



JUNE 2020

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Political Commissars in the Chinese Navy

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Abstract

The Chinese navy follows U.S. warships operating in the East and South China Seas, sometimes creating tense situations between the two military powers. With the potential for future aggressive maneuvers by Chinese warships and their desire to operate continuously near U.S. warships, there is an increased chance for miscalculation. To avoid future miscues that could lead to further confrontation, a better understanding of the Chinese navy's planning and decisionmaking process aboard vessels can reduce the likelihood of a conflict. As a component of the Chinese Communist Party-led (CCP) political system, the Chinese navy, unlike the U.S. Navy, utilizes political commissars aboard its warships and submarines. This report explores the political commissar's influence and function aboard Chinese naval vessels.

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Foreword

Next year, the Communist Party of China (CCP) will celebrate 100 years since its founding, with more than seven decades as the sole ruling power in mainland China. Despite this longevity, the CCP remains vastly understudied and widely misunderstood. Deep analysis of the structure and operations of the Party remains confined to academic journals and workshops or small communities of interest in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Department of Defense (DoD).

With this report, CSIS scholars seek to help fill the gap in open literature about the CCP, shedding light on how and why the CCP has placed such emphasis on political and ideological control within the Chinese military. As China enters a window of strategic opportunity to influence sea power around the globe, such granular analysis will only become more important. How political control affects the military preparedness of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) should be one such area of future scholarship.

**Dr. Kathleen H. Hicks, Senior Vice President; Henry A. Kissinger Chair and
Director, International Security Program**

Mr. Jude Blanchette, Freeman Chair in China Studies

Report Notes

The report explores the position of political commissars in the Chinese navy. There are various types of political officers (political commissars, political directors, and political instructors) at different grade levels within the Chinese political work system. However, the primary analysis of this report centers on political commissars serving aboard People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels most frequently encountered by foreign naval units on the high seas, namely destroyers, frigates, supply vessels, and submarines. In addition, the report provides limited discussion on political commissars in the PLAN's other branches, namely in naval aviation, the marine corps, and the coastal defense force.

The following terms, specific to the field of People's Liberation Army (PLA) studies, are used throughout the report and shall be defined upfront:

- “Party committee” refers to Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) committees at all levels of the PLA.
- “Party standing committee (PSC),” composed of a Party committee's leading members, decides important issues in a PLA unit on a daily basis. This report clearly identifies the PSC for matters where it plays a decisive role.
- “Chinese navy” and the “People's Liberation Army Navy/PLAN” are used interchangeably but refer to the same service of the PLA.
- “Naval vessel” and “warship” refer to either a destroyer, frigate, supply vessel, or submarine.
- In accordance with the dual-command system, the PLA designation of “military commander” is equivalent to a “commanding officer” in the U.S. Navy—the terms are used interchangeably.

Introduction

The sea was like glass, the sun shone brightly off the water with a nearly cloudless sky as a U.S. warship conducted independent maritime operations somewhere in the Western Pacific. A lookout with binoculars aboard the U.S. warship observed an unknown ship approaching astern from over the horizon. It was a Chinese warship that soon broadcasted a signal from a bridge-to-bridge radio, which is the universal method for professional mariners to communicate on the high seas. The Chinese stated they would remain near the U.S. warship for several days, typically resulting in the Chinese warship maintaining visual range, in silence, and a shadow position following every maneuver of the U.S. warship.¹ During this period of careful observation by the Chinese, many physical approaches were made on the U.S. warship at close range in what can only be described as a game of cat and mouse.

This scenario happens all too frequently, and in fact, several similar maritime encounters occur between United States warships and Chinese warships.² These ship maneuvers, while tactical in nature, can have strategic implications. Chinese navy warships are led by a military commander and political commissar that serve command together, both striving to achieve military and political objectives set forth by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Chinese warships and the Maritime Militia have increasingly experienced close maneuvers to U.S. warships.³ Luckily, these incidents have not triggered a maritime crisis. In 2009, several Chinese vessels blocked the path of the USNS *Impeccable* to protest U.S. acoustic operations in the South China Sea.⁴ The USS *Cowpens* was operating in international

1 The Chinese navy organize “sea and air forces to track, monitor, verify, and identify the U.S. ships.” See the following article as an example of how the Chinese navy follows U.S. ships, Adela Suliman, “China Says It ‘Expelled’ U.S. Navy Vessel from South China Sea,” NBC News, May 2, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-says-it-expelled-u-s-navy-vessel-south-china-n1196261>.

2 For the purposes of this report, the term “encounter” refers to situations between two [naval/maritime] vessels that are considered safe in nature and where both China and the U.S. follow the Code of Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and the term “incident” refers to an interaction between two vessels assessed by one or both to be unsafe or unprofessional and in which CUES was not used.

3 Maritime Militia are irregular Chinese maritime forces such as fishing vessels used for “joint military, law enforcement, and civilian defense.” See report: Conor Kennedy and Andrew Erickson, China’s Third Sea Force, the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA (Newport, RI: CMSI China Maritime Reports, March 2017), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

4 Michael Green et al., “Counter-Coercion Series: Harassment of the USNS *Impeccable*,” Asia Maritime Transpar-

waters in 2013, observing China's new aircraft carrier *Liaoning*, when another Chinese warship maneuvered across the ship's bow.⁵ In 2015, the USS *Lassen* was challenged by Chinese warships and Maritime Militia vessels during freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) in the Spratly Islands.⁶ Approximately two years ago, the Chinese Type 052C Luyang II-class destroyer *Lanzhou* approached the USS *Decatur*, nearly colliding with the ship. In years following, Chinese warships continuously followed U.S. warships, sometimes at close range, throughout the waters in the East and South China Seas.

China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is the largest navy in the world by sheer numbers, with some 400 warships and submarines.⁷ The PLAN is building new platforms, developing advanced technologies, increasing systems integration, and improving weapons capability to create a world-class navy. As the PLAN continues to modernize and its fleet multiplies quantitatively, vessels bearing the PLAN standard are operating further from China's coastline. Predictably, maritime encounters between the U.S. Navy and PLAN have become a common occurrence. Confidence-building measures are in place to help prevent maritime miscalculations,⁸ but existing mechanisms may not be enough to address problems engendered by a new reality.⁹

Maritime encounters between two competing navies have occurred throughout history. During the Cold War, the United States frequently had maritime skirmishes with the Soviet navy. Former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Elmo Zumwalt commented that "foolish episodes of this kind occurred all the time" and that they were "juvenile, terribly dangerous."¹⁰ In addition, he said that "beyond the immediate danger to property and the loss of life any one of them might cause, any one could lead people to shoot at each other with results that might be by that time impossible to control."¹¹

A future maritime incident between the PLAN and U.S. Navy is possible, but it can and should be avoided. The Department of Defense (DoD) and the U.S. Navy must have an increased understanding of how Chinese warships and submarines operate in the

ency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 9, 2017, <https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-harrassment-usns-impeccable/>.

5 David Alexander, "U.S., Chinese Warships Narrowly Avoid Collision in South China Sea," Reuters, December 14, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-ships/u-s-chinese-warships-narrowly-avoid-collision-in-south-china-sea-idUSBRE9BC0T520131214>.

6 Ben Blanchard, "Angry China Shadows U.S. Warship near Man-Made Islands," Reuters, October 28, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-usa/angry-china-shadows-u-s-warship-near-man-made-islands-idUSKCN0SK2AC20151028>.

7 Michael McDevitt, *Becoming a Great 'Maritime Power': A Chinese Dream* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analysis, June 2016), 45, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/IRM-2016-U-013646.pdf; and David Lague, "Special Report: China's Vast Fleet Is Tipping the Balance in the Pacific," Reuters, April 30, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-army-navy-specialreport/special-report-chinas-vast-fleet-is-tipping-the-balance-in-the-pacific-idUSKCN1S612W>.

8 In 2014, the United States and China became signatories to a maritime agreement known as the Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), which provides basic communication guidelines to break down language barriers and assist in understanding maneuvering intentions while operating near one another. Twenty additional navies also signed this agreement.

9 Bonnie Glaser and Jeff W. Benson, "China's Conduct Heightens the Risk of Conflict in South China Sea," *South China Morning Post*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3052429/conflict-prevention-south-china-sea-depends-china-abiding-existing>.

10 Elmo R. Zumwalt, *On Watch: A Memoir* (New York, N.Y.: Quadrangle, 1977), 393.

11 Ibid., 393.

Western Pacific and beyond. Most strategists, tacticians, analysts, and policymakers focus heavily on advances in Chinese naval hardware capabilities (e.g., weapons, submarines, ships, electronic surveillance and attack platforms). While grasping changes in platform capabilities is vital, understanding the “software” component—how the Chinese navy makes decisions using those capabilities—is equally as important in preventing a future conflict or if the situation requires engaging the PLAN in battle. Political commissars have influence in naval operations because of their shared authority and collective decisionmaking with the commanding officer. The political commissar system within the Chinese military has been in existence for more than 70 years and continues to play an important role today. Consequently, the role of the PLAN commissar in naval operations should not be overlooked. By understanding this critical human element, both navies can reduce the chance of an unnecessary miscalculation.

This report is organized into five sections. The first section provides the key insights discovered during the course of the research project to assist policymakers, researchers, and national security professionals. The second section provides a detailed look at the roles and responsibilities of the political commissar within the Chinese navy. The third section discusses the specifics of how much influence a political commissar and Party standing committee (PSC) have aboard a Chinese naval vessel and the implications of that influence. The report concludes with identifying shortfalls in areas where more research is required and offers three tangible recommendations as a way forward. The appendix provides additional information about the Soviet navy commissar system, which serves as a comparative model in understanding the PLAN political commissar system.

Key Insights



Vice Admiral Shen Jinlong, commander of the Chinese PLAN, and Vice Admiral Qin Shengxiang, political commissar of the PLAN, jointly proposing a toast at a welcome reception for commemorating the 70th anniversary of the PLAN's founding in Qingdao, Shandong province, China, April 22, 2019. Photo: MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/ Reuters

“The People’s Navy has been bold and loyal throughout its long journey. Generations of officers and servicemen were tempered through winds and waves. They always took the Party’s banner, the Party’s direction, the Party’s will as their own and acted to the motto ‘The People’s Navy is loyal to the Party, never deviating in 10,000 miles of sailing.’ ‘I command the war hawk,’¹² I listen to the Party’s command’, ‘Our loyalty is inscribed in the deep seas.’ The Navy has always stood firm in choosing the right path and followed the correct banner in political trials.”¹³

Vice Admiral Shen Jinlong, commander of the PLAN, and
Vice Admiral Qin Shengxiang, political commissar of the PLAN, 2019¹⁴

¹² “War hawk” refers to naval aviation aircraft.

¹³ Jinlong Shen and Qin Shengxiang, “Renmin haijun: yangfan fenjin 70 nian (People’s Navy: 70 Years of Advancement),” qstheory.cn, August 2019, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2019-04/16/c_1124364140.htm.

¹⁴ The quote was written by both Admirals Shen and Qin in their article about the 70 years of PLAN advancement.

In April 2019, Vice Admirals Shen Jinlong and Qin Shengxiang toasted to the growth and success of the PLAN while also displaying the power of a dual-command system. The CCP maintains firm control of the PLAN through Party organizations within the military, and political commissars serve as the essential facilitators. Whether leading at the highest levels of the CCP or aboard Chinese naval vessels, commissars are conducting political work, which serves as the identity of a Party navy.

The following insights provide the Department of Defense (DoD), U.S. Navy, and the broader national security community with a better understanding about the political commissar's role, influence, and decisionmaking process, which could help avoid miscalculation and prevent an unnecessary armed conflict.

