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SHOULD MODERN WESTERN MILITARIES HAVE POLITICAL COMMISSARS?

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Abstract: The Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) political commissar system is often criticized as an impediment to warfighting as it impedes decision-making and undermines military professionalism. However, modern Western militaries may benefit from a political commissar system if it enables a more effective link between operational outcomes and political goals. An ideal political commissar system that is designed with proper considerations to a political commissar’s echelon, training, progression, authority, and responsibilities can leverage the benefits of such a system while mitigating the risks.

Keywords: political commissar, People’s Liberation Army, PLA, unity of command, dual-command structure, decision-making, foreign policy advisors, POLADs

In most modern Western militaries, the idea of a political commissar who shares equal rank and authority with the military commander is a cognitive paradox that contradicts the “unity of command” as a warfighting foundation. The United States Army explicitly identifies *unity of command* as a principle of war, and defines it to mean “a single commander [coordinating] the actions of all forces toward a common objective.”¹ The U.S. Army doctrine explains further that “giving a single commander the required authority is the most effective way to achieve unity of effort,” and “diffusing responsibility otherwise creates misunderstandings during the stress of combat.”² As a result, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) political commissar system can be prematurely criticized as an impediment to warfighting without first understanding a political commissar’s roles and responsibilities.³ While some criticisms leveled against the PLA’s political commissar system are valid concerns, namely that (1) the PLA’s dual-command structure impedes operational decision-making and (2) undermines the professionalism of the military, these criticisms are neither entirely detrimental nor fundamentally antithetical to the idea of a political commissar within the military.

¹ *Operations*, Field Manual 3-0 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2022), A-3.

² *Operations*, A3.

³ Jeff Benson and Zi Yang, *Party on the Bridge: Political Commissars in the Chinese Navy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2020), 2930.

More importantly, modern Western militaries may benefit from a political commissar system that enables a more effective link between operational outcomes and political goals. While it is unlikely and impractical for militaries today to replicate the PLA's political commissar system as is, an ideal political commissar system that leverages the benefits while mitigating the risks could be designed with proper considerations to a political commissar's echelon, training and progression, and authority and responsibilities.

Understanding the PLA's Political Commissars

A discussion of PLA political officers must begin with an understanding of the political nature and elements of the PLA. Recent English-language studies such as a report on PLA personnel prepared for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission in 2022, as well as a report on political commissars in the PLA Navy (PLAN) by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in 2020, have made such information more accessible for the non-Mandarin speaker. The PLA exists as the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the overarching purpose of any political work within the PLA is to ensure that the PLA remains the party's army rather than a national army.⁴ The subordination of the PLA to the CCP can be traced back to the 1920s, notably to the Gutian Conference in 1929 where the absolute leadership of the CCP over the Red Army was established and where the principle that the "Party commands the gun" (党指挥枪) was formalized.⁵ In more recent years, this relationship became enshrined in the 2010 Regulations on the Political Work of the PLA, and emphasized by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping at the 2014 All-PLA Political Work Conference at Gutian where he stressed the need to enhance the CCP's control over the PLA.⁶

Political control within the PLA exists in the form of individuals and organizational structures. At the individual level, political officers are spread across the different echelons of the PLA: political officers at the regimental level and above are known as political commissars (政治委员), battalion-level officers are known as political directors (教导员), and company-level officers are known as political instructors (指导员).⁷ At the structural level, "Party Committees" (党委) exist at the regimental level and above, with the CCP's Central Military Commission (CMC) as an example of a Party Committee at the highest level.⁸ Within each Party Committee, a smaller Party Standing Committee (PSC), comprised of approximately five to six leading members, is responsible for day-to-day leadership within

⁴Kenneth W. Allen et al., *Personnel of the People's Liberation Army* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission by BluePath Labs, 2022), 16.

⁵Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 10.

⁶Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 11.

⁷Allen et al., *Personnel of the PLA*, 17–18.

