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Introduction

The first half of 2019 has seen a steady procession of developments marking a closer alignment between the United States and Taiwan (also known as the Republic of China, or ROC). In May, a meeting was held between U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton and his ROC counterpart David Lee (李大維) in the course of the latter’s visit to the United States (Taiwan News, May 25). In early June, the Pentagon’s newly-released Indo-Pacific Strategy Report included Taiwan in a list of “countries” friendly to the United States, and referred to Taiwan as one of the “reliable, capable, and natural partners of the United States” in Asia, which is “actively taking steps to uphold a free and open international order.” [1]
Events in July were capped off by a new round of U.S. military sales to Taiwan, and two brief visits to U.S. territory by ROC President Tsai Ing-Wen (蔡英文) (see details below). Taken together, these developments have signaled a clear reorientation of U.S. policy towards a closer relationship with Taiwan—one which has been eagerly reciprocated by President Tsai, who has proclaimed her administration’s “determination to promote Taiwan on the international stage” (Twitter, July 21). Conversely, the reaction has been harsh from state sources in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Xinhua, May 27), thereby threatening to introduce further tensions into a Sino-U.S. relationship that is already severely strained.

A New Round of Arms Sales to Taiwan

Throughout both the Bush (43) and Obama Administrations, arms sales to Taiwan were frequently delayed or aborted due either to U.S. concerns about damaging relations with the PRC, or to domestic political wrangling in Taiwan—and as a result, arms sales were often conducted on an irregular and ad hoc basis (CRS, August 29, 2014). Officials in the Trump Administration, by contrast, have indicated intent to normalize arms sales and other forms of security cooperation with Taiwan (VOA, July 19). In June, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Randall Shriver stated that Taiwan could contribute to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy through further investments in its own defense, and that the administration envisioned a “more normal process” for arms sales to Taiwan, which would “treat Taiwan as a normal security assistance partner.” [2]

Since April, the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) has notified Congress of intent to proceed with the sale to Taiwan of three major packages of military equipment and training services:

- The continuation of a pilot training program at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, and maintenance and logistics support for existing F-16 fighter aircraft in Taiwan's inventory (estimated cost of $500 million) (DSCA, April 15);
- A large package of military vehicles, munitions, and support equipment, headlined by one hundred eight M1A2T Abrams battle tanks (estimated cost of $2 billion) (DSCA, July 8);
- Two hundred fifty Block I-92F Stinger missiles and four Block I-92F Stinger Fly-to-Buy missiles, with associated support equipment (estimated cost of $223.56 million) (DSCA, July 8).

Additionally, there has been press speculation that an additional approval is forthcoming for sales of sixty-six new F-16V variant airframes (Taiwan News, July 23); however, as of the date of this article, no such notification has been issued.

The announcements of the arms sales drew predictable demands from the PRC to cancel the sales, as well as harsh condemnation and unspecified threats to levy sanctions on any companies involved with the sales (Xinhua, July 12; CNBC, July 15). In the wake of these notifications, the PRC also announced that it would
conduct air and naval exercises in the vicinity of the Taiwan Strait—exercises widely assumed to be a symbolic expression of Beijing’s displeasure (SCMP, July 14). After nearly three weeks, the expected exercises reportedly commenced with drills off the coast of Zhejiang Province on July 28 (SCMP, July 29).

Taiwan’s President Visits the United States in July

Symbolically, the most prominent sign of closer U.S.-Taiwan ties was the two-part visit by ROC President Tsai Ing-Wen to the United States in July. Visits to U.S. soil by senior Taiwan officials, even when undertaken in a nominally private capacity, have long been sources of severe friction in both the Sino-U.S. and the cross-Strait relationships: for example, Beijing’s reaction to the June 1995 visit by then-ROC President Lee Teng-Hui to give a speech at his alma mater of Cornell University was one of the precipitating factors of the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis (UPI, June 9, 1995; Scobell, January 1999).

In March 2018, the Taiwan Travel Act (TTA) was signed into U.S. law, containing language that explicitly called for reversing earlier policies under both Republican and Democratic administrations of denying travel access to the United States for senior ROC officials. [3] Although formal exchanges with Taiwan are still severely limited in comparison to states with whom the United States maintains official diplomatic relations, there has been a marked increase in U.S. visits by high-level Taiwan government officials since passage of the TTA.

