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The Likelihood of a Military Coup in the People's Republic of China

At face value, the current structure of civil-military institutions in China suggests that a coup is unlikely, both for fundamental reasons and due to the presence of multiple potential coup-proofing measures. However, recent events, including a potential coup attempt, suggest that a successful military coup may be more likely than this structural background would suggest. In particular, recent moves by President Xi to consolidate power may ultimately make a coup more likely, by angering military leaders, weakening civil-military institutions, and shifting the regime in a personalist direction. Combined with a potentially slowing economy, political setbacks in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and growing resistance from Western countries, this means that a successful military coup may actually not be entirely out of the realm of possibility.

Structurally, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) appears to be a fairly well-institutionalized regime, with a fairly peaceful civil-military history, that also has several potential coup-proofing measures. While [various factions](#) in the CCP do exist and compete with another, the one-party structure of the regime has so far ensured that this competition does not spiral into a full-blown coup, with the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Chinese military, backing one side. In particular, despite multiple leadership struggles, no actual coups have really occurred during the CCP's existence. Moreover, the relationship between the PLA and the CCP has appeared to be relatively amiable; the most notable example of dissidence in recent history is when General Xi, commander of the 38th Group Army, refused to act forcibly against protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989, and that remains an isolated incident. In addition to this amiable history, the presence of [political commissars](#) in the PLA likely helps increase soldiers' devotion to the CCP. The PLA is also controlled by the [Central Military Commission](#) (CMC), which is housed in the Ministry of National Defense. While most of the members of the CMC are

generals, the chairman is typically a senior leader in the CCP, further ensuring that the CCP controls the PLA. The CMC also controls the People's Armed Police (gendarmierie) and the Militia. While these other armed forces are also controlled by the CMC, they are technically separate from the PLA, and could ostensibly be used by the CCP to fight against a potential coup by the PLA. Lastly, China has two ministries in charge of internal security: The Ministry of State Security (secret police and internal intelligence) and the Ministry of Public Security (regular national police). These internal security agencies could likely be used to monitor the PLA and, again, fight back against a potential coup. Thus, the presence of multiple armed forces and internal security agencies, apparent established party control of the military, and the promotion of CCP ideology via political commissars all suggest that a military coup would be unlikely.

While a broad overview of the structure of civil-military institutions in China suggests that a coup is unlikely, a closer examination suggests that this might not be entirely true. For starters, while it is true that the PLA and the CCP have historically had fairly good relations, this has typically been due to [shared interests, rather than a culture of civilian supremacy being ingrained into the PLA](#). This means that the apparently good relationship between the PLA and CCP is more fragile than it might appear to be at first glance. Indeed, [recent instances of apparent insubordination by the PLA](#), under both Presidents Hu and Xi, showcase [a potentially growing gap](#) between the interests of the PLA and the CCP. A potential cause of this growing difference is China's increasing presence in global affairs, a result of a foreign policy shift embodied by President Xi's declaration that this ["will be an era that sees China moving closer to center stage."](#) This shift requires further resources to be devoted to the PLA, which in turn increases its political power and, thereby, [potentially increases tensions between the PLA and the CCP](#). Another, more proximate cause for tension between the PLA and the CCP is President Xi's

“anti-corruption” drive and consolidation of power. Numerous military officials have been arrested, charged with corruption, and Xi has also restructured command structures, such as [downsizing the CMC](#). In the short term, this will [likely increase grievances among PLA officials](#), due to a loss of both economic gains and political standing, which could very well inspire a coup. In fact, [rumors of a coup attempt](#) abounded after the recent arrest of General Fang and suicide of General Zhang, both members of the CMC. [Some evidence](#) suggests that this might have indeed been the case, with Fang and Zhang motivated by the fact that they had [“no prospects for career advancement”](#) under Xi. Xi’s consolidation of power could also have negative consequences in the long term. In particular, by developing a “cult of personality” while also [repealing institutional safeguards](#), like term limits, Xi is taking China from a one-party state under the CCP to a personalist state under him. While China [is not quite a personalist state yet](#), per se, this shift still likely exacerbates the potential of a military coup, as personalist regimes tend to be more brittle than one-party regimes. Finally, the CCP is facing increasing pressure on various fronts: The Chinese economy is slowing, China is reviled in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, and Western countries, especially the United States, are becoming increasingly hostile. This has led to [criticism emerging from elites](#); if the CCP is unable to address these issues adequately, both elites and the wider public could lose support in the CCP, ultimately leading to a military coup.

From a structural standpoint, the likelihood of a PLA coup against the CCP appears low, due to the structure of the CMC and other civil-military institutions, the presence of political commissars in the PLA, and the existence of multiple armed forces and internal security agencies. However, China’s increasingly outgoing foreign policy, coupled with Xi’s “anti-corruption” campaign and consolidation of power, along with a slowing economy and external pressures, have laid the grounds for a potential coup, either in the short term or the long term.

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