⁸Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 12.

the PLA unit. Typically, the political commissar serves as the secretary and the military commander serves as the deputy secretary on the committee.⁹

The PSC is the “supreme decision-making organization in the unit” and is responsible for all “major issues” (重大问题), including military affairs, political work, personnel readiness, and logistics.¹⁰ Concurrently, PLA units practice a dual-command structure (双首长制) where the military commander and political commissar are coequals. In this structure, key decisions are made collectively at the PSC, while the military commander and political commissar are responsible for executing the PSC’s decisions concerning military and political work, respectively.¹¹ Political work generally refers to the implementation of CCP policies, enforcing party discipline, and overseeing political education.¹² Notably, notwithstanding the dual-command structure, the PLA military commander is authorized to make independent decisions in the event of an emergency, although those decisions need to be subsequently reported back to the Party Committee.¹³ In addition to political work, political commissars have two additional roles. First, they are also responsible for the cohesion, morale, welfare, and administrative needs of all personnel, duties more commonly associated with the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) in Western militaries.¹⁴ Second, while the political commissar does not formally evaluate the performance of the military commander, the commissar provides input on the commander’s performance to the commander’s direct superior.¹⁵

While political commissars are often viewed as distinct from military commanders, both groups of officers have more similarities than typically expected. For example, many PLA political officers have some form of military background as many had started out as company-grade officers on the military command track before they were selected to become political officers.¹⁶ Political officers remain as uniformed members of the PLA, and are coequals with their assigned commanders by nature of their position and grade.¹⁷ In the event that the commander is incapacitated, political officers have been called on to take over command of the military unit, such as when the political commissar of the PLAN frigate *Yingtian* (531) replaced the captain when directing and leading operations against the Vietnamese during the Johnson South Reef skirmish in March 1988.¹⁸ Since 2014, the PLA has pushed for political officers to improve their operational warfighting knowledge to enhance their integration of political work into the military and better prepare them for

⁹ Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 12.

¹⁰ Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 12.

¹¹ Allen et al., *Personnel of the PLA*, 17.

¹² Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 17–18.

¹³ Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 15.

¹⁴ Allen et al., *Personnel of the PLA*, 18.

¹⁵ Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 25–26.

¹⁶ Allen et al., *Personnel of the PLA*, 18.

¹⁷ Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 25. In the PLA, grades are different from ranks. The PLA officer corps has 15 grades and 10 ranks. Each grade has a primary and secondary rank associated with it, while each rank can have multiple grades associated with it. For more details, refer to appendix 4 in Kenneth W. Allen, *Political Commissars of the PLA Air Force* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2021).

¹⁸ Allen et al., *Personnel of the PLA*, 19.

battle command during contingencies.¹⁹ In the PLAN, political commissars are required to study naval operations and pass examinations, and they have been designated “mission commanders” (任务指挥员) since mid-2018, a mission-specific title previously reserved only for military commanders.²⁰ At the higher levels of the PLA, officers have shifted between military commander and political commissar billets. A 2021 analysis of past PLA Air Force (PLAAF) political commissars revealed that five of them had taken senior command appointments prior to becoming the PLAAF political commissar, while three of them later served as PLAAF commanders after serving as PLAAF political commissars.²¹ Political commissars and military commanders should thus be viewed as two intersecting rather than parallel tracks within the PLA.

Common Criticisms of Dual-Command Structure

There are two main criticisms regarding the PLA's dual-command structure. First, critics argue that the dual-command structure is an impediment to operational decision-making in various ways.²² The dual-command structure means that decisions must now be made by two individuals instead of one, which could cause crucial time delays in a military environment in which officers make quick, high-stakes decisions. The military commander and political commissar as equals also suggests the lack of a clear resolution mechanism when they disagree on the course of action, unlike a single-command structure in which a sole individual is authorized and accountable for making the final decision after considering differing input. The dual-command structure may also increase the likelihood of miscommunication, as orders from the two individuals may differ or be interpreted differently by subordinates. Relatedly, mission command may also be jeopardized as subordinates could be confused by potentially differing intents from the commander and commissar. Another drawback of the dual-command structure is the diffusion of responsibility, which may lead to undesirable psychological effects such as group think or the bystander effect, in which one individual may choose to preserve the dual-command harmony and go along with the other's decision despite personal reservations. Last, in a worst-case scenario, the dual-command structure can promote internal divisions and create factions as subordinates pick sides and align themselves with one against the other. Ironically, the dual-command structure goes against a famous Chinese proverb that “one mountain cannot have two tigers” (一山不容二虎), meaning that two powerful entities cannot coexist within the same limited territory.

