

**China's New Civil-Military Dynamic:
Challenges and Opportunities for PLA Modernization**

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Introduction

Since the mid-1990s the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been undergoing an ambitious reform and modernization program. Acting upon its own assessments of the rapidly changing nature of modern warfare in the wake of the first Gulf War—and changing perceptions about China's security situation—Beijing's military leadership concluded that the armed forces of China were ill-suited to cope with its future defense-related challenges. In response, the leadership of the PLA set upon a path of reform aimed at building a more professional force in a corporate and institutional sense, and a more capable force in an operational sense. This primarily entailed changing the Chinese armed forces in two ways, called the “Two Transformations” in the parlance of the PLA:¹

- From an army preparing to fight local wars under ordinary conditions to an army prepared to fight and win Local Wars Under Modern Informationalized Conditions; and
- From an army based on quantity to an army based on quality.

A corollary to the “Two Transformations” is that the PLA must shift from an army that is personnel intensive to one that is science and technology intensive. The scope of reforms that the PLA is aiming to implement in order to achieve this is broad and affects all areas of PLA activity. Three key areas that the PLA is focusing on include:

- The development, procurement, acquisition, and fielding of new high-tech weapons, technologies, and combat capabilities.
- The development of new operational concepts and warfighting doctrine for their employment.
- The vast array of institutional reforms that will be necessary to underwrite the first two.

However, the PLA and its modernization program do not exist in a vacuum. Understanding what the PLA aspires to achieve also requires placing PLA modernization within the broader domestic context of a changing China. On the one hand, the ability of the Chinese military establishment to achieve many of its near- and long-term objectives will be as much a function of what Chinese society can or cannot support, as it will be a function of the plans and aspirations of the military leadership. On the other hand, social, economic, and political change in Chinese society—forces operating beyond the institutional boundaries of the PLA—are serving as catalyzing forces for adaptive change within the PLA.² Understanding these forces are as important as understanding the nuts

and bolts of the PLA's modernization program. While this paper cannot possibly address all of the complexities that are present in the Chinese civil-military dynamic, it will look at three “realities” that the PLA is facing, and discuss how the PLA is adapting to socio-economic changes on the ground.

The Three Realities

Reality #1: The changing dynamics in Chinese society attendant to over two decades of “reform and opening up” represent a double-edged sword for the PLA.

In some cases, the advances of the so-called “Rising China” bode well for the aspirations of China’s leaders to modernize the military. For example, China’s booming economy adds to the increasing levels of funding that the PLA needs to modernize the force (new equipment and technologies) and pay for operations, maintenance, and especially personnel. Moreover, growing pockets of capacity in key sectors of China’s “new economy” are assisting the PLA in the research and development of the technologies its new warfighting paradigms demand. One could also point to the emergence of a private sector economy as creating opportunities to rationalize the inefficiencies in the PLA’s logistics system, by allowing the PLA to “outsource” for common use goods and services it previously had to provide for itself.

In other cases, socio-economic change engenders challenges to the institutional agenda of the PLA. The same economy that is supporting PLA modernization now provides stiff competition to the PLA in attracting the best and brightest of China’s youth, and offers challenges to the retention of the military’s most talented officers. On the enlisted side, the highly educated urban high school youth the PLA needs for conscripts are often loath to heed the bugle’s call and find ways to evade locally-mandated conscription quotas, whereas the rural poor still see PLA service as a means of personal advancement. Thus, while the ranks are being filled, they are not necessarily being manned with those the PLA desires.

Reality #2: Emerging demographic trends affect the PLA as much as they do the rest of Chinese society.

