

BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects

BY DAVID SHAMBAUGH

Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002.
ISBN: 0-520-22507-4 (cloth); 0-520-24238-6 (paperback, 2004); xxvii + 374 pages.

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The Military Connection in China

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It is not often that several features of a book come together to endow it with extraordinary significance. This occurs when the book deals with an important topic, when it adds to the knowledge of that topic, when its publication is timely, and when—most importantly—its quality is excellent. Such a book is David Shambaugh's *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects*, an accomplished study of the Chinese armed forces since the early 1990s.

China's Foreign Affairs: The Military Connection

The importance of the book derives from the key role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in China's external relations and internal politics. On the external scene, the mission of China's armed forces is no different from that of other armies: providing military backup to the foreign policy objectives of the nation's leaders. And yet, the connection between military force and foreign policy in China is closer than in most countries. Consequently, the role of the army in both formulating and carrying out this policy is more central.

The military connection is particularly strong because China's international aims and aspirations are driven by an intense nationalism, a force that draws on images of past greatness and subsequent helplessness in the face of imperialist humiliations. This nationalism has been particularly intense during periods when the Chinese sensed a threat to their security and sovereignty, felt that they had been wronged, or determined that their

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national honor had been trampled upon. Given China's recent history, it is not surprising that these feelings bubble close to the surface of Chinese decision-making.

As a result, Chinese leaders have been prone to resort to force in a variety of situations: intervening in Korea against the United States, taking military action along the border against the Soviet Union, instigating several crises in the Taiwan Strait, and undertaking invasions of both India and Vietnam. Although Chinese military actions have been calculated and low-risk, they have hardly been no-risk, especially since almost all such actions were against the superpowers or their allies.

The Chinese, in short, have been quite disposed to resort to military force, even when they were materially inferior, in order to stand up to the great powers or to punish neighbors who had incurred their wrath. Although China has pursued a much more congenial foreign policy in the past decade (with the exception of Taiwan), military force remains an important potential component of Chinese foreign policy. As the capabilities of the PLA increase, so will the military's importance in supporting China's external aims.

The PLA's role, moreover, is not due solely to combat capabilities. Since the early 1990s, PLA leaders have also moved to a central position in the formulation of China's foreign policy. Under Mao Zedong (毛澤東), military brass had undoubtedly been consulted on foreign affairs issues that had security implications; the ultimate decisions—from the Korean War to the Sino-Soviet conflict—were, however, made by Mao in accordance with his personal inclinations. Because of Deng's Xiaoping's (鄧小平) more cooperative style and weaker position, the military in the Deng era presumably carried more weight in foreign affairs—though Deng still made the final decisions by himself.

Jiang Zemin (江澤民) also had the final word, but not according solely to his own inclinations—a circumstance which also holds true of his successor Hu Jintao (胡錦濤). Both Jiang and Hu have lacked the personal authority and political standing in the military that ensured the PLA's unconditional compliance to both Mao and Deng in all situations regardless of the consequences. As a result, Jiang and Hu have had to grant

concessions to the PLA in order to ensure its support. One concession has obviously been the unprecedented participation of military chiefs in foreign affairs decisions that are of concern to the PLA, including issues related to Taiwan and relations with the United States.

Chinese Politics: The Military Connection

Armies are expected to play a central role in the implementation of a country's foreign policy, and military leaders are often brought in on foreign security-oriented decisions. What armies are not expected to do is to play a pivotal role in a country's politics. This is, however, precisely what the Chinese army has always done—although in significantly different ways.

The PLA was a central pillar of the power structure that Mao and Deng dominated, ready to do the leader's bidding in all circumstances and without question. The main reason for this loyalty was the immense personal authority of both leaders, despite the differences in their standing and style. This authority ensured that both leaders could rely on unconditional military support for their political activities and leadership conflicts.

Their authority was underpinned by both the long-standing ethos of military subordination to political leadership and the organizational controls that the Communist Party had embedded in the army. The most important manifestation of the stature that both Mao and Deng enjoyed in the military was evident in the response of the PLA to calls for intervention on their side in severe leadership crises—as Mao's power base in launching and carrying out the Cultural Revolution, and as Deng's enforcers in suppressing the Tiananmen (天安門) demonstrations.

The post-revolutionary successors to Mao and Deng do not have the invaluable advantage of similar stature in the eyes of the PLA, and therefore must be amenable to military concerns. This gives the PLA a measure of political influence that is a new feature of the Chinese political scene. One result of this influence is the extraordinary autonomy that the PLA has enjoyed to run its own affairs under both Jiang and Hu. Another is the steady rise in the military budget, although preparations for a war over Taiwan also help explain this rise.

An important source of the military's influence also lies in the uncertainty—which did not exist under Mao and Deng—regarding any PLA response in the event of a major leadership struggle. Although such a scenario is remote, China's post-revolutionary leaders cannot be completely confident that the PLA will automatically line up behind the paramount leader, as has occurred in the past. This uncertainty applies both to any struggle at the level of high politics, where the support of military commanders will be essential for the leader's victory, and to developments at ground level, where military intervention will be essential to suppress resistance to the leadership.

The role of the military at the local level is also a source of present influence. This role has increased in recent years, with China's dizzying economic surge having produced vast unemployment and discontent, which has in turn resulted in numerous outbreaks of violence. Although the regime has tried to use the People's Armed Police (人民武警) whenever possible, there have been many instances in which the PLA was called upon to restore order. Thus, in the localities the PLA remains the leadership's last line of defense against widespread instability and chaos.

Academic Research: A Weak Connection

Given the importance of the PLA in China's foreign affairs as well as internal politics, it is surprising that the subject has been largely neglected in academic research or publications, especially in the United States. A prime example of such glaring omission can be found in the two volumes of *The Cambridge History of China* which deal with the post-1949 period; they devote special chapters to important topics—except the military.¹ As yet another example, *Understanding Modern China* is advertised in the March 2004 issue of *The China Quarterly* as a "well-grounded exploration of the most crucial issues affecting China today," but one looks in vain for a chapter on the military.²

¹Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²Robert E. Gamer, *Understanding Modern China* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2003).

One reason probably lies in the notion, not unknown in political science departments, that to deal with the Chinese military is less useful and dignified than other "cleaner" and more "scientific" subjects. Another reason presumably lies in the assumption that the importance of the military in Chinese politics has to be commensurate with a visible presence on the political scene. Since most of the time this presence has not been obvious, its importance has not been given due consideration. Whatever the reason, there are few experts on the PLA in political science departments, and most of the serious work on the subject in the United States has emanated from the government, military academic institutions, and think tanks.

The Shambaugh Connection

David Shambaugh's book provides a much-needed and most welcome connection between the academic work of a prominent political scientist and the Chinese military. There is no other volume that equals *Modernizing China's Military* in comprehensiveness of scope, richness of detail, and thoroughness of treatment. Shambaugh's volume provides both an excellent overview and an in-depth analysis of every important aspect of the Chinese armed forces since the early 1990s. The analysis is perceptive, the assessments judicious, and the writing lucid.

The book is the product of a massive research effort. A unique feature is the use that the author has made of a wide range of Chinese sources which have only recently become available, and he has supplemented this data with interviews with Chinese military officers. His footnotes constitute a comprehensive bibliography of all important works on the PLA that have been published in recent years.

David Shambaugh has clearly moved the study of the PLA to a new level of excellence. Hopefully, he has also moved it closer to the mainstream study of China.