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WHY JIANG STAYED ON: A DIFFERENT VIEW

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***Summary:** Jiang Zemin's retaining of the CMC chair position in the recent Party Congress in China has triggered various interpretations. The dominant interpretation is that Jiang would remobilise China's military for intra-Party leadership power struggle. This commentary offers a different view: rather than using the military for personal gains, Jiang retained the CMC chair position so that he can help Hu to gain experience in civil-military coordination over major policy issues, and in minimizing the military's role in the policy process so that it can stay on the current course of defence modernization.*

Jiang Zemin's retaining of the chair of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Central Military Commission (CMC), the highest military decision making body in China, was a jarring exception to the otherwise smooth transfer of power from his third generation leaders to the fourth generation headed by Hu Jintao. That triggered diverse interpretations of the implications; among them the dominant view that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would be remobilized into the CCP leadership's power struggle. This commentary argues that the PLA is not likely to be re-engaged in China's domestic politics, but will stay on its current course of defence modernization. It also sets out why Jiang stayed on as CMC Chairman.

The Remobilization Argument

Pundits contend that by retaining the CMC chair without holding the CCP Politburo and Central Committee memberships, Jiang has indeed revived the "strongman" politics of Deng Xiaoping, because this has enabled him to "attend to state affairs by controlling and mobilizing the military" ("yongbing tingzheng"). At least this may generate uncertainty and division in the new Politburo Standing Committee (PSC, China's highest policy-making council), and impede Hu, the new general secretary, from embarking on new policy initiatives. This may also allow Jiang to exert pressure on the Politburo over major policy decisions, and give him a final say over such decisions. A darker scenario is that Jiang is literally imitating Deng (who held the CMC chair without holding other formal Party positions in the late 1980s, watched Zhao Ziyang and Hu Yaobang fall as Party general secretaries, and replaced them with Jiang). This suggests that Jiang, by holding the gun and also placing his purported protégés in the PSC, would wait in the wings for a major crisis like the 1989 Tian Anmen Incident to erupt, and for Hu to trip. According to this theory, Jiang

and his men would then exploit Hu's poor handling of the crisis, mobilize elite political and military support, and finally replace him with Zeng Qinghong, the avowed Jiang loyalist. How valid or plausible is such a scenario?

Why PLA Not Likely to be Remobilized

There is no question that Jiang would exert some influence over policy by retaining the CMC chair. But such influence is not likely to grow to the point of triggering a Jiang-Hu power struggle that requires the mobilization of military support for several reasons.

First, there are no major ideological and policy differences between Jiang and Hu. Both are committed to continued economic growth and political stability.

Second, Hu has gained quite a few levers that may work in his favour. Hu's position as general secretary is stronger than that of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Zhiyang. This is because Jiang (who has never served in the PLA and is not a founder of the PRC or the PLA) is not comparable to Deng in status and influence, even though he holds the CMC chair (Deng could influence policy even without holding that post, as reflected in his 1992 southern tour, which rekindled the economic reform). Consequently Hu can use his statutory power as general secretary to further consolidate his position by co-opting the so-called Jiang protégés. Hu's style of being not highly dependent on personality politics should also work in his favour.

Third, the CMC chair does not always guarantee power and influence, as shown in the downfall of Hua Guofeng.

Fourth, unlike the earlier Party leaders, Hu has inherited low inflation, rising living standards, and a measure of political stability, which should reduce his political vulnerability.

Fifth, unlike the earlier generations of revolutionaries and ideologues who believed in "contradictions and struggle," the Hu generation consists of technocrats who largely believe in consensus building and expertise-based problem solving. Such a managerial style should lead to preventive measures with regard to major problems (such as corruption, the widening wealth gap, rising unemployment, and reform of banking and SOEs) before they become crises that may undermine the leadership.

Sixth, unlike Hu Yaobang's and Zhao's relations with Deng earlier, Hu's low-key, conflict-avoiding, and deferential style should also minimize the chances of a Jiang-Hu power struggle. A less contentious and more robust civilian sector presided over by a relatively competent technocratic leadership should deny the rationale for any military intervention.