Rising life expectancies and the “one child policy” have each affected the PLA. Increased life expectancy is one of the many benefits of a modernizing China. Yet the “graying of China” comes with its own set of pressures on the government. For the PLA in particular this means increasing burdens on the military benefits and retirement system as the ranks of retirees grows.³ It also means problems for retention as those officers who have the requisite skill sets to successfully move into the private sector do so in order to financially support the emerging “4-2-1” family structure (4 grandparents, 2 parents, 1 child). In some cases, “PLA couples” (e.g., husbands and wives who are both commissioned officers) have had to make a conscious decision that one spouse should leave the PLA and find employment in the more lucrative private sector economy in

order to more adequately support the family, and to hedge against the declining financial advantages of serving in the military.

Moreover, China's "one-child policy" brings its own set of challenges to the PLA. According to one statistic, in 2006, "only-child soldiers" will account for 52.4% of the force.⁴ This trend comes with dual implications. A survey conducted by the political officers in one particular group army is instructive: on the one hand, the survey found that "only sons" tend to outperform soldiers with siblings in verbal tests, communication skills, and aptitude for computer use. On the other hand, "only-child soldiers" tend to exhibit behaviors that are worrisome from the perspective of unit cohesion and effectiveness, including reluctance to engage in high-risk training; problems in cooperating with peers; and a sick call rate twice that of soldiers with siblings.⁵ While the data sample on this issue is admittedly small, it is highly suggestive that, if nothing else, the PLA itself is concerned with understanding the implications of the new demographics of Chinese youth.

Working in conjunction with the realities of market forces, the greatest impact China's one-child policy has had on the PLA is the revision in 1998 of the military service laws.⁶ Prior to 1998, conscripts sent to the ground forces (the army) served three years while conscripts sent to the navy and air force served for four years. In 1998 the new laws reduced service to two years for all services and branches in the PLA. A key driving force for the reduction in service time was rising pressures from below over the hardships and opportunity costs associated with the absence of only sons for so long a period. In the countryside, the issue revolved around the economic hardships rural families faced with their only son unavailable for working the family farm in the absence of a rural social safety net. In the cities, parents of well-educated "only sons" were becoming deft in finding ways for their only-children to evade military service so as not to miss opportunities for college or higher paying private sector employment.⁷

The new laws have had an immediate impact on the PLA. The amount of time conscripts on active duty now have to train to standard is seriously curtailed with uncertain, but potentially serious, implications for unit readiness. Moreover, the conscription and demobilization cycles are now shorter. Hence, the cycle is more time intensive to manage and requires greater coordination between military authorities and local civil authorities on both ends of the process.

Reality #3: The most complex adjustments in civil-military relations in today's China are those occurring at the local level.

It is in the provinces, counties, and municipalities where the national defense responsibilities of civilian authorities, the institutional requirements of the PLA, and changing socio-economic circumstances on the ground are intersecting to create new tensions and challenges.

Since the founding of the PRC, civil-military relations at the local level have exhibited a duality of cooperation and competition. In times of great duress, cooperation and mutual support between civil and military authorities, and soldiers and civilians at the local levels, has usually been the rule, not the exception. Whether combating floods or fires, providing disaster relief in the wake of earthquakes, or even the recent “campaign” against SARS, local governments and local PLA garrisons have worked in concert for the greater good. This is the story the Party-State would prefer to tell.

However, evidence indicates that civil-military tensions at the local level are increasingly a function of the pressures under which civilian and military officials labor to meet their respective national defense responsibilities in the face of new socio-economic challenges at the “grass-roots levels.” These pressures stand in bold relief when considering the challenges posed by conscription, demobilization, and the mustering of civilian assets for national defense mobilization.