President Tsai first made stops in the United States in August 2018, in the course of a trip to visit Paraguay and Belize (Taiwan Today, August 21). The days spent on U.S. soil were not official visits; rather, they were treated as "transit stops" on the way to South America. However, the extended layovers allowed Tsai to engage in activities of a political and (unofficial) diplomatic nature, to include a speech delivered at the Reagan Presidential Library in Los Angeles, and a visit to the Johnson Space Center in Houston (Politico, August 20). Tsai's remarks in California represented the first public statements made on U.S. soil by a Taiwan president since 2003, and she used the occasion both to assert Taiwan's value as a contributing member of the international community, and to praise Reagan's legacy as a defender of freedom throughout the world (CBS Los Angeles, April 14, 2018; ROC Presidential Office, April 14, 2018).

Tsai has conducted similar "transit stops" this year, beginning with a stay in Hawaii in March, made in the course of a trip to visit diplomatic allies in the Pacific (Honolulu Star-Advertiser, March 27). During this stop, Tsai pressed the case for U.S. approvals of Taiwan requests for new arms purchases, and made a speech that warned against the "Hong Kong example" of PRC efforts to undermine democratic societies like Taiwan (AFP, March 28).

In mid-July, President Tsai undertook a "Journey of Freedom, Democracy, and Sustainability" to the Caribbean from July 13-18 to visit four of the island states that still offer diplomatic recognition to the ROC: Haiti, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Saint Lucia (Agencia EFE, July 14; ROC
On both the outbound and return legs of this Caribbean trip, Tsai made stops in the United States: first in New York City on July 12-13, and then in Denver on July 19-20. Although the events conducted during these stops involved private institutions and state-level officials rather than representatives of the U.S. federal government, these meetings and speeches still represented the most ambitious and overtly political events conducted by a Taiwan political leader on U.S. soil in many years.

In New York, Tsai attended a conference hosted by the U.S.-Taiwan Business Council (see accompanying image), and was the key speaker at a Columbia University discussion event. At this latter engagement President Tsai spoke forcefully to praise Taiwan’s democratic evolution, and warned against the creeping authoritarian influences promoted by the PRC. She warned that “freedom around the world is under threat like never before,” and that “given the opportunity, authoritarianism will smother even the faintest flicker of democracy” in societies like Taiwan. She warned in particular about “economic enticements with hidden strings attached,” and stated that “China exploited [Taiwan’s] reliance [on the Chinese market] as a means to infiltrate our society, an attempt to use it as a bargaining chip to be traded for our democracy” (Columbia University, July 12; ROC Presidential Office, July 13).

On the return side of her Caribbean trip, President Tsai made a stop in Denver, where she was the guest at a dinner with state officials from Colorado and Wyoming (CBS Denver, July 18; Colorado Politics, July 18). She also attended multiple events hosted by Colorado Senator Cory Gardner, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia. These included: a visit to the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, CO; a visit to the National Center for Atmospheric Research’s Earth Observing
Tsai’s public events in the United States drew a predictably harsh reaction from media outlets and spokespersons for the PRC. Upon Tsai’s arrival in New York, PRC Ambassador Cui Tiankai tweeted that “Taiwan is part of China. No attempts to split China will ever succeed. Those who play with fire will only get themselves burned. Period.” (Twitter, July 12). The English edition of People’s Daily opined that “the United States played the Taiwan card against China, allowing Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen to use the United States as a platform to promote ‘Taiwan independence’ and undermine China-US relations… she seized every opportunity she could to make a show of it, serving as a pawn for foreign powers to interfere in China’s internal affairs” (People's Daily Online, July 16).

