

“Crisis management and institutional transformation: How China’s Communist Party ensured survival through military modernization, 1976–1992”

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ARTICLE INFO

Brandon Sommer (2025). Crisis management and institutional transformation: How China’s Communist Party ensured survival through military modernization, 1976–1992. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, 23(3), 310-327. doi:[10.21511/ppm.23\(3\).2025.23](https://doi.org/10.21511/ppm.23(3).2025.23)

DOI

[http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/ppm.23\(3\).2025.23](http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/ppm.23(3).2025.23)

RELEASED ON

Thursday, 21 August 2025

RECEIVED ON

Friday, 14 March 2025

ACCEPTED ON

Monday, 28 July 2025

LICENSE



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JOURNAL

"Problems and Perspectives in Management"

ISSN PRINT

1727-7051

ISSN ONLINE

1810-5467

PUBLISHER

LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”

FOUNDER

LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”



NUMBER OF REFERENCES

54



NUMBER OF FIGURES

0



NUMBER OF TABLES

0

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BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES



LLC "CPC "Business Perspectives"
Hryhorii Skovoroda lane, 10,
Sumy, 40022, Ukraine
www.businessperspectives.org

Type of the article: Reflexive Preface

Received on: 14th of March, 2025

Accepted on: 28th of July, 2025

Published on: 21st of August, 2025

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CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION: HOW CHINA'S COMMUNIST PARTY ENSURED SURVIVAL THROUGH MILITARY MODERNIZATION, 1976–1992

Abstract

The survival of authoritarian institutions during periods of systemic crisis represents a critical challenge in understanding institutional transformation and organizational resilience. This theoretical paper aims to develop a critical realist framework for analyzing how institutions ensure survival through crisis learning processes during periods of systemic transformation. The theoretical basis draws on critical realism and the morphogenetic approach to theorize structure-agency interactions during critical junctures, introducing concepts of crisis learning cycles, systemic persistence, and facing/reacting mechanisms. Following an innovative theory of systemic persistence, the analysis centers on the ways in which the Communist Party of China ensured its own survival through successive rounds of crisis learning. The results demonstrate that military modernization, not economic development per se, constituted the central organizing principle of institutional transformation. The study reveals that economic reforms and the opening up of trade were components of a larger arrangement constructed by Deng Xiaoping, the primary focus of which was not benefiting the Chinese people, but another project essential to the Communist Party. The theoretical results demonstrate that crisis learning occurs through iterative cycles where agents progressively understand systemic elements and construct durable solutions. The framework offers practical value for understanding institutional transformation processes and organizational survival strategies during periods of fundamental change, with applications extending beyond authoritarian contexts to any institution facing an existential crisis.

Keywords

crisis, learning, military, China, survival, transformation, legitimacy

JEL Classification

P21, P30, O53, N45

INTRODUCTION

The survival of China's Communist Party (CCP) during a period when communist systems collapsed globally represents a fundamental puzzle in institutional analysis. While most socialist regimes succumbed to economic crisis and political upheaval during the 1980s, China's Party not only maintained power but strengthened its institutional position. This poses the scientific problem of identifying the mechanisms through which authoritarian institutions adapt to existential threats while preserving core power structures.

The transformation of China's political economy following Mao's death represents one of the most significant institutional shifts of the late 20th century, yet conventional accounts often fail to identify the systemic elements that made these reforms both necessary and possible. This paper takes a critical realist approach to the study of crisis that starts by elucidating key aspects of the ontology of critical realism



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Conflict of interest statement:

Author(s) reported no conflict of interest

and how to situate crisis within this ontology. In order to illustrate the value of this approach, I examine the crisis that followed the chaos of 1976 in China (Gewirtz, 2022) that culminated in both the first Tiananmen Square Protests and the death of Mao. By examining the events that led up to the crisis and what followed, we can trace a well-known story of how the Communist Party of China reorganizes itself and the entire socio-economic system that has developed. This story will not be retold in this paper. Rather than focusing on the events surrounding the crisis, I look at the systemic nature of it, which requires asking what must be there for those events to take place as they did, thus moving from actualist accounts to a critical realist interrogation of the real. To elucidate the systemic nature of these events, I make use of a new approach to the study of crisis and the political economy of systemic persistence. This approach applies critical realism to the literature on critical junctures which demonstrates that when the ontology of crisis is taken seriously, we must analyze how systems transform, while mindful of events we consider how they are responding to incoherence within the systemic properties of the whole system, ie. the political economy of China. However, those systemic properties and their relative importance is not always apparent. Thus, this approach guides us through the steps necessary to make explicit the properties that exist and how they are related and what may make them coherent again. In this paper I trace and explain how with this approach we can understand how the various events contributed to the post-crisis rebuilding of systemic elements, tracing several iterations or rounds of learning before a new systemic form can emerge (Jessop & Knio, 2019; Knio, 2018, 2019, 2020). Rather than focusing on individuals, this approach considers the nature of how agents¹ derive their power, not from their authority as individuals, but from their positions within social structures. Therefore rather than seeing Deng Xiaoping as an architect of reform, we can see him as being one of few who was in a privileged position to understand the nature of the Maoist socio-economic system, its unravelling and what it would take to reconstitute it. Following the theoretical approach, I introduce key social structures from before the 1976 Tiananmen protests or ‘critical juncture’, which turn out through the various rounds of crisis learning to be relevant to the systemic persistence of the entire system. To understand this, I demonstrate how key groups that emerged following the critical juncture attempted to offer a solution. Suggesting that, the ultimate compromise engineered by Deng Xiaoping on his Southern Tour, proved durable, reconfiguring the elements putting the CCP’s continued control at most risk, offering a solution most compatible with the systemic properties of Mao era China’s political economy; and that this solution was intended, above all, to ensure the CCP’s stability in a post-Mao era.

1. THEORETICAL BASIS

1.1. Critical junctures and crisis learning – A theoretical explanation

This study aims to identify the systemic elements underlying China’s post-1976 transformation, with particular focus on how the Communist Party of China ensured its own survival through successive rounds of crisis learning following the first Tiananmen Square protests. Analysis of China’s institutional transformation requires a methodological approach capable of capturing both structural constraints and agential responses during periods of systemic crisis. I use ‘critical juncture’ here in a way common to its use in the

field of political science, to distinguish between “baseline institutional continuity [and an] emergent cleavage/crisis [that] departs from the baseline and triggers [definitive change]” (Knio, 2019, p. 27). Because critical junctures are based on the perceptions of individuals learning from crises, the literature understands such actions as contingent as opposed to deterministic (Collier & Munck, 2022; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Taking a critical realist approach, I also see critical junctures as emergentist and trans-immanent, as creating the conditions for the emergence of truly new, unpredictable, social forms. These will not resemble the sum of their parts: rupture of the system instead necessitates that the anterior parts or systemic elements be contended with in the construction of a new whole that is systemic and durable (Bhaskar,

¹ Following Archer (1995), I use agents to denote representatives of collectivities who are a manifestation of how groups form around social structures.