- **From the PLAN headquarters to individual naval vessels, the political commissar works alongside the military commander.¹⁵**
 - The PLAN's current system promotes dual-command authority between the political commissar and military commander to make administrative and operational decisions. Division of responsibility exists, but those responsibilities are inevitably linked to each other.
 - In a dual-command structure (双首长制; *shuang shouzhang zhi*), the political commissar is typically the same grade and in most situations the same rank.
 - Both officers follow direction and guidance from superior PSCs.
- **Political commissars are given authority parallel to the military commander aboard naval vessels that allows them to influence naval operations more often than previously thought—their duties should not be overlooked.¹⁶**
 - Commissars serve as the secretary of the PSC, the supreme decisionmaking body in the unit, while the military commander generally serves as the deputy secretary.
 - Commissars provide evaluation inputs in the military commander's individual performance report.
 - Commissars manage discipline, morale, and welfare of the crew—a role typically carried out by the top senior enlisted officer or non-commissioned officer aboard a U.S. naval vessel.
 - Commissars assume the role of mission commander (任务指挥员; *renwu zhihuiyuan*) and are expected to maintain similar naval operations skills as the military commander.¹⁷

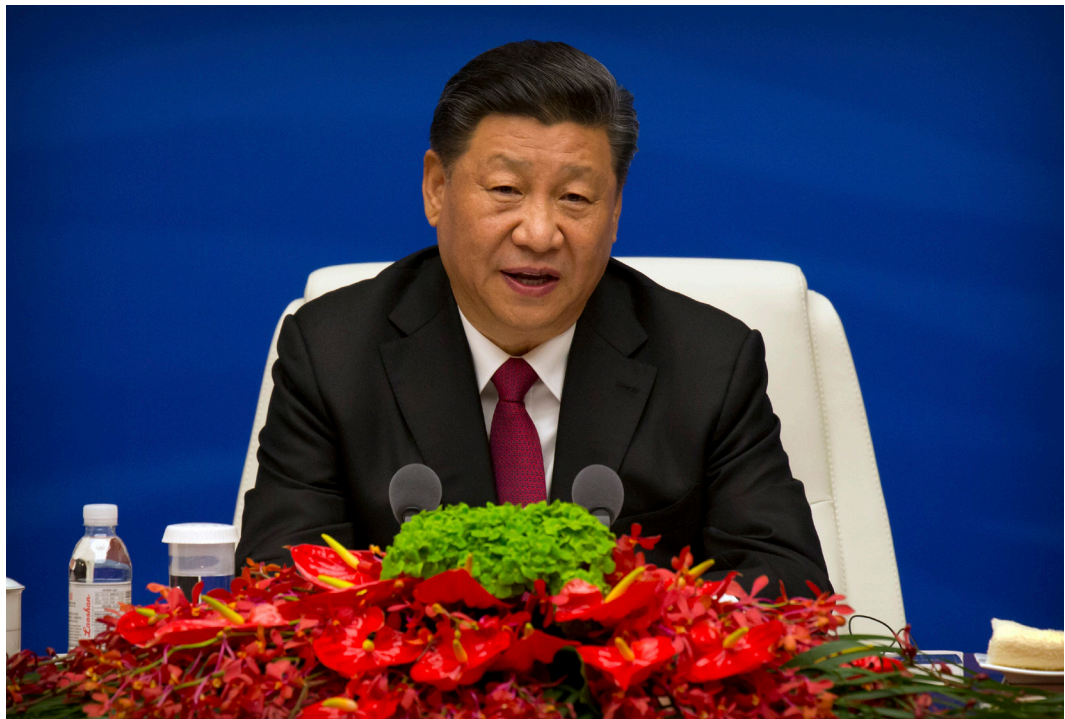
15 Political commissars exist at every level from the regiment level to the CMC to maintain Party control over the military. Political officers also exist at the company and battalion level.

16 Political commissars serve on all Chinese naval vessels that are at the regiment level and above, including, frigates, destroyers, submarines, and support vessels.

17 In the PLAN context, a mission commander is the person assuming overall responsibility in successfully completing a naval mission.

- **The PSC aboard naval vessels is the driving force in planning and developing Chinese naval operations, with the political commissar at the helm.**
 - The PSC is the nerve center of decisionmaking aboard a naval vessel.
 - The PSC promotes a collective leadership model that covers both administrative and operational issues.
- **The PLAN's collective leadership model in decisionmaking aboard naval vessels may result in delayed response times in critical situations, a lack of flexibility to adapt senior leaders' contrasting viewpoints, and increased miscommunication.**
 - The PLAN's collective leadership model emphasizes more control and is useful in problem solving. This differs from the U.S. Navy's mission command model, which is based on flexibility and independence.
 - A PSC can be comprised of five to six officers: a commanding officer, two executive officers (operations and administrative/logistics), a political commissar, and one or two deputy political commissars.
 - The U.S. Navy utilizes a command triad structure involving two officers and one top senior enlisted officer or top non-commissioned officer. This typically includes a commanding officer, an executive officer, and a command master chief or chief of the boat (submarines).
- **The Chinese commissar system sharply contrasts that of the Soviet model, which had influenced commissar systems in numerous communist navies.**
 - The Soviet navy operated with a single-command structure where the political commissar was lower in rank and subordinate to the commanding officer of a naval vessel. By contrast, the Chinese political commissars and military commanders are co-equals operating under the collective leadership of the PSC.
- **More research should be conducted to understand the role of the PLAN political commissars and the PSC.**
 - Academic and professional talks on the topic of single- and dual-command systems could provide additional insights about the strengths and weaknesses of both systems.
 - Future meetings with PLAN leadership should include conversations with both the military commander and political commissar.
 - A dedicated research group established within the China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) at the U.S. Naval War College can provide further analysis of political work in the PLAN.

The Role of the Political Commissar



China's leader Xi Jinping, also the chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) speaks during an event to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in Qingdao, in eastern China's Shandong province on April 23, 2019. Photo: MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/AFP via Getty Images

“The Party’s absolute command is the soul of a strong military, and forging that soul is the unshakable central task of military political work.”

“It must be recognized that the Party committee system, the dual command system, and the political commissar system are institutional arrangements, all the more so, a political design.”

Xi Jinping
Speech at the 2014 All-PLA Political Work Conference

A Tradition of Party Control

“Build the army with politics” (政治建军; *zhengzhi jianjun*) is the CCP’s foremost principle in managing the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). CCP control of the PLA can be traced back to the 1927 Sanwan Reorganization, where CCP committees (党委; *dangwei*) were established at battalions and regiments of the Mao Zedong-led Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Revolutionary Army (中国工农革命军; *zhongguo gongnong gemingjun*).¹⁸ In addition, Party branches (党支部; *dangzhibu*) were set up at all companies, further centralizing the Party’s control of the army.¹⁹ All these CCP organs were chaired by a political commissar (政治委员; *zhengzhi weiyuan*), with the military commanders (军事主官; *junshi zhuguan*) serving as the deputy secretaries.

The principle of the “Party commands the gun” (党指挥枪; *dang zhihui qiang*) was formalized at the Gutian Conference of 1929.²⁰ It was proclaimed during this meeting that the CCP is the absolute leader of the Red Army (the precursor to the PLA) and that the latter is not just any warfighting institution but one with a political mission to bring communist revolution to the whole of China.²¹ As Mao Zedong wrote that same year, “The Chinese Red Army is an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution.”²² With that goal in mind, resolution of the Gutian Conference called for intensified indoctrination of the troops to ensure strong political convictions. Party building (党建; *dangjian*) henceforth become a central focus of political workers in the Red Army.²³ All educational means, be it publications, training sessions, or education through recreation, would be geared toward communicating the CCP’s ideology to Red Army members. However, it was also identified that propaganda should not only be internal but also target the enemy to cause disintegration among its ranks.²⁴ Accordingly, one way to divide the enemy is by showing the Red Army as a righteous force through humane treatment of prisoners-of-war, a task delegated to political commissars, who demonstrated its usefulness in communist political warfare against the Kuomintang and Japanese.²⁵

18 CCP-led military forces experienced several rounds of rebranding. On October 10, 1947, communist military forces renamed themselves the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. The Sanwan Reorganization, named after the village in Jiangxi Province where the event took place, occurred after Mao Zedong’s failed Autumn Harvest Uprising. In essence, political organizations were established to tighten the Party’s control of the military so that the demoralized units would not disintegrate amid the retreat. While communist units that participated in the Nanchang Uprising of August 1927 (one month before Mao’s Autumn Harvest Uprising) already had political work mechanisms based on the Soviet model, Sanwan Reorganization established indigenous institutions such as Party committees that operated differently from Soviet conventions.

19 Xiaosong Shou et al., eds., *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun de bashinian* (Eighty Years of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army), *Junshi kexue chubanshe*, 2007, 33.

20 The Ninth Party Congress of the Chinese Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army’s Fourth Army, better known as Gutian Conference, was held on December 28 and 29, 1929, in Gutian Village, Shanghang County, Fujian Province.

21 Shou et al., *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun de bashinian*, 36–39.

22 “On Correcting Mistaken Ideas in the Party,” in *Mao Zedong Selected Works*, vol. I (December 1929), 106.

23 Party building has two main components: (1) developing and strengthening Party organizations, and (2) political and ideological indoctrination of Party members.

24 “Zhongguo gongchandang hongjun disijun dijiuci daibiao dahui jueyan (Resolution of the Chinese Communist Party Red Fourth Army’s Ninth Plenum),” Marxist Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/1968/1-068.htm.

25 Military Political Work Studies Writing Group, *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo xue* (Military Political Work Studies), *Renmin chubanshe & gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe*, 2011, 91.

In 2014, China's Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman Xi Jinping led the All-PLA Political Work Conference at Gutian, echoing the historical precedence 85 years ago.²⁶ Xi put forth five demands regarding PLA political work during this meeting:

- The Party's control of the PLA must be enhanced. Party committees must be at the forefront of leadership at all levels;
- Strict management of cadres/officers must be maintained. A good PLA officer must be loyal to the Party, combat capable and astute, have a strong sense of responsibility, and have a clean and impressive record of achievements;
- PLA service members (i.e., officers and enlistees) must maintain good conduct. The fight against corruption will continue;
- The PLA must build up its fighting spirit; and
- There must be innovation in political work to keep up with a rapidly changing world.²⁷

Organizational Overview

In 2016, China's military reforms realigned three existing organizations to reinforce Party control and reduce corruption. First, the Discipline Inspection Commission enforces "Party discipline within the PLA, including conducting investigations of suspected corrupt personnel."²⁸ The secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission is a member of the CMC.²⁹ Second, the Political and Legal Affairs Commission "establishes regulations and legal norms to improve the administration" and also handles criminal activities.³⁰ Third, the Audit Bureau is another investigating organization, "responsible for inspecting PLA finances and supervising the military's audit system."³¹ These three organizations are beyond the scope of this report but are important to mention because of their independence from the Political Work Department.

The CMC Political Work Department has a critical role in enforcing the Party's control over the military by managing the political indoctrination, personnel management, and the political commissar and Party committee systems.³² As the lead Party organ in PLAN units, the PSCs take on the function of the supreme decisionmaking body.³³

26 Hui Zhang, "Party Commands Gun: Xi," *Global Times*, November 13, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/889686.shtml>.

27 "Xin gutian huiyi: Xi Jinping wei jundui zhengzhi gongzuo kai yaofang (New Gutian Conference: Xi Jinping Gives Prescription for Military Political Work)," *Chinese Communist Party News Online*, November 2, 2014, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/1102/c164113-25956877.html>.

28 Phillip C. Saunders et al., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), 35.

29 *Ibid.*, 15.

30 *Ibid.*, 36.

31 *Ibid.*, 38.

32 *Ibid.*, 15.

33 Jeffrey Becker, David Liebenberg, and Peter Mackenzie, *Behind the Periscope: Leadership in China's Navy* (Newport, RI: Center for Naval Analysis, December 2013), 56, https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/CRM-2013-U-006467-Final.pdf.

The CMC is a type of Party committee, and its chairman is the highest-ranking Party representative in the PLA.³⁴ Following this structure, there are Party committees at the regimental level and above, grassroots Party committees at the battalion level, and Party branches at the company level.³⁵ Beneath the Party branch are Party small groups (党小组; dangxiaozu) at platoons and even squads, although the existence of Party small groups depends on how many Party members are in the unit. Party small groups are subordinate to the company Party branch and its political instructors. These Party organs vary in size depending on the size of the unit they govern. At minimum, three Party members can form a Party branch.³⁶

Generally, the unit political commissar is the PSC secretary, with the military commander as deputy secretary.³⁷ Besides making decisions on major issues (重大问题; zhongda wenti), leading troops in combat and training missions, and responding to emergency situations, PLA Party committees and branches likewise focus on political work, ideological indoctrination, and organizational tasks, such as:³⁸

- Implementing Party policies;
- Indoctrinating troops with the Party's official ideology;
- Party and Communist Youth League building efforts in the unit;
- Party member management;
- Issues relating to annual work objectives; and
- Security-related issues and relations with local population.

34 According to Article 24 of the Chinese Communist Party Constitution, "The Central Military Commission is responsible for Party work and political work in the armed forces, and shall prescribe the organizational system and organs of the Party in the armed forces."

