

Cao Gangchuan: A Political Biography¹

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Cao Gangchuan's Military Career

Cao Gangchuan was born in Wugang, Henan Province, in December 1935. At age 19, he joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and was immediately sent to study artillery and ordnance at two entry-level technical schools, at the latter of which he graduated to serve as a teacher for one year. In 1956, he joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and was singled out for Russian language education to prepare him for six years of study at a prestigious artillery engineering school in the Soviet Union.

When Cao returned to the PLA in 1963, he began a long career in the equipment and ordnance system within the Beijing staff departments. For 12 years, including the time of the Cultural Revolution, he worked as a low-level officer in the munitions offices of the General Logistics Department. From the mid-1970s, Cao moved over to assume increasing responsibilities in the equipment departments of the General Staff Department (GSD), serving as deputy director of the Military Equipment Department from 1982-89. During this period, sources close to General Cao confirm that he often traveled to Europe and Russia on procurement delegations. After Tiananmen in 1989, General Cao directly oversaw this commerce as director of the Office of Military Trade under the Central Military Commission.

Beginning in 1992, General Cao entered the top ranks of the PLA leadership, though he continued to expand his career portfolio in the areas of military production and procurement. After serving as the deputy chief of the General Staff, he moved to replace Ding Henggao as head of the Commission of Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense (COSTIND), which then served as the key coordinating link between the PLA and the defense-industrial base. After the 1998 bureaucratic reforms, which moved the RDT&E (research, development, testing, and evaluation) and procurement functions of COSTIND to the new General Armaments Department (GAD), Cao continued to perform the same functions as the first director of the new organization, which remains his current functional position along with his position as vice chair of the Central Military Commission.

Analysis

General Cao's entire career has been spent as an equipment and ordnance staff officer; he has no experience commanding troops in a combat unit. Yet, one source points out that Cao rose from deputy director of the GSD Military Equipment Department to deputy chief of the General Staff in 10 years, an ascent this source described as "unprecedented." One staff officer who has worked with him for more than 20 years asserts that Cao "knows his job and subject matter." Moreover, he "is not arrogant and does not show off."

Despite his widely recognized talents, Cao is also known as a “lucky general” for two reasons. He took over COSTIND after the satellite rocket failures and since then there has not been a launch failure, though no one attributes this success to Cao. He has also benefited from the renewed focus on arms R&D (research and development) and weapons since 1996, which has brought him to the attention of Jiang Zemin. Moreover, he is identified by sources as the key link between the PLA and the Russian military-industrial complex, which has sold China a steady supply of advanced weapons in recent years to fill critical niches in its Taiwan scenario-oriented modernization.

For these political and military reasons, Cao was set to be promoted to vice chair of the Central Military Commission at the 16th Party Congress in November 2002. It also would not be a surprise to see Cao assume the role of defense minister at the National People’s Congress in March 2003, for this is the normal precedent for the holder of the “non-warfighter” vice chairmanship in the Central Military Commission. To his credit, Cao is reportedly one of the most cosmopolitan and well-traveled of China’s military leaders, and he could broaden the largely ceremonial role to maintain oversight of the PLA’s arms sales relationships with foreign countries. In particular, he has been to Russia many times on delegations when he was director of the GSD Military Equipment Department, and reportedly has many Russian friends.

A balanced assessment should point out that Cao does have one potential weakness. He may have problems with the seven military region commanders because he has never commanded troops in the field. However, one of Cao’s defenders asserted that some current and former military region commanders, such as newly designated Central Military Commission Vice Chair General Guo Boxiong, are “narrow-minded” and may be not be as “forward thinking” as General Cao.

Details of Cao’s Career

July 1954, joined People’s Liberation Army (PLA)
1954-56, student, Nanjing Number Three Artillery Ordnance Technical School and Number One Ordnance Technical School; teacher, Number One Ordnance Technical School, in 1956
July 1956, joined Chinese Communist Party
1956-57, student, PLA Dalian Russian Language School
1957-63, student, Military Engineering School of the Artillery Corps (Soviet Union)
1963-69, assistant, Ammunition Division, Ordnance Department, General Logistics Department
1969-75, assistant, Munitions Division, Military Equipment Department, General Logistics Department
1975-82, staff officer and deputy director, General Planning Division, Military Equipment Department, General Staff Department
1982-89, deputy director, Military Equipment Department, General Staff Department
1989-90, director, Military Affairs Department, General Staff Department
1990-92, director, Office of Military Trade, Central Military Commission
1992-96, deputy chief of the General Staff

1996-98, minister, Commission of Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense

1998-2002, director, PLA General Armaments Department, and member of CCP Central Military Commission

2002, vice chairman, Central Military Commission, and director, General Armaments Department

Party and State Positions

- 1997, member, 15th Central Committee
- 2002, Politburo member, 16th Central Committee

Promotions in Military Rank

- 1997, general

Note

¹ This biography draws heavily from a wide variety of sources, including the excellent biography of General Cao in David Shambaugh's forthcoming University of California Press book, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems & Prospects*, and "Xinhua Bio on Cao Gangchuan, Politburo Member of CCP Central Committee," Xinhua News Agency, November 15, 2002.