2008; Jessop & Knio, 2019; Knio, 2020). Agents are thus forced to respond to the impact of the critical juncture on the various systemic parts. Their knowledge of those systemic parts will be limited, however, by the stratified² nature of reality, in which empirical events and the real mechanisms that enable them can be “out of phase with one another” (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 234).³ This is why relatively less attention is paid to single events than to the transcendental question of what must be there, the systemic elements, for all of the events that happened to exist as they did. As agents contend with the crisis after the critical juncture, they have limited knowledge of the systemic elements affected, especially as the crisis heightens. This is why crisis learning is a useful heuristic in understanding the processes through which agents learn about the systemic elements in play during a crisis and develop proposals for its solution. Solving the problems created by a critical juncture requires considerable reflection on the anterior parts of the social whole: agents are, at the same time, learning through processes expected and unexpected, and engaging with systemic elements in attempts to stem the crisis. They will then be looking for ways to prevent it from recurring. I will first clarify “anterior systemic elements” and then the ways in which agents employ their understanding of these elements to construct a new whole.

Following Knio’s (2019) analysis the critical juncture encompasses not just the moment of cleavage but also the responses to it. This opens the door to a theorization of the ways in which agents interact with structures at moments of crisis and how understanding the systemic features of what causes the crisis emphasizes the importance of time and reflexivity for understanding the durational nature of crisis events. The structures within which agents are operating precede them, and initially constrain their actions. An agent’s first response to a crisis is therefore not best seen as directly affecting the others involved in that crisis, but as a process of learning the nature and extent of the structures involved. This process becomes more nuanced as key agents become aware of the ways in which other agents are responding,

and the effects on the system of their responses; as such, processes of crisis learning eventually lead to systemic solutions.

In Knio’s (2019) approach, agents at the onset of the critical juncture represent “pre-groups”, those that pre-existed the juncture, whose structural power is based on inherited or pre-juncture positions. During and after the juncture, collectivities form and reform as agents interpret and reinterpret the systemic elements implicated and their consequent allies. The theory defines these agent aggregates as “collectivities sharing the same life chances, ... [with] interests (in protecting or improving the latter) which are external to roles, yet can be pursued through them” (Archer, 1995, p. 256). Archer distinguishes between corporate agents who share “emergent properties of promotive organization and articulation of interests,” and primary agents who are “inarticulate in their demands and unorganized for their pursuit, [meaning that] they only exert the aggregate effects of those similarly placed who co-act in similar ways given the similarity of their circumstances” (Archer, 1995, p. 185). Until the Southern Tour, Deng Xiaoping acted as a corporate agent amongst others representing a particular collectivity at the top of the Communist Party; I will make the case here, however, that the stable collectivity that resolves the crisis caused by the critical juncture emerges only after the 1989 Tiananmen Square and lead-up to the Southern Tour.

Following Knio and Sommer (2024), I will use the term “facing” to describe agents’ first recognition of events as a crisis, and then of its impacts. As the crisis begins to affect its larger context, I will use “reacting” to represent the actions of agents as they respond with slowly sharpening focus to its key contextual features, and as they re/de/group with the clarification of their interests. Facing and reacting generally occur multiple times, as agents engaged in a process of crisis learning in response to the impacts of the reactions of others (Jessop & Knio, 2019; Knio, 2019). It is a process that can be followed sequentially, from the onset of the crisis or critical juncture.

2 As a term of critical realism, ‘stratification’ refers to the distinction made by the approach between three ontic levels: the empirical, the actual, and the real (Bhaskar, 2008). The empirical is understood as the ground of physical experience where reality consists of nothing but the experienced/observable. The actual refers to all that there is to be known about an event, whether experienced or not (Collier, 1994, p. 44). The real is the realm of mechanisms that must be there for those systemic parts to be possible.

3 Out of phase refers to the nature in which people perceive events and the strategic action they take in relation to those events, which, in a stratified ontology, has little to do with the reasons that those events can exist in the first place.

In this way, episodes of facing and reacting to the 1976 Tiananmen protests can be charted, eventually making it possible to identify the features of the pre-crisis social form that was triggered by the events. Time is also needed for an assessment of the depth of the crisis, whether it has produced a critical juncture or simply a systemic response. Systemic responses will be resolved through the manipulation of existing systemic elements, whereas a critical juncture, in this conceptualization, will require agents to construct new systemic forms. Key systemic elements only become apparent with the exposure of each step in the solution to the crisis. An example discussed in the following section is Hua Guofeng's arrest of the Gang of Four. He made this move as they were threatening chaos and a splintering of the Party's top echelon following Mao's death, which occurred shortly after the 1976 Tiananmen events. Removal of the threat to the integrity of that echelon, at that point, shows the Party to have had an interest in containing the succession question within its elite, and how the power of the succession question was a systemic property of Mao's political economy. While not a defining feature of the immediate crisis, in other words, it helped to create its contextual landscape: it was, for this crisis, a 'systemic element'. This is another theoretical point. With each response to the crisis, that contextual landscape, and thus the elements that were reinforcing the socio-economic system's baseline continuity, becomes clearer; and it is only once a clear picture of those features is realized that a new systemic form can be conceived. Ultimately, by tracing the cycles of facing and reacting we can understand the systemic features that form the basis for how each collectivity understands the crisis and its own positions within it.

This paper illuminates the process of crisis learning that occurred in Mao's China after the critical juncture initiated by the 1976 Tiananmen Square protests. I evaluate the systemic effects of their combined responses to the crisis and subsequent results by tracing their perceptions of its causes and the lessons learned from others' responses. I then assess the capacities of each to

understand the crisis and to offer an adequate solution, i.e., one that considers their ability to marshal sufficient resources to carry it out. This paper identifies the systemic elements that led to the end of the Maoist socio-economic system and how those systemic elements were re-constructed. It is the argument of this paper that those systemic elements must be taken into consideration by any analysis of China's political economy.

2. RESULTS

2.1. A brief introduction to reforms

Before examining the critical juncture that precipitated China's reforms, it is essential to contextualize this analysis within existing scholarship on Chinese political transformation and critical realist approaches to institutional change. The 1978 Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is often heralded as the beginning of the country's economic reform program (Lin, 2012; Naughton, 1995). According to Naughton (1995), however, very little happened in the immediate aftermath, other than Deng Xiaoping's assertion of himself over Hua Guofeng. This paper argues that a focus on Deng Xiaoping's re-emergence at the Communist Party's highest levels yields a post-hoc explanation (Gewirtz, 2022). This explanation does not adequately theorize the systemic persistence of the Maoist system and the particular way in which CCP members contended with it in the Reform era⁴. Emphasizing Mao's declining health in explanations of the demise of the Maoist system or Deng Xiaoping's particular strengths as "a man of rare talents" in his rise to power, while both true, leaves unconsidered the nature of a system that set the stage for both situations to develop. Key here are the features of a period that forced such a change in Communist Party direction, one that was impossible even as a consequence of the disasters brought on by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Further, an analysis that begins with Deng Xiaoping's installment as de facto Party leader leads directly to the narrative of market reform inscribed by the debates of

⁴ I do not mean to diminish the role of Deng nor his prowess as a leader, only to offer a rationale for the argument that his fame should be credited to a much later time in the reform.

the 1980s and early 1990s (Baum, 1994; Fewsmith, 1994)⁵, which centers on reform and the country's opening up, in the economy itself.⁶

Although the economic arguments are important and have been considered extensively in the development of this paper, I have chosen to focus predominantly on the political nature of crisis response, as in my view it speaks better to the problematic of structure and agency that has been set up in the theoretical section. While to the well-trained reader of the historical events of the reform era, the next section might seem like a haphazard restatement of obvious facts, especially in relation to the way the narrative is traditionally presented. However, I ask the generous reader to consider reading the paper following the logic of the argument that each crisis learning should be read in response to the contemporaneously contingent responses of agents involved, such as how the dual track price stabilization programs were a viable solution to endemic problems of production and distribution of the Maoist political economy. In other words, the facing is a response to the systemic break that triggers the critical juncture, and the reacting is an agential response taking into consideration the critical juncture and what has happened.