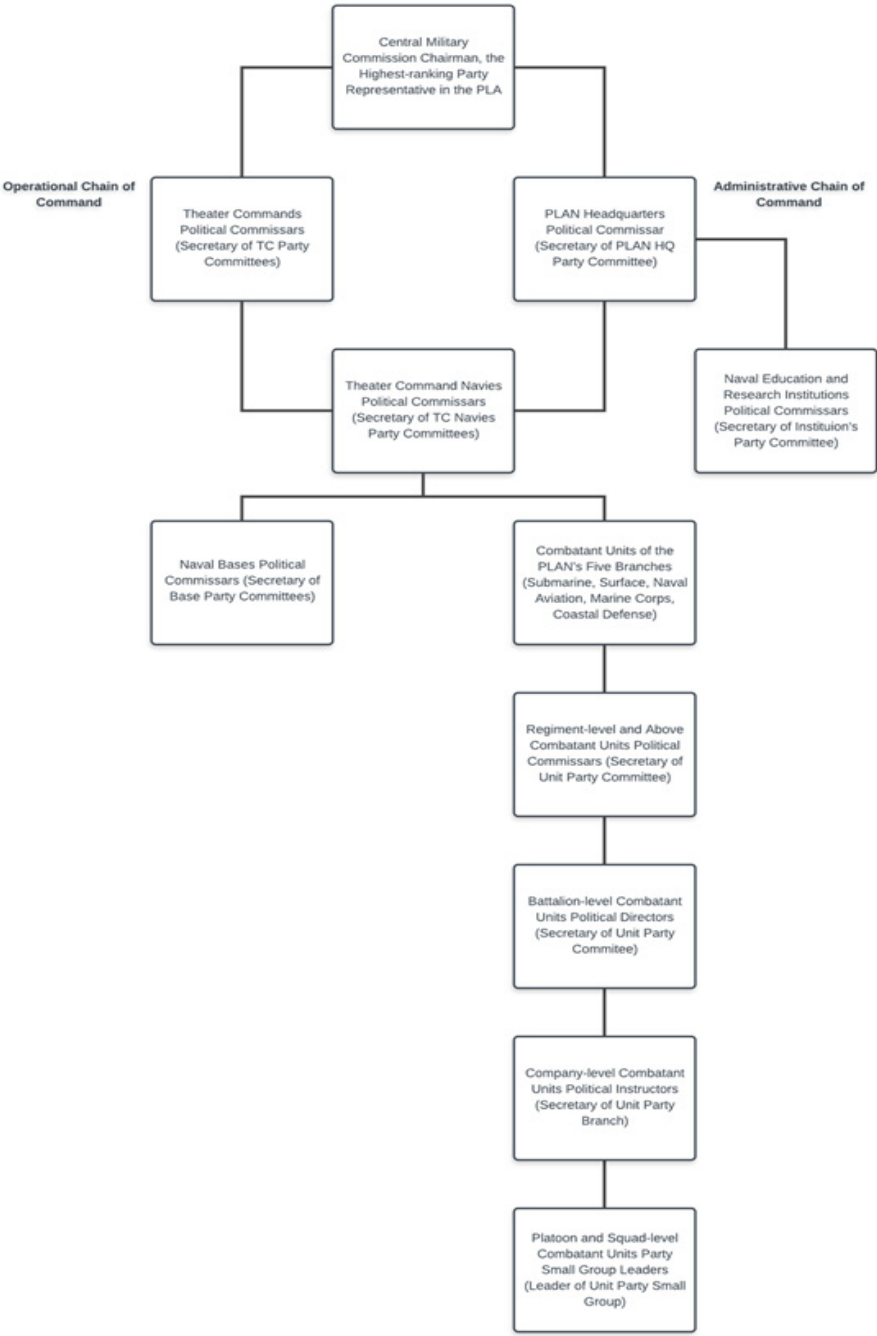
35 Party committees are elected by a Party congress. The newly elected Party committee then elect a PSC from among themselves. The outcome of the PSC election (i.e., the standing committee secretary, deputy secretary, and members) must be approved by the Party committee at the higher level. PSC members are the core decisionmakers of the Party committee. See: Military Political Work Studies Writing Group, *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo xue*, 122–123.

36 "Zhonggong zhongyang yinfa 'zhongguo gongchandang zhibu gongzuo tiaoli (shixing)' (Party Central Committee Releases 'Chinese Communist Party Branch Work Regulations [For Trial Implementation])," Xinhua, November 25, 2018, www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-11/25/c_1123764501.htm.

37 There are cases where the military commander serves as the secretary of the Party committee. During the April 1979 Triton Island Skirmish where PLAN forces captured three Vietnamese navy vessels, the PLAN commander Chen Weiwen headed the Xisha Front Command Post and its temporary Party committee concurrently. See: "Jinfang 1988 nian nansha haizhan haishang zhihuiyuan Chen Weiwen jiangjun (Interview with Commander of the 1988 Nansha Battle, Admiral Chen Weiwen)," Guangdong Party History Online, June 1, 2018, <http://www.gddsw.com.cn/shtml/dsb/xxjy/ksls/2018/06/01/680915.shtml>.

38 The PLA's Political Work Regulations did not clearly outline what makes a "major issue." In a recent development, following a successful long-range bombing exercise, the Party committee of a Southern Theater Command Naval Aviation regiment took the lead in organizing a tactics study group to increase the unit's joint operations capability. See: Qinghang Qin and Hongwei Gao, "Nanbu zhanqu haijun hangkongbing moutuan hongzhaji yuanhai yanlian daji shuimian mubiao (Southern Theater Command Naval Aviation Regiment Conducted Long-range Bombing Exercise Against Surface Targets)," Xinhua, March 15, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2020-03/15/c_1210515013.htm; and "Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun zhengzhi gongzuo tiaoli (People's Liberation Army Political Work Regulations)," 2010, author's copy.

Figure 1. Organization of PLAN Political Officers



Source: based on authors' original analysis.

Ahead of naval missions, a temporary Party committee (临时党委; *linshi dangwei*) would be formed for naval formations and individual vessels according to the mission's demands.³⁹ Compared to the Party committee that focuses on the abovementioned topics, temporary Party committees prioritize operational command.⁴⁰ The PSC that created the temporary Party committee decides the latter's composition, authority, position within the chain of command, and establishment procedure.⁴¹ There are PLAN regulations on setting up temporary Party committees, but these are kept confidential.⁴² However, political commissars do normally serve as the secretary of these temporary Party committees.⁴³ In response to joint operation needs, the PLA has recently been experimenting with so-called joint Party committees (联合党委; *lianhe dangwei*) in presiding over joint operations exercises, such as one landing operation exercise involving both PLA Army and PLAN units.⁴⁴

Operating under a system referred to as the “division of responsibility system under the unified collective leadership of the Party committee (党委统一的集体领导下的首长分工负责制; *dangwei tongyi de jiti lingdao xia de shouzhang fengong fuzezhi*),” perennial tension exists between military commanders and PSCs over decisionmaking power.⁴⁵ While the military commander assumes responsibility in military work-related issues (军事工作方面的问题; *junshi gonzuo fangmian de wenti*), they must work within the PSC's collectively designed goals.⁴⁶ As the supreme decisionmaking organization in the unit, the PSC commands work in military affairs, political work, logistics, and equipment supply and maintenance. Officers, enlistees, and various organizations within the unit cannot act as they please (各行其是; *gexing qishi*), position themselves as equals to the Party committee (不能与党委并立; *buneng yu dangwei bingli*), or place themselves above the Party committee (更不能凌驾与党委之上; *geng buneng lingjia yu dangwei zhishang*).⁴⁷

Although the military commander is tasked with realizing the PSC-set goals by deciding and implementing measures in the military sphere, in an era where “Party leadership in all work” (党对一切工作的领导; *dang dui yiqie gongzuo de lingdao*) is emphasized, Party

39 Ibid. According to the PLA Political Work Regulations Article 24, “Temporary units that perform tasks independently shall establish temporary Party committees as required.”

40 Temporary Party committees are not a phenomenon restricted to the PLA. Examples of such committees in the civilian world are aplenty. For an official explanation on temporary Party committees, see: “Linshi dangwei de zhuyao gongzuo renwu yu chixu shijian (What Are the Main Tasks and Duration of the Temporary Party Committee?),” Chinese Communist Party Members Online, accessed February 20, 2020, fuwu.12371.cn/2016/02/08/ARTI1454941275771209.shtml.

41 Military Political Work Studies Writing Group, *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo xue*, 123.

42 Some known regulations include: Measures on Further Strengthening the Construction of Party Organizations under Dynamically Decentralized Conditions, Rules of Procedure for Maritime Temporary Party Committees, and References for Temporary Party Committee Political Capability Training. See: Zongfeng Dai and Tao Li, “Donghai jiandui mou qianting zhidui: qianxing shenhai de ‘tiejiliang’ (A Submarine Flotilla of the East Sea Fleet: ‘Iron Backbone’ Under the Deep Sea),” *Xinhua*, May 28, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-05/28/c_129881445.htm.

43 Zhiqiu Wang, Zongfeng Dai, and Yaxun Liu, “Renping fenglangqi xinyou ‘dingpanxing’—haijun 152 jianting biandui zhixing huhang he huanqiu fangwen renwu zhong zhuadangjian gongzuo jianwen (Let the Storm Rise, the Belief remains Fixed—Navy’s 152 Naval Formation’s Party Building Work During Escort Missions and Global Visits),” *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, January 11, 2016, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-01/11/content_134977.htm.

44 Yueming Jiang, Fei He, and Zujing Tong, “Lianhe zhizheng, duanzao guoying ‘yixian zhihui’ (Victory by Jointness, Forging Superb ‘Frontline Command Post’),” *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, February 17, 2020, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-02/17/content_254300.htm.

45 “Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun zhengzhi gongzuo tiaoli [People’s Liberation Army Political Work Regulations].”

46 Military Political Work Studies Writing Group, *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo xue*, 126–127.

47 Ibid., 126.

committees have further consolidated their lead position in decisionmaking.⁴⁸ In fact, experts from the PLA National Defense University have called on the Party committee to become the “general’s tent (中军帐; *zhongjun zhang*)” where council of war is held.⁴⁹ There is evidence of temporary Party committees making tactical decisions on confronting suspected pirate boats, rescuing fishermen on high seas, and whether a submarine should surface or remain submerged when the seawater piping system malfunctioned.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, when faced with emergency situations (紧急情况下; *jinji qingkuang xia*), the military commander can decide and issue orders independently.⁵¹ However, the military commander must report back to the Party committee later regarding decisions made and submit to Party committee inspection.⁵² In other words, the military commander is accountable to the unit Party committee, and their power in decisionmaking waxes and wanes depending on the situation. While the military commander largely retains the freedom to command, that autonomy is nevertheless influenced by the existence of a superior decisionmaking organization, which most definitely shapes a commander’s leadership and behavior.

When disagreements emerge, PSC meetings are utilized to resolve disputes between political commissars and military commanders. In such situations, both sides will present their case and a PSC vote will be called. The minority then must follow the majority decision. However, private coordination of opinions and reporting to superiors for a resolution is normally used before balloting to avoid deepening the split between the unit leaders.⁵³

Besides Party committees and branches, there are political work departments from the CMC level down to the regiments. These departments work closely with corresponding Party committees and implement the political work agenda in the unit. The focus areas include: organization, Party cadres, propaganda, culture, security, public relations, external liaison, and Party secretaries.⁵⁴ A PLA political work textbook identifies political work departments as the “staff and helper” of the Party committee and political commissar in conducting unit political work.⁵⁵

48 “Party leading all work” is a prominent subject in Xi Jinping’s political philosophy. First raised in February 2015 at a meeting with high-level cadres, Xi has since elevated the Party’s lead role in governing China. Enhancing the Party committee’s power and responsibilities is part of the plan in strengthening Party control. See: Jun Zeng et al., *Jianchi he jiaqiang dang de quanmian lingdao yanjiu* (Study on Upholding and Strengthening the Party’s Comprehensive Leadership), Renmin chubanshe, 2019, 64, 106.

49 Ruoliang Yin and Zhang Chengfu, “Dangwei ruhe tigao lingdao budui beizhan dazhang de benling (How does the Party Committee Improve Leadership in War Preparation and Operation),” *Guangming Daily*, July 7, 2018, http://news.gmw.cn/2018-07/07/content_29716743.htm.

50 Bingzheng Li, Lei Zhang, and Chao Ma, “2019 nian quanjun dangjian gongzuo huimou (A Review of Party Building Work in the Military in 2019),” Ministry of Veteran Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, December 30, 2019, http://www.mva.gov.cn/sy/xx/gfxx/201912/t20191230_34513.html; Yinchuan Li and Taotao Xu, “Zhongguo haijun di 33 pi huhang biandui chenggong jiuzhi yiming zhongguo ji zhongshang chuan yuan (Chinese Navy’s 33rd Escort Formation Successfully Rescues and Treats an Injured Chinese Crew Member),” China News Online, December 11, 2019, <https://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/zw/mil/2019/12-11/9030643.shtml>; and Dai and Li, “Donghai jia ndui mou qianting zhidui: qianxing shenhai de ‘tiejiliang.’”

51 PLA Political Work Regulations did not specify what constitute an “emergency situation,” although the term likely refers to a serious, dangerous instance when immediate actions are needed, such as during military encounters at sea; and “Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun zhengzhi gongzuo tiaoli (People’s Liberation Army Political Work Regulations).”