**Conclusion**

The combined weight of statements from official policy documents, an apparently more regular process for arms sales freed from political linkage, and high-level visits by ROC policymakers (even if treated in an unofficial, or only semi-official, capacity) all indicate a decisive shift in the nature of U.S. government policy towards Taiwan. Furthermore, this warming trend has been displayed in both the executive and legislative branches, and with bipartisan support across the U.S. political divide. Following the chill that settled into U.S.-Taiwan relations during the parallel George W. Bush / Chen Shui-Bian administrations, and an improved but still distant relationship between the Barack Obama / Ma Ying-Jeou administrations, the U.S.-Taiwan relationship is now the closest one seen in decades.
This warming of U.S.-Taiwan ties has progressed in tandem with the steady deterioration of relations between the United States and the PRC. Beijing continues to deny any legitimacy to the government of Taiwan, and maintains the rigid position that the island is an inalienable part of Chinese territory—and that it is therefore subject to the rightful authority of the PRC and its ruling Communist Party. Any movement towards closer U.S. relations with Taiwan may therefore be expected to produce a concurrent erosion of relations with Beijing. The Trump Administration has evidently decided that, at least for now, this is a price worth paying. Whether this trend continues, and whether it survives potential future political shifts in both Washington and Taipei, will be a development well-worth watching.

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Notes

[1] “As democracies in the Indo-Pacific, Singapore, Taiwan, New Zealand, and Mongolia are reliable, capable, and natural partners of the United States. All four countries contribute to U.S. missions around the world and are actively taking steps to uphold a free and open international order. The strength of these relationships is what we hope to replicate in our new and burgeoning relationships in the Indo-Pacific.” See: U.S. Department of Defense, Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region (June 1, 2019), p. 30.


[3] "This bill expresses the sense of Congress that the U.S. government should encourage visits between U.S. and Taiwanese officials at all levels… [and] permit high-level Taiwanese officials to enter the United States under respectful conditions and to meet with U.S. officials, including officials from the Departments of State and Defense." See: Text of Public Law #115-135 (Taiwan Travel Act), signed into law March 16, 2018.

[4] Currently, only seventeen states still maintain formal diplomatic relations with the ROC (the PRC will not allow any state to maintain dual relations with itself and the ROC). This list of seventeen is comprised primarily of small island states in the Pacific and the Caribbean, a handful of states in Latin America, and the Vatican. See: “Diplomatic Allies,” ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (undated).

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Introduction

Beijing is preparing for a host of major meetings and anniversaries in the months ahead. The first of these will be the annual senior leadership summer retreat at the Beidaihe resort in early August, when current Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo members meet with retired cadres—particularly, former affiliates of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) (Financial Review, August 19, 2016; SCMP, August 8, 2018). Next in line will be a military parade of unprecedented scale on October 1, when the leadership will commemorate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The October 1 parade will be expected to feature state-of-the-art military hardware, such as the Dong Feng 31AG intercontinental ballistic missile, and the J-20 stealth jet fighter. Super-sophisticated vehicles from China’s ambitious space exploration program will also be displayed (Ming Pao [Hong Kong], July 19). Preliminary plans for potentially an even greater celebration—the CCP’s 100th birthday in mid-2022—are already on the drawing boards.

In the midst of such preparations, as well as momentous issues such as the trade talks with the United States, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping has called upon members of the Party to embrace the ideals of Party history and Communist practice. In this, the tone that Chairman Xi strikes does not evoke the future: rather, it looks to the past as the 66 year-old princeling underscores the imperative for CCP members to maintain the “original aspirations” (初心, chuxin) of the Party’s earlier history. This term was prominently featured during Xi’s inspection trip to Inner Mongolia in mid-July, in the course of which a common official slogan was “don’t forget your chuxin and firmly remember your mission” (不忘初心, 牢记使命 / bu wang chuxin, laoji shiming) (Xinhua, July 16).

The Party’s “Original Aspirations” as Defined by Xi

Chuxin, one of Xi’s most commonly-used terms, is a reference to the original goals of the CCP. These include serving the people, rediscovering the party’s original and correct political orientations, realizing “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” and strengthening “party construction.” As Xi stated during his Inner Mongolia trip, “We must firmly bear in mind our chuxin and mission and implement a developmental platform of putting the people as the core [of party work].” While the paramount leader waxed eloquent on “new developmental concepts,” he mainly dwelled on “the job of stabilizing growth, pushing forward restructuring [of the economy], buttressing the standard of living and preventing risks,” and noted that the country’s 70 years of achievement had “fully proven that we are right in going down the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics.” He further asserted that the “CCP has won the embrace and support of the people because our party has from beginning to end firmly guarded the chuxin and mission of seeking happiness for the
Chinese people and aiming at the great renaissance of the Chinese nation." He boasted that if the party’s 90 million members will safeguard their chuxin, and pledge unquestioned loyalty to the leadership, the CCP "will remain impregnable and invincible" (Xinhua, July 16).