For example, the widening gender gap and continued population growth in China insures, in theory, that there is no dearth of males available for conscription — and it is the responsibility of local civilian officials to produce them every year for the PLA. But meeting the quotas for *qualified candidates* is often problematic. For example, in rural China, the breakdown of the traditional household registration system (the *hu kou* system), the dissolution of the large agricultural communes of the past, and especially the exodus of country youth to the cities and coastal regions in search of work and higher wages is making it increasingly difficult for local officials to produce their quota of males who possess the requisite educational levels, clean criminal records, and medical qualifications for military service. The pressures on local officials are compounded by the compressed conscription cycle in the wake of the new military service laws. As a result, the PLA is not always getting the personnel it needs. The unqualified, with the connivance of pressured civilian officials, can buy their way into the PLA. At the same time, the qualified, especially in the cities, can buy their way *out* of military service by purchasing false statements of medical disqualification.⁸

A potentially greater challenge at the local level—and one that has broader implications for social stability—is the issue of demobilization. Large groups of two-year conscripts—numbering about 400,000 annually according to one statistic—are released from mandatory military service each year and sent back to their homes of record. These former soldiers must be reabsorbed into their communities, and are supposed to be guaranteed job placement, given preferential treatment for various social services, and in some cases provided a living allowance until they begin civilian employment.⁹

It is the responsibility of local governments to provide these benefits for demobilized conscripts. Depending upon the economic conditions of the locality, and the numbers of conscripts returning home, these requirements can pose tremendous burdens that not all localities can meet. These obligations were being so unevenly fulfilled at the local level that in 2002 Beijing issued a circular that was meant to force local officials to meet their obligations.¹⁰ And Beijing has a large stake in ensuring that they do. In May 2003, Professor Yu Jinrong of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, published

research which found that a good number of the peasant uprisings in one county in Hunan Province were led by males with prior service in the PLA.¹¹

Equal, if not greater, than the socio-economic burdens posed by returning conscripts is the challenge of absorbing the hundreds of thousands of career officers who have been, and continue to be, released from service in the course of the massive reductions in force that have taken place in the last few years.¹²

The difficulties associated with the reintegration of former officers into Chinese society, the complex options and accompanying regulations devised at the national level to accommodate officers released from active duty, and especially the burdens under which local governments are laboring to absorb these numbers are not well understood. For example, the unknown tens of thousands of officers who have chosen to take lateral transfers to state sector jobs (*zhuanye*, one of several options) are finding local officials hard-pressed to place them in civil bureaucracies that are under their own pressures to downsize, or in state-owned factories that are already inefficient due to underemployment. Placing these demobilized officers in jobs is all the more difficult when local officials have to deal with skill sets incompatible with local needs. Moreover, since the civil service and the military personnel systems have evolved along dissimilar paths over the past decade, finding positions where the demobilized officer receives a comparable level of salary and benefits is difficult.

A final issue in local civil-military relations that presents new challenges is the impact of a thriving private sector economy on the national defense mobilization system. Local governments still bear the costs of raising and training their people's militia units and providing logistical support to the PLA when large exercises are held in their locales. In today's China, however, "time is money," and resources sent from the private sector to support mobilization activities are resources not applied to achieving the "bottom line." Who, if anyone, will compensate local private entrepreneurs for the use of their resources? On what legal basis do local civil-military authorities request the support of private assets? What happens if local entrepreneurs do not provide the resources they are asked for, as was the case in Hainan Province in 2002 when only 50% of the civilian vehicles requested for a mobilization exercise actually showed up?¹³ For years now PLA mobilization officials, from the General Staff Department down to the county-level offices of the People's Armed Forces Departments, have been voicing a dire need for the National People's Congress to pass a National Defense Mobilization Law to grapple with these and other unresolved questions. The fact that such a law has yet to be passed is an indication that the politics and economics on this issue have not been fully resolved.

How the PLA is Adapting

The PLA is exhibiting adaptive capacity both in adjusting to China's new realities as well as taking advantages of new socio-economic conditions to achieve its own ends.

China's new socio-economic environment clearly presents many challenges to the PLA's modernization plans. The PLA, however, is responding by adjusting the institutional policies and practices that it can control, and by taking advantage of the opportunities presented by economic changes.