52 Ibid.

53 Nan Li, ed., *Chinese Civil-Military Relations: The Transformation of the People’s Liberation Army*, Routledge, 2006, 104.

54 Military Political Work Studies Writing Group, *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo xue*, 132.

55 Ibid., 133–134.

Although political commissars at different PLA units share similar duties, they do have different designations. Officers at company-grade organizations are called political instructors (政治指导员; *zhengzhi zhidaoyuan*), at battalion-grade organizations are called political directors (政治教导员; *zhengzhi jiaodaoyuan*), and at regimental-grade and above are called political commissars (政治委员; *zhengzhi weiyuan*). Political workers at platoons and squads are known as Party small group leaders (党小组长; *dangxiaozu zhang*). While not officially political officers, PLA Party small group leaders do perform political tasks with the intention to “strengthen and regulate the political life of Party members.”⁵⁶ CCP regulations on Party small groups give them a clear political mission of indoctrinating, exerting Party control, and fortifying Party esprit de corps, in addition to carrying out orders of the Party branch.⁵⁷ Therefore, absent the official designation as political officers, Party small group leaders’ duties render them at least political workers.⁵⁸

Political commissars are present wherever a Party organ is. Political commissars exist at all combat and non-combat units of the PLAN. Each theater command navy, naval research and education institution, and naval base and support base has a political commissar and a corresponding military commander. Combatant and non-combatant units of the PLAN’s five branches—the submarine force, surface forces, naval aviation, marine corps, and coastal defense force—also share a similar setup. Under the PLA dual-command system, political and military commanders are of equal status, with each managing work in their respective area of expertise.⁵⁹

Each PLAN submarine flotilla (支队; *zhidui*)—a division leader-grade organization—has a political commissar. Every PLAN submarine, be it conventional (regiment leader grade) or nuclear powered (division deputy leader grade), has a political commissar. Every surface flotilla (支队; *zhidui*) and squadron (大队; *dadui*) has a political commissar. Based on their grade, every destroyer (regiment leader grade) and frigate (regiment deputy leader grade) has a political commissar. Depending on the size of the ship, each or several departments would have either a political director or instructor who works with corresponding department heads. Battalion leader-grade 3-digit hulls have political directors (see Table 1 for details on vessel types). Company leader-grade 4-digit hulls have political instructors (see Table 1 for details on vessel types), although experimentation is underway in the Southern Theater Command Navy to eliminate political instructors at such vessels and delegate political work to military commanders.⁶⁰

56 Office of Naval Intelligence, *China’s Navy 2007*, 2007, 19–20; and Xianghui Li et al., “Ruhe danghao jiguan dangxiaozuzhang? Wutai you duoda? (How to Better Serve as an Organization’s Party Small Group Leader? How Large is One’s Stage?),” *People’s Liberation Army Daily*, March 20, 2017, http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2017-03/20/content_7531458.htm.

57 “Zhongyang he guojia jiguan gongwei yinfa ‘zhongyang he guojia jiguan dangxiaozu gongzuo guize (shixing)’ (Central and State Organs Work Commission Releases ‘Central and State Organs Party Small Group Work Regulations [Trial Implementation],’)” *Communist Party Members Online*, December 18, 2019, <http://www.12371.cn/2019/12/18/ARTI1576640904775568.shtml>.

58 Zhao Jin, *Dangzhibu gongzuo shouce* [Handbook of Party Branch Work], hongqi chubanshe, 2018, p. 182.

59 Military Political Work Studies Writing Group, *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo xue*, 129.

60 “Bushe zhidaoyuan, kan ta ruhe nixi ‘yijiantiao’ de shuang fengshou (How Does One Successfully Shoulder Two Duties without Political Instructors),” *Legal Daily*, April 25, 2019, www.legaldaily.com.cn/army/content/2019-04/25/content_7841621.htm.

Table 1. Political Officer's at the PLAN's Five Branches

	Submarine	Surface	Naval Aviation	Marine Corps	Coastal Defense
Political Commissar (Organizations at the Regiment-level and Above)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bases (corps deputy leader grade) ▪ Conventional submarines (regiment leader grade) ▪ Nuclear submarines (division deputy leader grade) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bases (corps deputy leader grade) ▪ Flotilla (division leader grade) ▪ Squadron (regiment leader grade) ▪ Aircraft carrier (division leader grade) ▪ Destroyer (regiment leader grade) ▪ Frigate (regiment deputy leader) ▪ Service ships (regiment deputy leader grade) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bases (corps deputy leader grade) ▪ Air division ▪ Air brigade ▪ Air regiment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bases (corps deputy leader grade) ▪ Brigade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bases (corps deputy leader grade) ▪ Regiment
Political Director (Organizations at Battalion-level)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ship departments (battalion leader grade) ▪ Battalion-leader 3-digit escort boats, landing ships, minesweeper ships, submarine chasers, service ships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Flight group (battalion leader grade) ▪ Reconnaissance Group (battalion leader grade) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Battalion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Battalion
Political Instructor (Organizations at the Company-level)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ship departments (company leader grade) ▪ Company-leader 4-digit escort boats, landing crafts, minesweeper boats, missile boats, missile speedboats, service ships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Flight squadrons (company leader grade) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Company
Party Small Group Leader (Platoon and Squad-level)				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Platoon and squad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Platoon and squad

Source: based on authors' original analysis.⁶¹

Political commissars are attached to every naval aviation air division, brigade, and regiment. Political directors are present at flying and reconnaissance battalion-level groups, and political instructors are present at aviation squadrons. For the marine corps and coastal defense units, political commissars are present at the regimental level and up, political directors are present at the battalions, political instructors are present at companies, and Party small group leaders are present at platoons and squads.

Duties

The PLA's "three principles of political work (政治工作三大原则; zhengzhi gongzuo sanda yuanze)" are "officers and soldiers as one, military and people as one, and breaking-up enemy forces."⁶² In other words, the goal of PLA political work is to build a highly disciplined force with strong esprit de corps that dedicates itself to improving the people's livelihoods and that can bring about disintegration of enemy ranks. According to the PLA's Political Work Regulations, duties of political commissars can be summed up as five clusters: Party building and officer/enlisted management, propaganda and indoctrination, shaping military lifestyle, peacetime security, and wartime political work.⁶³

61 "People's Liberation Navy - Submarine Branch - Organizational Structure," Global Security, accessed June 17, 2020, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/plan-sub-org.htm>; and Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen, eds., *The PLA as Organization v2.0* (Vienna, VA: Defense Group Inc., 2015), p. 327.

62 "Renmin jundui zhengzhi gongzuo de sanda yuanze shishenme? (What Is the People's Army's Three Principles of Political Work?)," *Zhongguo gongchan dang xinwen wang* (Chinese Communist Party News Online), www.cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64156/64157/4418380.html.

63 "Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun zhengzhi gongzuo tiaoli (People's Liberation Army Political Work Regulations)."

- **Party building and officer/enlisted management:** Build up the Party's standing among service members. Ensure the Party has a strong presence in the lives of service members. Recruit, recommend, train, educate, and supervise Party members. Monitor instances of malfeasance. Assist Communist Youth League organizations in the PLA.
- **Propaganda and indoctrination:** Propagate the Party's latest policies, organize policy study sessions, promote officially approved values to service members (i.e., patriotism and nationalism), and ensure the Party leader's political ideology is known and respected in the barracks. Monitor and shape popular opinion among service members.
- **Shaping military lifestyle:** Organize cultural and sporting events, administer science and culture education, receive feedback from representatives of service members, and ensure service members' benefits are promptly delivered. Provide mental health services.
- **Peacetime security:** Maintain good relations with local populace living near bases. Conduct research on adversaries. Perform counterintelligence, operations security tasks, and counter enemy psychological operations. Conduct research on political work.
- **Wartime political work:** Join the military commander in executing operations, rally the troops, mobilize militia and local population, maintain wartime order, care for the wounded and dead and their family members, cultivate fighting spirit, execute legal, public opinion, and psychological warfare, and advance disintegration of enemy ranks. Cosign orders with the military commander.⁶⁴

Since the 2014 Gutian Conference, there has been a renewed focus on political commissars mastering battle command, which the Chinese deem one of the PLA's revolutionary traditions. In past naval battles and skirmishes, not only have PLAN political commissars participated in operation planning and execution, they also personally led attacks.⁶⁵ During the March 1988 Johnson South Reef Skirmish, the political commissar of PLAN frigate Yingtian (Hull 531) took over from the captain when the latter fell ill with hepatitis and had to recuperate onshore.⁶⁶ Li Chuqun, political commissar of the frigate Nanchong (Hull 502), led seven subordinates armed with cleavers and daggers, sailed toward Johnson South Reef in a small boat, and severed mooring lines of the Vietnamese navy boat near the reef.⁶⁷

Currently, in PLAN surface units at least, political commissars have been officially designated “mission commander (任务指挥员; renwu zhihuiyuan)” along with the captain

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ For example, after intercepting South Vietnamese communications on the plan to seize Duncan Island on January 19, 1974, the PLAN South Sea Fleet held an emergency operations planning session on the night of January 18 with the Fleet Political Commissar Duan Dezhang in participation. See: Zhaoxin Li, “Wo qinli de xisha haizhan (My Personal Experience During the Paracel Islands Battle),” Yanhuang Chunqiu (China Through the Ages), accessed May 23, 2020, <http://www.yhcnw.com/34/10118.html>.

⁶⁶ “Yuan 531 jian zhengwei tan 3-14 haizhan: jiaozhan shi chuxian shijige guzhang (Former Political Commissar of Hull 531 Talks About 3-14 Naval Battle: More Than a Dozen Malfunctions Amid Battle),” Sina Military, March 13, 2013, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2013-03-13/1125718366.html>.

⁶⁷ Xiaorong Hong and Wei Li, “Zaijian, nanchongjian: huishou ‘laobing’ 44 nian suiyue (Farewell, Nanchong. Looking Back on 44 Years of Service),” China Military Online, September 16, 2013, http://www.81.cn/hj/2013-09/16/content_5502398_3.htm.

since mid-2018. Previously, the title was exclusively associated with the ship captain.⁶⁸ In fact, China's official press has proudly hailed the "dual commander system" (双指挥员制; shuang zhihuiyuan zhi) in reinforcing the "Party commands the gun" motto.⁶⁹ For the same principle, PLAN leaders commanded political commissars to "study military affairs and practice command (学军事, 练指挥; xuejunshi lianzhihui)."⁷⁰ This development illustrates the Party's commitment to increasing the role of political commissars in naval operations.

PLAN political commissars must now study all aspects of naval operations and pass tests modeled upon a captain's examination in order to retain their position.⁷¹ Subjects include operational command, handling emergency situations, psychological offense and defense, and technical details.⁷² In addition, political commissars who originally worked at desk positions are rotated to various combat units of the PLAN to gain first-hand combat experience. In naval aviation, for example, political commissars in Southern Theater Command Naval Aviation units are training to become qualified commanders.⁷³ Moreover, "special mission aircraft (特种作战飞机; tezhong zuozhan feiji)," which refers to airborne early-warning, anti-submarine warfare, electronic intelligence, electronic warfare, and psychological operations aircraft, now reserve a seat for political officers to experience airborne special missions first hand as a ride-along.⁷⁴ Comparable occurrences have been seen in other branches of the PLAN.

Such measures are being implemented with the two following objectives in mind. PLAN political commissars must know how to command so they can serve as a capable co-commander during missions and even takeover from the military commander when the situation requires.⁷⁵ Also, in order to optimize the effectiveness of political work, political commissars must have a complete understanding of service members' daily lives by being on the front line themselves. In the words of one PLAN commissar, "How can a layman guide a master? If you are a military affairs layman, then you surely will be less bold in

68 Rong Hou, Guoqiang Sun, and Guoquan Chen, "Haijun shenhua 'sanjiang sanzhenhdun' zhuanxi xuexi jiaoyu de qishi yu sikao (Reflections on the Navy's Deepening 'Three Lectures and Three Rectifications' Special Education)," Xinhua, April 15, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2019-04/16/c_1210110628.htm.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Wei Li and Canhong Zheng, "Nanbu zhanqu haijun mou zhidui jintie shizhan zuzhi zhengzhi gongzuo ganbu gangwei kaohe (Flotilla of Southern Theater Command Navy Tests Political Work Cadres under Real War Conditions)," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, June 11, 2019, www.mod.gov.cn/power/2019-06/11/content_4843372.htm.

72 Rongrong Zhang et al., "Junzheng jietong, zhanji heyi—zhezhi qianting budui de zhenggong ganbu xiang dangdang! (Well-Versed in Military and Political Affairs, Skilled in War and Politics—the Political Commissars of This Submarine Unit Are Very Impressive!)," Sina News, November 11, 2017, <http://www.mil.news.sina.com.cn/2017-11-11/doc-ifyn-sait7186735.shtml>.

