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Deng Xiaoping: The Soldier

June Teufel Dreyer

Deng Xiaoping's attempt to modernize and professionalize the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will surely be remembered as one of the most important components of his historical legacy. Yet, ironically, Deng's military activities formed a decidedly minor part of his career. Deng received no formal military training, and Chinese Communist sources have very little to say about his military contributions before 1980; most of what was reported comes from his enemies¹ and is difficult to corroborate. What has been written after 1980 has a suspiciously hagiographic ring² and is also difficult to confirm.

Deng was born to a prosperous family and received a traditional education in his native Sichuan. One of his classmates was Nie Rongzhen, who would later become one of the ten military men honoured by the People's Republic of China (PRC) with the title of Marshal.³ In 1920, at the age of 16, Deng was sent to France to complete middle school. Pursuing a course of general studies there, he met Zhou Enlai who was instrumental in persuading him to join the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 1926, Deng left for Moscow where he studied Marxism–Leninism and the theory and practice of revolution rather than military affairs. One of his fellow students was the daughter of Feng Yuxiang, best known in the West as “the Christian warlord.” It may have been through her that Deng received his first “military” position, as Deputy Director of the political department and Director of Education at the Sun Yat-sen Military Academy Feng had recently founded in Xi'an. As is implied by its title, Deng's job was to instil his students with loyalty to Feng and Feng's agenda rather than dealing with such matters as strategy or military training.

Even so, Deng's stay at the military academy was brief. He had arrived in Xi'an in March 1927; during the following month, Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang (KMT) forces turned definitively against the CCP in the Shanghai massacre, thus ending the united front between KMT and CCP. As evidence of his loyalty to Chiang, Feng Yuxiang expelled Communists from his academy, Deng included. Leaving Xi'an to join his erstwhile mentor, Zhou Enlai, Deng participated in various organizing activities on behalf of the Party. In September 1930, he became political commissar of the Seventh Red Army in Guangxi. Beleaguered by KMT forces, the Seventh Army attempted to join the Red Army's main force in the rural soviet Mao Zedong had established at Jinggangshan in Jiangxi

1. See, for example, Shen Ping, “Forever adhere to Chairman Mao's line on army-building: criticize Deng Xiaoping's revisionist fallacies on army-building,” *Hongqi*, August 1976, pp. 4–9.

2. For example, Yang Qunzhang, *Deng Xiaoping: Xinshiqi jianjun sixiang yanjiu* (Beijing: Liberation Army Publishing House, 1989).

3. Nie's career paralleled Deng's precisely for a time: both studied in France, worked at the Renault factory, and then left for Moscow and the University of the Toilers of the East. However, Nie then transferred to the Red Army Academy.

province. It suffered heavy losses, with Deng sharing the blame for the disaster.⁴

Shortly thereafter, Deng arrived in Jinggangshan, where his duties were primarily organizational. In 1934, he was appointed Secretary-General of the General Political Department of the First Front Army, his principal duty apparently being to edit the military journal *Red Star*. However, the Long March began shortly thereafter, precluding any publication duties. Deng, with the other Long Marchers fortunate enough to survive until its end in Yan'an, were immediately faced with yet another battle for survival, against both KMT and Japanese forces. Deng's contribution, in conjunction with Liu Bocheng, concentrated on expanding the Red Army and using it in conventional regimental and division-sized operations against Japanese supply trains, isolated bases, and small troop concentrations. Deng's position at the time was political commissar of the 129th Division of the Eighth Route Army; Liu served as commander.

The Eighth Route Army was commanded by Peng Dehuai, known as a champion of military professionalism. Thirty years later, critics of Liu and Deng (as well as Peng) argued that this gave them a different focus from the guerrilla force tactics associated with Mao Zedong's vision of People's War. Yet there is no evidence that the two methods were viewed as antagonistic to each other at the time; it is just as likely that circumstances dictated whether regular units or guerrillas would be employed in a given operation. It should also be pointed out that, until 1942, an important part of Deng's job was co-ordination of "irregulars," including local troops, guerrillas and militia – none of whom were expected to fight much beyond their native villages – with the movements of the regular forces of the 129th Division. Rather than being devoted to an abstract model of military professionalism, as he has generally been portrayed,⁵ Deng appears rather as someone who was willing to use whatever means were available and efficacious to a given end. This is consonant with his image as a statesman who wished to seek truth from facts, and whose economic philosophy was to ignore the name of a system so long as it was able to produce goods and services. Whether because or in spite of his outlook, Deng apparently earned the respect of both commanders and commissars; Liu Bocheng reportedly thought so well of him that he regularly sought Deng's opinion of the military and political implications of any operation before beginning it.⁶

In later years, the growth of Communist forces would lead to major reorganizations of troops. Peng Dehuai became commander of the First

4. See Benjamin Yang's "The making of a pragmatic Communist: the early life of Deng Xiaoping, 1904–49," in this issue, for a fuller treatment of this episode.

