

BOOK REVIEW

Phillip C. SAUNDERS and Andrew SCOBELL, eds., *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking*. California: Stanford University Press, 2015. 360 pages. eBook ISBN: 9780804796286; Cloth ISBN: 9780804794626; Paper ISBN: 9780804796255. 29.95 USD.

This edited volume presents detailed descriptions and analyses of institutions and functions of members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) that have been influential in China's national security policymaking. It grew out of a conference held in November 2011, roughly a year before the 18th Party Congress of the CCP that ushered in a new phase in the history of the PRC under Xi Jinping. It was co-sponsored by "Taiwan's Council of Advanced Policy Studies (CAPS), RAND, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the National Defense University" (ix). The papers were subsequently updated in late autumn 2014. The book addresses itself to specialists in the field of Chinese studies on security issues mainly affecting East Asia and the United States, and is also of interest to readers interested in global international (security) studies. All chapters provide basic information on the themes covered, allowing the reader to study each contribution separately.

The book contains much valuable information on the content and development of Chinese security policies, in particular, issues and concepts that may not be familiar to many readers. Non-China specialists in political and other social sciences will find much material of value for comparative approaches. The book (fortunately!) avoids indulging in detailed theoretical discussions. The contributors and editors have managed to steer clear of the temptation to replace cautiously worded presentations of the issues involved with bold and striking, but unsubstantiated, guesswork. Despite employing numerous caveats, the authors succeed in conveying the basic features of Chinese (security) policy making and its complexity.

The footnotes include numerous references to primary and secondary material in English, while some chapters also provide detailed information about sources in the original Chinese. There are relatively few references to discussions in the Chinese media and internet on security strategies. Studies on sensitive topics, such as the formation of strategy and policy-making, invariably face a dearth of open sources and restrictions on the use of classified intelligence and analyses. This book is copiously annotated, but most authors limit their references to open (written) sources, usually in English.¹ Most papers in this book refrain from making intensive use of publications in Chinese by organs of the PLA, which is regrettable, since close reading of such texts frequently allows for insights difficult

¹ This is unrelated to the authors' Chinese language ability. See for example M. Taylor Fravel "Projecting Strategy: The Myth of Chinese Counter-Invasion," *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2015): 171-81.

to obtain from more general sources. An additional chapter evaluating publications by Chinese professional authors in monographs, journals, and newspapers related to military institutions would have been welcome.

Rather than providing detailed comments on each chapter I will discuss topics common to most contributions. This work includes examples which show that CCP leaders had few problems in calling generals to order when their published opinions diverged from the Party line. There are instances where it is reasonable to assume differences between the PLA and CCP in case studies of policymaking on Taiwan, Korea, and territorial disputes. This book demonstrates that the PRC is not a monolith, but that policy is the outcome of complex interactions among different players and interest groups. “The relationship between the NSC, the CMC, the LSGs, and the CCP CC GO is unclear at this point, as is the nature and extent of PLA Representation on the new body” (Michael D. Swaine, 146).

This reviewer would have welcomed more information about the role of political commissars in the decades since the death of Mao Zedong. “In Communist regimes, this is known as ‘parallel rule,’ in which the government and military bureaucracies are overlaid by a parallel hierarchy of party structures that enables the ruling party to supervise their work. The CMC sits at the apex of this parallel party structure and one of its chief roles is to closely monitor the political and military activities of the PLA general departments and other key service commands” (Tai Ming Cheung, 88). The “PLA general Political Department which supervises political commissars and evaluates officers for political reliability takes guidance from civilian party officials and disseminates it through the military” (Saunders and Scobell, 9).²

The presence of party organizations not just within the PLA, but numerous other institutions, including companies and conglomerates, makes it difficult to distinguish borders between what is “public” and what is “private.” This raises doubts as to whether Samuel Huntington’s distinction of “objective” and “subjective civilian control” is useful for analysing relations between the CCP and the PLA as suggested by Alice Miller (60), and to what extent one may speak of a civilian, or an independent public sphere: “Slowly increasing levels of military transparency limit the availability of alternative civilian analysis of military issues” (Saunders and Scobell, 8). Likewise, there are no simple ways to grasp the role of academics inside and outside the PLA (Saunders and Scobell, 11) It is striking that civilian “security experts are among the loudest and most bellicose voices in the Chinese public sphere” (Saunders and Scobell, 11) and it remains difficult to assess the weight of non-military analyses.

