



China's "Gun-Control" Problem: Jiang vs. Hu?

by Yu Bin

Does China have a "gun-control" problem? Yes. The question of who controls one of the world's largest armed forces naturally attracts international attention. Recently, however, there seems to be excessive speculation about a power struggle between the moderate reformist head of the state/party, Hu Jintao, and the nationalist/conservative military strongman, Jiang Zemin, who continues to hold the position of chairman of China's powerful Central Military Commission (CMC).

On the eve of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 16th Congress' fourth plenary session (Sept. 16-19), the Jiang-Hu rivalry is said to involve key policy issues. They range from Beijing's "uncompromising" stance toward Taiwan, Hong Kong's democratic elections, growing social instability at home, rampant corruption, inner-Party democracy, and the most salient issue of all: who will command the 2.5-million People's Liberation Army (PLA), which is thought to favor a hardline policy toward Taiwan.

Media focus on the so-called Jiang-Hu rivalry over the CMC chairmanship, however, misses other points that may be more important. In the absence of major foreign and domestic crises, current politicking in China has more to do with policy issues, particularly Taiwan, than major personnel changes; and more on leadership continuity than a reshuffle. The alleged Jiang-Hu "gun-control" dispute and the PLA's growing role in Chinese politics may not hold much water given the clear trend toward firm civilian control of the military since 1978.

PLA depoliticization under Deng

After the massive military intervention in politics during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), China's political and military elite concluded that the excessive politicization of China's politics and armed forces should not be repeated; soldiers should go back to the barracks and the PLA should focus on professionalization, re-structuring, training, streamlining, and military modernization. As a result, civilian leadership regained its authority. The PLA was essentially depoliticized, de-factionalized, and began the longest professionalization in its history.

In the late 1980s, the PLA quelled the student-led demonstrations. The military was brought back into politics, albeit reluctantly, by the civilian leadership. Once normalcy and stability were re-established, paramount leader Deng Xiaoping moved quickly to place the PLA under the new CMC Chairman Jiang Zemin in November 1989. Deng then made sure that Jiang institutionalized control over the PLA.

The PLA's first civilian boss

As the PLA's first real civilian leader, Jiang managed to

develop unprecedented institutionalized authority, which enabled him to assume all the top offices in China: CCP general secretary, president of the state, and CMC chairman.

These formal titles, however, were not necessarily sufficient for Jiang to command the PLA. During his tenure as CMC chair, Jiang made a concerted effort to befriend the PLA, leading to the military's eventual acceptance of his leadership. Military spending rose steadily in the 1990s. Jiang traveled widely and frequently to military units, during holidays, and to remote areas. He managed to gain support and loyalty from almost all sectors of the PLA: younger officers for his policy of nurturing a highly educated, well-trained, and professionalized officer core; from the rank-and-file for improving living conditions; from older generals for being promoted to retirement or semi-retirement. Over time, Jiang felt so confident of his ability to command and control the PLA that he decided in 1998 to sever the military completely from commercial activities, something that Deng was either unwilling or unable to do.

Jiang also took major steps, almost every five years, to reshape the army. These include the April 1992 decision to continue to streamline and restructure the PLA to consolidate the 1-million man reduction in the 1980s and the September 1997 decision to cut an additional 500,000 soldiers in three years. This was followed by a major overhaul of the PLA's command-and-control, logistics, and armament mechanisms in April 1998 when a unified General Armament Department of the PLA was created, alongside the General Staff, General Political Department, and General Logistics Department. Jiang's most recent effort to reform the PLA came in 2002-03 when he articulated the "dual-historical mission" for the PLA's mechanization and information-based military (*xinxi hua*) in the CCP's 16th Congress in November 2002 and the concept of "RMA with Chinese characteristics" (*zhongguo tese de junshi biange*) in March 2003, making the PLA's information-based capability the key for China's military modernization.

Implications for Hu

Jiang may give up command of the Chinese military in the current plenary session, just as he yielded his Party post to Hu in late 2002 and the state presidency in March 2003. Or he may choose to fade away over a few more years. Whichever he chooses, the PLA's future top civilian leader will have to operate against the backdrop of Jiang's legacies. This has a number of implications.

First, Hu himself will have to nurture a relationship with the PLA. Simply taking over the CMC chair does not eliminate the need to define the style, scope, and depth of his own ties with the military. In this sense, possessing the chair of the CMC may not be terribly important for Hu.

Second, the process by which Hu assumes the PLA's civilian leadership started at least five years ago when he became a vice chairman of the CMC. Hu's elevation to the number-two position in the CMC was more than a procedural and symbolic promotion, given his deep involvement in the de-commercialization of the PLA in the late 1990s. Once Jiang made the decision to de-link the PLA from commercial activities, Hu was assigned to do the "dirty work." This was guaranteed to be unpopular among PLA officers. The fact that the PLA went along with these decisions suggests its acceptance of Hu as future commander-in-chief.

The current "dual-center" politics in China – Hu as the Party/state leader and Jiang as the PLA boss – may not be desirable for timely and efficient decision making. The unfinished leadership transition from Jiang to Hu, however, is the most uneventful in China's modern history. It is unlikely that Hu and Jiang have a compelling reason to hurry through the most "normal" transition of the CMC leadership.

Finally, it is common sense that leadership crises in China occur usually in times of socio-political upheaval. Although China faces tremendous difficulties in its economic and political reforms, the nation has been in the midst of continuous economic development with no sign of a major domestic crisis (except for SARS). Jiang and Hu may have disputes over specific issues, but there is consensus on the key objective: China's economic growth and social stability.

The gathering Taiwan storm

The only possible source of crisis may come from the highly sensitive and increasingly dangerous issue of Taiwan's independence, as Taiwan's self-imposed time-lines are fast approaching regarding constitutional revision (in 2006) and perhaps bolder moves toward independence before the end of Chen Shui-bian's second term (in 2008).

If this occurs, policies – whether by Jiang or Hu – will be largely driven by the perception of a sharply deteriorating cross-Strait situation and fears that Taiwan is becoming a grave threat to China's core national interests. This means that Taiwan is seen as an independence-minded province reaching the point of no return; as a key component of a *de facto* military alliance; and as a platform to launch military strikes on China's vital politico-economic and population centers. In a broader and historical perspective, China's Taiwan policy will be driven not necessarily by the "hawks" in the PLA, but by Chinese nationalism that has been in the making since the late 19th century when Taiwan was ceded to Japan after the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese War. This is the case regardless of the nature of the China's political system: emperor-based, republican, communist, or democratic.

If that is the case, as the situation is unfolding, Jiang and Hu may well be more united in seeking an effective solution than vying for the position of CMC chairman. And Jiang may continue to command the PLA in the near future while a storm gathers over the Taiwan Strait.

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