg. 31.

<sup>76</sup> "China-Demonstrations-Protests in China-Social Unrest." RRT Research Response. [www.mrt-rrt.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/71/chn34939.pdf.aspx](http://www.mrt-rrt.gov.au/ArticleDocuments/71/chn34939.pdf.aspx) (accessed April 15, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Forsythe, Michael. "China's Spending on Internal Police Force in 2010 Outstrips Defense Budget." *Bloomberg*. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-06/china-s-spending-on-internal-police-force-in-2010-outstrips-defense-budget.html> (accessed April 7, 2011).

<sup>78</sup> Fisher, pg. 31.

<sup>79</sup> Ramzy, Austin. "China Cracks Down After 'Jasmine Revolution' Protest Call." *Time.com*. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2052860,00.html> (accessed March 4, 2011).

certainly be implications for party-army relations.<sup>80</sup> In fact, in 2010, China spent more on internal security than national security and plans to do so again in 2011. The 2010 spending on internal security, \$83.5 billion, was 6.7% over budget and a 15.6% increase over 2009.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, if social unrest does rise to significantly higher levels, the PLA may again find itself a player in internal security, but the question, as Anthony Saich points out, is on which side would the PLA find itself in such a situation?<sup>82</sup>

### **Implications of Social and Political Considerations for the CCP-PLA Alliance in China**

Each of the considerations discussed in the previous section—professionalization vs. party loyalty, historical party-army relations vs. recent occurrences, revolutionary era vs. post-revolutionary leaders, and economic growth vs. social and political issues—highlight different elements, trends, and players in the current and future outlook of party-army relations. Each often contradictory consideration also does not take place in isolation. For example, the concept of professionalization and the prevalence of post-revolutionary leaders are elements that both tend to increase autonomy of the PLA. This increased autonomy can then be used to explain recent patterns of interaction between the PLA and CCP which in turn further reinforces PLA autonomy. Social and political issues comprise another facet of the evolving CCP-PLA relationship by highlighting the increasing role of the Chinese people, who are capable of affecting grassroots change in the status quo. This section will take all of these considerations and attempt to draw conclusions about where they leave China's party-army dynamic.

China's party-army alliance is still strongly in place, but the dynamic is more delicate than the PRC has enjoyed in the past. This conclusion is evident by the interplay of the considerations discussed in the paragraph above. This conclusion does not suggest a "rogue PLA" or that China is necessarily headed towards such an extreme. It does, however, raise the possibility for outcomes diverging from the status quo of previous party-army relations in the PRC.

As the historical foundation on which the alliance was formed continues to age, social, political, and economic factors become increasingly important. Social and political problems have the potential to create unrest which could spark grassroots change in China. However, such a push for change will likely remain scattered and lack the force necessary to prompt action as long as China enjoys such sustained economic growth and rising prosperity. The current economic context in China is likely the reason for a lack of noteworthy excitement in China while parts of the Middle East and North Africa were swept with popular democratic movements in early 2011. The main difference between China and nations such as Tunisia and Egypt is that the Chinese people have a reasonable expectation that their economic well being will continue to increase. In fact, nearly two thirds of Chinese judged their lives to be better than five years ago, and nearly three quarters believed their lives would be better in five years than they are now, according to a Pew Research Center poll conducted in the spring of 2010.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Finkelstein, Gunness (eds), Saich, pg. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Forsythe, Michael.

<sup>82</sup> Finkelstein, Gunness (eds), Saich, pg. 4.

<sup>83</sup> Bakshi, Amar C.. "Are the Chinese raring for revolution?." CNN.

<http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/01/are-the-chinese-raring-for-revolution/?hpt=Sbin>  
(accessed April 2, 2011).

Despite such optimism among Chinese, these and similar statistics suggest that economic growth is the only fiber holding together the status quo in China. Absent such growth, growing anger over social and political complaints would be compounded and significant change would certainly be possible. Further, as previously mentioned, if such economic growth that enables large PLA budget increases were to cool, the CCP would have to make decisions about where to allocate resources. If such decisions conclude at the expense of the PLA, change in the party-army relationship sparked by the PLA would also be possible. As Richard Fisher points out, while a crisis sufficient enough to unite the PLA against the CCP has yet to occur, it would be unwise to dismiss such a possibility.<sup>84</sup> The delicate social, political, and economic pressures in China certainly pose such a possibility for the future. Thus, a considerable amount of pressure is placed on economic growth for all aspects of current PRC policies and practice, including the alliance between the party and the military.