Finally, Jiang has established his leadership credibility by delivering 13 years of economic growth and political stability. A key element of this legacy is his policy of keeping the PLA out of domestic politics, and putting it firmly on the course of defence modernization. For instance, in 1991, Jiang removed Yang Baibin from the CMC for seeking to remobilize the PLA into domestic politics by exploiting the role of the PLA in the 1989 Tian Anmen Incident.

Jiang was also the first to champion the call for "strengthening the army through

science and technology' (*“keji qiangjun”*), and launch the 1996 policy of “two transformations” of the PLA (“from preparing for local war under ordinary conditions to preparing for local war under high-tech conditions, and from a manpower-heavy force to a technology-based force”) and the 1997 policy of demobilizing 500,000 soldiers. Moreover, Jiang presided over the 1998 policy of divesting the PLA of its extensive business activities. Under Jiang, defence spending grew steadily and the PLA has acquired a large quantity of advanced arms from abroad. For all these reasons, it is unlikely that Jiang would squander his legacy by remobilizing the PLA into domestic politics, thereby risking the blame for creating political instability. Also, two decades of defence modernization has produced an officer corps that may lack the desire and skills for getting involved in the more messy domestic politics.

Why Jiang Retained CMC Chair

If remobilization of the PLA into domestic politics is not likely, why did Jiang retain the CMC chair? One explanation is technical and procedural and has to do with the Party-state nature of the CMC. The CMC is both a Party and a state institution even though the same people constitute their membership. The CCP Congress can only elect the Party secretary and the Party CMC chair. If Hu had taken the Party CMC chair now, Jiang would have to stay as the state CMC chair till the National People's Congress (NPC), which appoints the state CMC chair, is convened next March. In order to avoid the dilemma of having two CMC chairs, according to this explanation, Jiang would stay as both the Party and the state CMC chair till next March. Then he would resign his Party CMC chair at a Party Central Committee plenum to be held right before the NPC, and hand over both the state CMC chair and the state president positions to Hu at the March NPC.

A more plausible alternative explanation is political. But unlike the remobilization argument which suggests that Jiang would use the PLA for personal gains, this explanation assumes that Jiang really intends to help Hu to gain experience in coordinating the civil-military interaction at the top level, and ensuring that the PLA would be less involved in the policy process of the Politburo, and stay on its course of defence modernization. There are a few reasons to support this explanation.

First, none of the new PSC members (including Hu) has served in the PLA, and few have experience in national security affairs. Even though Hu has served three years as the CMC vice chair, this is not sufficient for him to be confident in dealing with major political-military issues or unexpected external crises. Second, none of the current uniformed CMC members has held full time civilian positions. Some new uniformed members were directly promoted from the military regions. As a result, they may have little experience at the central level and in foreign affairs, but may hold strong views on issues such as Sino-US relations, Taiwan, and defence spending.

The relatively new, young, and inexperienced leaders on both sides of the civil-military boundary do require a person with more experience to nurture smoother political-military coordination over policy issues (particularly in constraining the sometimes excessive demands of the PLA), and thus avoid policy blunders. Jiang seems to be the ideal candidate for playing such a role, having had personal experience in dealing with the PLA on thorny issues such as the “Yang brothers,” the PLA's business divestiture, or how to handle the EP-3 incident.

A few institutional arrangements in the CMC and the Politburo also support such an explanation. For instance, Jiang was able to persuade all the uniformed CMC members above 70 to retire (including Zhang Wannian, Chi Haotian, Fu Quanyou, Yu Yongbo, Wang Ke, and Wang Reilin). This would certainly work favorably for Hu to consolidate authority in the future CMC.

In the new Politburo, the percentage of uniformed members also declined, from nine percent (two out of 21) to the current eight percent (two out of 24), while they continue to be excluded from the PSC, now expanded from seven to nine members. As before, the PLA has maintained only one seat in the new CCP Secretariat.

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