2.2. Identifying the critical juncture – The first Tiananmen Square protests

The number of crises, near crises, and events (social, political, and economic) that occurred during Mao's rule is striking, especially in relation to the extraordinary number of preventable deaths resulting from the Great Leap Forward and the famine of the Cultural Revolution. Despite the turmoil, Mao remained firmly at the top of the CCP's power structure (Teiwes & Sun, 2007), with the system supporting his rule effectively resisting enormous pressure for change. My argument here is that this resistance was finally overcome at the critical juncture represented by the tomb-sweeping festival (Qingming) of March 26-April

5, 1976. The laying of wreaths honoring the death of Zhou Enlai (Premier from 1949 to 1976), first in Nanjing, and then in other parts of the country, may seem minor in the scope of Chinese history, but in Tiananmen Square, the protests played an especially political role. In Tiananmen, organizations starting with a middle school laid wreaths that not only included tributes to Zhou but also thinly veiled critiques of the suppression of his mourning and of Mao himself. In many cases, Zhou was credited for moderating Mao's policies, especially through the Cultural Revolution; a role, in hindsight, to which people seemed to be sensitive. This would help to explain why they came out in such numbers to grieve for him (Macfarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006; Teiwes & Sun, 2004). These Tiananmen Square critiques thus represent the first public questioning of the legitimacy of the regime.

As this paper is embedded in critical realism, it rejects the Humean constant conjunctions argument (Bhaskar, 2008, 2019); the precise event that triggered the critical juncture is relatively less important. Instead, the critical juncture represents the conglomeration of events that signaled that the old structures were no longer functioning. I use this minor event in modern China's history as a representative heuristic illustrating how the conglomeration of events triggered the dramatic shift in the country's socio-economic structures. In order to take the ontology of critical realism seriously, I start with an elucidation of the key structures that undergirded the legitimacy of the Maoist period and proceed by describing agents' interaction on them in crisis (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1993). Identifying the key structure is meant to explain the precise understanding that I am using of those structures, so that it is clear for the reader how, when agents react to them, what exactly they are. These explanations should be read as a prelude to what is to come, as the structural aspects of the Maoist period are contended with after the critical juncture, but only become known to be important with each step in the crisis learning.

5 Both are excellent accounts of the minutiae of the reform period, and it is noteworthy that Baum selects a similar time period to that used in this analysis. Here, however, I examine the formation of causal necessity, a different analytic focus from Baum's chronological account of events.

6 I do not mean to discount the unsatisfactory economic situation in which the Party found itself at the end of the Maoist period; I simply suggest that the situation opened significant room for experimentation, with the caveat that the Party remained in power. Neither do I want to diminish the role played by key leaders of the economy in navigating its uncertainty.

The first, Mao's Personality Cult, was a direct target of the first Tiananmen protests, something that had hitherto been unthinkable. Tsou (1987) cites 1957 as the year when Mao's cult of personality took over as a key CCP organizing principle: by at once speaking to the National Humiliation and its redress by the Communist Party, Mao's personality cult became the key force for Party legitimacy. It triggered images of the century known as the National Humiliation, beginning with the Opium War (1840–42) and ending with the Communist victory in the 1949 Chinese Civil War. Numerous attempts were made during this time to counter the Western Imperialists including the Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1901, the 1911 Revolution, the May 4th Movement (1915–1921) and the Chinese Civil War (1927–1936 and 1945–1947). As their failures mounted, both the ruling Kuomintang and the CCP began to couch the period in the language of conquest. It was the CCP who were finally able, not only to defeat the Kuomintang, but also to put up a legitimate vision of the path to National Rejuvenation. Because the National Humiliation represented, “an unprecedented challenge to the Chinese people as a whole,” and because it took the most important steps to rebuild for those who “regarded themselves as the most civilized people in the world” (Chi, 1975, p. 3), the Communist victory could begin the path to National Revitalization. It is against this background that all other aspects of the time must be understood.

National Rejuvenation would be delivered through the idea of a ‘New China’⁷ against which Mao and the Party contrasted the old feudalist, backward China, with entrenched and self-destructive interests that were the target of imperialist powers. For the New China, the Party would eliminate capitalist vested-interests; it would provide revitalization through the particular Marxist “analysis of the twin evils of feudalism and imperialism supporting each other, which ... [would make] excellent sense to any Chinese patriot” (Fairbank, 1972, p. 36). The CCP presented Marxism as a method to solve the most substantial of the country's ills, its revitalization being the ultimate goal. Hung (2011) recounts Mao's speech, a mere ten days before the official founding of the People's Republic, where he

states: “Chinese People have stood up!” He argues that with the use of ‘stood up’, Mao was announcing “the end of China's painful modern history, with its successive plagues of political instability, its incessant wars and its long course of social dislocation, economic backwardness, widespread human suffering and worse still, foreign aggression” (Hung, 2011, p. 1). The speech also heralded the dawning of a new era: ‘New China’ was powerful imagery that would underlie the sacrifices that so many would make in the Maoist time.

Using Weberian types, Johnson (1976, p. 80) describes Mao as a “Caesarist,” someone whose domination was achieved through an ability to gain mass approval. He argues that Mao's power base rested with the masses and was cultivated through a propaganda machine and the creation of his cult of personality. Teiwes (2018) raises serious questions about whether the personality cult played such a strong role in Mao's dominance. Drawing as well from Weber's types of legitimacy, he divides Mao's ability to maintain authority into four distinct periods:

1. 1949–1958, when virtually all modes of legitimation reinforced Mao's authority;
2. 1959–1965, when Mao's behavior led to reservations on traditional and legal-rational grounds by ranking officials, but no serious challenge;
3. 1966–1971, when the resort to unbridled charismatic claims destroyed legality and caused graver doubts within the elite; and
4. 1972–1976, when limited challenges to Mao's authority appeared (p. 62).

It is only in the third period, through the Cultural Revolution, that Mao's personality cult as a mass movement played a role (Han, 1976, p. 375). In this period, Mao also recognized that the fickleness of the masses could not be relied upon as a base of support and determined that the army would be needed when necessary. We need, therefore, to look beyond Mao's personality cult for a more convincing explanation of the

7 Professor Frederick Teiwes alerted me to this idea in a personal correspondence.

longevity of his authority. It is argued here and elsewhere that Mao's power was derived instead from his exceptional talent as a strategic leader and his ability to build coalitions to fend off attacks (Gregor, 2014). This was added to by the difficulty confronted by elites below Mao with deposing him without risking compromise to the Communist Party itself: separating the legacy of Mao from the Party would indeed prove to be an intractable problem (Teiwes, 2018, p. 62). Mao's personality cult was a key basis of legitimacy for the Party: both a symbol and cornerstone of the survival of the CCP, and one that the elites themselves were nervous about disturbing. But while it resonated both inside the Party and outside to the masses, its primary power was strategic: it underpinned Mao's unpredictability as he leveraged the various factions of the CCP against those who challenged him. The real power of the personality cult, in other words, lay in its use as a policing mechanism within the CCP.