The second criticism is that the presence of a political commissar undermines the ability of the military commander to carry out their duties in a professional manner. By serving as a watchdog for the CCP and by empowering the political commissar with influence over

¹⁹ Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 18.

²⁰ Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 18–19.

²¹ Allen, *Political Commissars of the People's Liberation Army Air Force*, 15–16.

²² Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 29–30.

the performance review of the military commander, the political commissar holds powerful leverage that obliges the military commander and all military subordinates to fall in line with the CCP's policies or risk career implications. The military commander's autonomy is jeopardized, and they are incentivized to prioritize self-preservation over the best interests of the unit. Furthermore, the political commissar's presence as a whistleblower scrutinizing every word and action may stifle a culture of innovation, initiative, and flexibility. Instead, it promotes a culture of acquiescence that hampers a military's ability to cope with evolving challenges.

Addressing Common Criticisms

While the above criticisms of the dual-command structure are valid concerns, they reflect a one-sided view of the drawbacks from the *PLA's* political commissar system and do not properly consider the potential benefits of an *ideal* political commissar system if it was better designed. By looking through the lens of what a political commissar system *could* be rather than what it *currently* is in the PLA, the basic tenets of a political commissar system appear less contradictory to a military unit as one might have previously assumed.

A slower and more deliberate decision-making process is not always a detriment, even and perhaps especially in the military. While there are occasions when decisions must be made quickly, these moments happen mainly during active hostilities and there are many more less-urgent decisions in the military that could benefit from a collective decision-making process. Whenever possible, commanders in most modern Western militaries today already take time to consult their staff and discuss key decisions with their executive officers and top senior enlisted officers before arriving at a decision. Bureaucracy is not necessarily bad, especially in a large organization like the military, where resources could be easily misused if not for existing rules and regulations. In theory, the PLA military commander is also authorized to make independent decisions without the political commissar in the event of an emergency. While the definition of an emergency can be overly ambiguous to facilitate the effective transition from dual to single command structure, the idea of having a dual-command structure in time-permissive situations and a single-command structure in urgent situations is a logical one.

While a dual-command structure may increase the likelihood of miscommunication and complicate dispute resolution, these problems also exist in a single-command structure and can be effectively mitigated by establishing clearer communication channels and dispute resolution mechanisms in advance. For example, while differing verbal instructions from the commander and commissar may create additional confusion for subordinates, this problem can be minimized by having formal decisions and guidance codified in writing to reduce ambiguity. In addition, healthy disagreements may be beneficial for decision-making as they sharpen decisions through the resolution of differing perspectives and can reduce the possibility of individual errors arising from a single command structure. A useful analogy that advocates for the dual-command structure is to view the military commander and political commissar as the "father and mother" of the unit. Having two parents is likely

more beneficial for the growth and nurturing of a child despite the heightened risks of miscommunication, disagreement, infighting, and diffusion of responsibility. Similarly, having a military commander and political commissar share the responsibility of leading a military unit could be more beneficial for the unit as compared to a single command structure.

Regarding the second criticism, the presence of a political watchdog overseeing the actions of a military commander may be unnerving to some modern Western military practitioners, but this discomfort ignores that militaries have all along been a tool of political statecraft. The military is inherently political because war is inherently an extension of politics. The military thus strives not so much to be apolitical, but rather only to be non-partisan in its conduct. In the context of the United States, the military is obliged to follow the direction of the political party in power. The *National Security Strategy* released by the political party in power at the time is translated into the *National Defense Strategy* and the *National Military Strategy*, and a U.S. military servicemember is expected to align their actions with present-day political guidance.²³ If it is assumed and accepted that all military units are by default subservient to the political party of the day, the presence of a political commissar overseeing the actions of a military commander to ensure they are aligned with the political guidance should be viewed as an enabler rather than an impediment.

