Hu Jintao and the PLA Brass

Alice Miller

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) national congress that will meet in the fall of this year is likely to register only limited changes among China's top military leadership. These changes will only slightly alter the representation of the military on the Party's top decision-making body, the Politburo, and the make-up of the key military policy body, the Central Military Commission (CMC).

The changes in Party and military leadership will emerge from the 17th Central Committee's First Plenum, which will convene the day after the Party's 17th Congress closes. The plenum's communiqué will list the members of the Party's new Politburo and Secretariat and of the Party's CMC. The following spring (2008), the 11th National People's Congress (NPC) will appoint the membership of the state's Central Military Commission, a listing that will be identical to the Party's CMC.[1]

Military Representation in the Party Leadership

The PLA's most direct avenue of influence in the top leadership of the Party is its representation on the Politburo. As Table 1 suggests, membership of the military in the CCP leadership has stabilized over the past two decades at two seats on the Politburo and one on the Secretariat, the body that supervises implementation of Politburo decisions throughout China's political order. This allotment of Politburo seats appears to reflect a deliberate effort over the past two decades to balance representation of major organizational constituencies.

Table 1
Military Representation in Party Leadership Bodies

	13th Congress 1987	*14th Congress 1992*	*15th Congress 1997*	*16th Congress 2002*
Politburo Standing Committee	—	Liu Huaqing	—	—
Politburo	—	Yang Baibing	Chi Haotian Zhang Wannian	Cao Gangchuan Guo Boxiong
Secretariat	Yang Baibing *(added 11/1989)*	Yang Baibing	Zhang Wannian	Xu Caihou

Table 2 enumerates in its first three rows the total membership of the Politburo, its Standing Committee, and the Secretariat over the period from the 1982 12th Congress to the 2002 16th CCP Congress. The subsequent seven rows tally the number of Politburo members who hold concurrent posts in other major sectors of the political order.

Table 2
Politburo Membership by Organizational Constituency, 1982–2002

	12th	*13th*	*14th*	*15th*	*16th*
PB	25+3	17	20+2	22+2	24+1
PBSC	6	5	7	7	9
Secretariat	9	4+1	5	7	7
Secs on PB	4	2	4	6	5
CC Depts	2	1	1	1	2
SC VP/SC	2/2	3/2	4/1	4/1	4
NPC VCs	2	1	2	2	1
Military	8	0	1	2	2
Regional	0	4	5	4	6
Other	12	6	8	10	11

Notes: PB = Politburo (numbers indicate full members + alternates); PBSC = Politburo Standing Committee; "Secs on PB" refers to members of the Secretariat who serve concurrently on the Politburo; CC = Central Committee; SC VP/SC = State Council vice premiers and state councilors; NPC VC = National People's Congress vice chairmen.

As the table suggests, Politburo seating has stabilized at 5–7 seats for each of three major organizational constituencies: leaders working in the Party apparatus (either on the Secretariat or the Central Committee departments); leaders working in state institutions (State Council vice premiers and state councilors and NPC vice chairmen); and Party leaders from the provinces.

Balancing of organizational constituencies on the Politburo appears aimed at sustaining a collective dynamic among an oligarchy at the top of the Party and at inhibiting the rise of dictatorial powers by any single leaders, as previously enjoyed by Mao Zedong or by Stalin in Soviet leadership politics. Balanced representation prevents any one of them from emerging as a predominating bloc and base of power in the leadership.[2]

In this context, the severe limitation of military representation—only two members in contrast to the 5–7 members from the other major constituencies—is striking. It may reflect a continuation of the attempt to limit the influence of the military in the top political leadership—an effort that goes back the early 1970s in the wake of the 1971 Lin Biao affair and that has extended throughout the Deng Xiaoping era. It may also reflect an attempt to curb the power of the general secretary, who since 1989 has served concurrently as chairman of the CMC.