73 Yanxiang Wang and Guoquan Chen, "Hei, zhege feixing xunlian zhihuiyuan shi zhengwei (Hey! The Flight Training Commander is the Political Commissar)," People's Liberation Army Online, January 26, 2019, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/26/content_226220.htm.

74 Andreas Rupprecht, *Modern Chinese Warplanes: Chinese Naval Aviation - Combat Aircraft and Units* (Harpia Publishing, 2018), 26–29; and Yi Lu, "Zhongguo haijun shoushe 'zhenggong zhanwei' zhengwei suiwei genfei (Chinese Navy Establishes 'Political Work Station' for the First Time, Political Commissars Join Flight Missions)," People's Liberation Army Online, October 21, 2014, http://www.81.cn/hj/2014-10/21/content_6189154.htm.

75 Jun Mao et al., "Qianting zhengwei sheshen dulou 'shengmingxian' zheyang qianru zhanwei (Submarine Commissar Risks Life to Plug Leaks, This Is How 'Lifeline' Fits into the Battle Position)," People's Liberation Army Daily Online, November 22, 2016, www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-11/22/content_7370472.htm.

political work.”⁷⁶ The era of focusing purely on political work or working at comfortable offices is a thing of the past.

Case in Point: Political Commissars Undersea

China’s modernizing submarine force is one that could pose a great challenge to rival navies in the Indo-Pacific. As of 2019, the PLAN had four ballistic missile submarines, six nuclear attack submarines, and 50 diesel attack submarines.⁷⁷ Most valued for stealth, the submarine force demands iron discipline. Political commissars play an important role in this respect. Cramped, noisy, and often on long missions, life in a submarine is not easy, and stress levels are usually higher than surface units.⁷⁸ Thus, in addition to serving on the temporary Party committee, political commissars and their deputies in PLAN submarines must fully maximize their role as the caregiver and enforcer of rules to ensure the military commander has a well-disciplined team. Although a highly secretive force, publicly available reports revealed the following roles of a PLAN submarine force political commissar.

Maintaining order is one duty of a PLAN submarine political commissar. While inspecting all areas of the ship, Deputy Political Commissar Xiao Jizhong stopped those on board from heavy exercise that could contribute to rising carbon dioxide levels and service members whose choice of entertainment could affect sonar effectiveness.⁷⁹

Stabilizing service members during or post emergency situations is another task of political commissars. After encountering a dangerous accident during a mission underneath the high seas, Zhang Yingjun, political commissar of an unnamed PLAN submarine, realized the engine department head looked shocked and depressed. After chatting with him, Zhang realized that it was the comrade’s first mission after returning from a long vacation, and he blamed himself for not reacting fast enough when the submarine sank quickly due to a change in water conditions. Zhang immediately applied his knowledge to stabilize the department head’s emotions. After a long talk, Zhang and the department head devised new methods to help members of his unit increase awareness of potential dangers. The engine department returned to work with renewed confidence.⁸⁰

As training curriculums are updated according to new demands, PLAN submarine political commissars must spend more time learning about command and control. Deputy Political Commissar Fan Zuoxi of an unnamed PLAN submarine must now study some 14 courses on submarine warfare that include joint training, submarine tactics, and torpedo attack. Besides learning from the books, Fan insists on touring all departments during training missions to ensure he has a strong grasp on the mindset of his subordinates. The more he

76 Jiangshan Duan et al., “Zhenggong ganbu xue junshi de ‘shenlan’ yangben (A ‘Deep Blue’ Model of Political Cadres Learning Military Affairs),” People’s Liberation Army Daily Online, November 10, 2017, www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-11/10/content_191532.htm.

77 Donald O’Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress*, RL33153 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2019), 20, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>.

78 Li Peng et al., “Mental Health Status of Submariners and Its Influencing Factors,” *Journal of Navy Medicine* (Chinese) 40, no. 4 (July 2019), 291–292.

79 Leifeng Zhang, “Xunhang shenhai—sanming qianting zhenggong zhibanyuan xungeng shouji (Deep Sea Patrol—Notes of Three Submarine Political Worker),” Xinhua, May 31, 2017, www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2017-05/31/c_129621702.htm.

80 Ibid.

knows about warfare and training, the better he can track the thoughts of his submariners. Consequently, he can be more effective in rallying troops and raising morale with methods that can truly touch the hearts of service members. “If you do not understand warfare, then you will make the mistake of treating just the symptom instead of the cause,” said Fan. By learning all aspects of the ship and constantly presenting himself in the trenches with his subordinates, Commissar Fan has gained much confidence among his troops, which will serve him well in future missions.⁸¹

The above descriptions show that the PLAN submarine force commissars play a leading role in stabilizing the unit in emergency situations, maintaining discipline, and keeping morale high during missions. Additionally, with the ongoing PLA campaign urging political commissars to study battle command, submarine commissars are also spending more time studying submarine warfare, an act that would simultaneously benefit political work effectiveness among submariners, since a commissar is well versed in submarine warfare can better understand the crew’s thought process. However, open sources normally report good news that brushes up the PLA’s image. Not mentioned in the sources are the political commissar’s duties in wartime psychological operations, counterintelligence, and managing relations with the commanding officer, which would be especially interesting in the context of a submarine but was understandably omitted due to security implications.

81 Rongrong Zhang et al., “Junzheng jietong, zhanji heyi.”

Influencing Naval Operations



A Chinese navy formation, including China's first aircraft carrier Liaoning, during military drills in the South China Sea. January 2, 2017. Photo: STR/AFP via Getty Images

“The Chinese have their way and we have ours, and if open conflict ever comes it will be bitter indeed.”⁸²

Mr. Kenneth C. Cathey
Naval War College Review, 1971

For more than 70 years, even with enormous growth in maritime power, the Chinese navy has embraced a dual-command relationship between the military commander and political commissar. This dual-command relationship is an important distinction from how the U.S. Navy executes command and control.

82 Kenneth C. Cathey, “Who Is the Commissar: Political Officers in the Chinese Communist Army,” U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons, accessed March 2020, 71, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol24/iss9/5>.

In 2018, the PLAN coproduced the movie, *Operation Red Sea*, depicting historical fiction from China's successful non-combatant evacuation operations in Yemen. The PLAN frigate *Linyi* safely entered the port of Aden on two different occasions extracting nearly 600 Chinese citizens and approximately 225 foreign nationals.⁸³ The ship's crew were hailed as national heroes and demonstrated the PLAN's capability to conduct military operations in the far seas. The movie provides additional insight about the possible dynamic between the commanding officer and political commissar.

In a scene near the end of the movie, the *Linyi* was pier side waiting for its marines to return before departing out to sea. The frigate had been previously attacked, but the ship's air defense systems prevented damage. As the threat level increased, and the risk of an additional attack was imminent, a crew member in the ship's command and control center reported to the commanding officer that they lost communications with the marines ashore. The commanding officer had to decide whether to get the ship underway to keep his crew and evacuees safe or leave the marines behind. The following was the dialogue that occurred:

Crew member: "We tried to reach them (marines), to no avail."

Commanding officer: "And their individual positions?"

Crew member: "We've lost those too."

Commanding officer: "Stay on high alert, keep trying."

Crew member: "Yes, sir."

Political commissar (pulls commanding officer aside): "The ship is under threat. To protect the citizens on board, we'll move away from the port."

Commanding officer: "Okay. Let me see if our superiors will approve of sending in a drone."

(The frigate safely departed from port out to sea and later launched a drone to support the marines ashore.)

While a fictional depiction, one can nonetheless glimpse what the dual-command structure might look like in action by the above dialogue. The scene illustrates the ideal PLAN coordination between a commanding officer and political commissar. Throughout the movie, the political commissar stood side by side with the commanding officer. In addition, the political commissar gave directions to the commanding officer in a crisis situation. The political commissar supervised the entire operation and clearly understood that if the frigate did not depart quickly, the lives of the crew and evacuees would have been jeopardized. The commissar is not necessarily the one actively making command decisions, but he or she can direct the commanding officer what to do or not to do (or what the commanding officer must do) based on the Party's concerns. The scene is a realistic portrayal of a political commissar's influence and authority during naval operations.

83 Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "PLA Navy Used for First Time in Naval Evacuation from Yemen Conflict," Jamestown Foundation, *China Brief*, April 3, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/pla-navy-used-for-first-time-in-naval-evacuation-from-yemen-conflict/>.

Command and Control Characteristics

At the most basic level, command and control is the ability to synchronize military activities. Royal Navy Admiral Sir Cyprian Bridge in his book *The Art of Naval Warfare* commented that “at the heart of it all, war is essentially a contest of wits, that in it the human element is the most important.”⁸⁴ Human decisionmaking is required for command and control, whether deciding how to maneuver entire fleets or conduct operations aboard a naval vessel. The political commissar in the Chinese navy maintains Party integrity aboard a naval vessel, but they also serve as a key actor in planning naval operations.

There are three distinct command and control characteristics aboard Chinese vessels. First, the military commander and political commissar are to integrate as one to promote a collective leadership model. The dual-command structure provides dissimilar responsibilities between the commanding officer and political commissar, but both share the burden of command equally.⁸⁵ The commander is responsible for executing tactical military actions, and the political commissar manages the crew’s personnel readiness. In the 1971 *Naval War College Review*, Kenneth C. Cathey discussed the different functions or responsibilities of Chinese political commissars, such as ensuring the Party’s control of the military and dealing with the psychological and organizational fields.⁸⁶ He said that the Chinese “go to extraordinary lengths in trying to integrate all the functions, to deliberately intertwine them to such an extent that the functions cannot be done independently of each other.”⁸⁷



Chinese President Xi Jinping, also general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), presents the PLA standard and the naming certificate to the captain and political commissar of aircraft carrier Shandong during the commissioning ceremony of China’s first domestically built aircraft carrier at a naval port in Sanya, Hainan Province, December 17, 2019. Photo: XINHUA/LI GANG via Getty Images

84 Scott Swift, “Master the Art of Command and Control,” U.S. Naval Institute, September 5, 2019, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2018/february/master-art-command-and-control>.

85 Becker, Liebenberg, and Mackenzie, “Behind the Periscope,” p. 60.

86 Kenneth C. Cathey, “Who Is the Commissar: Political Officers in the Chinese Communist Army,” U.S. Naval War College Review 24, no. 9 (1971): 60, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol24/iss9/5>.

87 Ibid., 60.

The command of a naval vessel is separated between military and political affairs, but those two functions are closely interconnected when conducting naval operations. As Mao Zedong, who founded the PLA, once said, “Military action is a method used to attain a political goal. While military affairs and political affairs are not identical, it is impossible to isolate one from the other.”⁸⁸ In 2015, during a visit to China by a group of senior officers from the U.S. Navy, a Chinese naval officer described the relationship between the commanding officer and a political commissar aboard a naval vessel like the relationship between a “father and mother.”⁸⁹ The goal of these two leaders is to have an inseparable relationship and a bond between them to nurture their crew and follow the direction of the Party. One is the military professional and the other serves as the caretaker, always looking out for the safety and welfare of the crew.⁹⁰ Together, both officers share the trials and hardships of command at sea. To achieve success, the commanding officer and political commissar must collectively work side by side to accomplish any given mission.

The dual-command relationship in this report focuses on political commissars serving on PLAN vessels most frequently encountered by foreign naval units on the high seas, namely destroyers, frigates, supply vessels, and submarines. However, this relationship occurs at all levels in the PLAN. There are numerous photos illustrating similar situations where the commanding officer and political commissar are working side by side in their duties.⁹¹

Second, the seniority of a political commissar aboard naval vessels matters. The commanding officer and political commissar are co-equals by the nature of their position and grade. An important distinction that is often overlooked is that the Chinese seniority system is based primarily on grade—there are 15 grades and 10 ranks.⁹² The system places more importance on an individual’s grade and designated billet than rank. For example, a political commissar may outrank a commanding officer of a naval vessel or vice versa, but both are typically the same grade, and their designated positions make them co-equals.⁹³ Aboard U.S. Navy ships, it is also common for the commanding officer and executive officer to have the same rank, but their roles and responsibilities are different.

Third, political commissars manage the PLAN’s personnel system. A central promotion board does not exist, and the Party committee determines all promotions at the next highest level. Commissars do not write a formal performance evaluation of the commanding officer

88 Cathey, “Who Is the Commissar,” 72.

89 Christopher Bodeen, “Senior US Navy Officers Visit Chinese Aircraft Carrier,” *Navy Times*, August 7, 2017, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2015/10/21/senior-us-navy-officers-visit-chinese-aircraft-carrier/>.

