

China Watch by Gregory F. Buhyoff

Deng's Pyrrhic victory

A surprise at the Peking party congress: the People's Liberation Army asserted its political power.

The final results of China's 12th Communist Party Congress—the announcement of the new leadership lists of the party Politburo and other leading bodies—proves once again the pitfalls of China-watching. Western observers—including, we must admit, this writer—were convinced, partly by the bold pre-conference statements of top Chinese leaders, that the faction associated with strongman Deng Xiaoping would totally revamp the party leadership.

When the announcements were made, they produced clear evidence that the Dengists have far from total control, and that Deng had been forced to make last-minute compromises with powerful opponents of his faction and its policies. Deng has succeeded in the relatively easier task of finishing off the remnants of the hard-line Maoists, those associated with Mao's successor Hua Guofeng and the so-called "whateverist" faction. Hua himself was ousted from all remaining leading party posts and attacks were made on him, by name, in the party proceedings.

However, Deng did not reach his announced goal of kicking elder party leaders like Ye Jianying and Li Xian-nian upstairs onto a face-saving "advisory council" which was to make way for "younger" leaders associated with the Deng faction. He also failed to downgrade the status of the Politburo itself and transfer the center of party power to the General Secretariat of the Central Committee, which is

packed with Deng followers. Achieving the second goal depended on forcing the old guard into self-imposed retirement.

The key to Deng's problems, which were clearly not fully anticipated by the Dengists themselves, was opposition from the Chinese military—the People's Liberation Army (PLA)—and their semi-allies in the so-called Petroleum Faction, the name given to groupings tied to the heavy-industry state sector who oppose Deng's economic decentralization measures. The army, which has fought budget cuts and seeks weapons modernization, has made common cause with the "industry" group.

The elderly Marshal Ye draws support from the pro-industry/pro-centralization groupings. Before the party congress General Secretary Hu Yaobang and fellow Dengist Wan Li went on the record as telling foreigners that these men and other older people, symbolically including Deng, would retire to the "second line." At the Congress, among the first items was the drafting of letters to aging party stalwarts Marshal Liu Bo-cheng and Mme. Sai Chang expressing gratitude for their service now that they were retiring.

This ruse was countered when Marshal Ye declared to the congress that he had many times asked the Central Committee to relieve him of his duties, but, alas, the CC refused. Faithful always, Ye added, I will continue to serve.

When the smoke cleared, Ye and Li remained members of the Politburo Standing Committee (only Hua was dropped), with Ye ranking above everyone except Hu Yaobang, who is number-one only by virtue of his formal position as party General Secretary. Deng, Premier Zhao Ziyang, Li, and Chen Yun make up the rest of the Standing Committee.

The full Politburo list shows that the PLA was the only real organized national force standing in Deng's way. Out of 28 Politburo members (25 full and 3 alternates), 9 are active PLA men, compared to 6 in the previous list. While Canton military chief and Deng opponent Xu Shiyou was kicked upstairs to the advisory council, others came in, including the head of the important Peking military district, Qin Jiwei. Also appearing on the list is a key member of the Petroleum Faction—Yu Qiuli, who retains his Politburo post despite his ouster earlier from his position as Petroleum Minister and Vice-Premier.

Another interesting token of possible PLA muscle is the ouster from the Politburo of Defense Minister Geng Biao, the first non-PLA man in that post, which he had obtained over the head of Xu Shiyou. Opposition to Geng centered on the issue of the heavy cuts in the defense budget. At the upcoming National People's Congress he will probably lose the Defense Ministry post as well.

Deng will proceed with far-reaching purges in the party membership, particularly of the Maoists. He will follow the standard practice in communist countries of re-issuing party cards. Many Maoists, who entered the party en masse during the Cultural Revolution, will simply find themselves dropped from the rolls. But Deng's success may have the same limits as his attempt to purge the top.