

They Protest Too Much (Or Too Little), Methinks: Soldier Protests, Party Control of the Military, and the 'National Army Debate'

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Retired soldier protests and stern internal propaganda campaigns calling for military loyalty and denouncing talk of a “national army” suggest cracks in the façade of Chinese party-army unity. This article analyzes recent civil-military developments in China, offering an assessment of their implications.

Introduction

In April and August of this year, hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of ex-soldiers reportedly gathered outside high-level military and party offices in Beijing, protesting the perceived failure of the PLA to provide them with jobs or health care after their service period had ended. While the incidents have yet to be reported in the Chinese press and were first picked up by a media outlet controlled by Falun Gong, subsequent interviews of witnesses and police by the *South China Morning Post* and other correspondents lend credibility to the early accounts.¹ In both cases, the demobilized soldiers mustered outside the main gate of the General Political Department, which is responsible for responding to petitions from personnel. The August incident, which occurred on Army Day (August 1) sought to highlight the sad plight of one of the central figures in the April protests, Korean War veteran Gan Guozhong, who was unable to afford hospital treatment and succumbed in July to a bone disease after spending the last six months of his life bedridden at home.²

If true, these two protests were a rare public airing of military discontent, which the party is particularly eager to avoid because of the inevitable questions it raises about the steadfastness of the PLA to defend the party and, more broadly, social stability. These protests suggest that the system is not doing a good job of providing a strong social safety net for demobilized soldiers and retired personnel, which any banana republic junta would tell you is an important governance requirement during periods of rapid social and economic change.

Analytically, however, it is not clear from the outside whether these protests were simply isolated incidents or public manifestations of deeper structural problems in civil-military relations. It's possible to determine which by performing a close textual exegesis of recent party and military propaganda on civil-military relations, comparing it with the recent past, in particular the early months of the Hu-led Central Military Commission and the prior period of struggle between Hu and Jiang Zemin for control of the military.

The late spring of 2005, for example, witnessed the continued advance of a core set of military themes and propaganda concepts associated directly with Hu Jintao. First and foremost, Hu's position in the pantheon of past military leaders seems to be modestly but firmly set. The standard formulation describes the PLA as "holding high the great banner of Deng Xiaoping Theory and the important thinking of the 'three represents,' implementing in depth Jiang Zemin's thoughts on national defense and army building, and conscientiously carrying out a series of instructions from Chairman Hu."³ In actuality, Mao still sits atop of the pyramid with his "thought," closely followed by Deng's "theory," Jiang's "important thinking," and finally Hu's mere "instructions." This is not to say that Jiang's influence outweighs that of Hu, who seems to have firmly consolidated power. Indeed, it would be presumptuous of Hu to prematurely declare his contributions to Chinese military science, inviting the same sarcastic mockery that naturally stalks Jiang Zemin and other armchair Napoleons like Kim Jong Il. At the same time, it was notable that *Jiefangjun bao* on May 1 and June 13 headlined with sets of photos of Mao, Deng, Jiang, and Hu meeting with the same individual, Fei Xiaotong, seemingly equating Hu with the other three faces on China's Mount Rushmore.

The modest appellation of Hu's "instructions" to the PLA should not undermine their importance as guideposts to his thinking on military modernization, or diminish their value in comparison with the themes of his predecessor, Jiang Zemin. In this respect, the key concept is Hu's notion of "scientific development" [*kexue fazhan*], which has multiple layers of meaning embedded within it, including the desire to balance the fiscal demands of military modernization with the economic and social demands of Hu's "well-off society" (*xiaokang shehui*).⁴ A second important theme of the Hu military line is a directed and serious focus on "combat effectiveness as the focal point," and "winning" in military struggle as the metric of success.