In a July article published in the party theoretical journal Seeking Truth, Xi admonished party members to "boost their self-consciousness and firmness in strengthening and pushing forward the political construction of the party" (Qstheory.cn, June 30). Xi has repeatedly cited Mao's instruction on the fact that “whether it be east, south, west, north or center, the party provides leadership for everything” (People's Daily, July 15; CPCNews, August 1). While a generation of reformers have advocated learning from the beneficial aspects of the Western model, Xi has insisted on what Mao called “a dialectical-materialist worldview and methodology.” As Xi has warned since taking power in 2012, the party cannot afford to make “subversive mistakes” in political and economic policies. “Subversive errors” are a reference to theories and policies that have betrayed the Maoist chuxin—and which, if adopted, could spell the end of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (China News Service, June 1, 2018; Xinhua, October 8, 2013).

What’s Behind the Revived Calls for Communist Chuxin?

Effusive displays of confidence aside, Xi’s back to basics ethos reflects the fact that the CCP is encountering immense difficulties. On the domestic front, the economy is going through rough patches, and official growth figures for the second quarter of this year (6.2 percent) are the lowest in 27 years. The two potential new growth poles—high technology and consumer spending—are facing tough times. The country’s top
information technology companies, for example, are having trouble obtaining core components from the United States and other Western countries. Consumer spending is hitting the doldrums partly because of unprecedented levels of household debt, which is estimated at 52 percent of gross domestic product (HK01.com, July 15; South China Morning Post, March 21).

On a global level, China is locked in what many commentators call a new “Cold War” with the United States—one in which trade disputes, which have caused some multinationals to relocate out of China, are but one facet of the colossal confrontation. The recent anti-Beijing protests in Hong Kong have added to leadership concerns that what Xi calls “black swan events”—social incidents morphing into full-scale color revolutions—could appear on the mainland (China Brief, February 20; Apple Daily [Hong Kong], June 13). Xi’s response to China’s current crisis is to return to Maoist chuxin.

However, the calls for professing allegiance to the Party and reinstating its chuxin may be a cynical way for Xi to demand further loyalty to himself. As Xi stated in a Politburo study session in mid-2018, “[I]n upholding party leadership, the most important thing is to safeguard the authority of the party central authorities (中央, zhongyang) and to concentrate and unify leadership [at the top]” (People’s Daily, July 1, 2018). Indeed, the putative “party core for life” has doubled down on the imperative of the zhongyang enjoying the right to “set the tone [for major decisions]” (一锤定音, yizhuidingyin) and to ensure that “[controversies] must be settled by the uppermost authority” (定于一尊, dingyuzun) (Xinhua, July 15; CCTV, July 5). In other words, Xi has arrogated to himself the position of custodian of the Maoist “one voice chamber.”

**Signs of Opposition, and Xi’s Veiled Threats of Renewed Party Purges**

However, Xi is far from having a Mao-like grip on authority, as evidenced by the indirect criticisms levied on the “21st century Mao Zedong” from senior CCP members who do not belong to the Xi camp. The “original aspirations” ideological movement could be an effective means by Xi to silence his internal critics. Faced with Trump’s increasingly harsh demands for Chinese trade-related concessions, Xi has assumed the moral high ground by threatening to go back on the road of “self-reliance” (自力更生, ziligengsheng)—and has even issued calls to embark on a “new Long March” of Maoist-style autarky (CNR.cn, May 21; Guangming Daily, April 20).

