

## China's political force

Thanks to history, the party and PLA have a unique relationship - but which is the boss

### MILITARY

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Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun, Mao Zedong once famously said. Sixty years after the founding of the People's Republic, many of Mao's other teachings have been forgotten and forsaken - but not this one. Every top communist leader since Mao has known what supreme power rests upon.

To this day, the People's Republic has no official national army. The 2.3-million-strong People's Liberation Army is the largest armed force in the world, but its ultimate loyalty is to the Communist Party alone.



According to the constitution of the People's Republic, the PLA is "under the absolute leadership of the Chinese Communist Party". The party guarantees its control over the military through a complex but thorough system of commissars and political departments at every level of the armed forces. Ultimately, the PLA take orders from the Central Military Commission (CMC), not from the Ministry of National Defence - which falls under the civilian government.

Theoretically, there are two CMCs - the party CMC and the state CMC. The creation of a state CMC in 1982 was seen as a move to answer criticism and give the PLA a shade of national colour.

The commander-in-chief of the state CMC is the president of the Republic. In practice though, the state CMC is identical to the party CMC in membership, rendering the claim that the PLA is also a national armed force purely academic.

Over the past two decades, China has pushed vigorously to turn the PLA into a modern fighting force. Its military doctrines were drastically revised to keep them abreast with the latest developments. Its hardware was upgraded and expanded and its soldiers received better training and command. But the core value of the PLA as a safeguard of the Communist Party's political monopoly remains unchanged.

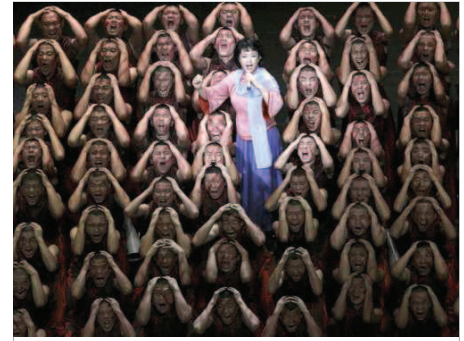
Ted Galen Carpenter, vice-president for defence and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute in Washington, says the Communist Party leaders fully understand that the PLA is probably the only institution capable of ending the party's political domination.

"They are determined to maintain tight controls so that such a possibility does not arise," Carpenter said.

The importance of the military in politics can be seen by the role the PLA has played in the transfer of power. In the past 60 years, the military has twice intervened to decide who should be China's next supreme leader.

The first time happened in October 1976, when Mao's heir Hua Guofeng teamed up with marshal Ye Jianying to bring down the Gang of Four - headed by Mao's wife Jiang Qing . Everyone knew Ye, not Hua, was behind the coup. Hua was soon brushed aside and Deng Xiaoping - a close ally of Ye and a respected military leader himself - took over.

The second time was more tragic. Driven by anger and disappointment at widespread corruption, hundreds of thousands of students gathered in Tiananmen Square to protest in 1989. The party was divided over how to best handle the situation, with general secretary Zhao Ziyang calling for dialogue with students while premier Li Peng demanded a forceful crackdown. Eight powerful party elders, headed by Deng, backed Li and imposed martial law in Beijing. The army was called in to enforce the order but many civilian protesters tried to block its advance. After weeks of stalemate, the PLA soldiers opened fire on the crowds and forced their way to Tiananmen Square.



Troops rehearse for their role in a musical drama that will form part of celebrations of 60 years of the People's Republic. The Red Army, not the party, made the Communist revolution, giving it a special place in China's history, scholars say.

Photo: Reuters

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