No explicit term or age limits mandate retirement by members of the Politburo. But an internal Party norm that Politburo members retire at the next Party congress upon achieving the age of 70 appears to have been in force since the 15th CCP Congress in 1997. If that norm continues to hold, then one of the two current members of the Politburo—Cao Gangchuan, at 72—may be expected to retire in favor of a younger man at the Party congress this fall. The other military leader on the Politburo, Guo Boxiong, is 65 and so need not retire, at least on grounds of age. The same is true of the PLA representative on the Secretariat, Xu Caihou, who is 64 this year.

Evolution of the Central Military Commission

The Central Military Commission has evolved since the beginning of the reform era nearly three decades ago into a small body whose membership appears now to be defined by role and office. The present organization of the CMC revives and modifies a pattern employed in the 1950s, and it displaces the CMC structure that evolved across the Cultural Revolution decade (1966–76). Table 3 summarizes the changes in structure and size of membership on the CMC across this period.

Table 3
Membership of the CCP CMC, 1954-2007

	1954	*1956*	*1959*	*1969*	*1976*	*1977*	*1982*	*1987*	*1992*	*1997*	*2002*
Chairman	Mao	Mao	Mao	Mao	Hua	Hua 1981: Deng	Deng	Deng 1989: Jiang	Jiang	Jiang	Jiang 2004: Hu
Vice Chairman	-	-	3	6	4	5	3	2	2 1995: 4	2 1999: 3	3
Members	12	12	21	49	29	63	-	-	4	4	4 2004: 7
Standing Committee	-	-	13	12	10	22	-	-	-	-	-
Standing Committee Vice Chairman	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-
Secretary-General	1	1	1	-	-	1	1	1	-	-	-
Deputy Secty-General	1	1	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The evolution of the Party CMC after 1949 is complex and, because command of China's military has been a crucial political asset, has been intricately intertwined with Party leadership conflict. The main features of this evolution are as follows:

- The CMC's origins go back to 1928, but it went into eclipse with the establishment of the PRC in 1949.[3] It was restored in September 1954, when Soviet-style socialist state institutions were established at the First NPC, concurrent with an effort to set forth a corresponding delineation of responsibilities for command of an increasingly professionalized PLA. By a Politburo decision of 28 September 1954, the CMC was

re-established to "be responsible for leadership in military work" under the direction of the Politburo and Secretariat.[4] At the same time, the first PRC constitution, adopted at the 1954 NPC session, stipulated that command of the PLA lay with the president of the PRC—Mao Zedong, until he ceded that position to Liu Shaoqi in April 1959.

- Through the 1954–59 period, the CMC was composed of the chairman (Mao), several regular members, and a secretary-general and deputy secretary-general to manage day-to-day affairs. The original cast of members appointed in 1954 counted all 10 men awarded the rank of marshal in 1955, plus Party Secretary-General (秘书长) Deng Xiaoping. At the 8th Congress in 1956, the number of regular members was increased to 21. These included the same group appointed in 1954, and added 10 new men evidently selected *ex officio*: the heads of the three general departments, the commanders of the Navy, Air Force, and Armor, and other major PLA components.
- In 1959, following the watershed Lushan Plenum and the purge of Marshal Peng Dehuai, Mao reconfigured the system. A new position of CMC vice chairman was created, and a new core body was established—a CMC Standing Committee—as a subset or the broader CMC membership. In 1959, the Standing Committee was composed of Mao, the nine remaining marshals, and the directors of the General Staff and General Political Departments.
- Over the next two decades, the 1959 system remained in place, but CMC membership expanded significantly in number—from 49 in 1969 to 63 in 1977. Membership also broadened to include military leaders from farther down in the military hierarchy—including commanders and political commissars of China's then 11 military regions—as well as some civilian political appointees, including Lin Biao's wife Ye Qun, "Gang of Four" partisan Wang Hongwen (added 1975), and commander of the leadership bodyguard, Wang Dongxing. Finally, across this period command of the PLA reverted to Mao Zedong as chairman of the CCP, as stipulated explicitly in the 1978 revision of the PRC constitution.
- After replacing Mao's successor Hua Guofeng as CMC chairman in 1981, Deng Xiaoping began a decade-long process of restoring the CMC system established in the mid-1950s. The 12th Central Committee's First Plenum in September 1982 reaffirmed Deng as chairman and appointed three vice chairmen, but it named no members. It named Yang Shangkun as vice chairman of a CMC Standing Committee, but it did not enumerate members of a standing committee. The same pattern of appointments emerged out of the 1987 13th CCP Congress. The meaning of these arrangements is not clear, but they were in any event transitional.
- The 14th Party Congress in 1992 gave rise to a new CMC configuration: a chairman (Jiang Zemin until 2004), two or three vice chairmen (including Jiang's apparent successor in waiting, Hu Jintao), and four members. As in the mid-1950s, the members appear to have been selected *ex officio* as heads of the general headquarters departments. The same arrangement emerged from the 1997 15th CCP Congress, and the 2002 16th CCP Congress, though in the latter it was expanded to include the fourth headquarters department created in 1998, the General Armament Department (GAD).
- At the 16th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum in September 2004, concurrent with Hu's succession to Jiang as CMC chairman, three new members were added. These