The first Tiananmen incident was thus a notable mass demonstration of displeasure with Mao's policies, and displayed, especially to the Old Guard,⁸ the public's weariness with Mao. For the Party, this was a pivotal moment and triggered a response by Mao that opened a door: it severed Party survival from the personality cult and elevated its importance (Teiwes & Sun, 2004). Party legitimacy and the personality cult were not as intimately intertwined as previously thought. This could not have gone unnoticed by the fast-ageing megalomaniacal Mao. This is the basis for my contention that the tomb weeping festival meets the requirements for departure from baseline institutional continuity; its threat to the personality cult, and as I will show, the effects of subsequent responses on the cult's systemic elements cannot be interpreted simply as the preferences of individuals⁹.

In the following subsection, I will connect this understanding of the first Tiananmen Square protests to aspects of the failing Maoist socio-economic system of the time. This analytic path reinforces my argument that among the forces at play in the Chinese reforms of 1976 to 1997, including irresistible economic conditions, priority ought to be given to the crisis threatening the durability of the Communist Party, the outcome of which was by no means inevitable. I will show the economic forces behind those reforms to be but a component of a larger complex of issues resolved by Deng Xiaoping during his 1992 Southern Tour.

2.3. Crisis learning

The following analysis presents the results of applying our critical realist framework to key moments of crisis learning in China's reform period, discussing how each episode reveals fundamental aspects of the system's underlying structure. In this part, I examine key responses to the problems triggered by the critical juncture of the first Tiananmen Square protests. I assess the Tiananmen protests in stages, teasing out their systemic elements to demonstrate the ways in which agents 'face' and then 'react' to the crisis.¹⁰ What this section demonstrates is that the crisis was not only a crisis of succession, but the complexity of the real cause only becomes clear at the Southern Tour in 1993, as each stage of crisis learning is a step in learning about the causes of the crisis itself.

2.4. The first crisis learning:¹¹ Mao, legacy building, and succession

The 1976 Tiananmen Square protests were first faced and reacted to by Mao:¹² perceiving a substantial challenge, he was pushed to finally name a successor in Hua Guofeng. It is my argument here

8 The Old Guard was a somewhat heterogeneous group of revolutionary leaders of the Communist Party, many of whom suffered at the hands of Mao, especially during the Cultural Revolution.

9 In this case, those of Mao and Deng.

10 The elucidation of the various crisis moments is necessarily stylized to give the reader enough of a sense of what happened, or what did not happen, to understand the systemic elements that were being addressed during each of the crisis learnings. For example, the 13th Party Congress in October of 1987 could also be analyzed in this approach to see what it did and did not achieve in relation to facing and reacting to problems. We could also trace how the 'initial stages of socialism', 'socialist market economy', and 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' fit into the narrative of crisis responses.

11 There were other instances of crisis learning in the years leading up to the Southern Tour. In selecting those here, I aim to demonstrate with the benefit of hindsight that it was these key instances that led to Deng's ability to create a stable social grouping, with significant power and resources, by the time of the Southern Tour.

12 I would like to thank a conference participant for pointing out the possibility that Mao's faculties at this stage were so far gone that he may not have had the capacity to properly act on these events. This alternate explanation strengthens the systemic argument of succession and legacy; however, as Hua Guofeng was able, strategically, to fulfil this role.

that Mao understood the politics of the Tiananmen Square protests in relation to two phenomena: the first was the crisis of succession, which had threatened the internal cohesion of the Party since the Cultural Revolution, and which he now needed to stem; the second was his legacy, which he needed to ensure would be upheld. The question of Mao's succession was one that pervaded the entire Maoist period. By 1960, he was 70 years old; given that life expectancy at the time in China was approximately 50 years, the question of succession then would have been a natural one (Babiarz et al., 2015). In Mao's lifetime, he named four successors: Liu Shaoqi, who was persecuted to death as a traitor at the start of the Cultural Revolution; Lin Biao, who died trying to escape a purported failed coup attempt; Wang Hongwen who, as a protégé of Mao, was elevated to second in command behind Zhou Enlai, but was then subject to an apparent reversal when Mao went instead with Hua Guofeng; and Hua Guofeng who served as Premier after the death of Zhou Enlai, and Chairman after the death of Mao (Teiwes, 2018; Teiwes & Sun, 2007). Throughout the period from the 1960s until Mao's death, especially with Mao's declining health, the question of succession was dramatically played out at the highest levels, making it a central factor with which agents needed to contend. In the early 1970s, for example, the game of succession intensified, with the Gang of Four¹³ playing a decisively antagonistic role.

Succession seems to have been mediated for Mao by the issue of legacy building. The lessons he learned from the way in which Khrushchev re-wrote the story of Stalin after his death played strongly in his mind as he aged (Barnouin & Changgen, 2016). In fact, the legacy building itself became a key decision-making factor as he chose his successors, first Wang Hongwen and then Hua Guofeng, both of whom lacked the experience and training of other Party members but seemed to have been extremely loyal to him (Teiwes, 2018). In fact, the whims of Mao significantly heightened the tensions between the Gang of Four and

the Rightists¹⁴ as he attempted to identify who his legacy would be best preserved by. Mao's decision to appoint Hua as his successor linked Hua to his own authority, and thus bestowed upon him the duty and need to maintain the personality cult in order to consolidate his position as Premier (and future Chairman) of the Party.

What is notable about this critical juncture is that it was almost immediately followed by the death of Mao, the protagonist, removing any possibility for a purely Maoist 'protection' of the status quo. Notable as well is Mao's naming of the four successors, and the trouble that ensued after each, forcing three recessions. What we see in the years following Mao's death is a manifestation of a similar situation, one I am calling the 'dual core problem.' This is where the system, struggling with two people in charge (Hua and Deng), necessitates the choice of a single, ultimate decision-maker. In the Maoist period, problems emerged each time this came in effect. Solving the succession issue only partially resolved the dual core problem; it was pervasive throughout the 1980s, with ultimate authority resting between sometime adversaries Chen Yun, Deng Xiaoping, Zhao Ziyang, and Hu Yaobang. Notwithstanding the choice of eventual successor, the problem of the dual cores, along with other unresolved issues, prolonged the crisis.

2.5. The second crisis learning: Hua and the survival of the Communist Party

Given Mao's treatment of those who threatened the absolute character of his power, Hua Guofeng understood that simply solving the problem of succession would not stem the crisis, and he took quick action to ensure the Communist Party's survival (Fewsmith, 1994). Less than a month after Mao's death, Hua had the Gang of Four imprisoned. This was a step made pivotal by the actions of the Gang, who were choosing to engage, not in closed-door, but in open conflict with Party members, creating a situation into which outside

13 The Gang of Four were leaders of the Radicals, who represented the CCP's most radical Maoist tendencies. In Mao's time, they were only ever vaguely a gang, but there is evidence that even after Mao, the name served as a useful construction. The Radicals were key instigators of the Cultural Revolution and became Politburo members, controlling the propaganda arm of the CCP and much of the state media, especially in Shanghai. The Gang of Four included Jiang Qing (Mao's wife), Zhang Chunqiao (Vice Premier of the PRC and Chairman of the Revolutionary Committee of Shanghai), Yao Wenyuan (writer and Politburo member), and Wang Hongwen (second vice-chairman of the CCP).