5. For example, by William Whitson, arguing that Deng's Soviet training and time with Feng Yuxiang were formative experiences. See *The Chinese High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1973) p. 123. As noted above, Deng did not study the military during his year in the USSR and there is no evidence that he was otherwise exposed to it. His time with Feng was very brief, and spent in indoctrination of cadets.

6. *Ibid.* p. 158.

Field Army, which conquered the north-west of China and had its principal strength there. Liu and Deng's troops became the Second Field Army, which was instrumental in conquering central China and, after that, south-west China. The Second Field Army and his native Sichuan, the most populous and prosperous province in the south-west, were to provide Deng with power bases. He served as political commissar of the South-west Military and Administrative Commission from 1950 to 1952.

Through Zhou Enlai's patronage, Deng relocated to Beijing in 1952 and received a series of important positions, including head of the Party's Organization Department and Secretary-General of the Secretariat of the Party Central Committee. Only one of these, a vice-chairship of the National Defence Council, had direct responsibility for military affairs. However, many of the others had supervisory functions with regard to matters of great importance to the military, such as defence budgets and personnel appointments.

Deng was unscathed by the purge of his former commander and later Defence Minister, Peng Dehuai, in 1959. Although Peng was known, and subsequently vilified, for his efforts to modernize and professionalize the PLA, the proximate cause of his downfall was not so much dissatisfaction with his military policies, but his criticism of Mao Zedong over the failure of the Great Leap Forward. Deng's own purge during the Cultural Revolution was accompanied by the generic charge that he had followed the "capitalist road" and the specific criticism that he did not care whether an economic system was capitalist or socialist so long as it produced goods. There was no mention of military matters, and indeed a leading scholar of the PLA clearly did not even consider Deng a military figure. William Whitson, writing in the early 1970s about late 1966, noted that "key Party figures disappeared at this time, with Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping the most prominent Party members to be disgraced, but no important military figure was removed."⁷

Deng was rehabilitated in August 1973, through Zhou Enlai's efforts. His initial appointment was as first Vice-Premier of the State Council. Although again not directly tasked with military affairs, Deng must have been aware of concerns at the highest levels of leadership during this period about the PLA. The military had emerged from the Cultural Revolution with far too much power, thus threatening Mao's dictum that the Party must always control the gun rather than vice versa. Furthermore, in certain areas, several military leaders held concurrently the top Party and government jobs as well, causing worries that they would form "independent kingdoms" that could ignore central government directives. In addition, radical leaders felt that military officers were in general hostile toward both them and their cause. Realizing that Mao was in declining health and painfully aware of the role the PLA might play in any succession struggle, radicals were concerned that neither they personally nor their philosophy might survive the death of the Chairman.

Two important steps were taken in this period to allay these fears,

7. *Ibid.* p. 376.

neither of them associated with Deng. First, in October 1973, radicals associated with the Gang of Four began reorganizing militia units under urban command centres. The new units combined public security and firefighting functions along with more traditional militia duties. Working from the radicals' power base of Shanghai, they also began to supply units with more sophisticated weapons manufactured in the city's munitions factories. It would later be alleged that the Gang planned to make the militia into a counterweight to the PLA in order to decide the succession struggle, and indeed the 1975 Constitution raised the militia to a position of parity with the PLA.⁸

Secondly, on 31 December 1973, there was a major, and unprecedented, reshuffle of high-ranking PLA leaders involving eight of the PRC's eleven military regions. In several cases, these involved lateral transfers: for example, the commanders of the Guangzhou and Nanjing military regions simply exchanged places, as did the commanders of the Jinan and Wuhan military regions and the Fuzhou and Lanzhou military regions. Since the commanders' Party and government positions did not move with them, the net effect was to reduce the ability of these individuals to form independent kingdoms.

On 29 January 1975, Deng was named head of the General Staff Department (GSD) of the PLA. Although it had been rumoured for some time that Deng would receive a high-ranking military position, this particular appointment was surprising: given his previous experience as a commissar, the directorship of the General Political Department (GPD) would have seemed more appropriate. That post, however, went to a member of the Gang of Four, Zhang Chunqiao, and it is possible that Zhou Enlai wanted Deng in the GSD as a counterweight to his radical arch-enemies.

