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Political Sway of the Military Is Subtly Spreading in China

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES JUNE 2, 1989

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While China's political leaders have removed themselves from sight to engage in a bitter struggle for power, there are signs that the military may be accumulating a larger role in the Chinese political process.

It is still too early in the power struggle to determine the consequences of the political crisis, but some scholars and diplomats see the outlines of two trends: a greater military influence during a prolonged period of political instability, and less certainty that the army will carry out orders from political leaders.

Some fear that the leadership may increasingly be vulnerable to military pressure, and even to a coup. But they say that the army is genuinely trying to become a more professional organization and that it may not be interested in taking advantage of weakness in the Government. **Pattern of Strength**

"The military gains strength whenever the political leaders depend on them to tackle unrest," said an Asian diplomat in Beijing. But he and other diplomats noted that there were competing trends and that the military may not necessarily want to play a pivotal political role.

Some Chinese are worried about hints of an greater military role because of suspicions that it could be misused by the family of President Yang Shangkun, the 82-year-old veteran military figure who took a hard line against student

demonstrators.

Many students and intellectuals are suspicious of Mr. Yang and believe, without real evidence, that his next target is Deng Xiaoping, China's senior leader. No. 2 to Deng in Army

Mr. Yang is vice chairman of the Central Military Commission and subordinate to Mr. Deng, who is chairman of the commission.

In addition, Mr. Yang's younger brother, Yang Baibing, is head of the general political department of the People's Liberation Army. And Chi Haotian, the chief of the General Staff, is widely rumored to be President Yang's son-in-law.

A young official at Communist Party headquarters said President Yang took his post in exchange for giving up his influence over the military, and that his younger brother was elevated as part of the arrangement. But the official said the Yang family was doing what it could to accumulate more control over the military, with an eye toward gaining more political power.

"By the time old Deng realizes what's going on, it'll be too late," the official said. Zhao as Obstacle

An obstacle to Mr. Yang would have been the Communist Party leader, Zhao Ziyang, who was also the first vice chairman of the Central Military Commission and the intended successor to Mr. Deng as chairman of the commission. But Mr. Zhao has already been stripped of his power to order the movement of troops, a senior party official said, and he is now being criticized in internal documents in preparation for an attempt to dismiss him as party leader.

With Mr. Zhao out of the way, only Mr. Deng would rank ahead of President Yang on the Central Military Commission. And only Mr. Deng has greater prestige and influence over the army than the Yang family.

Beijing is thick with intrigue these days, and the military fits into all of them. There are disputes about who has ordered some of the troop movements, and there are those who say that President Yang ordered some of the troops without informing Mr. Deng. What Role for Troops? In addition, there are doubts about why the troops have been called to the capital. It was originally believed that they were summoned to intimidate and suppress the democracy movement.

Most officials acknowledge that that was one reason, but they say that it was at least as important to provide a show of force to intimidate Mr. Zhao and his supporters in the Beijing Military Region. A more important role for the army would reverse the trend of the last decade, in which the military has lost soldiers,

money and prestige.

The People's Liberation Army, which includes all services, has seen its share of the national budget drop from 17.9 percent in 1979 to 8.2 percent last year, and about 1.5 million soldiers have been demobilized.

Few of the present Central Committee members are army officers, and none of the obvious candidates to lead the Government or the Party in the future have much military experience. Unrest Leads to Power

Yet whenever there has been unrest in recent Chinese history, the military has gained strength. In 1969, after three years of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, army officers composed a full 45 percent of the newly chosen Central Committee.

The influence of the military in those years was cut back after concerns about the army's reliability, and especially after a murky incident in 1971 that apparently was an attempted coup by the top military figure, Lin Biao. Now, too, there are growing doubts about the military's reliability, but in a different sense.

The fear used to be that the military might seize power for itself. That remains a concern, especially after Mr. Deng ultimately leaves the scene.

But the more obvious sign of unreliability has been the army's apparent reluctance to enforce martial law in any strict way. Convoys of troops were easily stopped on the outskirts of Beijing by crowds of people who sat in front of the trucks, and some soldiers tearfully withdrew. Orders Reportedly Ignored

The head of the 38th Army is said to have refused to march on Beijing, and the Beijing Garrison Command is also widely believed to have been unwilling to carry out martial law. "The army has proven itself a most unreliable tool of the Government," said a Western diplomat in Beijing. "It was a quasi-rebellion. This time it just refused. Next time, it might turn on the Government."

In fact, the army eventually did enter Beijing and take up positions in places like the train station and the airports, but only after clearly establishing that it was not going to harm citizens.

Some people think that was the result of a careful negotiation: the army effectively agreed to obey instructions if the instructions were amended so that they stipulated that no violence would be used against Beijing citizens.

"More and more of the military leaders are independent of the party and the leaders," said Thomas Chan, a China scholar at Hong Kong University. "They may not be so easily used in the future as the personal army of the leadership."

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