The military decision-making process in Beijing and its implications for the PLA’s evolution

Rong-I Arthur Hong\textsuperscript{a,b} and Yang-Cheng Wang\textsuperscript{b*}

\textsuperscript{a}Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI), Republic of China-Taiwan; \textsuperscript{b}National Defense University (NDU), Republic of China

The instruments of national power in the People’s Republic of China (hereinafter PRC or China) consist of three major pillars: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP; party), the State Council (state), and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA; military). The firm reign of the CCP over the entire country is upheld by nationalism, rapid economic growth, and the PLA. To accurately analyze the decision-making process of China’s military security, it is necessary to resolve this complex function with multiple variables that surround the tripartite mechanism of the CCP, PRC, and PLA. This tripartite mechanism of the CCP, PRC, and PLA could be reframed as a complex of Mind (CCP), Money (PRC), and Might (PLA). In this paper, the authors indicate that the so-called “characteristic of China” is a political system designed to implement the CCP’s mind through the PRC’s money, with the PLA’s might as the backbone. In practice, the center of gravity of this triangle is shaped by the general secretary of the CCP, the presidency of the PRC, and the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission (CMC). During the process of power transition, which could be initiated by law or through struggle, failing to establish a stable triangle could have a strong impact on China’s military decision-making process. An unstable triangle of CCP, PRC, and PLA—with the opaque military decision-making process of China—could lead to unpredictable consequences, not only for the Taiwan Strait, but also for the Asia–Pacific region.

Introduction

The instruments of national power in China consist of three major pillars: the Chinese Communist Party (party); the State Council (state); and the People’s Liberation Army (military). The Party–State–Military tripartite political architecture reflects the traditional philosophy of the CCP regarding political power, which is that it must be seized using the armed forces.\textsuperscript{1} The formula of how the CCP positions, commands, and employs its armed forces, the PLA, is defined in its spirit of this conventional philosophy. The mechanisms of the PLA and the State Council which interact with each other on matters of national security are derived and established according to the tripartite system. This unique architecture provides the PRC an ideal scheme with Chinese characteristics, offering an excellent excuse for China to continuously raise its national status through the PLA’s capacity to expand, both internally and externally.

\textsuperscript{*}Corresponding author. Email: drycwang@yahoo.com.tw
The complex nature of the Party–State–Military tripartite political architecture illustrates that only the leader in Beijing tightly grasping control of the PLA, qualifies as the leader of the entire country. The guidelines established by Mao Zedong that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun” were fully embraced by later generations of national leaders in Beijing. Mao was chairman of the CCP Central Military Commission (Party CMC) from its establishment with the reorganization of the CCP Central Revolutionary Military Commission in 1954 until his death in 1976. Later, Deng Xiaoping was chairman of the PRC Central Military Commission (State CMC) from 1983 to 1990, before transferring this position to Jiang Zemin as the first step of Deng’s succession plan. The two CMCs, the Party CMC, and the State CMC, are designed to be identical in terms of composition and memberships.

In practice, the Party CMC is the supreme decision-making body in the military command-chain of the PLA. The Party CMC is under the direct supervision of the CCP Central Committee and the members of the Party CMC are assigned by the Central Committee of the CCP. However, according to China’s constitution, the State CMC leads all of the armed forces in the PRC. The chairman of the State CMC, who is the commander-in-chief of the PLA, is elected by the National People’s Congress (NPC). Other members of the State CMC are also decided by the NPC or its Standing Committee according to the nomination by the chairman of the State CMC.

The fundamental differences between the PRC and an electoral democracy are (1) the CCP’s supreme control over the military and state systems, and (2) the PLA’s overwhelming underpinning of the CCP’s regime. Even though the Party CMC does not appear to possess legal status to command the armed forces of the PRC, the CCP still manages to command the PLA, from the perspectives of law and legitimacy, through the subtle mechanism of “one institution, two boards” between the State CMC and the Party CMC.

Both CMCs are, in theory, identical to each other in terms of name and membership. Usually, the person serving in the position of chairman for both CMS, as the general secretary of the CCP, and the vice chairmen of the CMCs also serves in the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CCP. Therefore, the relationship between both CMCs and the Politburo of the CCP becomes a key element for the decision-making process of China’s military-command chain.

The Ministry of National Defense (MND) of the PRC is a ministry under the State Council and the Minister of National Defense in the PRC does not have command and control authority over the PLA. The MND was set up according to a decision adopted by the 1st Session of the 1st NPC in 1954. Its official responsibilities had been to exercise unified administration over the development of national defense affairs. In reality, the MND itself only serves as the liaison body representing the CMCs and the PLA when dealing with foreign militaries in military exchange and cooperation.

With its thorough analysis of the CCP’s history and commanding architecture, this paper is aimed at deciphering the complex nature of the military decision-making process in China. In addition, the authors intend to point out the fact of the growing influence of the PLA over China’s national security policy by clarifying the relationships among the two CMCs, the Central Committee and the Politburo of the CCP, and the State Council.