Deng's military role was publicly invisible, whatever may have been going on beneath the surface. By contrast, Deng was extremely visible in his role as Vice-Premier, making a well-publicized visit to France, greeting German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt on his arrival in Beijing, meeting American Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and hosting banquets on behalf of his terminally ill mentor Zhou Enlai. None of the speeches made in connection with these occasions mentioned the military. At least in terms of the public record, Deng met no visiting military delegations. News of the PLA concerned its study of the works of Chairman Mao, its denunciations of empiricism – a cause dear to Deng's heart – and its vilification of Lin Biao. Military units were reported helping the peasants under various unlikely circumstances. For example, the crew of a fishing boat discovered, after putting to sea during peak season, that its refrigeration equipment had failed, and that they had brought no spare parts. A Chinese navy warship happened to have the

8. According to Article 15, "The Chinese People's Liberation Army and the people's militia are the workers' and peasants' own armed forces led by the Communist Party of China; they are the people's own armed forces." See *Beijing Review*, 24 January 1975, p. 15, for the complete text.

right spare parts. Its officers immediately interrupted the ship's duties, sent men to install the refrigeration equipment, and saved the catch.⁹ Also during this period, a number of individual valiant officers were perishing in an extraordinary repetition of the same scenario: throwing themselves on hand grenades which trainees had activated and then "inadvertently dropped."¹⁰

Deng's silence with regard to military matters is all the more puzzling in that it would later be alleged that, four days *before* his appointment as head of the GSD, he delivered a major speech which was in effect to become the blueprint for his military reforms. It was not published at the time, nor even mentioned by the press. Study sessions of PLA units regularly dealt with other materials, and a search of those major foreign wire services with good records on reporting rumours from major Chinese cities at that time also fails to find any reference to it.¹¹ The speech began to be alluded to in 1978, when Jinan PLA units were reported studying "documents of the enlarged meeting of the Military Commission held in 1975," including major addresses by Defence Minister Ye Jianying and Deng.¹² The mysterious document, containing many of the same themes alluded to in 1978, was finally printed in the *Selected Works* of Deng Xiaoping published in July 1983, where it was described as a speech to a meeting of the cadres of the GSD headquarters¹³ rather than an address to an enlarged meeting of the Military Commission. Ye Jianying's speech remains unavailable to this day.

If delivered in the form later published, Deng's speech must have been a bombshell, and all the more so in the context of the ritualized cant that was standard in official speeches during that period. Deng announced bluntly that a large majority of PLA members were dissatisfied with the state of affairs. The military was too large; defence expenditures took up too large a proportion of the state budget, much of it for personnel expenditures; discipline was poor; and the military was riven with factionalism. The General Staff had not acted as a staff. Since the Army had become "bloated and is not a crack outfit that would make a good showing in combat," Deng announced that Chairman Mao had proposed a reorganization. The overall size was to be reduced, and the large numbers of excess officers cut. The three General Headquarters that supervise the work of the PLA, the General Staff Department (GSD), the General Political Department (GPD) and the General Logistics Department (GLD), would also be overhauled so as to improve command and control.

Although it would later be alleged that Zhang Chunqiao, as head of the GPD, was able to block publication of various materials and documents,

9. *Xinhua* (hereafter *XH*), Beijing, 15 January 1975.

10. *Renmin ribao*, 7 March 1975, p. 4, in United States Technical Information Service, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, Vol. 4, China (hereafter *FBIS-CHI*), 13 March 1975, p. E7.

11. AFP (France), CNA (Taiwan), Kyodo (Japan) and Tanjug (Yugoslavia).

12. *XH*, 12 January 1978, in *FBIS-CHI*, 16 January 1978.

13. *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1 July 1983), pp. 1-3.

one must wonder whether even the collective power of the Gang of Four would have been able to suppress the circulation of such an important speech if, first, the demobilization had, as Deng stated, been devised by Mao and had his backing, and secondly, the speech actually said in 1975 what in 1983 it was purported to have said. Moreover, the call to reduce the size of the PLA drastically does not seem to fit with the general air of anticipation at that time of a war with the Soviet Union. In August 1975, Deng himself told visiting Japanese reporters that a third world war was inevitable, and that there was a need to prepare against it.¹⁴ Nor is there any evidence of an attempt to reduce the size of the military. The PLA regularly demobilized about a million men each year, but seemed to be conscripting at least that many at the same time. The International Institute of Strategic Studies in London estimated that in 1975 the PLA had *added* 250,000 men to its armed forces and created three new armoured divisions.¹⁵

Though no rumours surfaced about Deng's January 1975 speech, other rumours were current that appeared to indicate his attitude toward the Gang's re-organized militia. There were reports that militia groups were acting as foot-soldiers for the radical agenda, and also tales of clashes between rival units, particularly in the city of Hangzhou.¹⁶ In 1976, the attacks against Deng began with wallposters in Hangzhou indicating that problems connected with workers there had been followed by a personal visit by Deng and an "energetic" solution involving central government and local military intervention.¹⁷