14 The Rightists were a heterogeneous group of high-level officials that I see as representing the materialist wing of the Party.

influences would be drawn. This was especially concerning as Mao's prestige was no longer available to bring the powerful interests back into line. Hua's reaction to the Gang of Four ensured that, for the time being, CCP elites would remain the only corporate agents (Fewsmith, 1994).

With Mao gone and the Gang of Four imprisoned, the more nuanced war for succession could begin to heat up. Hua made a number of attempts to ensure CCP survival, most notably his 1976 10-year plan, incorporating some of the key ideas of both Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping. This was a bid to acquire broad sectoral support for a range of his proposed initiatives and provide a basis for the Party's legitimacy (Teiwes, 2018). His success can be gaged partly by the fact that although he is routinely categorized as a member of the whateverist¹⁵ camp, he was not purged along with the Little Gang of Four in February of 1980¹⁶. Prolonging of the decision on Hua, and importantly, the existence of other potential centers of power, continued to leave outstanding the dual core problem as well as the question of the personality cult and its relation to the Party's survival. Hua's offer of a solution to the legitimacy crisis in the form of the 10-year plan also continued to be just that, an offer of a plan. His ability to deliver the goods remained to be seen. The crisis, therefore, continued.

2.6. The third crisis learning: Mao's legacy, survival of the Communist Party and succession¹⁷

I want to be clear in this narrative that some situations occurred as a matter of course, especially in the early years after the first Tiananmen incident (critical juncture). The Old Guard failed to emerge as a contending force until after Mao's death, for

example, despite their strengthened position in its aftermath. The process of rehabilitating the cadres sent down to the countryside for re-education during the Cultural Revolution or cast aside by Mao had already begun in the early 1970s¹⁸. This was a response to the urgent need to get the bureaucracy under control following the extended Cultural Revolution. Returning these cadres to their positions, however, forced the CCP to confront the legitimacy of their rule and the survival of the Party, which brought about a new round of 'facing'. This time, however, the elite reacted by distancing the Party from its former Chairman.

If the first Tiananmen Square incident was a display of the people's loss of trust in Mao, the same could not be said for the Party elites. Their lives and careers were intimately connected with him, despite their suffering at his hands during the Cultural Revolution (Fewsmith, 1994, p. 105)¹⁹. This, the most powerful group, comprised what Teiwes calls the "Cultural Revolution Survivors and Victims" (Teiwes & Sun, 2007) and represented the oldest revolutionaries. Key members of the elite from the earliest days of the formation of the People's Republic had occupied the highest halls of office. Mao, the revolutionary who had won the civil war and brought the CCP to power, was not so easily disassociated from Chairman Mao, head of the People's Republic of China, who had instigated turmoil in the country for the better part of twenty years. Neither of these idealized versions of the man could easily be distanced from the Communist Party itself, whose members were complicit, or at the very least implicated, in that Maoist strife.

Writing an assessment of Mao was a controversial process, but a necessary 'reaction' in moving forward. When it was finally complete, it inscribed "a

15 Hua Guofeng is credited with creating the whateverist camp (the Little Gang of Four) with his 'Two Whatever's' statement, where the CCP would uphold whatever policy decisions Mao made, and whatever instructions Mao gave. The whateverist group consisted of Wang Dongxing, Mao's former bodyguard; Hua's key co-orchestrator of the removal of the Gang of Four, Chen Xilian, a PLA General who rose to power during the Cultural Revolution; Ji Dengkui, a Politburo Member and Vice-Premier; and Wu De, Chairman of the Beijing Revolutionary Committee. The whateverist camp was also closely associated with the Cultural Revolution Beneficiary group (Teiwes, 2018).

16 Outwardly, the reasons for purging the Little Gang of Four included its attempt to revive Maoist ideas and Mao's personality cult.

17 Dikötter (2016) and White (1998) make the argument that by the Tiananmen Square protests of 1976, peasants were already extensively experimenting with marketization in all areas of the countryside, and due to the decentralized nature of the Maoist economy, the Party had ostensibly lost control of the countryside economy. This argument is compelling and would place the critical juncture earlier than I have in this narrative. However, the countryside had often been out of reach of the Maoist economy in many Maoist periods, and the Party itself had experimented with the household responsibility system in the early 1960s. This form of marketization thus does not appear to have produced the systemic response necessary to count as the critical juncture for which I am arguing.

18 It accelerated after the death of Mao and the arrest of the Gang of Four.

19 This is especially true of PLA veteran General Huang Kecheng, who was purged by Mao but later launched a spirited defence of him and his contribution to the Party.

basically positive view of Mao as the great leader of the Chinese people whose personal brilliance more than once saved the Party despite serious errors over his last twenty years” (Teiwes, 2018, p. 87). Chen Yun, who remained a staunch socialist to the end captures this: “Had Mao died in 1956, his achievements would have been immortal. Had he died in 1966, he would still have been a great man but flawed. But he died in 1976. Alas, what can one say?” (The Economist, 2006). The Party thus decided that Mao’s mistakes had to be acknowledged and everything else but the lore of his revolutionary prestige had to be washed away if the Party had a chance of survival (Gewirtz, 2022).

Until the official Party verdict on Mao had been completed in mid-1981, the question of what to do with Hua remained open²⁰. The sensitivity of the issue was demonstrated by the fact that, despite Hua’s formal outranking of Deng, it was Deng who, from his return in 1977, had held onto the reins of power.²¹ Yet, because Hua could not be officially removed until the verdict on Mao had been formally written, and titles matter in China, he had kept his position throughout, leaving something about the country’s leadership and Mao’s legacy unresolved (Tsou, 2002). It was in the formal verdict, delivered at the sixth Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in June 1981, that the Party acknowledged Mao’s achievements and contributions, but also his mistakes, and the blame they laid was unequivocal. This assessment provides an understanding of the ‘reaction’ from the Old Guard, which lasted until June of 1981.

By this time, Hua had been demoted to vice-chairman and was subsequently dropped from consideration in the 1982 12th Politburo election. The official reason for his dismissal was the determination that Mao’s decision to appoint him had been an “illegal, feudal practice” (Baum, 1994; Teiwes, 2018, p. 88). It was by reversing the grounds of Hua’s appointment that the CCP demonstrated it

was no longer the Party of Mao. However, as mentioned, this decision could only officially be made after the assessment of Mao was complete. Thus, Hua found himself on the wrong side of history, trapped between the dynamics surrounding his appointment as Mao’s successor and the legacy with which he would find himself inescapably affiliated. As a consequence, he had to go.

The crisis simultaneously spoke to three systemic elements: succession, Mao’s legacy, and the survival of the CCP. Given the Old Guard’s practice of rallying around a common cause, the chance of outside interests threatening the CCP’s hold on power was small. The legacy of Mao had been written to acknowledge his great contribution to the Party, but also, to ensure preservation of the CCP’s legitimacy as a dynamic political institution: to insert a necessary wedge between it, and him. The only debate that remained was that of succession, wherein the CCP initially opted for collective leadership (Teiwes, 2018). Despite being nominated after Hua’s removal from the position of Chairman, Deng Xiaoping was never the CCP’s official head. Deng and other members of the Old Guard could remain outside the fray to provide a stabilizing force while others with less prestige were given official titles. These would not have sufficient power bases, in their own right, however, to challenge the Old Guard and could be scapegoated if something went awry. The Old Guard thus postponed the question of succession just as Mao had done, which, in turn, prolonged the problem of the dual cores.