The final dominant theme brings us full circle to the ex-soldiers protesting in Beijing. Hu's military speeches and the core party and military editorials since the spring have become increasingly shrill on the subject of the military's "absolute loyalty to the party," and warning of attempts by "hostile forces" to undermine this loyalty through calls for "depoliticization" (*feizhengzhihua*), "de-partification" (*feidanghua*), and "nationalization" (*guojiahua*). In a May speech on "scientific development," Hu called on the PLA to "provide substantial power to ensure the consolidation of the CCP's ruling-party status,"⁵ and then chief political commissar Xu Caihou made the remarkable public statement that Hu Jintao is "greatly concerned" about stability in the army.⁶

On the July 1 anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, *Liberation Army Daily's* main editorial repeated these themes, calling upon the army to adhere to the "party's absolute leadership," and "resolutely resist the influence of erroneous trends of thought, such as the call for 'the de-partification and depoliticization of the army' and the army's 'nationalization.'"⁷ In a July 15 article in *Liberation Army Daily*, Hu was quoted at length:

The party's absolute leadership over the army is our army's military spirit and it should never be changed. This concept must be further strengthened under the new historical conditions and this is the party's fundamental political demand on the army under the new situation.⁸

The author, Dai Yunpeng, continued with warnings about "hostile forces" and their campaigns of 'de-partification,' 'depoliticization,' and 'nationalization' of the armed forces, asserting that they were an important component of "peaceful evolution" whose basic aim is to erode and destroy the PLA's 'military spirit.' The author concluded with the following prediction: "if we are so bookish and unrealistic as to believe in what they say, then we are bound to make historic mistakes."⁹

The propaganda campaign on PLA loyalty and resistance to outside influence began to reach its fever pitch with the celebrations of the end of the "War of Resistance Against Japan" and the 78th anniversary of Army Day. In a speech on July 31, Central Military Commission Vice-Chair Cao Gangchuan asserted that the PLA would "steadfastly adhere to the fundamental principle that the PLA is under the absolute leadership of the Chinese Communist Party with Hu Jintao, general secretary of the CCP Central Committee, at the core (*hexin*)."¹⁰ Use of the term "core" to describe the paramount leader is a politically sensitive issue for Hu, who is more often simply described as the general secretary of the CCP. Cao called upon the military to continue the intra-army political campaign focused on "maintaining the advanced nature of party members," closing with a warning that [the Army] must unswervingly adhere to the fundamental principle and system of the party's absolute leadership over the army, and obey the commands of the CCP Central Committee and the Central Military Commission in all actions."¹¹

The apex of propaganda shrillness about military loyalty to the party was the traditional *Liberation Army Daily* editorial on Army Day, which used some variation on the phrase "absolute loyalty to the party" a total of 17 times in the course of a single article!¹² By contrast, the 2004 Army Day editorial mentioned the party's leadership of the army a mere six times, with Hu Jintao mentioned only once at the end of an article largely devoted to Jiang Zemin's concepts of army building and modernization.¹³ The 2005 editorial, however, took the issue to ridiculous extremes, recalling the line from *Hamlet*, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks":

[The PLA] has grown from a small and weak to a big and strong army and marched from victory to victory because our army has the strong leadership of the party, takes actions based on the party's command, always upholds the party's banner as our banner, follows the party's direction as our direction, and makes the party's will our will. Our army's history is a history of upholding the party's absolute leadership over the army; our army's victories are victories won under the party's absolute leadership; and our army's glory is founded with the party's absolute leadership. The party's absolute leadership over the army, wherein our

party's life is linked and our party's strength lies, is the core of the nature and basis of the tradition of the PLA.¹⁴

Far from being a bit player as in the 2004 editorial, Hu takes center stage for an extended soliloquy:

That the party's absolute leadership over the army is our army's soul can never change. Moreover, this concept should be further reinforced under the new historical condition. Hostile forces have stepped up their strategic scheme to "westernize" and "divide" our army; and advocated "de-orientation of the CPC and de-politicization in the Army" [*jundui feidanghua feizhengzhihua*] and "nationalization of the Army" [*jundui guojiahua*] in an attempt to change the character of our army. Chinese economy and society are undergoing penetrating transformation; relations of interests are being readjusted, and all kinds of ideas and cultures are agitating with each other. In order to preserve the glorious tradition and fine style of our party and our army; to continue the steady and correct political orientation; to maintain a high degree of stability, centralization, and unity of troops; and to ensure successful completion of various tasks in the face of the new situation, challenges, circumstances, and problems; it is imperative to uphold even more steadily the party's absolute leadership over the army.¹⁵

The article ended by linking the notion of party loyalty to concrete issues of command and control:

We will unswervingly maintain a high degree of unity with the party Central Committee; and firmly obey the command of the party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Hu to ensure the smooth implementation of military orders and decrees. On this issue of fundamental principle, there should be no ambiguity or wavering to the slightest degree.¹⁶

Just to show that the party propaganda apparatus was with the program, *Xinhua* echoed the *Liberation Army Daily* editorial by quoting Hu to the effect that "the party's absolute leadership over the Army is the soul of the Army, which is a principle that must never be changed and must be further emphasized under the new historic conditions."¹⁷ Hu even began extolling a new model PLA officer, Yang Yegong, whose primary attribute was his party loyalty.¹⁸ This orgy of civil-military pleading has an overall cumulative effect opposite to that intended, raising more questions and eyebrows about the actual loyalty of the PLA to the party.