additions also appeared to reflect *ex officio* criteria—the commanders of the Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery (strategic forces).

- In returning to the mid-1950s system of CMC organization, Deng also restored the 1950s delineation of command responsibilities over the PLA. As had been stipulated in 1954, the PRC constitution was revised in 1982 to state that command of the PLA lay with the PRC president. In addition, it mandated the establishment of a *state* CMC, which would manage all major substantive affairs of China's military. In step with this, the CCP constitution was revised in 1982 so that the *Party* CMC now was responsible only for the "Party and political work" in the PLA's party committee system. Potential confusion and conflict over the respective roles of the two CMCs have been avoided since 1982 simply by appointing the same leaders to both bodies.

As a consequence of Deng's reforms, the CMC is today a much smaller body than it was for much of its existence after 1949, and it is constituted on the basis of role and office. Table 4 presents the current CMC line-up. Chairman Hu Jintao, a man with no military experience prior to his appointment to the body as vice chairman in 1999, is the lone civilian on a CMC. The remaining 10 members are all professional military men carrying the rank of general. Two of the three vice chairmen represent the military on the Party Politburo, and the third sits on the Party Secretariat. The remaining seven count the heads of the four general headquarters departments, together with the commanders of the three specialized service arms of the PLA—the Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery. The latter three were evidently added to balance representation among the CMC's regular members, overcoming the traditional domination of CMC representation by ground forces leaders and consonant with the enhanced role these specialized services have in the joint warfare combat that the PLA has been working to develop since the mid-1980s.

Table 4
The Central Military Commission (2007)

	Age	*CMC Post*	*Concurrent Posts*
Hu Jintao	65	Chairman	CCP general secretary; PRC president
Guo Boxiong	65	Vice chairman	Politburo member
Cao Gangchuan	72	Vice chairman	Politburo member
Xu Caihou	64	Vice chairman	Secretariat member
Liang Guanglie	67	Member	Director, General Staff Department
Li Jinai	65	Member	Director, General Political Department
Liao Xilong	67	Member	Director, General Logistics Department
Chen Bingde	66	Member	Director, General Armament Department
Qiao Qingchen	68	Member	Commander, PLA Air Force
[Zhang Dingfa]*		Member	Commander, PLA Navy
Jing Zhiyuan	63	Member	Commander, PLA Second Artillery

**(deceased 12/2006)*

Turnover on the CMC Ahead?

If the preceding analysis is accurate, then new appointments to the CMC at the 17th CCP Congress—either to replace current members or to expand its membership—will suit the logic of *ex officio* representation. By that logic, for example, the present Navy Commander Wu Shengli, who succeeded the now deceased Zhang Dingfa in that post in August last year, will take Zhang's place on the CMC. Wu's promotion to admiral on 6 July reinforces that inference.