The individual contributions are grouped into three sections, Part 1: “The PLA and the Party State”; Part 2: “The PLA in Policy and Crisis,” dealing with general themes and issues affecting PRC and CCP security, policies and strategies towards Taiwan and North Korea (DPRK), and the rise of PLA Diplomacy; and

² The institution of “political commissars” originally derived from the Soviet model, but China’s implementation differed even from an early stage, due to the long decades of the civil war preceding the establishment of the PRC in 1949.

finally, Part 3, which takes on the role of the PLA and PLA-Navy (PLAN) in Territorial and Maritime Disputes.³ The contributors from all three parts belong to leading academic and research institutions, and are well known to specialists in the field of Chinese (security) studies. The first chapter, by Philip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, provides an introduction to basic issues, such as civil-military relations, different approaches to the methodology used to assess PLA policy influence in the context of Army-Party relations, the “PLA’s Role at different stages of the policy process,” and the decision phase, which includes “Formulation of Alternative Policy Options and Plans,” “Shaping Public Opinion,” “Building Coalitions,” and “Advocacy of Particular Policy Options.” After a survey of the “Implementation Phase” the introduction presents an “Overview of the Book” including summaries of the eleven individual chapters. Adopting a carefully defined methodological approach, the book seeks to move “beyond speculation and newspaper headlines to an in-depth examination of the PLA’s role in national security policymaking” (Saunders and Scobell, 2) and concludes that the PLA has “more influence on purely military issues than in the past, much less influence on political issues—and to be more actively engaged in policy debates on mixed civil-military issues where military equities are at stake.” It appears that there is little evidence of military dominance in major strategic decisions. At the same time, “Defining China’s maritime territorial claims as ‘core interests’ where compromise was impossible allowed the PLA to advocate tougher measures to defend China’s claims” (Saunders and Scobell, 22-23).⁴

The book’s emphasis is on events during the presidencies of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping. The chapter by Nan Li, “Top Leaders and the PLA: The Different styles of Jiang, Hu, and Xi,” provides a good overview and characterization of each of the three leaders (Nan Li, 120 ff.). It is somewhat surprising that no chapter is devoted to the relationship between the CCP and the PLA on China’s nuclear posture⁵ or issues related to economic warfare and energy security.

While this book provides numerous references to PLA thinking on military policies and strategies, its particular strength lies in linking the dynamic evolution of CCP and PLA institutions as a major factor shaping features of security policy making. This approach promises to allow a better grasp of long term tendencies than relying on daily news emanating from inside and outside China. The book includes numerous tables, such as data on high ranking PLA personnel in CCP institutions, but unfortunately, was published too early to include important

³ For a recent update on maritime missions, see Dennis J. Blasko “The 2015 Chinese Defense White Paper on Strategy in Perspective: Maritime Missions Require a Change in the PLA Mindset,” The Jamestown Foundation, *China Brief* 15, no. 12 (2015). [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=43974&tcHash=d67db88687507367b668f71cd4199603](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=43974&tcHash=d67db88687507367b668f71cd4199603). Accessed March 11, 2016.

⁴ Cf. *The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century*. <https://fas.org/irp/agency/oni/pla-navy-2015.pdf>. Accessed March 12, 2016.

⁵ Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, “Assuring Assured Retaliation. China’s Nuclear Posture and U.S.-China Strategic Stability,” *International Security* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2015), 7-50.

changes brought about by Xi Jinping's removal of rivals, such as Zhou Yongkang.⁶ There is also a detailed and highly useful index (seventeen pages) and information about the institutional attachment of the contributors and their major publications. The book would have benefited from a summary of complex structures that are referred to in most contributions, in particular, the relationship between major institutions of the CCP and PLA, such as the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the PBSC. The focus is on organizational structures rather than detailed information on the players, but additional data (in an appendix?) would have been welcome.