This reaction is noteworthy because the Maoist legacy and cult of personality would have appeared to have been key pillars of the Maoist socio-economic system. Survival of the Communist Party, however, proved to be much more important. The nature of the response thus represented a break from, but not a complete rupture with, the past. This is not because it could not, but because

20 Since the 1980 Politburo criticism session, Hua had no real power; however, the fact that he remained in his position should be understood in relation to the situation at the time, in which his position was intimately tied to Mao, thus he could not be dismissed formally until Mao’s legacy had been resolved.

21 Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated in July 1977 and, following his removal in April of the previous year, assumed all of his former roles at the Third Plenary Session. These roles were: Politburo Standing Committee, Vice-Chairman of the Central Committee, First Deputy Premier of the State Council, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and Chief of General Staff of the People’s Liberation Army. Deng’s rehabilitation was additionally facilitated by his prestige within the Old Guard (Teiwes, 2018). Some of the factors helping to develop that prestige were his administrative talents, which were widely respected; his inclusion as a part of the revolutionary generation; his extensive ties to the various leaders of the older generation that ran very deep throughout the CCP and PLA; his control over the military (Teiwes, 2001) and the common bond that existed between key revolutionary figures who had also suffered at the hands of Mao during the Cultural Revolution and wanted to ensure that such things would never happen again.

it was constructed to ensure the primacy of CCP survival and therefore the reduction as far as possible of intervention by outside agents. All of the pre-groupings with the power to act following the critical juncture resided within the CCP, in other words, and had an interest in its survival²². This is further evidenced by the fact that the Party never opened up a space for non-CCP elites to enter it. It is clear that the challenges of the first Tiananmen event targeted what would seem to be the most important pillar of Maoism, Mao himself. The fact that even in the absence of his authoritative presence, those in key positions rallied around the Party, protecting it from the compromise that many would have expected, suggests that the keystone of systemic persistence of the Maoist era was not Mao but the Communist Party he created. In fact, for everyone in power, persistence of the organization that held them there underlay all important decisions. If, in the Maoist era, Mao's cult of personality and prestige as the revolutionary hero who had saved the nation from the National Humiliation had, even as doubts and then challenges surfaced within the Party, served as the cornerstone of its legitimacy, especially within the Party, this could no longer have been the case²³. A new basis for Party legitimacy would remain unresolved until 1993. Thus, the second crisis learning uncovered other systemic elements that hitherto had been unresolved.

2.7. A second critical juncture: Tiananmen redux and the ignored PLA^{24 25}

The Tiananmen Square protests and massacre in June 1989 were one of the most serious crises for the Party since the founding of the People's Republic of China and represent a second critical

juncture. This brought forward a key contextual feature that had not been adequately considered in the writing of the verdict on Mao. The events themselves do not indicate the nature of the crisis that the Party faced. As leader of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and de facto paramount leader, Deng had final say over military decisions. Yet, despite his power, many military leaders resisted orders to send troops onto the streets of Beijing in order to end the protests (Bickford, 2001; Gewirtz, 2022; Jencks, 1991; Scobell, 1992)²⁶. Further, throughout the protests, significant doubts were raised by key army leaders about the degree to which the People's Liberation Army (PLA) should be involved, with many openly supporting the political reforms represented by Zhao Ziyang (Scobell, 1992). It is commonly assumed that 1989 Tiananmen represented the moment when unresolvable clashes between elite actors bubbled to the surface to create a sort of paralysis. It is also possible to suggest, however, that this paralysis came from the PLA's loss of faith in the Party and the political system at large (Yeung, 1999).

The People's Liberation Army had been a key stabilizing institution in the Maoist period. Mao dominated the army, exercising supreme control over all of its aspects (Guo, 2012; Joffe, 2006). Its upper echelons held high positions of power, both politically and administratively, as order was being restored at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Throughout the Maoist era, as an extension of Party goodwill, the PLA was charged with developing infrastructure, modernizing the economy, and providing goodwill services to local communities (Bickford, 2006). Further, Mao periodically used the PLA to outmaneuver potential threats, whether real or perceived, by promoting people

22 This theoretical approach could, of course, account for either option: the case where insiders were the only ones with a legitimate chance to take the reins of power and the case where a group intervened that was able to put an end to the CCP.

23 Even though the personality cult played a number of different roles throughout the Maoist period, its strength was strongly felt within the Party.

24 A conference participant suggested that the Sino-Vietnam war of 1979 provides evidence for a counterargument to that of Zhang (2005) that the PLA was neglected. I would suggest that Deng's ambiguous intentions and the outcome of the war are evidence of ulterior motives on Deng's part: that the war was meant to demonstrate to the PLA that they were not well prepared, and to show Hua Guofeng who was really in charge, as it was Hua who had commanded the war effort. What I argue below is not that the PLA was ignored in every instance, but that it was ignored in a systemic way.

25 I understand that this is a contentious period in Chinese politics. My point is not to minimize other groups that had legitimate claims to power at the time; it is only to highlight the group key to Deng's strategic reinforcement of the CCP. As I discuss in the following sections, Deng was aware of the neglect of the PLA and offered the army a bargain on his Southern Tour to make up for it.

26 A debate exists on whether Deng needed to rely on his trusted ally, the President of China, Yang Shangkun, and Yang's half-brother, CMC Secretary General Yang Baibing, to activate his nephew's 27th Group Army from Hebei to suppress the protestors (Bickford, 2001). Pollack (1992) argues, however, that bypassing Beijing-based units and activating a force without the capacity to deal non-lethally with the protests provides additional evidence of the significant splits within the military and command structure.

who were loyal to him within the organization (Guo, 2012, p. 252). In the Maoist period, a significant struggle took place between forces in favor of professionalizing and those seeking to politicize decision-making in the PLA, with Mao succeeding by forcing the Army's politicization (Guo, 2012, p. 420). The PLA was thus at once one of the most stable institutions of the Maoist period and the regime's most loyal supporter.

Elders had neglected its importance in the 1980s by using Deng's authority and position to ensure that defence, one of the Four Modernizations, would come last (Baum, 1994; Jencks, 1989; Pallack, 1992; You, 2002)²⁷. Throughout that decade, the budget of the PLA had been overlooked so that vital foreign exchange and other resources could be used to promote the development of civilian infrastructure and the country's productive capacity (Marti, 2002)^{28 29}. Further, its capacity had been significantly depleted through neglect at the end of the Maoist period, its role in the Sino-Vietnam war, and the selling off of old weapons and diversion of production to civilian items to fund the development of new munitions (Marti, 2002).