These attacks on Deng began almost immediately after the death of his mentor Zhou Enlai in January 1976. PLA units all over the country were among those denouncing him, though usually for such abstract sins as "opposing class struggle" rather than for particular crimes with regard to the military. In mid-March, an Agence France Presse (AFP) report judged that the number of PLA units involved in criticism was relatively small, and that even these units had "stayed well away from making any innovations in the campaign."¹⁸ Deng would eventually be attacked for his attitudes toward the military, as he would for his attitudes toward virtually every other facet of Chinese society, including even sport (Deng was alleged to have "twisted Mao's words 'friendship first, competition second' in order to exclude class struggle").¹⁹

Some of these attacks, such as that Deng wished to separate the army from Party control, were ritualistic, and had been consistently levelled against other top leaders being purged, including Peng Dehuai, Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao. Others involved construing Deng's words in a

14. Kyodo (Tokyo), 16 August 1975, in *FBIS-CHI*, 18 August 1975, p. A3.

15. *The Balance of Forces, 1976-77* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1976), pp. 59-60.

16. See, e.g., Edward K. Wu, "People's militia total secret, but it is everywhere in China," *Baltimore Sun*, 8 July 1975, p. 1.

17. AFP (Hong Kong), 27 February 1976, in *FBIS-CHI*, 27 February 1976, p. E1.

18. AFP (Hong Kong), 18 March 1976, in *FBIS-CHI*, 18 March 1976, p. E2.

19. *XH*, 9 May 1976, in *FBIS-CHI*, 11 May 1976, p. E3.

far-fetched manner: for example, when Deng said that the PLA must be able to “fight a war of steel,” that does not necessarily mean, as charged, that he was “advocating a purely military viewpoint” or “peddling the theory that weapons decide everything.”²⁰ And to allege that Deng “undermined militia-building” and “ordered the disbandment of militia units”²¹ overlooks the fact that Deng was opposing the building of a particular *type* of militia organization created by his, and Zhou Enlai’s, enemies. Moreover, to advocate purchasing some foreign weapons is not proof positive that Deng was “sacrificing China’s independence” and therefore possessed a traitorous “comprador mentality.”²²

Yet other charges, such as that Deng had “written off preparations against war”²³ were plainly at variance with his published statements on the need to fight a war of steel and on concern with the Soviet threat. Finally, charges that Deng wanted to “concentrate on the training of a few ‘aces’ in the militia” (vis-à-vis giving everyone in it the same training)²⁴ and opposed Mao’s concept of people’s war in favour of fighting “a professional war”²⁵ appear to be accurate.

Deng’s attempt to strike back, in the form of an April 1976 demonstration to honour the memory of Zhou Enlai, became the proximate cause for his dismissal and disgrace. In light of later charges that it was the militia, acting on orders from the Gang of Four, that put down this demonstration, it is interesting to note that the official press at the time was careful to point out that the suppression had been carried out jointly by militia, PLA and the Public Security Bureau. *Renmin ribao*²⁶ carried a follow-up piece devoting an entire page headlined “Salute to the Heroic Capital Worker-Militiamen, People’s Police and PLA Guards” to stories and pictures depicting the close co-operation among the three, which was also praised in numerous rallies. Accounts of the May Day celebration held soon thereafter took note of the “masses accord[ing] a very warm welcome to representatives of the worker-militia, people’s police, and PLA guards” who participated in the annual parade and celebrations.²⁷

Mao’s death in September 1976 and the arrest of the Gang of Four a few weeks later were accompanied by rumours that Deng would again be rehabilitated. Gossip that was later confirmed had it that Deng had taken refuge in south China, where he was being protected by several military leaders. Those names most often mentioned as his supporters were Defence Minister Ye Jianying of Guangdong province; newly-appointed head of the GPD, Guangxi native and head of the Guangdong revolution-

20. Beijing Radio, 12 June 1976, in *FBIS-CHI*, 14 June 1976, pp. K1–2.

21. Beijing Radio, 18 June 1976, in *FBIS-CHI*, 21 June 1976, pp. G3–4; Inner Mongolia Radio, 19 June 1976, in *FBIS-CHI*, 21 June 1976, pp. K3–4.

22. Theoretical Study Group of the Workers of the Wuhan Shipyard, “The traitorous behaviour of worshippers of things foreign as seen from Li Hongzhang’s navy building,” *Guangming ribao*, 17 June 1976, p. 3.

23. Beijing Radio, 12 June 1976, in *FBIS-CHI*, 14 June 1976, p. K2.

24. Shanghai Radio, 20 June 1976, in *FBIS-CHI*, 22 June 1976, p. G6.

25. Kunming Radio, 22 June 1976, p. J2.

26. *Renmin ribao*, 15 April 1976, p. 4.