Written in 2014, the introduction notes "Given the fragmented nature of much Chinese decision-making, PLA opposition can sometimes block or delay the adoption of policies, examples include the ten-year lag between initial proposals for a Chinese National Security Commission and the decision to proceed in 2013" (Saunders and Scobell, 13). It is shown that "the Chinese foreign policy and national security policymaking system suffers from limited information-sharing and an overall lack of coordination that sometimes produces suboptimal policy choices and implementation of decisions" (Saunders and Scobell, 23-24). To this must be added that institutions possessing a (near) monopoly on specialist knowledge are known to be able to influence decision making in most countries, and China is no exception. Interpenetration of CCP and PLA is accompanied by greater specialization, and it is questionable to what extent this affects the ability of the CCP to supervise the PLA and other institutions in Chinese society.

Factions, Corporate Identity, and Interest Groups in the PLA

"The informal, personalistic networks endemic to most Chinese institutions also exist within the PLA. However, patronage cliques are notoriously difficult to analyze from the outside and any conclusions about PLA group identity derived by this method rely as much on conjecture as on empirical analysis (Isaac B. Kardon and Phillip C. Saunders, 40).⁷ It is unclear to what extent shared experiences have played a role. "The PLA's last real combat experience was the border conflict with Vietnam in 1979, so current forces, including most commanding officers, have no actual combat experience" (Eric Hagt, 227). Changing evaluations of this campaign after 1980 may also have affected the formation of corporate identity within the PLA.

A growing sense of corporate identity among senior- and mid-level officers is also evident: "...a second important trend in civil military relations: the bifurcation of civilian and military elites as the career pathways of military and civilian leaders have diverged in recent years" (Kardon and Saunders, 37-38). One observes

⁶ For recent information about personality networks and Xi Jinping's "old boys network" one may, for instance, consult Cary Huang and Jun Mai, "Inside Xi Jinping's inner circle," *South China Morning Post*, March 3, 2016. <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1919744/inside-xi-jinpings-inner-circle>. Accessed March 12, 2016; "Xi relying on old boy network to strengthen Chinese military," *The Asahi Shimbun, Asia and Japan Watch*, March 27, 2015. <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/china/AJ201503270008>. Accessed March 12, 2016.

⁷ Although historians of Japan habitually call pre-war groups of like-minded "reformers" (*kakushin*) "factions," they were not necessarily members of formal organizations. Since the CCP prohibits formally organized "factions" one may conceptualize groups of like-minded politicians along similar lines.

disparities between National Defense University (NDU) graduates and non-NDU military personnel, together with the advent and rapid adoption of professional military education in the PLA (Kardon and Saunders, 40). On a different level one may refer to the effects of the divestment of PLA business interests that promoted the PLA's focus on its "core business."⁸ Since companies in the field of military technology are also involved in the execution of "technological cooperation" with North Korea and Iran, one may wonder to what extent the PLA may influence such cooperation. Some State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) have links to the political leadership and their offspring (princelings), and more research on China's "military industrial complex" is needed to evaluate the PLA's role.⁹ The activities of large conglomerates frequently straddle the levels of public, private, civil, and defence. The US security concept of a "full spectrum" approach including all aspects of modern society and technology in the service of security bears a certain similarity to Xi Jinping's comprehensive approach (see below), and one may not be off the mark to claim that similarities in industrial structure have a thoroughgoing influence on the conceptualization of security, regardless of the political-economic system. State-owned enterprises with monopolies of power often have strong ties to the CCP regulatory or administrative bodies that affect their interests. Such enterprises are widely viewed as significant obstacles to the CCP's goal of rebalancing the Chinese economy toward a more sustainable economic model, and some have been a target of Xi Jinping's anticorruption campaign. Western scholars have also noted the increased role of private business lobbying in China. "Some of the large state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and the national oil and gas companies in particular, are actors on the margins with regard to maritime security policy. Chinese resource companies do not necessarily seek a role in foreign and security policy, but their actions can complicate Chinese diplomacy" (Kardon and Saunders, 36).