Aside from Wu, what other changes may emerge from the 17th Party Congress? Formal criteria for retirement—beyond considerations of health, unsatisfactory performance, and political infighting—were set down in the 1994 "Active Service Regulations." These stipulate that regular CMC members are expected to retire at age 70, with possible extension to 72, and that there is no age limit for CMC vice chairmen. As Table 5 (next page) suggests, these retirement criteria appear to have been observed over the past decade. By the 1994 regulations, therefore, none of the current CMC members are required to retire.

However, as discussed above, there appears to be an informal norm in effect since 1997 that members of the Politburo who achieve the age of 70 are expected to retire at the next Party congress. By that norm, Cao Gangchuan, now 72, may be expected to retire from his Politburo post. Arguably, he could nevertheless retain his seat on the CMC, but that would appear to violate the representational role that CMC vice chairmen appear to play on the Politburo and Secretariat. This logic suggests that Cao will retire altogether in favor of a younger man later this year.

Cao's successor as CMC vice chairman and as Politburo member is likely to be selected from among the existing membership of the CMC. Speculation in the Hong Kong press and among some foreign observers has pointed to Chen Bingde, the former Jinan Military Region commander who was promoted to the CMC as GAD director in 2004, when Hu Jintao replaced Jiang Zemin as CMC chairman. The argument on Chen's behalf is that he replicates Cao's path to CMC vice chairman from the same GAD position. Chen is also one of the two CMC members who has been promoted to the rank of general by Hu—immediately after Hu's succession as CMC chairman. (The other is Second Artillery Commander Jing Zhiyuan.) This argument for Chen to replace Cao need not hold, however, since there is no evident historical requirement for experience in arms procurement among the CMC vice chairmen, and other leaders who have served on the CMC longer—such as Liang Guanglie or Li Jinai—may be selected on the basis of seniority to succeed Cao as vice chairman.

Table 5
Age of Appointment/Retirement of CMC Members, 1992–2004

Military Leader	*Age & position on appointment*	*Age & position at reappointment*	*Age & position at retirement*
Liu Huaqing	76, vice chairman (1992)	-	81, vice chairman (1997)
Zhang Zhen	78, vice chairman (1992)	-	83, vice chairman (1997)
Zhang Wannian	64, member (1992); appointed vice chairman at 67 (1995)	69, vice chairman (1997)	74, vice chairman (2002)
Chi Haotian	63, member (1992); appointed vice chairman at 66 (1995)	68, vice chairman (1997)	73, vice chairman (2002)
Yu Yongbo	61, member (1992)	66, member (1997)	71, member (2002)
Fu Quanyou	62, member (1992)	67, member (1997)	72, member (2002)
Wang Ke	64, member (1995)	66, member (1997)	71, member (2002)
Wang Ruilin	65, member (1995)	67, member (1997)	72, member (2002)
Cao Gangchuan	63, member (1998)	67, vice chairman (2002)	-
Guo Boxiong	57, member (1999)	60, vice chairman (2002)	-
Xu Caihou	56, member (1999)	59, member (2002); appointed vice chairman at 61 (2004)	-
Liang Guanglie	62, member (2002)	-	-
Liao Xilong	62, member (2002)	-	-
Li Jinai	60, member (2002)	-	-
Chen Bingde	63, member (2004)	-	-
Qiao Qingchen	65, member (2004)	-	-
Zhang Dingfa	61, member (2004)	-	-
Jing Zhiyuan	60, member (2004)	-	-

Hu Jintao and the CMC

Paralleling the institutionalization of politics in the civilian sector since the Deng era, a comparable series of institutionalized processes have taken hold in China's military, complementing Deng's efforts to reestablish PLA professionalism over the same period. As the preceding analysis suggests, the institutionalization of routine promotion and retirement procedures in the military seems in recent years to be shaping appointment to the top levels of the military system. The impact of these processes is to reshape the opportunities and tactics by which the Party general secretary, serving concurrently as CMC chairman, can stack the PLA brass to his political advantage.