The problem is further evidenced by the fact that throughout the 1980s, Deng's efforts to transfer power from the Party to the State, and to remove the bureaucratic complications of duplicate State and Party administrations, were regularly stymied. The PLA was one of the key places where efforts at removing Party influence were significantly slowed as senior leaders, especially in the early years of reform, resisted economic modernization (Baum, 1994). A serious attempt at reducing bureaucratisation was the 1985 PLA downsizing, for example, which entailed a limited decrease of the Army's labor budget as it moved from preparing for "early, total, nuclear war to peacetime army building" (Li, 2002, p. 93). Ultimately, while infrastructure and equipment investment had been neglected in the 1980s, key military watchers remark that the organizational capacity of the PLA had improved (Jencks, 1989,

1991; Pallack, 1992). This was a response, not to the centralization of a professional force, but to the persistence of the decentralized and political organizational structure of Mao's PLA. It encompassed the re-institution of the military rank system initiated by Deng in 1980, the formal implementation of which would not take place until 1988 (Pallack, 1992)³⁰. During the Tiananmen Square crisis, this professionalization actually worked to exacerbate inaction at the top. In 1988, Deng had formally given authority over the PLA to CMC head, Zhao Ziyang; when Party elders turned against Zhao, reporting lines became untenable. A situation was thus created that forced the PLA to 'choose sides' as a whole or risk splintering (Jencks, 1991; Pallack, 1992). It became another instance of a situation that can be seen as the tragedy of a dual core: failure to establish one clear core with the authority to take final decisions, especially in times of crisis. This, coupled with the failure of the Party to provide the resources needed by the PLA to handle domestic unrest with limited force, led to disaster.

Deng's strong words on June 9 to military officials and the party rallying around the leadership with Deng at the head, leading up to and in the immediate aftermath of Tiananmen, were strong signs that this would continue to be an inner-party matter (Gewirtz, 2022, p. 245). However, the subsequent reaction from the Party was to turn away from the economic policies of the 1980s even going as far as to suggest that Deng and Zhao had two different versions of economic reform (Gewirtz, 2022). Thus, demonstrating the tension that had been yet unresolved between how to maintain the Party's hold on power and ensure the modernization of the nation.

The events of Tiananmen and their aftermath demonstrate the degree to which contestation of the PLA was at the center of a power struggle over leadership of the country. They were exacerbated by the dual core problem, which spoke to a key principle of democratic centralism, that follow-

27 The Four Modernizations targeted agriculture, industry, defence, and science and technology.

28 Marti (2002) also suggests that the threat of external conflict had been low at the time, so planners deemed it safe to prioritize other factors.

29 There is evidence that general technological improvement of the military had received some attention before Tiananmen, especially in the 863 Program (Gewirtz, 2022). However, this was also considered part of a general improvement in technology and not simply military improvement, especially considering that in the 1980s, the line between military and civilian production was very porous.

30 In typical Dengist fashion, he took a gradual approach to implementation by refusing to force retirement in order to minimize the creation of enemies (Pollack, 1992).

ing discussion, the Party must have a reliable way to settle on a decision and have all members accept it. This was a problem prominent throughout the 1980s, within which the CMC and Politburo often operated independently, as two bodies with separate figures heading each entity³¹. In fact, until Tiananmen, it was not recognized that the systemic necessity of where the core of power needed to be centered was between the CMC and the Politburo³². In highlighting the extent of the PLA's neglect, the Tiananmen events revealed the army's primary mission, i.e., to ensure the internal stability and territorial integrity needed to maintain CCP rule. The 1989 Tiananmen Square protests thus demonstrated the PLA's centrality, the problem of its neglect, and the question of legitimacy for whoever, next, began to show its face.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. The ultimate crisis learning: The Southern Tour and its building blocks for perpetuation of Party rule

The rationale for the Southern Tour gathers together the strands of the political crisis outlined above – the Communist Party's legitimacy; the CCP's survival; modernization of the PLA; and the problem of the dual core – each, a piece of a whole that engulfed the Party throughout the 1980s. To this aggregate of problems, the Southern Tour begins to offer a durable solution³³. I will first re-state them and then, with the assistance of Knio's (2018, 2019) theory of crisis, explain how the final crisis learning responds to the critical juncture in 1976 and how the subsequent responses produce the over-determined final response.

The problem of the CCP's legitimacy was brought to an urgent level by the death of Mao. With the writing of the verdict on his rule, Party elders

closed the door on the basis of the personality cult and opened the question of what the new basis for legitimacy would be.

The CCP's survival was an issue made critical by events twice in the Reform years: first, in the days following Mao's death when the Gang of Four looked to be waging open conflict; and second and more seriously in the heat of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, when the army appeared to show a lack of faith in its authority. Notable is that both were predominantly intra-Party phenomena, demanding that its own be convinced that it was worth maintaining, so as not to provoke the groups that could splinter it apart.

The PLA's support and its modernization were shown to be critical to the CCP's hold on power by the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The Tiananmen events showed unequivocally that the army's support could not simply be taken for granted, but must be nurtured by giving it the capacity to do its job.

The dual core problem predated the Reform period but manifested in a number of ways throughout the 1980s as the factors influencing its rise shifted. The difficulty of settling on a single head, or core, is a response to the question of succession, but transcends the inability to simply name a successor. At its heart, it surfaces the question of whether one final decision maker is necessary to the longevity of the Chinese political system.

From the June 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising through the Eighth Plenum in late 1991, Deng was weakened, and Conservatives had the upper hand in state control (Baum, 1994; Marti, 2002)³⁴. At a number of meetings leading up to and including the Eighth Plenum, Premier Li Peng attempted to reinstitute key aspects of centralization and state planning into the economy (Fewsmith, 2008; Marti, 2002). It can be argued that Li Peng sim-

31 Hu Yaobang did not sit on the CMC, and Zhao Ziyang was its Executive Vice Chair while Deng was Chairman.

32 Another factor worth considering is that Zhao Ziyang had worked throughout the 1980s to reduce overlap between the Party apparatus and the state apparatus. This was a way for Reformers to weaken the control exercised by conservatives over the bureaucracy (Feng, 2006, p. 116). However, it also compromised the Party's ability to penetrate all aspects of society, which ran the risk of weakening its dominance over its socio-economic system

33 I will assess the extent to which this became a durable solution in a forthcoming paper.

34 In fact, Gewirtz (2022) makes a similar argument; however, our scientific projects are different. He makes a laudable attempt at filling in the events that have been suppressed and censored by the Party to provide a more accurate record of what happened. My project attempts to understand the systemic necessity and persistence of the socio-economic system in China, specifically the structural elements that must be present for the events that Gewirtz and others describe to be possible.

ply misunderstood the winds of economic change that had shaken the country over the course of the 1980s, and that these were better understood by the ascending Zhu Rongji. But having risen to the heights of the state apparatus, it is difficult to understand Li as someone who simply fell on the wrong side of history. In fact, he was a key agent from a group within the Party with substantial power, the Conservatives, broadly described by analysts as its planning wing (Fewsmith, 2008). The Conservatives and their *de facto* leader, Chen Yun, were significant actors throughout the 1980s, with economic control oscillating, dramatically and frequently, between them – stabilizing the ship when reforms appeared to threaten the economy – and the Reformers – pushing for increased economic growth. Throughout the 1980s, China’s economic base was restructured through gradual experimentation; however, that base had a lot of leeway to be controlled through various mechanisms. It was only after 1991 that Deng was finally able to recognize just how the Party could maintain its dominance over the economy without the Party tearing itself apart.