Xi Jinping's Rise to Power

Under Jiang Zemin's leadership some organizational reforms were carried out which streamlined the planning and execution of foreign policy. The "Coordinating Committee for foreign policy" was designed after the example of the US "National Security Council"; its first chairman was Liu Huaqiou, who was very active in negotiations with the US during the Taiwan crisis. "For example, during the 1995-1996 Taiwan strait crisis, a preapproved PLA operational plan involving exercises and missile firings near Taiwan was put forth (and ultimately accepted) as a ready means of expressing Beijing's resolve. This plan was reportedly never reexamined as the crisis evolved" (Michael D. Swaine, 154). Notwithstanding, I should argue that the Taiwan Crisis of 1995/6 was a major turning point in Chinese military strategy resulting in long term plans to better enable the PLA-Navy to counter US

⁸ For many years the PLA derived part of its budget from its participation in the national economy. This is reminiscent of practices under past dynasties, when the military used to rely on local funding in addition to support from the central government.

⁹ Willi Wo-Lap Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping. Renaissance, Reform, or Retrogression?* (Routledge, New York and London, 2015), especially his chapter on "Economics vs. Politics," 151-78, and *passim*.

maritime power in the West Pacific, China having been forced to give in to US navy pressure in the Taiwan Straits. This points to cautious and realistic behaviour not fully reflected in contemporary statements.¹⁰

Only a few years ago it made sense to argue that “The decline in personal authority at the pinnacle of the Chinese system since Deng is also conducive to greater PLA influence on policy” (Kardon and Saunders, 51). “So far Xi Jinping has been treated similarly as first among equals in the Politburo since his appointment as general secretary in November 2012” (Alice Miller, 72). The perception that Xi has close military ties and will “augment the military establishment’s already formidable clout informing policy and other arenas’ probably overstates the military’s influence, especially given the CCP system of collective leadership” (Kardon and Saunders, 38).¹¹ Xi Jinping’s forceful acting at the pinnacle of CCP and PLA power has improved his direct control of the PLA.

“Under Xi Jinping, the PLA’s external role has become more active and visible but also more complicated and ambiguous... In an important 2012 speech, Xi emphasized that China will maintain regional stability (*weiwen*) under the prerequisite of safeguarding China’s sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity, which others have summarized as *weiquan*, or protection of China’s rights and interests. This position differs from that of previous Chinese leaders, who emphasized maintaining good neighbourly relations and regional stability while shelving territorial disputes” (Eric Hagt, 239). There are indications that by 2013 Xi was already in stronger control: “However, the Third plenum reform decisions announced in October 2013, which cover a wide range of political, economic, government, and military issues, were approved by the CCP Central Committee rather than the CMC. This may have been simply a matter of packaging military reforms prepared by the CMC with those in other areas, but shifting the decision-making venue from the military-dominated CMC to the Central Committee may also have reduced PLA influence on the content of the military reforms” (Saunders and Scobell, 7). Xi Jinping strengthened his position against the PLA at a November 2014 meeting as chairman of the CMC, on the occasion of the 85th anniversary of the 1929 Gutian Conference,¹² held in the context of Xi’s use of corruption charges to purge political opponents.

Political developments in China since 2014 have considerably altered the role of individual players, personal networks and institutions, mainly a consequence of the ability of the prime leader Xi Jinping to oust competitors and place members of his own networks in important positions both in the CCP and the PLA. Developments in particular since 2015 demonstrate Xi’s ability to shape the roles and relationships between the NSC, the CMC, and carry out reforms that had been

¹⁰ Kurt W. Radtke, “East Asia on the Threshold to the Twenty-First Century,” in *Dynamics in Pacific Asia. Conflict, Competition and Cooperation*, Kurt W. Radtke et al., eds. (Leiden: Kegan Paul/IAAS, 1998), 69.