These latter steps have been widely perceived as Xi protecting his flank against critics who had authored a spate of articles in official media outlets that slammed the alleged penchant of unnamed leaders for cozying up to the Americans. Foremost among these was a June Xinhua commentary titled “Let Capitulationism Be Like a Rat in the Street,” which claimed that the media was replete with comments such as “China is in a disadvantaged position and it is wise to call upon everybody to make a compromise” (Xinhua, June 7). There are similarly hard-line articles in Guangming Daily and other official outlets, which have laid into the Chinese negotiation team’s apparent propensity for striking a deal with Washington (Radio Free Asia, June 12; Guangming Daily, June 6).
When National People’s Congress Chairman and PBSC member Li Zhanshu (栗战书) first coined the slogans yichuidingyin and dingyuyizun in July last year, the expected public protestations of loyalty to Xi—a ritual known as biaotai (表态), or “showing fealty”—failed to take place (China Brief, August 1, 2018). Except during the annual sessions of the NPC and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference last March, few PBSC or ordinary Politburo members saluted Xi’s decision-making prowess and other leadership qualities. In relation to the chuxin campaign, after Xi himself asked fellow cadres to support his yichuidingyin and dingyuyizun prerogatives, few among Xi’s protégés joined the biaotai game. This, despite the relatively large number of close Xi associates in the Politburo, including Li Qiang (李强), Chen Min’er (陈敏尔), Li Hongzhong (李鸿忠), Li Xi (李希), and Chen Quanguo (陈全国) (respectively the party bosses of Shanghai, Chongqing, Tianjin, Guangdong and Xinjiang). The exception was Beijing party secretary Cai Qi (蔡奇): in discussing how to implement the chuxin credo in the capital, Cai said party members must “stay absolutely loyal, and use practical actions to safeguard the zhongyang’s authority in yichuidingyin and dingyuyizun” (Beijing Daily, June 22; People’s Daily, June 22). It is noteworthy, however, that Cai seemed to be rendering his full support to the zhongyang in general, rather than to Xi in particular.

Xi has dropped hints that if his loyalty drive is not entirely successful, he might well launch another rectification campaign to rid the CCP of unqualified (or disloyal) members. Six years ago, Xi unleashed a previous purge by calling upon all cadres to “look [themselves] in the mirror, straighten out their attire, take a bath and cure their sickness” (People’s Daily, June 19, 2013; Ta Kung Pao [Hong Kong], May 5, 2013). While laying utmost emphasis on the Maoist chuxin, Xi has praised the infamous party purification movement that the Great Helmsman organized in the CCP’s Yan’an base during the early 1940s. In Xi’s speech marking the 98th birthday of the CCP in early July, Xi indicated that the question of the “four impurities”—a reference to lax standards in thought, politics, organization and work style—in the Party was still serious and must be rectified. “We must boost our combative spirit,” Xi told members who have supposedly failed to measure up to his tough standards. “We must be brave enough to brandish the sword and to engage in struggles so as to resolutely prevent and curb the syndrome of political numbness [as manifested in] not being able to make out the intentions of the enemies, failing to tell right from wrong, and failing to delineate the right path” (Seeking Truth Net, July 15; Apple Daily [Hong Kong], July 2).

Conclusion

In a message redolent of the “politics takes command” credo of the Cultural Revolution, Xi has stated that “political construction is an eternal task of the party.” Unlike the Great Architect of Reform Deng Xiaoping, who posited “economic construction” as a key task of the party, Xi has identified “grasping the correct political orientation” as “the number one issue for the party’s survival and development.” Accordingly, the correct political orientation must be manifested when the party is “planning major strategies, forming major policies, planning important tasks and implementing important work” (People’s Daily, July 17).
As set forth by Xi, this “correct political orientation” must be grounded in the proper *chuxin*. The ideological themes advocated by Xi—and especially this call for a return to the “original aspirations” of the CCP—hearken back to an idealized vision of the Party’s history. However, in the final analysis, Xi will only be able to win the respect of officials and ordinary people alike if he can come up with innovative ways to solve the country’s problems—and not wallow in the theoretical platitudes of the Maoist past.

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**A Preliminary Survey of CCP Influence Efforts in Hong Kong**

*By Russell Hsiao*

*Editor’s note:* Our previous two issues contained articles by Russell Hsiao that profiled institutions and methods employed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to cultivate influence in Japan (*A Preliminary Survey of CCP Influence Operations in Japan*, June 26, 2019) and in Singapore (*A Preliminary Survey of CCP Influence Operations in Singapore*, July 16, 2019). In this issue, Mr. Hsiao completes this series by examining the organizations and methods by which the CCP seeks to erode the independent institutions and political norms of Hong Kong, and thereby to more fully assert Beijing’s control over the city.