Since becoming CMC chairman in September 2004, Hu does not appear to have cultivated ties with the military brass as aggressively as Jiang Zemin did in the early 1990s after succeeding Deng Xiaoping as CMC chairman in 1989–90. Hu has promoted only three groups to the rank of general—Chen Bingde and Jing Zhiyuan in September 2004, 10 other officers in June 2006, and three more in July of this year. Hu has visited PLA units during inspection tours of the provinces only occasionally over the past three years, a practice Jiang Zemin seemed to relish. In his role as CMC chairman, Hu has presided over and delivered keynote addresses to PLA conferences, visited with veteran PLA leaders during Spring Festival, and visited the headquarters of the PLA newspaper *Liberation Army Daily* as a matter of routine. In return, Hu's pronouncements to the military have been saluted as "important instructions" from (CMC) "Chairman Hu," protocol that was routinely extended to Jiang Zemin. Although Hu has been credited on occasion with "new departures" in military affairs, there has as yet been no evident effort to praise him for major innovations in military doctrine or policy.

The contrast between Jiang Zemin's aggressive outreach to the PLA in the 1990s and Hu's more low-keyed approach comports with the different circumstances and political style of each man. Jiang took over leadership of the military without prior military experience, in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, and from a relatively insecure position. Though Hu also had no prior military experience before becoming CMC vice chairman in 1999, he had five years' experience on the body before assuming the post of chairman. In addition, Hu's appointment to the CMC in 1999 was part of an elaborate program of preparation for his eventual succession not only as leader of the military but also as the Party's and PRC's top leader. Jiang, who emerged as Party and military leader in the midst of crisis, had the benefit of no such experience.

Hu's low-keyed approach to the military also seems to comport with his careful approach to consolidating his position as Party leader. Hu has not appeared to seek the trappings of paramount "core" leader, content with a status as *primus inter pares* in a collective leadership. The outcome of the 17th Party Congress may change that picture. But evidence so far suggests that Hu's approach to the CMC therefore may reflect a deliberate matter of political style of the sort evident in his approach to Politburo politics.

Notes

[1] Since 1982, the PRC has had two parallel Central Military Commissions, one under the CCP Central Committee and the other under the PRC president and NPC. The 1982 Party and state constitutions delineated different responsibilities for these bodies, but membership on them has consistently been identical, except during the months of turnover between Party congresses and NPCs.

[2] A more detailed analysis of balancing among organizational constituencies on the CCP Politburo and its origins is presented in the brilliant paper, "Institutionalization and the Changing Dynamics of Chinese Leadership Politics," presented at the Brookings Institution conference, "Changes in China's Political Landscape: The 17th Party Congress and Beyond," on 12 April 2007, to be published in the forthcoming conference publication by Brookings Institution Press later this year. A similar effort at balanced representation of organizational constituencies on the Politburo of the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) was evident in the 1970s.

[3] The official founding date is June 1928, by resolution at the Sixth CCP Congress, held in Moscow. The revised Party constitution adopted at that congress does not mention a CMC. The Sixth Congress followed the collapse of the CCP's "united front" collaboration with the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) in 1927, which meant that the CCP henceforth had to struggle for political power on its own. The establishment of the CMC complemented the decision at the Sixth Congress that the Party begin building a CCP-led Red Army, set forth in the congress's resolution of the "peasant question." Some sources cite founding dates as early as 1925, but these appear to refer to other Party-military organs that foreshadowed the CMC. CCP Organization Department, CCP Party History Research Office, and Central Party Archives, ed. 中国共产党组织史资料 (Materials on the Organizational History of the Chinese Communist Party), Beijing: 中共党史出版社 (CCP History Publishing House), 2000, vol. 2, 95–96.

[4] Ibid., vol. 5, 55.