One example of this is the formation of a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) corps. Nearly simultaneously with the revision of the military service laws, the PLA in 1999 issued a revision to its *Regulations on Military Service of Active-Duty Soldiers*. The new *Regulations* laid the foundation for the creation, for the first time, of a professional corps of Non-Commissioned Officers.¹⁴ By January 2001 the PLA's four general departments issued a regulation that provided detailed policies and procedures for the recruitment, professional development, and career management of a cadre of professional senior enlisted persons. The new NCO Corps program, still in its infancy, will replace the previous haphazard practice of granting voluntary extensions to conscripts who previously served as surrogates for a professional NCO Corps, compensate for the turmoil resulting from shorter two-year conscription periods, and nurture a professional and full-career enlisted force to meet the demands of modern warfare.

Another example of the PLA taking advantage of the new economic environment is the creation in 1998 of the National Defense Scholarship program. Under this program, the PLA provides partial scholarships to worthy high school students to attend civilian universities in return for a commitment to be commissioned in the PLA upon graduation.¹⁵ The PLA established the program to take advantage the rising costs of a civilian college education in China, which is increasingly out of reach for talented but financially challenged high school students. With a scholarship program to offset the cost of education, the PLA has been able to take advantage of the civilian education system, to more easily recruit the types of students that it can train into the officers it needs for the future.

Beyond scholarships, the PLA is using China's civilian higher education system in other ways. This includes enrolling officers *already* serving on active duty in advanced degree programs at the nation's best civilian institutions; pulling its own military academies up to a higher level of academic standard through curriculum reforms modeled on civilian university models; and enhancing the quality of instruction at PLA academies by accepting top civilian professors as visiting faculty. In addition, the PLA is looking to China's civilian academic institutions to raise the level of the work done in its own academic and technical research institutes by partnering with civilian universities on joint research projects.¹⁶ Where once leaders of the Party enjoined the people of China to "learn from the PLA" it is now clear that the PLA is quite prepared to learn from other sectors of society.

PLA Modernization and Implications for the United States

Should the United States be worried about the PLA's modernization program? In the author's opinion, that is the wrong question to be asking. Whether the modernization of the PLA should or should not be a source of worry depends upon what that force will be used for in the future, and that is a political question, not a question that can be answered strictly on a capabilities-based assessment of the PLA's modernization program. In other words, it is about Beijing's intentions, not merely its capabilities. In addition, even if one looks at the question, "should the U.S. be worried?" strictly from a capabilities-based assessment, the answer also depends on how U.S. military modernization and transformation proceeds in the future.

For example, if one assumes that the U.S. military's program of transformation and modernization is going to stand still over the next decade then the PLA may be able to close the capabilities gap that currently exists. And yes, there might be cause to worry. If, on the other hand, U.S. military transformation and modernization continues, then it is unlikely that the current capabilities gap will be closed anytime soon. Thus, whether the US should be worried depends upon (1) the PLA's ability to continue to modernize (2) whether U.S. military capabilities will stagnate, remain frozen, or move further ahead as has been the historic norm, and (3) political factors that have nothing to do with a capabilities-based assessment of the PLA.

In closing, it is apparent that the immense socio-economic changes occurring in China today will continue to present great challenges, but also great opportunities, for the PLA. The PLA's ability to cultivate the high-tech soldiers capable of implementing its reform program in the face of tremendous socio-economic change is still up in the air. As Shi Yunsheng, former commander of the PLA Navy stated in 1998, "...those we need cannot come, or are not willing to stay after they have come, while those we do not need do not want to go away."¹⁷ The next 10 to 15 years will largely determine whether or not the PLA can manage its human capital to become the fully modernized and technologically capable force it aspires to be.

¹ Kenneth Allen, Dean Cheng, David Finkelstein, and Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, *Institutional Reforms of the Chinese People's Liberation Army: Overview and Challenges* (Alexandria, VA: The CNA Corporation, 2002), p. 3.

² For a discussion of adaptive change in response to extra-institutional stimuli see Guy L. Siebold, "Core Issues and Theory in Military Sociology," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, Summer 2001.

