

# THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY AND ITS ROLE IN CHINESE POLITICAL SYSTEM

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## INTRODUCTION

People's Liberation Army developed as the armed force of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party, Military Commission exercise political control; Mao Tse-Tung's military lecture of 1936-38 strongly influenced its doctrine. A system of political commissars, with full military status is mentioned throughout the PLA. People's Liberation Army (PLA) after 1949, evolved into a well disciplined force that provided effective support for the party's expansion on, and eventual control of the Chinese mainland.

The PLA recruited the principle of compulsory military service (law of July 30, 1955) by all males who attain the age of 18. Ministry of National Defence was established in 1954 on officer system based on former soviet model. Under Defence Minister, Ping Te-huai, the PLA was modernized with soviet equipment and its officer cadres became highly professional. After his departure the social and political work of the PLA was emphasized and after new regulations, growing political activities within the PLA were issued and implemented in 1963. A system was adopted for assigning senior officers to temporary duty as ordinary soldiers; the general political development of the PLA emerged as the loyal component in the military system of administration. As a presumed model of political rectitude and loyalty to Chairman Mao the PLA performed a central role during the Cultural Revolution. The PLA developed favourable image as a respectable and key element of Chinese communist structure. The People Liberation Army infact became stronger local military force in Asia.

The object of this paper is to give brief analysis about People's Liberation Army and, its role in political system of China, during Mao Zedong and Dengs era.

## PLA DURING MAO ZEDONG

Mao Zedong's statement that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" is indicative of the value he placed on the military as a means to bring about the revolution. However Mao also indicated and considered the military a means to victory rather than an entity to be valued in itself. He immediately qualified the statement quoted above by adding, "the party must always control the gun, the gun must never control party". This statement implies a clear cut distinction between the party and military. Mao and most of the other high ranking party leaders also held high position.<sup>1</sup>

PLA had evolved into a well disciplined force that provided effective support for the party's expansion on and eventual control of, the Chinese mainland. In the process, it developed certain characteristics which are collectively referred to as the Maoist Model. Mao played important parts in its development. He wanted to strengthen the people's army, the people's court and people's police.

The military is an instrument for the achievement of political goals. This is indicated by the statement that the political power grow out of a gun but the party must always control the gun. After the founding of PRC, soldiers were expected to assume responsibilities for organizing the masses and helping them to establish political power within the army. Party control was exercised through hierarchy of party committee headed by commissars and paralleling the military chain of command at the level. The relative importance of acquiring correct political view over the acquisition of advanced technology as a technique of army building. A corollary of the primacy of political over military goals, this tenet is similar to biblical beliefs such as "if our hearts are pure we will fight with the strength of ten thousand men."<sup>2</sup>

Sustained attention to military training or weaponry was criticized as "a purely military view point" as opposed to correct views that emphasized the importance of people i.e. people with politically correct ideology over weapons. Mao maintained that without the support of the masses, the successful pursuit of war, like any other political action, is impossible. Comparing the masses to water and the army to fish, he noted that an army that fails to

maintain rapport with the people will be opposed by the people. A military force that mistreats the people will dry up the water that supports it. Soldiers were required to memorize three main rules and eight points for attention. The three rules are:

- 1) Obey orders at all time.
- 2) Do not take a single needle or piece treat from masses.
- 3) Return every thing that has been captured.

The eight points are... (i) pay fair price for what you buy (ii), speak politely (iii) pay for everything you damage (iv) do not damage crops (v) Do not take liberty with women (vi) Return everything you borrow (vii) Do not ill treat captives (viii) Do not hit people or swear at them.<sup>3</sup>

Political power in the Chinese revolution had indeed “grown out of the barrel of a gun”. In those long years of revolutionary war it was hard to determine whether the party should organize the army or vice versa. From the very beginning, Mao recognized the distinction between the two organizations. Nevertheless, despite the fact that, during the Cultural Revolution, it was the army which played the historic political role and not the party organization. The official position on the legitimacy of the army's political stance during cultural revolution was stated by Premier Chou En-lai.

Chou added, “We are all connected with the Army” Chairman Mao had himself organized the Army, and Chou had also been a general, therefore it was wrong to make distinction between military and non-military individuals in positions of leadership. The Maoist military policies and the political involvement of the military has deflected the PLA from the serious pursuit of military objectives. Its transformation from a guerrilla force into a modern army, which had began in the early 1950s was disrupted by the end of decade. By the time the Maoists are ended, the Chinese military establishment, with the exception if its nuclear missile units had been ravaged as of fighting force.<sup>4</sup>



## MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICAL DECISIONS

After 1949, the military retained a special place in new political system. The real leadership of the Chinese military is exercised through the Military Affairs Commission of the CCP, and it is a measure of party dominance of the system that the PLA is sworn to defend the communist party rather than the state. The Military Affairs Commission has the same bureaucratic rank as does the State Council, and is thus not under government control. The general political department is largely in charge of running party activities in the PLA. It also plays a major role in military personnel decisions and in security in the PLA.<sup>5</sup>

Military involvement in political decision making at all level of chinese society is reflected in the high proportion of PLA officials appointed to position of leadership on all powerful, provincial levels of revolutionary committee. The meteoric political ascendancy of China's regional and provincial military leaders has been the most spectacular by product of the virtual destruction of the party machinery in 1967-68.