**Introduction and Background**

The steady erosion of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR)’s autonomy that has visibly occurred in the two decades since reversion—and accelerated under Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping since 2012—raises questions as to how the social, political, and legal institutions that make up the foundation of Hong Kong’s distinctive system and political autonomy have been eroded since the 1997 retrocession. This article provides a preliminary survey describing some of the means by which the central government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and its ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) intervene and exercise influence in Hong Kong—through the PRC Liaison Office, political parties, media, academia, and community organizations—in order to promote the CCP’s political agenda and undermine the influence of the territory’s pro-democracy forces.

The CCP has long sought to exert greater control over Hong Kong, but its methods have changed dramatically over time. In 1967, pro-PRC revolutionary riots instigated and organized by underground Communist forces led to a sweeping crackdown by the colonial government, which wiped out much of the CCP’s organizational structure in Hong Kong. [1] By contrast, CCP efforts that began prior to the 1997
reversion of the territory to the PRC have emphasized efforts to build behind-the-scenes influence through social organizations and influential persons.

An early warning sign for Beijing came in 1991, six years before the handover. In the first ever direct election of the Legislative Council (LEGCO) in Hong Kong that year [2], all the pro-Beijing candidates were defeated. Shocked by the result, Lu Ping (鲁平), then-director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office in the PRC State Council, publicly encouraged the organization of pro-Beijing political parties in preparation for the 1995 LEGCO elections. Politicians affiliated with pro-Beijing labor unions and other CCP-influenced organizations followed Beijing’s orders and formed the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB) in 1992 (Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, undated).

The evolution of China’s Hong Kong policy reached a turning point in 2003, after public angst came to a head over the attempt by SAR authorities to revise Hong Kong Basic Law Article 23. This step would have criminalized “political activities” by foreign entities, and cooperation with those foreign entities by local bodies. Following this controversy, the CCP intensified united front activities in Hong Kong. [3]

Image: The founding ceremony in July 1992 for the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (later renamed the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong), the pro-Beijing coalition in Hong Kong’s Legislative Council. (Source: DAB)

The Central Government Liaison Office in Hong Kong

Central government organizations generally kept a low profile in Hong Kong in the first 10 years after the handover. Until 2000, the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) operated under the loose cover of the New China News Agency (Xinhua
She, 新华社—also NCNA or Xinhua News Agency). One informed observer has described the relations between China and Hong Kong as “One Country, Two Systems,” but noted that within Hong Kong there is “One System, Two Administrations.” [4] The first of the “two administrations” is the local government headed by the chief executive (and selected by Beijing through the election committee), which is legally accountable to the Hong Kong people and Beijing. The second administration is the representative of the Central Government in Hong Kong, operating from the Liaison Office. Formally established in 2000, the office is currently headed by Wang Zhimin (王志民), who acts as the top CCP official in Hong Kong.

The Pro-Beijing “United Front” Architecture in Hong Kong

One of the principal means by which the CCP attempts to channel its influence globally is through its network of united front organizations (China Brief, May 9; China Brief, May 9). Hong Kong is no exception. The united front in Hong Kong follows a strategy of “long term cultivation,” with activities formed along “battle lines” (zhantian，战线) and divided across a broad social strata. [5] According to Sonny Lo, as part of this whole-of-society approach, the united front simultaneously engages multiple interest groups regardless of their political inclinations. Targeted constituencies include: the DAB and other pro-Beijing parties; Fujianese and Taiwanese interest groups; women’s interest groups; “All-China Federation” labor unions; businessmen, civil servants, and educators; and community organizations (China Uncensored, July 5).

Local observers claim that the Liaison Office coordinates the United Front system in Hong Kong. One prominent author has estimated that the united front architecture extends over more than 600 various organizations, and that “it has cultivated as many as 4,000 to 6,000 civic groups over the years.” [6] According to Lee Wing-Tat (李永達), a former member of the LEGCO and chairman of the Democratic Party, there are around 210,000 underground CCP cadres in Hong Kong (Liberty Times, March 25).