What would a significant change to the party-army dynamics of the past 60 years look like? There are two possible outcomes, each fueled by different social, economic, and political considerations. One option would be a separation of the party-army paradigm, but not a separation marked by professionalization. Rather, such a split in the party and the army would be characterized by an increasingly assertive PLA that eventually pursues its own agenda, potentially separate from the agenda of the CCP, but not bound by any governing document produced by the state. Thus, the PLA would, in this scenario, become its own political entity. Such an outcome would be enabled by factors previously discussed that relate more to the military / political realm than to social concerns, such as post-revolutionary leadership, a hypothetical decrease in military funding, and the continuation of recent PRC experiences in which a lack of communication between PLA and CCP leadership has been evident. Such an outcome would not be favorable to players in the United States or Asia, as the military would become increasingly free to pursue its own militaristic agenda. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates alluded to the worrisome nature of this outcome after his comments about the disconnect between the party and the army observed during the J-20 flight testing.<sup>85</sup>

Another possibility for a new paradigm of party-army relations in China is one characterized by a fully professionalized PLA. In this case, party-army relations would be fundamentally changed in that the military would be entirely loyal to the Chinese state as governed by a body of laws, vice communist party direction. In such a scenario, the PLA would no longer be used to enforce internal matters and the CCP's political agenda. A fully professionalized PLA may very well accompany broad political changes, a la a transition towards democracy, since many of the same motives that would drive a PLA / CCP split in this direction would also rationalize a transition to democracy. However, David Shambaugh points out that it is not inconceivable that a hybrid relationship of a professional national military could coexist with a ruling communist party, but with framework of state and legislative control. Shambaugh adds that China essentially accomplished the same transition in terms of the PRC economy by allowing a largely market-based economy to fall under socialist / communist infrastructure.<sup>86</sup> A professionalization model certainly would require substantial and fundamental changes,<sup>87</sup> whether or not it would be accompanied by democracy. Such changes probably would be enabled by popular movements as much as top level processes, fueled by popular protests and

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<sup>84</sup> Fisher, pg. 27.

<sup>85</sup> Gienger, Viola.

<sup>86</sup> Shambaugh, 14.

<sup>87</sup> Shambaugh, 14.

calls for change from an increasingly assertive Chinese public surrounding a major irritant in the framework of the political and social concerns discussed above.

### **Outlook**

A slight deviation in the party-army fortitude of China's past provides an opportunity for China to continue down a path that is ultimately more favorable to its own development and global interaction as well as to the United States and its interests. Such a path would undoubtedly be a path towards professionalization. A PLA that is loyal to the Chinese state, rather than the elites of the CCP, probably would be less likely to pursue agendas such as reunification with Taiwan, a longstanding political agenda of the CCP and still a potential flashpoint for Sino-U.S. conflict. Further, a push towards full professionalization would probably accompany similar political openings and perhaps a stepping stone towards democracy in China, if not already precipitated in concordance with a democratic movement. This would certainly result in a more responsible global China and perhaps ease the possibility of Sino-U.S. competition and tension in many regards.

A major shift in the status quo is not likely in the very near future, especially while China's overall economy, military budget, and per capita income enjoy such significant growth. Thus, the current party-army relationship must continue to be closely monitored, especially given the tone of recent events and the potential for a split in military and civilian elites. While such a move may be a step along the path to professionalization, it may also be a step towards an increasingly autonomous PLA that is able to pursue its own militaristic objectives. Thus, developments must be closely monitored, and importance should be placed on both diplomatic and military relations to account for the fact that the military and CCP may not necessarily be on the same page in all circumstances. Engagement of both the PLA and CCP is essential in order to prevent misunderstanding in the Sino-U.S. relationship.

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