90 While this may be an outdated gender stereotype in the United States, the Chinese naval officer described the relationship between the commanding officer and political commissar in this way.

91 “Xi Focus: Xi Attends Commissioning of First Chinese-Built Aircraft Carrier,” *Xinhua*, December 17, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/17/c_138638108.htm; and Ouyang, “Chinese naval escort task-forces complete mission handover,” *China Military Online*, accessed March 2020, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-01/03/content_7434695.htm; Chen Zhuo, “Danger Never Sleeps,” *CGTN* via Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, April 17, 2019, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-04/17/content_4840088.htm; and “Xi Encourages China’s Navy to Commit to Training,” *CGTN*, June 15, 2018, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d674e7855544d78457a6333566d54/share_p.html; and *CGTN*, “Xi encourages China’s navy soldiers to commit to training,” *YouTube*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3F0kXbPR65w>.

92 Office of Naval Intelligence, *China’s Navy 2007* (Washington, DC: 2007), 1, <https://fas.org/irp/agency/oni/chinanavy2007.pdf>.

93 “Xi Encourages China’s Navy Soldiers to Commit to Training,” *China Global Television Network*, 2018, 2:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3F0kXbPR65w>.

they serve with, but the commissar does provide input about the commanding officer's performance to the next higher level.⁹⁴ The ability to influence another person's professional career changes the relationship dynamic between the commanding officer and political commissar aboard a naval vessel. The commanding officer is incentivized to work closely with the political commissar due to certain career implications.

Command and Control Differences

For nearly 250 years, the U.S. Navy has commanded and controlled warships utilizing a single-command system aboard naval vessels to protect maritime commerce, ensure the freedom of navigation, and win wars. The commanding officer of a warship or submarine leads all aspects of vessel operations, from executing combat missions to maintaining the discipline, morale, and welfare of their respective crews. While the Chinese navy shares similar ways of managing functions such as navigation and engineering aboard naval vessels, the organizational structure and approach to making decisions differs from the U.S. Navy. The Chinese dual-command system relies on the commanding officer and political commissar making decisions collectively, whereas the U.S. Navy relies on one individual, the commanding officer.

Since the Chinese navy employs a different command and control system than the U.S. Navy, identifying key differences between the two systems can assist government leaders at the strategic and tactical levels in avoiding future maritime conflicts. While there are many facets in leading and managing a naval vessel, three command and control elements can influence naval operations: (1) a simplified decisionmaking process, (2) efficient crew management, and (3) the execution of mission command.

DECISIONMAKING PROCESS

Aboard any naval vessel there are daily administrative and operational decisions. A decisionmaking process is required to allow the seamless and steady flow of information to reach the commanding officer or, in the case of the Chinese navy, both the commanding officer and political commissar. Administrative decisions are those that involve personnel, watch routines, maintenance, and other areas that support a naval vessel's ability to achieve operational commitments. Operational decisions are made in areas such as the vessel's safety of navigation, weapons employment, launching of manned or unmanned aircraft, and the overall tactical use of the vessel's offensive or defensive capabilities.

The senior leadership aboard U.S. Navy warships and submarines is comprised of three individuals: the commanding officer, executive officer, and command master chief or chief of the boat (the top senior enlisted officer or non-commissioned officer).⁹⁵ These senior leaders are informally called the command "triad," and specific regulations do not govern how often the triad should meet and how it should function. Typically, the triad meets daily to discuss and decide administrative and operational issues. While these three individuals work together to manage the overall activity and routine of a naval platform,

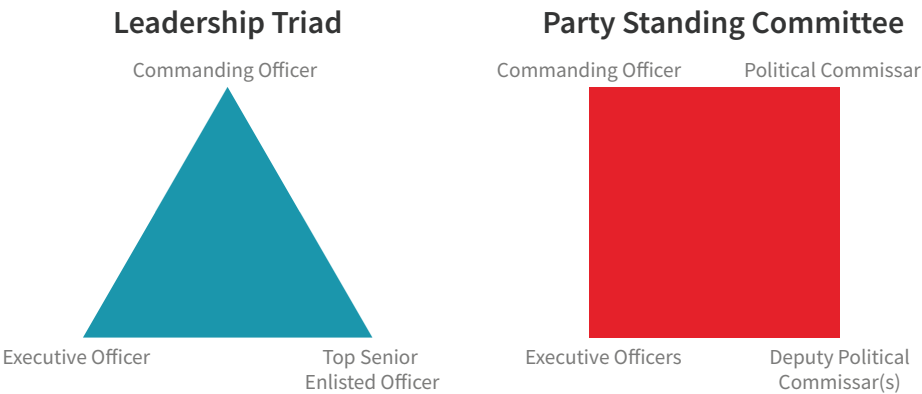
⁹⁴ Kenneth Allen. Interviewed by Jeff Benson. Personal Interview. Washington, DC, February 21, 2020. Mr. Allen has spent his professional career studying and working with Chinese military officers.

⁹⁵ Command master chiefs serve in warships. Chief of the boat serves aboard submarines. Both individuals are the top senior enlisted adviser to the commanding officer.

there is only one commanding officer to make decisions—the burden of command rests firmly with that individual.

According to U.S. Naval Regulations, “the responsibility of the commanding officer is absolute.”⁹⁶ The commanding officer also retains the authority “commensurate with his or her responsibility” and is held accountable for “the safety, well-being and efficiency of the entire command.”⁹⁷ The commanding officer’s allegiance is to support and defend the Constitution of the United States and not any political party. Every decision made aboard a U.S. vessel is linked to preserving the Constitution, following naval regulations, maintaining safety, and executing military orders from the operational chain of command.

In contrast, Chinese naval vessels are led by two naval officers who equally share command.⁹⁸ The senior leadership aboard a Chinese naval vessel is also governed by a PSC structure in making decisions. The PSC instills a collective leadership model where the committee makes decisions and the military commander executes those decisions.⁹⁹



Source: based on authors’ original analysis.

The PSC aboard a PLAN naval vessel is comprised of five to six individuals: the commanding officer, executive officer (operations), executive officer (administrative/logistics), political commissar, and one or two deputy political commissars.¹⁰⁰ This committee is chaired by the political commissar who serves as the secretary of the committee.¹⁰¹ Chinese political work regulations state that “the secretary (political commissar), deputy secretary (commanding officer) have equal rights. Individuals cannot decide on major issues or change the committee’s decision. The secretary and deputy secretary must have a strong Party spirit and proper democratic style, be good at incorporating everyone’s wisdom, and play the role of a committee member.”¹⁰²

96 “Chapter 8: The Commanding Officer,” in *U.S. Navy Regulations* (Washington, DC: DoD, 1990), 47, [https://www.secnav.navy.mil/doni/US Navy Regulations/Chapter 8 - The Commanding Officer.pdf](https://www.secnav.navy.mil/doni/US%20Navy%20Regulations/Chapter%208%20-%20The%20Commanding%20Officer.pdf).

97 Ibid.

98 This report focuses on Chinese warships and submarines that are led by naval officers at the grade of regiment or higher.

99 Military Political Work Studies Writing Group, *Jundui zhengzhi gongzuo xue*, 126-127.

100 The number of Deputy Political Commissars likely depends on the size of the ship and its crew. For example, a Jiangkai II frigate has one deputy political commissar.

101 Becker, Liebenberg, and Mackenzie, *Behind the Periscope*, 56.

102 “Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Tiaoli (People’s Liberation Army Political Work Regulations),” 23.

The PSC serves as the nerve center in decisionmaking and impacts both administrative and operational matters. The 2015 Office of Naval Intelligence report on the PLAN stated, “Party committees convene to discuss specific operational objectives, such as reviewing navigation plans or improving the unit’s emergency readiness.”¹⁰³ Chinese political work regulations state that the Party committee exercises “centralized and unified leadership over the organization, personnel, and work of their units.”¹⁰⁴ In addition, the PSC has the responsibility to “ensure the successful completion of various tasks such as combat, military training and emergency operations.”¹⁰⁵

In accordance with PLA political work regulations, “All major issues in wartime/combat/operations must be decided through collective discussions by the Party committee, and their implementation has to follow by the military and political commanders in accordance with the division of labor.”¹⁰⁶ During the conduct of naval operations or combat, political work regulations also require to “convene the Party committee in due course to listen to the reports of the combat situation, analyze the battlefield situation, adjust the combat deployment, improve the combat plan and coordinate the cooperation between the combat operations of the various troops as time allows.”¹⁰⁷

Disagreements are likely to occur in any military organization among senior leadership. If there are disagreements between the political commissar and commanding officer, a PSC is convened to discuss and resolve the issue(s).¹⁰⁸ Political work regulations also indicated in emergency situations (where a committee meeting might not be feasible due to time constraints) that the commanding officer and political commissar have the authority to make decisions but are required to make a full report to the committee for review.¹⁰⁹

Whether utilizing a triad or PSC, both navies also rely on dedicated watch teams during underway operations to manage the bridge, combat information center, and engineering spaces.¹¹⁰ In the U.S. Navy, operational reports are delivered directly to the commanding officer by watch team leaders. It is unclear to outside observers if both the commanding officer and political commissar in the Chinese navy receive the same operational reports. For routine operational matters such as safety of navigation, it makes sense for the commanding officer and not the political commissar to receive that particular report. However, if executing an operation with political ramifications such as operating near a Vietnamese fishing fleet in the South China Sea, both officers may receive operational reports collectively.

103 Office of Naval Intelligence, *The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: 2015), 30–31, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/plan-2015.pdf>.

104 “Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Zhengzhi Gongzuo Tiaoli (People’s Liberation Army Political Work Regulations),” 23.

105 Ibid.

106 Section 3, Organization and Implementation of Wartime Political Work, 2006, author’s copy.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

109 David Michael Finkelstein, Kristen Michael Gunness, and You Ji, *Civil-Military Relations in Today’s China Swimming in a New Sea* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2015), Chapter 7.

110 The Chinese and U.S. navies may have different terminology for physical locations on naval vessels. In general, each naval vessel has similar command and control watch stations. Bridge or pilot house is the physical location to navigate a naval vessel. Combat Information Center is the physical location to launch weapons, conduct electronic surveillance, and assess information required for operations. Engineering has a physical location to manage the naval vessel’s engineering plant. Each location has an officer(s) that provides reports to senior leadership.

Depending on the operational situation, it would not be uncommon for either a triad or a PSC meeting to convene on short notice. The essential leaders are connected via a communications circuit or may operate in the same physical location (i.e., the bridge), which allows an opportunity for discussions before a final decision is determined. For example, a pre-planned operation could be changed due to unforeseen circumstances. The commanding officer may contact members of the triad or PSC to receive their feedback about the operational change and how to best adjust the naval vessel's schedule.

In a single-command system aboard a U.S. naval vessel, the commanding officer can quickly decide with little if any guidance from superiors in dealing with administrative or operational issues. Of course, there are naval regulations and military laws to abide by, but commanding officers are empowered to command their naval vessels. In a dual-command system, the commanding officer potentially has less autonomy in his or her ability to act because of Party control.

There are four areas that could be problematic in a dual-command system. First, with such a formal and hierarchical process, administrative and operational time delays could and probably occur. Instead of seeking approval from one person, the crew may have to seek a second approval or even multiple approvals from each member of the PSC to carry out an action or task. For example, the underway watchbill, a document that indicates the time frame and position an individual stands watch underway, is more than likely approved by both the commanding officer and political commissar.

Second, a commanding officer in the Chinese navy can make military-related decisions, but the political commissar has a vote in the process and can cause change if desired. Prior to any major operation or navigation evolution, the PSC members would likely be briefed by subject matter experts, who are most likely officers. During this meeting, the commanding officer and political commissar would grant approval and provide guidance in how to execute an operation—staying within their own spheres of influence while also promoting the collective leadership model. However, it would be naïve to think there are not disagreements between the commanding officer and political commissar. It is unknown exactly how these disagreements are handled if an agreement cannot be achieved. Regardless, the political commissar has a vote in the process.

Third, a dual-command system limits flexibility and crew initiative. The entire system is all about maintaining control and following Party intentions. Instead of fostering an environment to empower individuals to take action, the crew may wait for direction by the commanding officer or political commissar before taking appropriate action. In a single-command system, the commanding officer relies on the crew to follow the commander's intent and can also delegate to individuals to make decisions on their behalf in time-sensitive situations.

Fourth, miscommunication between the commanding officer and political commissar will occur. It is inevitable. Needing to obtain written and in some situations verbal concurrence from both officers will almost certainly lead to mistakes. In addition, the commander and commissar's responsibilities are clearly defined, but there are most likely areas of overlap where both officers may disagree on a way forward and tension may ensue. Of course, there is miscommunication issues in a single-command system, but one person can quickly make the ultimate decision when a disagreement emerges.