The people's liberation Army's training system had undergone a major reorganization as part of a continuing drive to modernize the chinese armed forces. The need for change in the training system was not rapidly apparent until the late 1970s. During the cultural revolution, the army emphasized the dominance of politics of our professionalism. Soldiers were more involved in conducting ideological warfare than training for fighting real war.<sup>6</sup>

The central military commission's decision to restructure the PLA's specialized military academies. The PLA structure is divided into vertical compartment, which most modern armed forces have a much more integrated service structure. A potential side effect of de-compartmentalization is a weakening in the influence of political department within the PLA.

The communist armed struggle for power lasted for more than twenty years and created an almost unique, symbolic relationship between party and the military. Mao was the military strategist of the first rank. Deng Xiopeng had much experience in warfare before

1949. That, when in 1955 the PRC confirmed the highest military rank on 10 individuals, it also offered this honour to Deng. He declined. To the communist leader in China, the military has had both national security and domestic political role.<sup>7</sup>

The war with Vietnam served as a spur to much needed military reform. This threat from the South, combined with the overall political and economic changes that Deng was seeking, made professional military reforms, both urgent and possible. Deng's wide ranging reforms, often termed the second revolution focussed on developing a pragmatic social structure less driven by the Mao's standbys of ideology, political reliability, class struggle and self reliance.<sup>8</sup> Deng's military reforms consisted of two primary elements i.e. modernization and professionalism.

### PLA DURING DENG'S ERA

Deng's leadership initiated a stunning series of radical reforms that dramatically broke away from the Maoist approach to national development. The long stagnant military establishment was one of the main objects the high command could embark on the much needed process of renovation.

The effective implementation of Deng's reforms was contingent, first of all on getting the PLA out of politics - a long-lasting legacy of the Maoist period. This, Deng did slowly but successfully. The political role of the PLA was radically transformed at all level by relieving troops of non-military duties in the localities, by dislodging regional military commanders from powerful political posts, and by scaling down military representatives in national policy-making organs. At the same time, the Deng leadership restored political supervision over the PLA but did this in a restrained manner that did not infringe the professional prerogative of military command.

The result of a decade of reforms have been mixed. The achievements have been extensive and impressive. Compared with Chinese army of the late Maoist period, the PLA is much more modern, but compared with modern armies, the PLA is still backward.

By the end of 1985 the reform pendulum was swinging in a more conservative direction. The international scene was changing. In Chinese terms, the world was moving from conflict to co-operation.<sup>8</sup> The PLA's role in maintaining civil order and its involvement in domestic politics differs from its past. With respect to the Tiananmen while the PLA's military intervention was decisive and dramatic, its political involvement was relatively superficial. The military professionalism also played a key role in limiting the depth of PLA in political involvement.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of Tiananmen and the subsequent power struggle, the guiding military ethic was shifted from a professional orientation, focussing on expertise, operations, and combat readiness, to a political orientation focusing on revolutionary spirit, ideological purity and loyalty to the party.

That the army's obedience to the party was in question is evident from the campaign launched after Tiananmen to ensure political loyalty.

Deng was in a position to make military commission more amenable to the party center's direction and according to the Ministry of National defence a larger executive role, military affairs would be co-ordinated more closely with other government functions and there would be a larger measure of civilian control.

Deng appears dedicated in consolidating party and government control over the PLA; curtailing its traditional role in politics, and eventually modernizing and reforming PLA forces. Deng has had long and close association with China's Military and relied on their support to wage his second comeback to political power in 1977.

However Deng and his supporters made connection to military position. There has been renewed emphasis on political work in the PLA, with the PLA serving as a national model of the new morality since Deng's military leadership represent the strongest grouping in top party council.<sup>10</sup>



## CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above mentioned studies, that the military influence in national politics has been curtailed. The army has been called upon as the only institution capable of restoring order and reconstituting state power: Deng's wide ranging reforms to modernize Chinese Army, to cut political influence from Peoples Liberation Army was successful. Deng appears dedicated to consolidating government and party control over the PLA. Due to curtailing its traditional role in politics, Chinese Army reshaped its structure. The PLA is serving as a model of new morality. The PLA will continue to modernize itself but slowly. Chinese forces feel no immediate threat from super-powers and can only afford to pursue military modernization at a gradual pace because Maoist military policies and the political involvement of the military had defeated the PLA from the military objective.

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