¹¹ Willi Wo-Lap Lam “PLA Gains Clout: Xi Jinping elevated to CMC Vice-Chairman,” *China Brief* 10, no. 21 (October 22, 2010).

¹² James Mulvenon, “Hotel Gutian: We haven’t had that spirit here since 1929,” Hoover Institution, *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 46, March 19, 2015. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/spring-2015-issue-46>. Accessed March 12, 2016.

discussed for quite some time, including the reduction of Military Regions from seven to five.¹³

The recent reforms of military regions was caused by decisions of the Xi administration “to integrate the military chain of command to overcome the vertical divisions that were put in place with the various military regions...Under Xi Jinping, the PLA’s external role has become more active and visible, but also more complicated and ambiguous” (Eric Hagt, 239). Xi Jinping thus may seem to have acquired greater control over the PLA, but closer interaction may in due course also lead to a greater interdependence between Xi’s networks and the PLA. One also needs to consider the possibility that attempts to widen the scope of his cult of personality is not so much a sign of strength, but weakness. It remains to be seen whether Xi’s attempt to cut through vertical divisions among Chinese (security) institutions will be successful in the long run in the context of recent decisions to allow greater leeway for local commanders in the wake of erupting (international) clashes.

Xi’s Interpretation of a Comprehensive View on China’s Security and the Establishment of a National Security Commission

Xi brought up the notion of “Overall National Security” (*zongti guojia anquan guan*) for the first time on April 15, 2014 at the first meeting of the National Security Commission (*guojia anquan weiyuanhui*) in his capacity as General Secretary of the CCP Center (*zhongyang*). This term comprises both traditional and non-traditional security, covering security in the areas of politics, society, territory, military, economy, culture, technology, cyberspace, environment, raw materials, and nuclear issues.¹⁴

A series of speeches by Xi presented major themes for the coming years of his administration. Couched in jargon that echoes former leaders, including Mao Zedong, he drew a picture of China in which the CCP remains very conspicuously the guiding force, ensuring a rational balance between sectors and interest groups. In a China whose state organs are charged to implement CCP policy, there is little room for a genuine public space, since the PLA is controlled by CCP common concepts such as “civilian control of the military,” unless one identifies the CCP as part of a public civilian space.

China’s Global Strategy

In theory China’s concept of a global security order is linked to that of a UN based global order, similar to Japan’s post-war concept of a UN-centred approach towards security. This may be interpreted as a smokescreen for the pursuit of purely nationalistic aims, but it has influenced the conceptualization of security in the Chinese National Security Commission” (NSC), which has adopted an all-inclusive

¹³ On Xi’s links with the Nanjing Military Region and recent new appointments of military personnel see also “Xi relying on old boy network to strengthen Chinese military” (based on research notes by Kurashige Nanae and Hayashi Nozomu), *The Asahi Shimbun, Ajia and Japan Watch*, March 27, 2015. <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/china/AJ201503270008>. Accessed March 12, 2016.

¹⁴ For an overview, see Baidu, “Zongti guojia anquanguan.” There have been frequent references to this speech since it was given. <http://baike.baidu.com/view/12890183.htm>. Accessed March 12, 2016.

approach that has been continued since. Terms frequently used include “overall national security outlook”¹⁵ (*Zongti guojia anquan guan*) as well as “comprehensive security” (*zonghe anquan*).¹⁶ China’s security strategy, “thinking globally, acting locally,” refers to the current age as different from the periods of planned economy and initial reform, and is therefore a new era that requires a complex and comprehensive approach. An article published in the journal of the Central Party School *Xuexi shibao* connects the origins of the National Security Committee to the concept of domestic and foreign comprehensive security (*zonghe anquan*), a term found in Japanese official sources on security since the late seventies, and occasionally referred to in Chinese writings on the subject. A year later, on April 20, 2015 occurred the second reading of the proposed the draft of the law on national security.