Trade Federations and Labor Unions

Trade federations and labor unions provide one of the major conduits for CCP co-option activities. This includes groups such as the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (FTU), the Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers (FEW), and pro-CCP chambers of commerce. According to one observer, these federations engage in grassroots outreach and perform social services—such as bringing food and other basic living essentials to supporters, hosting dinners, and similar activities—in order to expand the support base for the CCP. These tactics were described by one analyst as “vote buying during non-election season.” Given Hong Kong’s legal status as a Special Administrative Region of the PRC (with no legal restrictions preventing its people from participating in political activities in China), the CCP reinforces these united front tactics by recruiting pro-Beijing community leaders in Hong Kong to sit on local and provincial-level branches of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). [7]
The All-China Federations (Zhonghua Quanguo Hui, 中华全国会), are national-level organizations under the CPPCC, a political-advisory body directed by the CCP (Gov.cn, February 9, 2005). In particular, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (Zhonghua Quanguo Zhonggong Hui, 中华全国总工会) is the most active and has the longest history in Hong Kong. Other active All-China Federations in Hong Kong include the All China Women’s Federation (Zhonghua Quanguo Funu Lianhe Hui, 中华全国妇女联合会) and the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce (Zhonghua Quanguo Gongshangye Lianhe Hui, 中华全国工商业联合会) (All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, undated). While not directly listed, local observers believe that the Hong Kong chapters are subordinate to, and serve as local chapters of, these All-China Federations. [8]

Political Parties

Because Hong Kong is a SAR, the PRC government is able to exert indirect control over the Hong Kong elections. Under Hong Kong’s Basic Law, half of the seats (35) representing geographical constituencies in the LEGCO are subject to direct elections, while the other half are elected by functional representatives (businesses, professionals, banks, insurance companies, etc.), which are generally pro-establishment. Despite this structural limitation, the pro-democracy coalition still generally wins around 55% of popular support in the LEGCO elections, but the pro-Beijing coalition still controls the legislature through the functional representatives. The CCP thus exerts indirect control over the LEGCO by its control over the coalition of pro-Beijing parties. [9]

United front mobilization is most effective at the local district-level. According to Lee Wing-Tat, on average there are 550 underground cadres in each of Hong Kong’s 450 districts (Liberty Times, March 25). The aforementioned networks are mobilized for elections and counter-protests. [10] DAB support at the district level is consistent with and appears to be an indicator of effective mobilization, generally leading to electoral victories for the pro-establishment parties. At the same time, pro-democracy forces do not have comparable resources at the district level. According to Loh, “Overlapping memberships among DAB, FTU, and key united front bodies result in a ‘triple alliance’ among them to count on each other for campaigning support.” [11]

Media

Hong Kong is still an open society, and the territory’s citizens have access to alternate sources of information. However, traditional media networks are coming increasingly under the control of pro-Beijing entities. [12] Aside from Apple Daily and Ming Pao, most newspapers, television networks, and online news outlets are either directly owned or indirectly controlled by pro-Beijing businessmen. At the same time, CCP propaganda work under Xi Jinping has become more aggressive. In the case of the ongoing protests in Hong Kong, China is using propaganda on at least two levels. First, it is selectively showing its domestic population negative news about the anti-extradition protests (such as portraying only the alleged violence of protesters,
Academia

Academic freedom has been curtailed by the filling of senior executive positions by pro-CCP mainlanders. Pressure has also been applied against faculty members, and some junior academics were terminated for their involvement in the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Administrators in eight government-funded universities were handpicked by Hong Kong’s former chief executive, and are alleged to be increasingly pro-Beijing. [14] Academic associations such as the China Association of Professors in Hong Kong and Macau are also united front outfits, with many members sitting in the CPPCC and the NPC. [15]

Community Organizations

The CCP is also utilizing community organizations (shetuan, 社团) to mobilize support for pro-Beijing political parties at the grassroots level. Hometown, kinship, and clan associations are prominent examples of these community organizations. The PRC Liaison Office is often seen engaging with the leaders of community organizations as part of its co-option strategy for business elites and grassroots individuals, and offers them benefits such as selection for seats on statutory boards (and sometimes affiliations with the NPC or CPPCC). It’s worth pointing out that most community organizations provide social services for real needs, and in doing so build trust and loyalty. These community organizations are then mobilized when necessary for elections or counter-protests. (Anecdotal evidence of counter-protesters claiming that they do not know what they are protesting appears to support this observation.) [16]