27. *XH*, 1 May 1976, in *FBIS-CHI*, 3 May 1976, p. E2.

ary committee Wei Guoqing; and Guangzhou Military Region commander Xu Shiyou. Those most prominently listed as Deng's enemies were Beijing Military Region commander Chen Xilian, Beijing mayor Wu De, and Wang Dongxing, head of the country's security apparatus.²⁸ Ye's support for Deng was rumoured to be qualified by his insistence that Deng make a self-criticism for his role in instigating the Qingming disturbances²⁹; on the other hand, he was believed to have protected Deng from Chen Xilian, allowing Deng to circumvent roadblocks and escape unscathed from Beijing after the demonstrations.³⁰ A visiting British-Chinese author was told that Deng's biggest mistake while in office was not in his opposition to the Gang of Four (or, by inference, his military policies) but in his desire to rehabilitate cadres who had been purged in past mass campaigns too quickly.³¹

At the same time, under the aegis of Hua Guofeng, who held the top positions in Party, government, and military simultaneously, pronouncements on the PLA were consonant with ideas Deng had expressed previously. For example, a series of lectures on Shanghai Radio stressed the importance of modern weaponry ("when a people's army armed with Mao Zedong Thought is equipped with high-technology weapons, it will be invincible – like a tiger with wings").³² The lectures also advocated reducing the number of troops, and cutting administrative and personnel expenditures so as to devote more money to economic projects.³³

Deng's reinstatement in mid-July 1977 to his previous positions, including head of the GSD, was accompanied by no startling changes of military policy – indeed, most of his ideas with regard to the PLA had been implemented by Hua Guofeng ever since Hua assumed office after Mao's death. While Taiwan intelligence sources reported that there was a furious power struggle going on between Deng and Hua,³⁴ Deng was telling visiting author Han Suyin that he was "only an assistant, a helper of Chairman Hua; I don't want anything else."³⁵ As after his previous rehabilitation in 1975, Deng's role in the military was again, at least publicly, invisible. News about the PLA seemed ostentatiously to ignore him. For example, the September 1977 issue of *China Reconstructs* praised Hua Guofeng's military expertise, describing him as an "excellent tactician in guerrilla warfare," and the much-praised Hard Bone Sixth Company of the PLA wrote an article for *Hongqi* praising Mao, Ye

28. See, for example, Yasuaki Ishikawa, "Delayed rehabilitation for Deng," *Sankei shinbun* (Tokyo) 4 April 1977, p. 3; AFP, 29 March 1977, in *FBIS-CHI*, 30 March 1977, p. E1.

29. "Bandit Ye Jianying opposes bandit Deng's return," *Lien-ho pao* (Taipei), 22 April 1977, p. 1.

30. "Peiping posters attack Chen Xilian," *Chung-kuo jih-pao* (Taipei), 20 December 1977, p. 3.

31. Han Suyin's account of her conversations with Chinese officials in AFP, 14 February 1977, *FBIS-CHI*, 15 February 1977.

32. Shanghai Radio, 15 February 1977, in *FBIS-CHI*, 17 February 1977, p. E1; see also Nigel Wade, "Debate over Chinese bill for defence," *The Daily Telegraph* (London), 2 March 1977, p. 2.

33. *FBIS-CHI*, 17 February 1977, p. E2.

34. CNA (Taipei), 15 December 1977.

35. Quoted in *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 21 November 1977, p. 189.

Jianning, He Long, and a long list of other leaders for their military acumen; Deng was conspicuous by his absence.³⁶

Beginning in October, Deng made some cautious moves in the military sphere, meeting the commander of the Swedish armed forces and addressing a delegation of retired high-ranking Japanese Self Defence Force officers. But the battle between Hua and Deng was not publicly joined, and even then only allegorically, until the following year. On 4 January 1978, the official military newspaper *Jiefangjun bao* carried a scathing article entitled "Initial Analysis of Those Who Follow the 'Wind'." Its pseudonymous author Dao (way) Xin (new) heaped scorn on the wind-following tendencies of a statesman of the Five Dynasties of a millennium ago who sounded remarkably like Hua Guofeng. In light of Hua's vow to "support firmly whatever decisions Chairman Mao had made," there could be little doubt in anyone's mind whom Dao Xin was really criticizing. *Renmin ribao* gave the article added cachet by reprinting it two days later.³⁷ Deng posed his counter-slogan "seek truth from facts," which was also a quotation from Mao. By November, ten of the PRC's eleven military regions had held high-level meetings affirming the importance of seeking truth from facts. The sole resister was the Beijing Military Region, thus confirming rumours that its commander, Chen Xilian, was in the forefront of military opposition to Deng.³⁸

Deng's re-presentation of the four modernizations at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December left little doubt as to his pre-eminent position in the PRC, lack of formal title notwithstanding. The four modernizations, however, put the military last in line for funding. This prioritization is believed to represent the successful culmination of a major effort to convince PLA leaders that a modernized defence force could not be grafted on top of a backward economic and scientific base. Not until agriculture, industry and technology had been modernized could the country's military expect to be really strong.