³ Anthony Saich, "Social Trends in China: Implications for the Chinese People's Liberation Army," in David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil-Military Issues in Today's China: Swimming in a New Sea*, (NY: ME Sharpe, 2006).

⁴ Xiaobing Li, “The Impact of Social Change on the PLA: A Chinese Military Perspective,” in David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil-Military Issues in Today’s China: Swimming in a New Sea*, (NY: ME Sharpe, 2006).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sijin Cheng, “Conscription: From the Masses,” in David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil-Military Issues in Today’s China: Swimming in a New Sea*, (NY: ME Sharpe, 2006).

⁷ Han Jun. “You Chengxiang Fenge Zouxiang Chengxiang Xietiao Fazhan” (From the Urban-Rural Divide to a Balanced Urban-Rural Development). *China Economic Times*, 2004-3-19.

⁸ Sijin Cheng, “Conscription: From the Masses,” in David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil-Military Issues in Today’s China: Swimming in a New Sea*, (NY: ME Sharpe, 2006).

⁹ Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, “Demobilization and Resettlement: The Challenge of Downsizing the People’s Liberation Army,” in David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil-Military Issues in Today’s China: Swimming in a New Sea*, (NY: ME Sharpe, 2006).

¹⁰ The circular was titled, *Circular on Conscientiously Implementing the “Conscription Order” and the “Demobilization Order” of the State Council and the Central Military Commission and Further Strengthening and Standardizing the Work of Preferential Resettlement* (2002). It was promulgated under the authority of the State Council’s Ministry of Civil Affairs.

¹¹ Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, “Demobilization and Resettlement: The Challenge of Downsizing the People’s Liberation Army,” in David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil-Military Issues in Today’s China: Swimming in a New Sea*, (NY: ME Sharpe, 2006).

¹² Most students of Chinese military affairs are well aware that in its search for a leaner and more capable military the PLA has undergone two major reductions in force since the million-man demobilization of 1985: a reduction by 500,000 that began in 1997, and another 200,000-person cut that commenced in 2003.

¹³ Xiaobing Li, “The Impact of Social Change on the PLA: A Chinese Military Perspective,” in David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil-Military Issues in Today’s China: Swimming in a New Sea*, (NY: ME Sharpe, 2006).

¹⁴ Yang Yangshen, Duan Yueshan, “Reform of Chinese Army’s NCO System Brings Historic Change to Military Personnel Structure,” *PLA Daily* (online version), October 13, 2004.

¹⁵ Tom Bickford, “Searching for a 21st Century Officer Corps,” in David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil-Military Issues in Today’s China: Swimming in a New Sea*, (NY: ME Sharpe, 2006).

See also: Sun Weijun, “PLA Department, Tianjin University Sign Agreement on Training Military Cadres,” *Zhongguo Xinwen She*, May 31, 2002; “PLA Enlarges Enrollment of Military Recruits in Civilian Universities,” *Xinhua*, May 7, 2004; and “First Batch of National Defense Students Graduate from Tsinghua University,” the *PLA Daily* (online version), July 14, 2004.

¹⁶ Kristen Gunness, “Educating the Officer Corps: The Chinese People’s Liberation Army and its Interactions with Civilian Academic Institutions,” in David M. Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil-Military Issues in Today’s China: Swimming in a New Sea*, (NY: ME Sharpe, 2006). See also Xi Shigang, “Report on Development of Senior Personnel of Science and Technology by the Arms Department of the PLA General Staff Headquarters,” the *PLA Daily* (online version), April 29, 2002; and “Military and Civilian Universities Jointly Launched Ph.D. Forum,” the *PLA Daily*, (online version), January 6, 2004.

¹⁷ Vice Admiral Shi Yunsheng, "Strategic Thinking on Vigorously Cultivating Cross-Century Navy Talents with Deng Xiaoping Theory as Guidance," *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*, No. 4, November 1998, pp. 69-73.