Conclusion

The topic of civil-military relations is curiously absent from the Pentagon's recent report on Chinese military power, leaving its readers with the impression that there is no

daylight between the civilian and military leaderships in China.¹⁹ In fact, however, the volatile combination of nationalism (buoyed by the upcoming launch of China's second manned space mission and by Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics) and continuing tension over the unresolved cross-Strait situation (with the perceived threat of U.S. military intervention) has created a domestic environment in which unrestrained assertiveness on the part of the military should not come as a surprise. In such an atmosphere one might also expect to see a concomitant constraint on civilian leadership. The recent inflammatory statements by General Zhu Chenghu provide examples of both: Under a less constrained civilian regime, the good general (if he even had the temerity to open his mouth) might well have been sent on a lengthy vacation in the romantic wilderness of Qinghai Province. As Beijing, Washington, and Taipei contemplate the various scenarios in which political conflict could escalate to military conflict, the above evidence suggests that the military and civilian leaderships in China may indeed not speak with one voice and think with one mind. For Washington, these possible fissures are fraught with both danger and opportunity.

Notes

¹ "Veterans in Pension Protest Rounded Up—Police Break Up Ex-Servicemen's Rally As PLA Marks Its 78th Anniversary," *South China Morning Post*, August 2, 2005.

² Ralph Jennings, "1,000-Plus Ex-Soldiers Protest Unemployment in Beijing," *Kyodo*, April 14, 2005.

³ Dai Yunpeng, "Military Spirit Will Never Change," *Jiefangjun bao*, July 15, 2005, p.3.

⁴ National Defense University Research Center for Deng Xiaoping Thought and the Important Thinking on "Three Represents," "Apply the Scientific Development Concept to Guide and Command the Building of Combat Effectiveness," *Jiefangjun bao*, May 18, 2005, p.7.

⁵ "Hu Jintao: We Must Use the Principle of Scientific Development to Guide the Strengthening of the Military Forces' Combat Ability," *Liberation Army Daily*, May 18, 2005.

⁶ "Military Leader Calls for Preventing Crime in Army," *Xinhua*, May 25, 2005.

⁷ Editorial, "Vigorously Strengthen the Building of the Party's Advanced Nature in the Armed Forces," *Jiefangjun bao*, July 1, 2005, p.1.

⁸ Dai Yunpeng, "Military Spirit Will Never Change," *Jiefangjun bao*, July 15, 2005, p.3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Reception Held to Mark PLA's 78th Founding Anniversary," *Xinhua*, July 31, 2005.

¹¹ Cao Zhi, "Ministry of National Defense Holds Grand Reception to Celebrate 78th Anniversary of PLA Founding," *Xinhua*, July 31, 2005.

¹² "Stride Forward Under the CCP's Absolute Leadership—Marking the 78th Anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese PLA," *Jiefangjun bao*, August 1, 2005, p.1.

¹³ "Work Hard for the Development in Leaps and Bounds in Our Army's Modernization Drive," *Jiefangjun bao*, August 1, 2004.

¹⁴ "Stride Forward Under the CCP's Absolute Leadership—Marking the 78th Anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese PLA," *Jiefangjun bao*, August 1, 2005, p.1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Army’s Newspaper Calls for Enhancing Party’s Leadership Over the PLA,” *Xinhua*, August 1, 2005.

¹⁸ Jia Yong and Zhang Xuanjie, “The CMC Holds a Lecture on the Advanced Deeds of Late Comrade Yang Yegong; Hu Jintao Attends the Lecture and Meets All Members of the Lecture Team; Guo Boxiong, Cao Gangchuan, Xu Caihou Are Present,” *Xinhua*, August 12, 2005; and “Chinese President Calls on Army To Follow Example of Dedicated General,” *Xinhua*, August 12, 2005.

¹⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report To Congress: The Military Power of the People’s Republic Of China 2005*, Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2005.