Whether by accident or design, the PLA's performance in the February 1979 attack/"pre-emptive counter-offensive" on Vietnam fully confirmed Deng's prediction that it was "not a crack outfit that will make a good showing in combat." Chinese infantry forces fought without air cover; radio communication between tanks broke down; units invaded in columns without securing the areas between the columns, and so on. Publicly, the media proclaimed a great victory, even alleging that China had "touched the tiger's backside" (that is, annoyed Vietnam's ally, the Soviet Union) with impunity. Privately, there were indications of concern. AFP quoted a military commission document of 18 February as saying that there had been two serious problems with the war. First, the PLA had not fought in a long time, and the co-ordination of troops had not been satisfactory. Secondly, the army was not used to the mountains

36. "Chairman Mao's great banner guides our struggle forever," *Hongqi*, September 1977.

37. Translated in *FBIS-CHI*, 11 January 1978, pp. E1-3.

38. "Provinces and army back Deng," *China Record* (London), November 1978, p. 4.

and climate of south China, and hence there had been only “limited advancement.”³⁹ Deng’s own assessment was reportedly that the political and diplomatic aspects of the war were favourable, but that “the actual military side of the operation had not gone so well.”⁴⁰ Yang Dezhi, commander of the Kunming Military Region and deputy commander of the Vietnam incursion, commented tersely that the operation “had brought up a number of new questions for our military, political and logistical work, and also provided us with new experiences.”⁴¹

In March, a picture of Deng, dressed in military uniform and seated astride a white horse, went on sale in Beijing. Seemingly aimed at calling attention to Deng’s role in the victorious battles of the late 1940s, when the original photograph had been taken, it showed Liu Bocheng at his side, Liu’s head turned toward Deng in what seems a deferential pose.⁴² However, Deng’s public role with regard to the military remained muted until 1980, when he assumed Hua Guofeng’s position and ensconced Yang Dezhi in his former position of head of the General Staff Department.⁴³ Actual military policies showed no break with those being implemented since 1977; the difference was that Deng was now publicly credited with them. They encompassed the following.

A reworking of strategic doctrine which replaced People’s War with People’s War Under Modern Conditions. Though described as an adaptation of Mao’s principles to present-day conditions, most analysts feel that it represents a sharp break with the past, with retention of the original name intended to blur the ideological impact of the discontinuity. People’s War Under Modern Conditions is characterized by greater attention to positional warfare, modern weaponry and combined arms. The concept of luring an enemy deep into Chinese territory with the intention of surrounding and destroying him was amended to include the possibility of forward defence: many Chinese strategists felt that, by the time the enemy had been lured far enough into the PRC for this to work, they would have destroyed much of the country’s vital industries and transport links. In addition, China’s incursion into Vietnam must have sharpened planners’ awareness that future confrontations were apt to involve engaging the enemy *outside* the territory of the PRC.

More attention to training. Troop training programmes were ordered to be reorganized. Less time was to be given to political study sessions and more to the study of strategy and tactics. Training exercises were adapted to the sort of real-life situations that combat troops might actually be expected to face, and to reflect the conditions of weather and terrain of particular geographic areas.

39. AFP (Hong Kong), 20 February 1979.

40. Reuters (London), 20 March 1979.

41. Beijing Radio, 16 May 1979, in *FBIS-CHI*, 17 May 1979, p. Q2.

42. AFP (Hong Kong), 6 March 1979. Liu was Deng’s superior at this time, both nominally and in reality.

43. “Peking names new chief of staff as Deng Xiaoping yields the post,” *New York Times*, 1 February 1980, p. A6.

Efforts to acquire advanced weaponry. Both foreign and indigenous sources would be utilized. The National Defence Science, Technology and Industry Commission was charged with supervising research and manufacturing for the PRC's seven industrial ministries that deal with defence production. Military procurement missions were sent abroad to examine a wide variety of foreign weaponry and related items, including tanks, trucks, helicopters, warplanes, missiles, lasers and computers.

Reorganization of the PLA into a smaller, younger and more responsive force. With the perception of threat from the Soviet Union much reduced after 1981, plans were announced to diminish the size of the military by one-quarter, or a million people. The number of military regions was reduced from eleven to seven, thereby cutting down on the number of headquarters and their personnel. The new military regions were authorized to command tank and artillery divisions and other specialized service branches; in the past, these branches had been directly under the armed forces supreme command. Field armies were replaced with smaller group armies. New regulations provided for the reinstatement of a rank system and set limits for time in grade. Older officers, many of whom were in their 70s or 80s, were encouraged, and in some cases forced, to retire. This made it possible to promote younger, more vigorous people to command positions.