While potential challenges exist in a dual-command system, there are positive attributes to consider as well. First, the political commissar is dedicated to personnel management. The emphasis in managing the crew's morale and welfare illustrates the PLAN's enormous commitment to its service members. Second, the challenges and trials of command are shared collectively by two officers. While this may seem like a hinderance in some ways, the opportunity to discuss and share thoughts with a peer can be beneficial in stressful situations. Command at sea is lonely, and the burden of ultimate responsibility weighs heavily on an individual—the measure of success or failure rests simply with the commanding officer. In difficult times, the ability to consult a peer about a decision can also be useful. Third, a collective decisionmaking process can help reduce unnecessary errors. The necessity for both officers to agree before taking action forces collaboration instead of decisionmaking by one individual.

CREW MANAGEMENT

From the construction of new warships to creating personnel positions to launch aircraft aboard an aircraft carrier, the PLAN has long desired to become a maritime force matching the capabilities of the U.S. Navy. The photo of the aircraft carrier *Liaoning* is an example of how the Chinese navy adopted the same personnel assignments as the U.S. Navy when conducting aircraft carrier operations. The person in yellow is known as a shooter—the person who informs the pilot that the aircraft launch has been approved.



This photo taken on January 2, 2017 shows Chinese J-15 fighter jets on the deck of the Liaoning aircraft carrier during military drills in the South China Sea. STR/AFP via Getty Images

The Chinese navy is creating a cadre of non-commissioned officers similar to the U.S. Navy. In 1999, the Chinese navy implemented reforms to further develop non-commissioned officers. Today, non-commissioned officers represent 70 percent of the crew aboard naval vessels.¹¹¹ The Chinese navy also emphasizes the importance of non-

111 “Xinxing haijun shiguan rencai fangzhen jiasu chengzhang (New Type of Naval Non-commissioned Officer Quickly Emerges),” Xinhua, August 19, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2019-08/19/c_1210247911.htm.

commissioned officers receiving a college education to build a capable enlisted force. Although improvements have been made in this area, the PLAN has not been able to develop the role of the top senior enlisted officer aboard a naval vessel in the way the U.S. Navy has done for more than 125 years.

The top senior enlisted officer (non-commissioned officer) known as the command master chief (warships) or chief of the boat (submarines) aboard a U.S. naval vessel has almost identical responsibilities as a political commissar in the Chinese navy. The only exception is that the top senior enlisted officer is not involved in party politics, a primary role for a PLAN commissar.

The top senior enlisted officer aboard a U.S. naval vessel is charged with the “formulation and implementation of all policies concerning the morale, welfare, job satisfaction, discipline, utilization, training of enlisted personnel.”¹¹² The top senior enlisted officer is also a member of the triad, as previously stated, and is practically involved in every decision. In addition, the individual is subordinate to the commanding officer, assists in managing the crew, and leads the chief petty officer’s mess. The senior enlisted officers, known as the chief petty officers or senior non-commissioned officers, manage personnel, maintenance, and training and are vital to accomplishing any administrative and operational tasking for U.S. naval vessels.

Whether or not the PLAN establishes a top senior enlisted officer in the future, the PLAN may have difficulty imitating the U.S. Navy in this area. The political commissar and the top senior enlisted officer in the U.S. Navy assume their leadership role from two dissimilar backgrounds and perspectives. The PLAN typically has a commissar equivalent in rank and grade to the commanding officer, and the U.S. Navy has a top senior enlisted officer subordinate to the commanding officer. While the responsibilities to manage the crew are similar, the command and control leadership structure is fundamentally at odds to one another.

MISSION COMMAND

The U.S. military embraces mission command at every echelon to achieve success. In accordance with U.S. military joint doctrine, “mission command enables military operations through decentralized execution based on mission type orders.”¹¹³ U.S. military doctrine further states that “[m]ission command is built on subordinate leaders at all echelons who exercise disciplined initiative and act aggressively and independently to accomplish the mission.”¹¹⁴ Mission command is about commanders retaining the authority to act independently and resourcefully without direct oversight.

In the U.S. Navy, the commanding officer in a single-command system is allowed immense authority to make decisions. Dr. Milan Vego, the R. K. Turner professor of Operational Art at the U.S. Naval War College, commented that “[o]ne of the principal requirements for

112 “Navy CMDCM - Command Master Chief,” Navy COOL CMDCM - Command Master Chief Description, accessed April 2020, https://www.cool.navy.mil/usn/enlisted/desc/cmdcm_cmc_desc.htm.

113 Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-0, Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2018), 1-224, II-1, II-2, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_0ch1.pdf?ver=2018-11-27-160457-910.

114 Ibid.

success of mission command is freedom to act.”¹¹⁵ He advocates that mission command “effectiveness is predicated on giving subordinates sufficient freedom to act so they can exercise initiative in the course of executing their assigned missions.”¹¹⁶ Mission command creates an environment where the commanding officer has the autonomy to lead without continuous direction from superiors and can efficiently delegate certain authorities that empower a crew.

The PLAN collective leadership model differs from the U.S. Navy’s mission command model. The PSC and a dual-command structure are controlling mechanisms, whereas a single-command system relies on an individual, the military commander, to execute mission command with increased independence. The collective leadership model requires PSC members to agree mutually before taking action. In some situations, the dual-command structure requires concurrence from both the commanding officer and political commissar before the crew can execute orders. Collective leadership does foster teamwork and encourages a range of perspectives that can lead to better solutions and potentially minimize mistakes. However, the PLAN command and control system does not execute mission command in the same manner as the U.S. Navy.

While it is unknown how much a political commissar and the PSC may influence the decisionmaking process during operations aboard a naval vessel, the USS *Decatur* incident provides potential insights about PLAN command and control. In 2018, the *Decatur* was operating on a set course and speed while conducting a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) near Gaven Reef in the South China Sea. The Chinese destroyer *Lanzhou* approached from the port quarter (left side, astern of *Decatur*) transiting at a faster speed than the *Decatur*. In this overtaking situation, the *Decatur* was the stand on vessel which was required to maintain course and speed in accordance with the rules of the road.¹¹⁷ The *Lanzhou* was the give way vessel, meaning the Chinese must remain at a safe distance when passing the *Decatur*. However, the *Lanzhou* had maneuvered within 45 yards when the *Decatur* decided that the risk of collision existed and maneuvered away to avoid a maritime incident.

There are two plausible reasons why China decided to have a warship alter course toward the *Decatur*. First, China wanted to send a message of protest over U.S. Navy FONOPS. Over the last several years, the U.S. Navy has conducted FONOPS near the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Seas to further advance U.S. policy of sailing and operating wherever international law allows. In response, China has publicly refuted the U.S. position, stating FONOPS posed a threat to China’s sovereignty and security. Second, the move may have been meant to demonstrate disapproval of U.S. sanctions against China due to arms deals with Russia. Ten days prior to the FONOP, the Trump administration ordered sanctions against China because of aircraft and weapons sales with Russia.¹¹⁸

115 Milan Vego, “Mission Command and Zero Error Tolerance Cannot Coexist,” U.S. Naval Institute, February 21, 2019, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2018/july/mission-command-and-zero-error-tolerance-cannot-coexist>.

116 Ibid.

117 The rules of the road are the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea 1972 (COLREGs) published by the International Maritime Organization (IMO)—navigation rules prevent incidents at sea.

118 Lesley Wroughton, “U.S. Sanctions China for Buying Russian Fighter Jets, Missiles,” Reuters, September 21, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-sanctions/u-s-sanctions-china-for-buying-russian-fighter->

There are three takeaways to highlight the significance of the incident. First, the naval maneuver was ordered to achieve a political objective. The commanding officer was responsible for executing the maneuver and the political commissar was supervising the mission, which was to send a political message of protest against U.S. policy and naval actions. Second, given the possible political consequences of the maneuver, the planning of the operation was most likely a result of the PSC's work. The maneuver to operate within yards of the *Decatur* was a calculated risk that probably involved extensive planning and discussion aboard the *Lanzhou* as well as with superiors. Third, in a dual-command system, the commanding officer and political commissar were most likely working side by side in the same location during the mission. It is unknown where the two officers were actually stationed aboard the *Lanzhou* but given peacetime operations and the seamanship required to complete the maneuver against the *Decatur*, both officers were probably stationed in the bridge or pilot house.

The DoD, U.S. Navy, and national security leaders must continue to make an effort to understand the PLAN political commissar's influence over operations. The Chinese navy approaches decisionmaking in a different way from the U.S. Navy. Even though political commissars have different duties than commanding officers, they have influence in developing and planning naval operations. The Party controls the military and the PLAN is loyal in executing the Party's strategic visions. As both the commander and political commissar of the PLAN stated in 2019, "[a]t the cusp of international political and military struggle, [we must] resolutely implement the Party's will in every move, and every [single] soldier must attach great importance to prevent the influence of wrong ideas, and all [of our] words and deeds must resolutely abide by strict discipline and rules, so that the People's Navy is loyal to the Party, and no warship will [ever] go off course."¹¹⁹

jets-missiles-idUSKCN1M02TP.

119 Shen and Qin, "Renmin haijun."

Shortfalls and Way Forward



Chinese sailors peer inside a military vessel featuring a picture of Chinese President Xi Jinping, during an open day celebrating the 19th anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to Chinese sovereignty from British rule. Photo: REUTERS/Stringer

“My greatest concern is that, when the Party and the people need it, will the army always follow the absolute leadership of the Party?”¹²⁰

Xi Jinping, 2019

For most modern militaries, political commissars are an unfamiliar institution. In the U.S. military, officers are apolitical, without allegiance toward a political party. As China continues to build up a navy comparable in scale and capability to its American counterpart, understanding how the CCP manages and directs its navy is useful in preventing miscalculations and avoiding potential armed conflicts.

The Chinese have embraced political commissars for more than 70 years and, the dual-command system dates to the establishment of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Over the course of several years, there have been journal articles written about political

¹²⁰ “How Is China Strengthening Its Military?” CGTN, October 21, 2019, accessed April 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-10-21/How-is-China-strengthening-its-military--KYiHsfGeFW/index.html>.

commissars in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) but little about the role of the political commissar serving in the PLAN. The 2007 and 2015 Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) reports on the PLAN and the 2013 Center for Naval Analysis (CNA) report, *Beyond the Periscope*, briefly examined the role of political commissars and PSCs. Researcher Kenneth Allen has written on the topic as well and done extensive scholarship in understanding the inner workings of the PLA system at large. In addition, the 2007 book, *Civil-Military Relations in Today's China Swimming in a New Sea*, specifically the chapter titled, "Unraveling the Myths About Political Commissars," provided historical context in how the commissar system works in the military. These documents as well as primary sources written in Chinese were extremely useful in the course of this research project and can also serve as a foundation for further research.

The PLAN has made drastic changes in the last 20 years by increasing the total number of naval vessels, enhancing weapons capability, advancing technological systems, and conducting operational deployments farther away from the mainland. These changes illustrate the Chinese navy is evolving into a capable maritime force in the Indo-Pacific. The decisionmaking process concerning the daily operations of the PLAN is equally important. This report addresses several facets of the political commissar in the Chinese navy; however, more research is required going forward.

There are six additional areas that could assist in understanding the political commissar's influence in the PLAN.

- Additional research is required in exploring changing responsibilities of the political commissar as well as the PSC in moving from a peacetime to a wartime environment. In general, naval battles at sea could happen very quickly in a missile-dominated age. Does a political commissar's role really change that much in a battle or war? If so, how will their role change and what are the implications?
- The report does not address the training and education in the political commissar system. Researchers Kenneth Allen and Morgan Clemens have written about the education of Chinese naval officers in their 2014 report titled, *The Recruitment, Education, and Training of PLA Navy Personnel*. However, a knowledge gap remains about the military training and education during a political commissar's military career. While studying the biographies and career tracks of PLAN officers is useful, more should be done to understand the ongoing changes in how Chinese naval officers are trained and educated, especially amid the PLA's reform. An increased understanding of a commanding officer and political commissar's education track could shed light on the respective approaches to commanding naval vessels.
- The purpose of temporary Party committees is unclear in the overall construct of a dual-command system. Temporary Party committees are probably established at the regiment level and above to address a mission or tasking. In this report's section on the role of political commissars, temporary Party committees are briefly discussed, but more research in this area is warranted to reveal how temporary Party committees are formed and utilized in a maritime environment.
- More analysis is required on the role of political officers serving below the regiment leader grade. The primary analysis of this report centers on political commissars

serving on PLAN vessels most frequently encountered by foreign naval units on the high seas, namely destroyers, frigates, supply vessels, and submarines. Furthermore, additional research on political commissars in PLAN's other branches—in naval aviation, the marine corps, and the coastal defense force—would increase understanding of the political commissar system.