Comprehensive Leadership

Next to the CCP and the PLA the space of China’s political economy is also occupied by other “public” and “private” actors and interest groups. The role of SOEs and high-tech companies in China is conceived as an integral part of its security structure, a “Common Destiny Body” (*gongtong yunmingti*).

“Xi is also an enthusiastic supporter of the Maoist doctrine of ‘a synthesis of peace and war,’ meaning that even in peacetime, there should be synergy between, for example, economic construction and defense modernization.... There should also be ample cross-pollination between the R&D departments of the PLA, on the one hand, and those of state-owned enterprises on the other.”¹⁷ In several recently-published articles and speeches Xi Jinping refers to the new revolution in military affairs requiring coordination of research and technological developments in all fields that destroys concepts of time and space known in traditional warfare.¹⁸

¹⁵ Jin Canrong, “China’s National Security Concepts and Threat Perceptions,” paper read at the 9th Berlin Conference on Asian Security, June 14-16, 2015, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/nc/publications/swp-research-paper-detail/print/1/article/chinas_national_security_concepts_and_threat_perceptions.html. Accessed March 12, 2016.

¹⁶ For an overview of Chinese sources, see <http://baike.baidu.com/view/12890183.htm>. Accessed March 12, 2016. Several Asian countries developed concepts related to comprehensive security, including Indonesia (“National Resilience”) and even more so Japan, where the term “*sōgō anzen hoshō*” combines “traditional” and “non-traditional” security concepts, was popular for a few years after 1979. See Kurt W. Radtke, “An Overview of the Contributions to this Book,” in *Comprehensive Security in Asia: Views from Asia and the West on a Changing Security Environment*, edited by Kurt Radtke and Raymond Feddema, (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2000), 1-18. A recent Chinese publication refers to the Japanese concept of comprehensive power, also linking it to ancient Chinese classical concepts of comprehensive security. See Du Jia (pseud.), “Daguo anquanguan-riben ‘zonghe anquanguan tongling guojia anquan’ [Security Concepts of Great Powers; Japan’s “Comprehensive security concept” commanding national security], April 24, 2014, Xinhua Net. http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-04/23/c_126422037.htm. Accessed March 12, 2016. Vice foreign minister Cheng Guoping linked “comprehensive security” to Asian security concepts, in particular Xi Jinping’s approach in an article entitled “Yazhou anquanguan: Yinling yazhou anquan hezuo xin fangxiang” [Asian security concepts: Leading new directions for Asian security cooperation], CICA (Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building), May 20-21, 2014, at <http://www.cica-china.org/chn/yxzk/t1171447.htm>. Accessed April 8, 2016.

¹⁷ Lam, *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping*, 232.

¹⁸ “Jiefangjun mianlin yu qianguo jundui jishu chaju lada weixian” [The PLA is facing the danger of a widening gap with great powers in military technology], January 6, 2016, Huanqiu. <http://mil.huanqiu.com/observation/2016-01/8324717.html>. Accessed March 12, 2016.

Outlook

Together, the contributions to *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policymaking* provide a solid foundation for observers to assess the chances for future changes in the direction of Chinese security strategies towards its neighbours and the United States. Even though the emphasis, especially in the United States, is on US-Chinese relations, it seems advisable not to exclude the wider global context of China's security situation, especially in Eurasia. The CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) scholar Xue Li has recently commented on "The Foreign Affairs Risks for China of 'The Silk Road Economic Belt' and 'The 21st-century Maritime Silk Road.'"¹⁹ Last, but not least, changes within China may affect the global security situation as well.

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¹⁹ Blog posted on October 24, 2015, The Twenty Ten Theme. Blog at Wordpress.com. <https://gaodawei.wordpress.com/2015/10/24/cass-scholar-xue-li-the-foreign-affairs-risks-for-china-of-the-silk-road-economic-belt-and-the-21st-century-maritime-silk-road/>. Accessed March 12, 2016.