Leading up to the Southern Tour, Deng and the Reformers were well aware of the importance of shoring up support for the army, which they prioritized in the years following the late 1991 Eighth Plenum. Despite Deng’s marginalization at that Plenum, he called an enlarged meeting of the Central Military Commission in January 1992, his last and most important bastion of power. In that meeting, he convinced PLA leaders that the only way to modernize the Army was to support the program of reform and opening up (Marti, 2002)³⁵. Deng and his proxies, including Liu Huaqing and Yang Baibing, who accompanied him on the first part of his Southern Tour, travelled in turn to each of the country’s military bases to ensure the compliance of regional commanders. This was spurred by a perceived fear that the richer, coastal provinces, unhappy with the direction of the central government post-Tiananmen, might be consider-

ing separation (Marti, 2002). Key military leaders also needed to be convinced to relinquish control of local military industries in return for more stable funding and a requirement to professionalize. It was in this period that the CMC unified the command of army industries in the form of a military industrial complex and began to dispose of assets that were unrelated to its core function (You, 2016).³⁶

In order to assure the military that they would have stable and growing budgets, another group thus needed to be brought into the coalition: the coastal leaders³⁷. In a move to secure their necessary financial and material support, and with the first part of the tour behind him, Deng embarked on his better-known early 1992 Southern Tour. We can now understand why, as Yang Shangkun explained, the PLA would “protect the emperor and guard his inspection tour” (You, 2002, p. 275)³⁸. This statement was complemented by another from his half-brother, Yang Baibing, that the PLA would “escort the reforms” (Marti, 2002, p. 154). Deng’s mission was to convince the provincial leaders to remit more revenue to the center in exchange for continued economic reform. Thus, Deng’s Southern Tour had at once ensured the survival of the Communist Party through the support of a modernized military: a military that would come to form the basis for Party legitimacy by enabling continual material modernization of society. The modernization would increase society’s marketization for the primary benefit of the military – allowing determination of its best suppliers – while others would also get rich as well. In so doing, Deng recognized the importance of the PLA to the maintenance of CCP power, and at the same time, the necessity that the CCP provide the army with an overall vision of its legitimacy. This vision was one of radically increased effectiveness: an ability to set and maintain operational objectives, predicated on the CCP’s continuing modernization of its tools and equipment, a process for which the Coastal leaders would provide support.

35 A conference participant made the argument that while the PLA’s tools and equipment had also been neglected in the Maoist period, it did not trigger a modernization response. My approach does not deny the importance of individual preferences; in this case, it speaks simply to systemic necessity. Mao’s prestige within the Party meant that the Party did not need to modernize the army, and it chose not to. Later, both the Party and Deng could not avoid the search for a solution to the crisis within the PLA, as it threatened the power of both.

36 In 1998, Zhu Rongji insisted that the Army divest from all business interests, and by late 1998, more than half of the interests that had been formed in the 1980s and 1990s had been shut down (Bickford, 2006; You, 2002).

37 Provincial leaders, especially in the coastal provinces, had resisted calls in the early 1990s to re-centralize tax collection (Baum, 1994).

38 The emperor refers to Deng Xiaoping.

The 1989 Tiananmen massacre was a crisis that compelled Deng to exert enormous amounts of his social and political capital to finally put an end to it, and would ultimately result in the loss of much of his power. In November 1992, he relinquished his position as Chair of the CMC. This had the effect of transferring the CMC chairmanship to Jiang Zemin, which began the process of unification and, thus, resolution of the problem of the dual core under the chairmanship of the CCP. But as noted, the dual core problem had persisted since the Maoist era. In fact, it represented two interrelated phenomena, the first of which was the necessity to have an ultimate decision maker. In Mao's time, this was always Mao, but Deng, having suffered personally at the hands of a unilateralism during the Cultural Revolution, was unwilling to recognize the need for a single final arbitrator. This was something he had tried in vain to correct in the early years of reform through his promotion of a collective leadership and military professionalization (Guo, 2019)³⁹.

Aside from the unwillingness of Party elders to give ultimate authority to one person, having a single head, or core of power, required careful attention to the regional and ideological differences within the Party. Having a core alone would not offer sufficient capacity to balance its disparate interests: it would need to have a very specific orientation, captured in the concept of 'democratic centralism'. Democratic centralism was a Party principle held from the early days of its founding (Thornton, 2021); in the reform era, however, it began to emerge in a new form to replace the personality cult. It required a core

sitting above the Party to leverage the various factions, whenever this was required, to obtain ultimate consensus and to police one another (Guo, 2012)⁴⁰. The democratic aspect of democratic centralism represented a way to ensure sufficient experimentation and regional specificity (environmental and social suitability) to prevent some of the grave errors of the Maoist period. These involved over-centralization and unilateralism, running the gamut from arbitrary detentions and killings to the planting of unsuitable crops. The centralist aspect of such a core came to represent both the necessity to make a decision and the fact that this decision could require opposing entrenched interests in Beijing. Mao, and later Deng, realized that a variety of political positions lay outside Beijing's core political interests. Identifying these, from their place within the core, allowed them to mobilize, when necessary, the relevant forces against the entrenched interests of the Beijing bureaucracy and political establishment. In Deng's case, he could mobilize leaders of the dynamic coastal provinces, particularly Guangdong and Shanghai. Democratic centralism and the core thus offered Deng a familiar and viable mechanism for the maintenance of internal Party stability at a time when it was under particular threat.

Thus, Deng's systemic solution to the crisis that started in 1976 began to materialize, speaking directly to the systemic elements of the Maoist period and finding new ways to reassemble them in light of the structures that existed, what had happened after the crisis, and the key groups that had survived the 1980s.

CONCLUSION

I have taken a critical realist approach to critical junctures/instances of crisis learning in a re-examination of the events of 1976 as the beginning of the country's contemporary reforms. This approach infused with a critical realist lens theorizes the emergent qualities of a critical juncture which is not limited to path dependency or unintended consequences but rather by theorizing the nature of structure and agency both before and after the critical juncture we can understand the nature of how agents interact with structures in a process of first learning from the impacts of a crisis and then offering solutions to resolve it. As such, this approach reinforces the position that the Chinese economic reforms were

39 See especially the role of the Central Advisory Council (CAC) set up in the early 1980s to provide oversight and negotiation on reform, officially disbanded in 1992 (Guo, 2019).

40 Another key function of the core is the authority it conveys to speak with Party elders (Guo, 2019) who themselves hold significant sway over key Party groups, and whose influence is necessary to maintain Party unity.

never about economics per se: they were always about the best way for the Communist Party to extend its survival. In this light, the political crisis triggered in 1976 by the first Tiananmen Square protests is finally given a viable solution through events orchestrated by Deng Xiaoping in his 1992 Southern Tour. By providing the capacity for economic experimentation and at the same time, ensuring dominance over the political system, these events resolved the dual core problem to ensure internal Party stability. Further provision for CCP survival is made through agreements to keep up modernization of the PLA, which in turn, facilitates the Party's key claim to legitimacy: its expansion of the material basis of Chinese society. These represent necessities that form the key legacy of Deng Xiaoping: uniting the interests of the coastal leaders with those of the military in a modernization project supervised by the CCP. Thus, the transcendental question of what *must* be there can be answered with the necessity for military modernization through economic experimentation and internal party stability.

Left unchecked, however, the unrestrained increase in the material basis of society challenges the Party's singular hold on power. This is currently resulting in a tendency to centralize, which risks upsetting the coastal provinces, the developed interests external to Beijing that have provided the bases for modernization of the PLA. Mediating this relationship will be the single most important challenge for the Party in the coming years.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Brandon Sommer.
 Formal analysis: Brandon Sommer.
 Investigation: Brandon Sommer.
 Methodology: Brandon Sommer.
 Resources: Brandon Sommer.
 Writing – original draft: Brandon Sommer.
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