- The role of the two executive officers and the deputy political commissar aboard a naval vessel and as members of the PSC were not addressed. Further analysis of their responsibilities would enhance information about the process of the PSC and overall crew management and reveal operational nuances in battle or wartime. For example, if the commanding officer is wounded or killed in battle, does the executive officer assume and share command with the political commissar? Moreover, if the political commissar is wounded or killed in battle, does the deputy political commissar or the commanding officer assume those duties? A detailed look at the career progression of an executive officer and deputy commissar can also provide additional value.
- A closer examination of why the Soviet Union transitioned from a dual- to a single-command system (see Appendix on the Soviet navy commissar system) could identify the strengths and weaknesses of the two systems. In war, both single- and dual-command systems have upsides and downsides. A better understanding of how the Soviets managed these factors can assist civilian and military leaders in evaluating Chinese decisionmaking at the tactical or strategic levels, or whether China will make the same transition from a dual- to single-command system.¹²¹

In addition to further research, the U.S. Navy, with support from the DoD, should make three tangible actions to improve the U.S. military's understanding between a U.S. military commander and political commissar in the Chinese navy. First, the DoD should establish professional and academic talks between both navies to address the differences in single- and dual-command systems, especially as it pertains to commanding navy vessels. Second, future meetings with PLA leadership should include conversations with both the military commander and political commissar. Third, the U.S. Navy should create a working group within China's Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) at the U.S. Naval War College dedicated to researching the intricacies of the political commissar system and Party committee system in the Chinese navy. These actions can increase knowledge between both navies and serve as a mechanism to prevent a maritime conflict.

In conclusion, political commissars have a significant role aboard Chinese naval vessels—they are co-equals with the commanding officer and jointly share command. Drs.

¹²¹ The Soviet experience has taught many lessons to the Chinese leadership. Seen as a failed communist Party state, the Chinese still closely examine the reasons why the Soviet Union collapsed so suddenly and why the Soviet military failed to prevent regime change. The single-commander system, recognized by Chinese analysts as an institution that severed the close ties between the Party and the military, is a stark reminder for the CCP to maintain the indigenous system of "division of responsibility system under the unified collective leadership of the Party committee." There were plans to introduce the Soviet single-commander model during the PLA's modernization drive in the 1950s. But the proposal was dismissed due to stern opposition from Mao Zedong, the political commissar establishment, and other members of the PLA high command. For a brief description of the event, see: Taylor Frael, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 2019), 100.

Perlmutter and LeoGrande said in their 1982 journal article that “[t]he more professional the military becomes and the more sophisticated its technology, the more likely it is that the Party-army relationship will evolve away from symbiosis toward coalitional.”¹²² As the Chinese navy continues to rise in the maritime domain on a global scale, will they transition from a dual- to a single-command structure in the foreseeable future?

122 Amos M. Perlmutter and William M. Leogrande, “The Party in Uniform: Toward a Theory of Civil-Military Relations in Communist Political Systems,” *American Political Science Review* 76, no. 4 (1982): 784, doi:10.2307/1962970.

Appendix: The Soviet Navy Commissar System

The Soviet navy established a political commissar system which influenced the creation of similar institutions in other communist militaries, including China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). The political commissar system in the Soviet navy at different time periods operated under two dissimilar command and control constructs: dual-command (a military commander and political commissar shared command authority) and single-command (military commander retained overall authority and the commissar served as an observer/adviser). There is a common misunderstanding that the best way to understand the PLAN political commissar system is to look at the Soviet navy's commissar system. Yet such an approach has its flaws. While the roles of a political commissar may be similar, the command and control structure was significantly different. The Chinese government regularly analyzes the Soviet experience with the intent of avoiding similar mistakes, examinations of the Soviet system could provide valuable insights on advantages and disadvantages of the single- and dual-command systems and how the PLAN perceives the value of its existing Party control institutions.

The political commissar system in the Soviet Union was first developed by the Provisional Government in 1917.¹²³ The Bolsheviks invented this dual-command system as a mechanism to ensure Communist Party control over the military. In a 1982 journal article titled "The Party in Uniform: Toward a Theory of Civil-Military in Communist Political Systems," Drs. Amos Perlmutter and William M. LeoGrande identified dual command as "the most extreme form of Party control."¹²⁴ In addition, both authors offered that the relationship between the Communist Party and military in a dual-command construct can be defined as symbiotic—a "system of living together, a partnership involving one another, and is associated with the survival of each institutional structure."¹²⁵

In 1925, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) ordered the Soviet military to transit from a dual-command to a single-command construct. The single-command structure changed the relationship—the single military commander was solely in

123 Timothy J. Colton, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority: the Structure of Soviet Military Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 36.

124 Perlmutter and Leogrande, "The Party in Uniform," 782.

125 Ibid., 784.

charge of a military unit, with the political commissar serving as a keen observer and adviser. Interestingly, parts of the dual-command system remained in existence until the transition to single command gained full acceptance in 1942. The Soviet military's transition requires additional research and is highlighted as a discussion point in the "Shortfalls and Way Forward" section.

From 1942 to 1991, the single-command construct was known as *edinonachalie*, which unequivocally meant that the commanding officer would issue orders without the concurrence of the political officer.¹²⁶ The political commissar (known as the *zampolit*, or deputy commander for political matters) was always assigned a lower rank and served "militarily and administratively subordinate to the commanding officer."¹²⁷ Drs. Perlmutter and LeGrande defined the single-command construct as coalitional, "one of mutual benefit for the partners, a combination of facing internal and external adversities, but one where autonomy of each individual structure is the greatest concern."¹²⁸

According to Dr. Timothy J. Colton's analysis, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority: The Structure of Soviet Military Politics*, he discusses that political commissars were assigned at every level in the military to maintain Communist Party integrity and were equal in rank to the military commander of a unit.¹²⁹ Commissars were assigned to military units to prevent treason and retained the authority to cosign military orders.¹³⁰ In addition, Dr. Colton stated that "[c]ommissars were required to ensure the immediate and unconditional execution of commander's operational and combat directives."¹³¹

In a 1971 *Proceedings* article, U.S. Navy Captain Sumner Shapiro said, "As outlined in Soviet Armed Forces Regulations, the unit commander is the 'one-man manager' and is personally responsible to the Soviet Government and to the CPSU for the military and political training, combat readiness, and 'political-moral' condition of his unit."¹³² Captain Sumner also noted that the same regulations demanded that all military personnel be "loyal to the regime and devoted to the principles of Communism."¹³³ Typically, there were informally two types of political commissars that existed in the Soviet navy: those who failed to screen for command of a naval vessel and those who were designated early in their career principally due to Party connections and political involvement.¹³⁴

An unclassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report further highlighted that the role and responsibilities of a political commissar amounted to serving as the "watchdog of the Communist Party."¹³⁵ Both the commanding officer and political commissar had different

126 Colton, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority*, 14.

127 Ibid., 20.

128 Perlmutter and LeGrande, "The Party in Uniform," 782.

129 Gregory D. Young and Nate D. Braden, *The Last Sentry: The True Story That Inspired The Hunt for Red October* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 8.

130 Colton, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority*, 38.

131 Ibid., 41.

132 Sumner Shapiro, "The Blue Water Soviet Naval Officer," U.S. Naval Institute, *Proceedings*, February 1971, 21.

133 Ibid., 21.

134 Ibid.

135 "Combat Regulations of the Soviet Navy: Political Work," Library Reading Room Documents, Central Intelligence Agency, June 16, 2017, 3, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001430727.pdf.

In 2017, the Central Intelligence Agency released a 1987 top-secret report that translated a 12-chapter book from

chain of command reporting requirements. The CIA report also summarized that the commissar's responsibilities involved teaching concepts such as the "virtues of Marxism-Leninism, Soviet patriotism, heightened sense of political consciousness, high morale and military discipline, and a readiness to obey combat orders during battle."¹³⁶

Soviet commissars were managed under the direction of the Main Political Administration (MPA), which was sometimes referred to as the Main Political Directorate (MPD) (the organization's name changed numerous times over the years), which served as the authority over political work in the military.¹³⁷ In 1967, a subordinate political agency was developed to assist the navy as well as the other major military services.¹³⁸

Military councils (*voennyi sovet*) were established as a mechanism for decisionmaking at various command levels, including navy flotillas.¹³⁹ According to Dr. Timothy J. Colton in his book *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority: The Structure of Soviet Military Politics*, the council was mostly referred to as a "collegial form of leadership," where both the military commander and political commissar attended the meeting but the commander served as the chair of the council and presided over meetings.¹⁴⁰ Dr. Colton also commented that little was known publicly about the power of these organizations.

In the preparation for combat, the commissar reported to the commanding officer regarding the "crew's political morale and on measures carried out to prepare the ship's crew for combat actions."¹⁴¹ The political commissar's contribution largely depended on the task assigned. In combat situations, the commanding officer and commissar would operate in the same physical location (i.e., the bridge or combat information center) unless otherwise directed.¹⁴² According to *Combat Regulations in the Soviet Navy*, the role of the commissar in battle was to "mobilize the crew of the ship to execute the assigned combat task; take all measure to maintain high morale; and decisively suppress manifestations of cowardice, panic, and hesitancy in the ability to do one's duty."¹⁴³

In the Soviet single-command system, the military commander was clearly in charge, but the political commissar remained influential. While commissars played their part diligently for most of the Soviet navy's history, there were exceptions to the rule that resulted in devastating consequences. In November 1975, a commissar aboard a Soviet naval ship led a mutiny against the Soviet state. Although eventually suppressed, the mutiny showed the risk of authoritarian governments relying on a single-command system, where the checks and balances offered in a dual-command system are simply missing, and the rash acts of one disgruntled officer could pose a serious threat to the entire state.

the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Ministry of Defense's regulations on political work and combat activity in the Soviet navy.

136 Ibid., 3.

137 Colton, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority*, 9. MPA was also known as the Military Political Directorate.

138 Ibid., 10.

139 Ibid., 11.

140 Ibid., 64.

141 "Combat Regulations of the Soviet Navy: Combat Activity of the Ship," Library Reading Room Documents, Central Intelligence Agency, June 16, 2017, 8, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001430732.pdf.

142 Ibid., 24.

143 Ibid., 27.

The anti-submarine frigate *Storozhevoy* was at anchor in Riga on the Baltic Sea. The naval vessel was commanded by Captain Second Rank Anatoly Potulniy, and Captain Third Rank Valery Sablin served as his political commissar. Sablin served third in command of the warship and shared a positive relationship with his captain.¹⁴⁴ However, Sablin was dissatisfied with the Soviet government and lost faith in the CPSU. He hoped to establish a new Party and social order.¹⁴⁵

To accomplish his ambitious goal, Sablin recruited fellow crew members who then detained Captain Potulniy. Sablin then assumed command of *Storozhevoy*. He immediately addressed the crew and made a persuasive argument that the Communist system required change.¹⁴⁶ He convinced the crew to get underway from the port of Riga and transit to Leningrad to spark a larger revolution.¹⁴⁷ Sablin led the warship out to sea throughout the night without energizing any radars. It took approximately four hours for Moscow to become aware of the takeover.¹⁴⁸ Military orders were first instructed to stop the ship, but by 0600 an order was given to “Bomb the ship and sink it!”¹⁴⁹

The military establishment was in complete chaos in how to handle the situation. Ship and aircraft commanders struggled whether to attack one of their own warships. Later in the morning, several aircraft and more than a dozen warships trailed the *Storozhevoy*. The warship finally reached international waters, but Sablin’s goal to reach Leningrad was doomed. At 1025, fighter aircraft dropped ordnance on the stern of the warship and disabled the rudder.¹⁵⁰

Before a boarding party regained control, the warship’s captain was eventually freed by crew members. Captain Potulniy arrived on the bridge with a pistol in hand and shot his political commissar in the leg, sparing his life.¹⁵¹ Luckily, no person died or was severely injured during the incident. Approximately five months later, after an investigation by the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB), Sablin and one other crew member faced criminal charges, while an additional 12 crew members were held for a lesser charge of “group insubordination.”¹⁵² Sablin was convicted of treason and sentenced to death.

In an authoritarian state, the military officer is both an ally and enemy of political leaders. A mutiny like Sablin’s with the intent to overthrow the government, if carefully plotted and carried out, can have ruinous consequences for the state. Thus, a system is needed to ensure the military’s complete loyalty to the ruling elites. While the Soviet single-command model placed authority in the hands of one officer, the Chinese model combining Party committees, dual command, and political commissars allows the Party-state firm control of the armed forces, down to every single PLAN ship traversing the high seas.

144 Young and Braden, *The Last Sentry*, 87.

145 Ibid., 85.

146 Ibid., 95.

147 Ibid., 96.

148 Ibid., 99.

149 Ibid., 100.

150 Ibid., 110.

151 Ibid., 111.

152 Ibid., 118.

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