Imposing nonmilitary restrictions on a military commander's actions and decisions is not a novel concept for Western modern militaries, as evident in the roles of the Judge Advocate General's (JAG) Corps and foreign policy advisors (POLADs) within the U.S. military. The mission of the JAG Corps is to provide "professional advice on law and policy" grounded in the "enduring respect for the Rule of Law."²⁴ While military commanders may be frustrated when legal advice restricts their available operational options, commanders also understand and accept that those restrictions are a necessary and essential feature of keeping the military in line with civilian values. Similarly, POLADs are foreign service officers from the Department of State who are assigned to senior military commanders to help bridge the gap between diplomacy and defense by integrating foreign policy considerations into defense policy planning.²⁵ Political considerations drive foreign policy and must supersede military considerations in a system where civilian oversight of the military is preserved. In the presence of existing legal and foreign policy restrictions on military actions, the military has little justification to reject additional political restrictions imposed by a political commissar.

²³ See, for example, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: President of the United States, 2025); Pete Hegseth, "Statement on the Development of the 2025 National Defense Strategy," press release, Department of War, 2 May 2025; and the most current *National Military Strategy* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022).

²⁴ E. M. Liddick, "No Legal Objection, Per Se," *War on the Rocks*, 21 April 2021.

²⁵ Jake Roodvoets and Andy Strike, "Recognizing Foreign Policy Advisors for Their Work in 2022," *DipNote* (blog), U.S. Department of State, 30 December 2022.

Potential Benefits

The U.S. military's experience in Vietnam and the Middle East have often been framed as the military's inability to achieve strategic and political goals despite obtaining tactical and operational victories.²⁶ The presence of a political commissar could potentially bridge this gap by enabling a military commander to better link operational outcomes with the desired political end-state, leading to a more effective employment of the military as a tool of political statecraft. In addition, military commanders are expected to articulate the strategic and political purpose behind their military operations to the rank-and-file soldiers, but commanders are often ill-equipped or untrained to do so effectively as the U.S. experience in Vietnam and the Middle East have shown. Instead, a political commissar embedded with the military units could better take on this task while freeing up the military commander to prosecute their assigned and trained tasks in warfighting.

From a simplified perspective, narrowing the gap between the military and civilian politics can be achieved via two ways: introducing an additional civilian role alongside that of the military commander while keeping the two roles separate, or blending the military and civilian roles into a single entity or individual. However, the civil-military relations model most Western countries adopt today is for the military to be separate from the civilians so that the military can develop its autonomy and professionalism while remaining subordinate to civilian control. A more viable solution to narrow the civil-military gap would thus be to introduce an additional civilian role (i.e., commissar) responsible for keeping the military close to politics while keeping the commander and commissar separate. In other words, for military and politics to come closer to each other while ensuring civilian oversight of the military in a Huntingtonian system, it is perhaps more feasible to have a political commissar working in tandem with a military commander than for a single individual to have to perform both the roles of the commander and the commissar.²⁷

Envisioning an Ideal Political Commissar

There are three key areas to consider and resolve if a military today decides to adopt some form of a political commissar system to reap maximum benefits while minimizing drawbacks. First, determine the appropriate echelon within the military to introduce the billets of political officers. As it is, the PLA has political officers embedded within the PLA from the company level and above. Arguably, politics and military affairs are more closely intertwined at the higher levels than at the lower levels; the company commander's task to seize a hill requires less political input than a fleet commander's decision to send a carrier group into an adversary's waters. From a resource perspective, it may also be prudent and

²⁶ Peter R. Mansoor, "Why Can't America Win Its Wars?" Hoover Institution, 10 March 2016.

²⁷ In his book *The Soldier and the State*, American political scientist Samuel Huntington proposed his view that a democracy needs to separate its civil and military spheres to develop a professional and capable military that would remain firmly under civilian control. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, 1957).

practical to start with embedding political officers at the brigade/regiment levels and above to assist senior military commanders with assessing operational outcomes in relation to political end-states.

Second, militaries need to deliberately think through recruitment, training, and career progression for these political officers. Should political officers be civilians who are rotated into the military for a temporary billet, similar to the POLADs, or should they be viewed more like the JAGs who are uniformed servicemembers with a distinct military occupational specialty (MOS) from the beginning of their careers? Alternatively, should political officers be selected from a pool of generalist military officers and then rotated between military command and political appointments as they rise in rank to provide them with experience in both tracks? What kind of military and political training should political officers be provided with, and is the military equipped to do so, or should other governmental agencies such as the Department of State be more intimately involved? There are no ready-made answers to these questions, but they are critical in determining if the introduction of political officers into the military could realistically help narrow a longstanding civil-military gap or end up as a counterproductive flop.