More stringent educational qualifications for the military. Units at and above the corps level were ordered to sponsor classes to bring PLA cadres up to the level of senior middle school or technical middle school. Self-study was encouraged as well. Those willing to enrol in night school, or in television or correspondence courses, were given assistance to do so. Tests of general and specialized knowledge were instituted. People who could not or would not meet the required standards might be denied promotion or be demoted. The Young Communist League was told to persuade outstanding college graduates to join the PLA.

A three-tier system was created to train junior, mid-level and senior officers, with more than a hundred military academies participating. The apex of the system is the National Defence University, which was founded in December 1985 by merging three PLA academies – military, political and logistical. Each had previously been operated by the relevant general department of the PLA. One motive behind consolidating the resources and expertise of the formerly separate institutes was the obvious one of producing a more efficient instructional system. Another, unstated, reason was to reduce departmental compartmentalization and the factionalism that separate institutions had reinforced.

Creation of a military that was more clearly differentiated from Party and government. There was a marked decrease in the number of individuals holding positions in either two or all three of the Party, government and military hierarchies. Statistical data show that there were 122 such

individuals in 1960, 445 in 1973 and only 73 in 1982.⁴⁴ Top military positions were increasingly held by people who had spent the majority of their working lives in the PLA, as opposed to individuals shuttling between civilian and military positions (as Deng Xiaoping, among many others, had done). By late 1992, all three directors of the PLA's general departments were career soldiers, as were all members of the Central Military Commission except for its titular head, Party leader Jiang Zemin.

Augmenting the military's role in support of economic development. With the threat of war much reduced, military production lines, which had typically worked at far below maximum capability anyway, could be re-gearred to produce goods for civilian consumption. Military-affiliated corporations not only produced such items as food, clothing and consumer electronics for domestic and foreign sales, but also manufactured weapons for export. The PRC quickly joined the ranks of the world's top arms merchants. At the same time, military units were expected, insofar as possible, to raise their own food and build and maintain their barracks. PLA units operated guesthouses and manufactured furniture. The military also went into the tourist business, flying groups of foreign visitors to points of interest in its planes, and even, for an extra fee, allowing members of these groups to discharge weapons on its firing ranges.

As might be expected, most of these reforms met resistance from one or more directions. Those who distrusted forward defence pointed out that the PLA might be outflanked and overrun. Those about to be demobilized resisted in a variety of ways ranging from armed rebellion⁴⁵ to using personal connections to avoid discharge.

For the first time since the founding of the PRC, conscription became a problem. While the Party was having trouble convincing older soldiers to retire, it was simultaneously experiencing difficulties in persuading younger people to volunteer. The success of Deng's privatization of the rural economy made it more profitable for peasant youth, who had been the mainstay of the PLA, to stay on the family farm. City youth tended to prefer unemployment to military service, and were in any case regarded by commanders as undesirable recruits: they were less inclined to obey orders than young peasants, and unused to the hard physical labour that military training demanded. Work units tried to foist their least desirable members on the military, and officers worried that the PLA would become an army of the unfit and unwilling.

Educational requirements could be circumvented by cheating on exams or using "back door" connections to certify one's proficiency in a subject one was actually quite deficient in.⁴⁶ Arguments between indigenous

44. See Monte Bullard, *China's Political-Military Evolution: The Party and the Military in the PRC, 1960-1984* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985.)

45. See, e.g. *Chengming*, December 1981, in *FBIS-CHI*, 14 December 1981, p. W1; *Asia Record* (Hong Kong), January 1982, p. 17.

46. See, e.g. *Jiefangjun bao*, 27 November 1988, p. 1; AFP, 24 October 1988, p. 30, in *FBIS-CHI*, 24 October 1988, p. 30.

design and production bureaucracies, who had a vested interest in not buying foreign weapons, and those who wished to purchase from abroad, slowed down weapons procurement, as did seemingly endless haggles over the level of technology to be purchased and the price to be paid.

Giving the military a larger role in the civilian economy also facilitated a large increase in military corruption. Guesthouses functioned as brothels, while the PLA in Tibet denuded large belts of trees in that ecologically fragile area in order to manufacture and sell furniture for its members' personal profit.⁴⁷ Soldiers removed substantial quantities of goods from PLA storehouses to dispose of privately; storehouses could also be used to stockpile smuggled items, which could then be transported elsewhere in military vehicles.

