Conference Brief
Strategic Studies Institute
U.S. Army War College,
The Heritage Foundation,
and American Enterprise Institute

After the 16th Party Congress: The Civil and the Military

Compiled by

Mr. Andy Gudgel
The Heritage Foundation

Key Insights:

- Elder Chinese Communist Party leaders such as Jiang Zemin are becoming increasingly marginalized, while leaders of the "Fourth Generation" are becoming more prominent.
- The Chinese political system is becoming increasingly institutionalized. However, this process is not yet complete.
- There is growing separation between Chinese civil and military elites.
- The best way to describe China's new military leaders is as "Techno-Nationalists"; generals with strong operational and technical backgrounds who have a great interest in modernizing the People's Liberation Army.
- Several new concepts in Chinese military thought require further study by Western researchers.

Over 50 experts in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) gathered at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, from September 19-21, to attend the 2003 PLA Conference. Cosponsored by the U.S. Army War College, the Heritage Foundation, and the American Enterprise Institute, the conference was titled "After the 16th Party Congress: The Civil and the Military."

The closing of the 16th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and subsequent personnel appointments saw great change in the civil and military leadership of the PLA. Former

AUTHENTICATED U.S. GOVERNMENT INFORMATION GPO

President Jiang Zemin relinquished all of the Party and State offices he held within the Chinese Government—save one. He allowed himself to be re-elected for another term as Chief the Party's Central Military Commission (CMC). By retaining control over the military, Jiang effectively usurped the Commander-in-Chief powers of the new General Party Secretary and President, Hu Jintao. This has lead to uncertainty within China about the exact military chain of command. Additionally, military leadership within the CMC has passed to a new generation of less political, more practical, generals. This conference addressed the impact that these personnel and political changes have had on the PLA.

The Two Centers.

The PLA is currently caught in the midst of a succession struggle within the CCP and finds itself torn between the "two centers" of power in Chinese politics: CMC Chair Jiang Zemin and President Hu Jintao. While the PLA first praised the continued leadership of Jiang Zemin, articles appeared in official Chinese military newspapers soon after, criticizing the strain put on the chain of command by having "two centers." President Hu Jintao, for his part, has been either unable or unwilling to force a change in the status quo. The PLA remains caught in the middle. While originally the army of the CCP, the PLA is in the process becoming a more modern national army, and the deadlock between Jiang and Hu hinders military modernization on several fronts, such as budget and equipment procurement, in addition to chain-of-command issues.

In the past year, President Hu Jintao has attempted to strengthen his position politically. While not openly disagreeing with Jiang Zemin, Hu used events such as the SARS crisis to both bolster his position and garner popular support. While he has had little apparent effect on China's National Security policy to date, by picking his political battles wisely, Hu has better positioned himself to affect it in the future.

The struggle between Jiang and Hu is also played out at other levels through the use of supporters in the younger "Fourth Generation" of CCP leadership. A good illustration are the interactions between Premier Wen Jiabao and Vice-President Zeng Qinghong. Despite being old friends, Wen is a supporter of Hu Jintao, while Zeng's loyalties lie firmly with Jiang Zemin.

As long as the struggle between the "two centers" continues, the PLA will have difficulty in pushing measures it needs to modernize through the CCP bureaucracy.

New Central Committee and CMC Members.

Other personnel changes within the CMC of the CCP will affect prospects for modernization within the PLA. The great personal influence once wielded by the top levels of the Party (such as Jiang Zemin) is slowly starting to fade, replaced by more formal institutional authority based on position. Many of the new Provincial Party Secretaries selected at the 16th Party Congress have been promoted "up through the ranks" from provincial levels, having started their careers as local Party functionaries. Local and provincial politics in China are conservative, as Party officials try to avoid upsetting their constituencies. Additionally, many of the newly appointed Secretaries had their higher education interrupted by the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, giving them a narrow world view. Looking at these two factors in combination, it is very likely that the newly appointed Secretaries have politically conservative outlooks. This conservatism will tend to slow political change in China, and hence limit the speed of PLA modernization.

On the other hand, the newly appointed generals of the CMC are younger, more experienced, better educated, and less political than their predecessors. Four of the six generals have previous experience working in Military Region Headquarters, while the other two focused on China's military science and technical research, especially China's rocket forces. Several of the generals are veterans of China's 1979 conflict with Vietnam and/or have had experience in PLA exercises directed

against Taiwan. They are more than capable of continuing the PLA along the previously established path of military modernization. Whether or not they are capable of dealing with rapid changes in the international arena and national security threats facing China is still unknown.

A New Old Concept in Chinese Military Thinking?

As China's military continues to modernize, new concepts and currents in Chinese military thinking will appear. A possible example of this is the term *Sha Shou Jian* (Assassin's Mace). A venerable Chinese proverb, Assassin's Mace is used to indicate a secret weapon or method used by a person or group to triumph over a stronger adversary. However, use of the term has increased in Chinese military papers since the late 1990s. Does this indicate an attempt by PLA strategists to "think outside the box" of ways of defeating a superior military force or is it a reference to a specific weapon or program within the Chinese military? The answer is possibly both. In low-level PLA literature, Assassin's Mace seems to refer to unconventional tactics, asymmetrical warfare, and even "miracle weapons" that could be used to negate the combat and technological advantages of a stronger adversary (generally assumed to be the United States). At the same time, several pronouncements by high-level PLA and Party leaders indicate that concrete Assassin's Mace weapons development programs exist. While the appearance of a "wonder weapon" on the battlefield could in fact give China a tactical advantage, the possibility that Chinese leaders, believing their Assassin's Mace would give them a sudden victory over the United States, would be more willing risk military action is even more worrisome. Terms such as Assassin's Mace, that indicate possible shifts in Chinese military thinking, bear closer watching by experts on the Chinese military. Conference participants stressed the importance of demystifying the Assassin's Mace concept and further improving our understanding of the term.

Conclusions.

The PLA continues to move along the path of military modernization. However, as it does, a number of factors affect and influence the pace at which this happens. Currently, the following factors are working to slow modernization within the PLA.

The first is China's perception of military threats against it. From the Chinese point of view, one of the major aims of military modernization is to be able to deter, or defeat if necessary, U.S. use of force in support of Taiwan. As long as Sino-U.S. tensions over Taiwan remain in the background, the Chinese military will have little need to speed up its military modernization.

A second influence comes from the Chinese economy. As China's economy grows, government tax receipts increase, providing more money for the PLA to modernize. Were the growth in the Chinese economy to drop from its current pace, so too would the money available to the PLA to improve or replace old weapons systems. Additionally, Chinese leaders since Deng Xiaoping have emphasized economic development over military modernization, pointing more budgetary resources in that direction.

Political maneuvering within the civilian leadership as well as PLA-CCP differences over the aim of military modernization also act as drags on the pace of military modernization. The PLA currently doesn't have a unified chain of command, with no one person in charge of both the party and the army. This has increased tensions both within the CCP and between the civilian and military members of the CMC, and hampered communication between the two establishments. Under these circumstances, rapid military modernization by the PLA is unlikely.

*****

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This conference brief is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

*****

More information on the Strategic Studies Institute's programs may be found on the Institute's Homepage at *http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi/* or by calling (717) 245-4212.