Last, militaries must clearly define the level of authority and responsibilities of political officers. On one end of the spectrum is the PLA's system where the political officer is a co-equal to the commander and has not only decision-making authority over all major military and nonmilitary decisions but also influence over the commander's performance review. On the other end of the spectrum is a powerless political officer who is too junior in rank and experience to contribute sufficient heft and whose input will inevitably be dismissed as subordinate to other military warfighting considerations. The right balance lies somewhere in between. For example, a political officer who is one rank below the commander can have sufficient influence while still ultimately subordinate to the commander. In terms of responsibilities, the political officer's roles should not overlap with the existing responsibilities of the NCO corps; instead, a political officer's duties should focus more on aligning operational outcomes to political end-states and less on being a party whip responsible for disciplining service members whose personal views fall out of line with the party in power.

Some academic scholars have argued that despite the perception of coequals, political commissars in the PLA have realistically always been in a subordinate position relative to the military commanders.²⁸ This is because PLA military commanders and their subordinates outnumber political officers in a collective-decision framework and because the PLA's focus on military modernization to become a world-class military has elevated the military subsystem over the political.²⁹ While the evidence for this remains uncertain, the 2018 movie *Operation Red Sea*, coproduced by the PLAN regarding a fictitious noncomba-

²⁸ You Ji, "Unravelling the Myths About Political Commissars," in *Civil-Military Relations in Today's China: Swimming in a New Sea*, ed. David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness (New York: Routledge, 2007), 166, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315705606>.

²⁹ Ji, "Unravelling the Myths About Political Commissars," 166.

tant evacuation operation, provides a rare glimpse of the PLA's ideal relationship between the political commissar and the commander. In the movie, as the ship commander deliberates whether he should sail farther out to sea to protect his crew and civilians onboard or to wait for a group of marines ashore whom they had lost contact with, the political commissar pulled the commander aside and reiterated the political significance of keeping the civilians onboard safe in view of the increasing threat to the ship.³⁰ The scene revealed two important features that the PLA possibly envisions in an ideal commissar-commander relationship: that the commissar's political considerations should be taken seriously, but that the advice can also be conveyed tactfully to the commander who remains ultimately responsible for that decision.

Conclusion

It is impractical to expect any modern Western military today to adopt the PLA's political commissar system as it currently is. However, modern Western militaries must not be overly quick to reject the idea of a political commissar system simply because of the cognitive discomfort it causes from challenging a fundamental warfighting assumption on the unity of command. Instead, a deeper analysis of the political commissar system has revealed that the often-cited criticisms of the dual-command structure can also bring benefits in narrowing the civil-military gap, and they are not too different from the legal and foreign policy restrictions that modern Western militaries already self-impose and accept. While the introduction of a political commissar may be too large a step to immediately adopt, militaries can start with smaller steps to explore the feasibility of political officers by introducing equivalent billets in training exercises or by expanding the influence of existing POLADs for example. From a strategic perspective, the PLA has for 30 years viewed the U.S. military "as a model to be emulated, a threat to be countered, and a benchmark for assessing PLA progress," but modern Western militaries have not adopted a reciprocal approach.³¹ In fact, despite direct contradiction with the dual-command structure, the PLA has openly studied the Western philosophy of mission command and publicized their findings with the Academy of Military Sciences as recent as 2022.³² By discounting and dismissing the PLA's commissar system as ineffective, modern Western military practitioners and policymakers are doing themselves a great disservice. Rather, we should academically interrogate the system and aim to clearly understand the possible lessons, weaknesses, or even benefits that such a system carries.

³⁰ *Operation Red Sea*, directed by Dante Lam (Hong Kong: Bona Film Group and Emperor Motion Pictures, 2018); and Benson, *Party on the Bridge*, 23.

³¹ Phillip C. Saunders, "U.S.-China Relations and Chinese Military Modernization," in *After Engagement: Dilemmas in U.S.-China Security Relations*, ed. Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), 290.

³² Larry M. Wortzel, *The PLA and Mission Command: Is the Party Control System Too Rigid for Its Adaptation by China?*, Land Warfare Paper 159 (Arlington, VA: Association of the United States Army, 2024).

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