Efforts were made to deal with these problems, some of which proved quite efficacious. While Deng's first effort at demobilization, from about 1981 to 1984, must be considered a failure, a second effort, from 1985 to 1987, was more successful, possibly because it dealt better with the problems that had emerged. Dual-use training programmes were set up within the military to teach soldiers skills that would ease their entry into the civilian job market, and efforts were made to match prospective employers with soldiers eligible for discharge. By the end of 1992, 7.4 million PLA members had taken part in these programmes, and 2.68 million had received civilian jobs.⁴⁸ Although these statistics do not reveal the fate of the other 4.72 million servicemen, the programme does seem to have blunted resistance to demobilization.

The knowledge that they would be able to learn a marketable skill while in military service may have served as well to reduce resistance to joining the PLA. Military authorities also devised a variety of innovative schemes such as assessing a fee of approximately 5 per cent of the income of every draft-age male in a district, with the resulting fund to be divided among the families of those who actually served.⁴⁹ An expected serious shortfall in recruitment in reaction to the use of the military to put down demonstrations in the spring of 1989 did not materialize: the contraction of the economy later in the year provided an impetus for many young men to enlist.

Other problems have been confronted, but with less satisfactory results. Military corruption remains a problem, and one that appears to be growing rather than diminishing despite efforts to curb it. Factionalism in the military is mentioned far less often than in the late 1970s, when Deng began to assert himself with regard to the defence forces. But, as the recent purge of members of the "Yang family village" within the PLA shows,⁵⁰ it continues to be a concern in 1993. There are also hints of

47. Lhasa Radio, 13 February 1982, in *FBIS-CHI*, 16 February 1992, pp. Q1-2.

48. Beijing Radio, 26 November 1992, in *FBIS-CHI*, 3 December 1992, p. 33.

49. *Jiefangjun bao*, 1 March 1988, p. 1.

50. Tai Ming Cheung, "General offensive: Yang's protégés fall as army shake-up continues," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (Hong Kong), 10 December 1992, p. 14, details a summary of these changes.

central leadership concern that growing regionalist tendencies in the economic sphere may spread to the military.

Conclusions

The Chinese military in 1993 is considerably more proficient than in 1976. Its capabilities are far from the level of the United States or the former Soviet Union, although there is no real evidence that the PRC aspires to a superpower-level military. A glance at the seven characteristics outlined above that comprise military reform under Deng's leadership hardly shows them to be brilliant or innovative: better training, weapons, education, organization; the shaping of the military as a more professionally distinct institution; and the periodic updating of strategy, are simply common sense. The final characteristic, the military's increasing role in civilian production activities, may arguably prove a drag effect on military modernization, though it can also be rationalized as a practical expedient, given the low likelihood of an attack on China's territory and the country's urgent need for economic modernization. Moreover, since most of these ideas were being pursued during Deng's period of disgrace in 1976–77, it is not clear that he alone should be credited with them.

It may be that Deng's real genius lies not in inventiveness, but rather in his ability to impose common sense standards on the military prior to Mao Zedong's death, which had seemed devoid of all common sense. Endless polemics on the desirability of taking class struggle as the key link or on the need to damn the theory that weapons decide all, while definitely weakening the fighting capabilities of the military, simultaneously masked the vested interests of leftist forces. Under the direction of Hua Guofeng, these forces were mortally weakened after October 1976, and more sensible attitudes toward improving the PLA emerged. It took Deng, however, to make these operational, often against massive bureaucratic resistance. The demobilization and reorganization of the 1980s is perhaps the most outstanding example of this. There have been personal and professional costs to these actions: within five years of his return to power, Deng had strained relations with all three of the PLA leaders who had championed his rehabilitation: with Wei Guoqing over the liberalization of PLA literary and cultural work (1982), with Ye Jianying over demobilization (1983), and with Xu Shiyong over appointing Hu Yaobang as head of the Central Military Commission (1985).

Deng has had failures. For example, he never was able to overcome the PLA's resistance to accepting Hu Yaobang as head of the Military Commission. An attempt in 1982 to abolish the Party's Military Commission after creating an equivalent body under the State Council was also a failure: the two commissions continue to exist, with overlapping memberships. After the evident hesitation that certain PLA units had shown over enforcing martial law during the demonstrations of 1989, it was alleged that many officers had become infected with bourgeois

liberal views that the army must be separated from politics.⁵¹ Clearly there were concerns that Deng's efforts to differentiate Party, government and army had gone too far. But in the end, it is Deng's military successes that will be remembered rather than his failures.

51. See, e.g., Liu Huaqing's 18 August 1989 speech to the Sixth Plenary Session of the navy's Sixth Party Committee, carried in *Renmin ribao*, 19 August 1989, p. 2. The proposal for greater army-Party separation was attributed to Zhao Ziyang, former CCP General Secretary and CMC Chairman, following his purge after 4 June. For further analysis see David Shambaugh, "The soldier and the state in China: the political work system in the People's Liberation Army," *The China Quarterly*, No. 127 (September 1991), pp. 527-568.