Triads

Beijing established ties with underworld figures in Hong Kong prior to the handover in 1997, seeking an additional means of future influence in the territory (Asia Times, November 30, 2018). This arrangement was hinted at by then-PRC Public Security Minister Tao Siju (陶驷駒), who told reporters in 1993 that some of the city’s triads “are patriotic” and that they “love the country and love the party” (SCMP, April 23, 2016; Hong Kong Free Press, July 27). According to Hong Kong academic T. Wing Lo, “triad leaders get a lot of money from the CCP through middle men” in the united front architecture (SMH, July 22).

Pan-democratic legislators in Hong Kong have in the past accused triad gangs of acting as violent enforcers for the city’s pro-Beijing administration, as in instances where gangs attacked protestors during the “Occupy Movement” in autumn 2014 (The Guardian, October 4, 2014). Triad gangs are also widely suspected of involvement in attacks against protestors amid the city’s current unrest—as when a large group of men
wearing white shirts carried out an apparently organized attack on commuters in the Yuen Long train station on the evening of July 21 (see accompanying images).

Image left: Men wearing white shirts and carrying sticks, widely suspected of being triad gang members, attack commuters (many of whom were returning from an anti-administration protest) in the Yuen Long subway station on the evening of July 21, 2019. (Source: SCMP)

Image right: A photo of pro-administration LEGCO member Junius Ho (Ho Kuan-Yiu, 何君堯) (left), shaking hands with a suspected triad member on the night of July 21, 2019. (Source: Reddit)

Conclusion

The Chinese Communist Party has long considered it necessary to intervene in Hong Kong, even well before the territory reverted back to China in 1997. A decade before the handover, the late Chinese patriarch Deng Xiaoping stated openly: “After 1997 we shall still allow people in Hong Kong to attack the Chinese Communist Party and China verbally, but what if they should turn their words into action, trying to convert Hong Kong into a base of opposition to the mainland under the pretext of ‘democracy’? Then we would have no choice but to intervene.” [17] The ongoing and escalating standoff between pro-democracy forces and city authorities (with Beijing involved behind the scenes) reflects the CCP’s imperative to enforce control over the city.

For the CCP, Hong Kong represents an imminent existential threat: it is a part of China, but it is not under full PRC administration. Beijing is clearly concerned that the city is turning into a “base of opposition to the mainland,” and as a response has been intensifying united front influence operations to affect Hong Kong’s political institutions and change its social fabric (Financial Times, July 14). CCP influence operations appear to be most successful with traditional constituencies such as unions and business groups, and with fringe groups of Hong Kong society (e.g., new migrants and triads), but far less successful with the current mainstream of Hong Kong society. However, demographic trends are shifting and mainland Chinese immigrants make up about 12.8 percent of Hong Kong’s population (SCMP, August 15, 2018). Although
more people appear be participating in united front activities, it is not clear whether these activities are truly changing hearts and minds. [18] If the 2003, 2014, and now 2019 protests serve as indicators, Beijing’s strategy has obtained influence in Hong Kong, but not affection.

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Notes
[2] The first ever legislative election (indirect) was conducted in 1985 after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Author’s interview, Hong Kong, July 11, 2019.
[12] Author’s interview, Hong Kong, July 12, 2019.
[15] It is noteworthy to point out that the colonial education system is also an important pillar for ensuring Hong Kong’s autonomy. An estimated 93% of primary and secondary schools are NGO owned, only about 7% are government-owned; an even more limited number are owned by leftist schools (pro-Beijing). Many do not necessarily support “patriotic education.” At the same time, official PRC policy is that Hong Kong ceased to be a colony in 1972; however, in practice the CCP still treats Hong Kong as dealing with “decolonization” (which emphasizes the need for united front operations). The civil service system still values Hong Kong’s autonomy based on the civil service system (education), independent judiciary, and rule of law. Source: Author’s interview, Hong Kong, July 10, 2019.
Major Themes in China’s 2019 National Defense White Paper

By Elsa Kania and Peter Wood

Introduction

On July 24, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) issued its first new national defense white paper (NDWP) since 2015 (Xinhua). “China’s National Defense in a New Era” attempts both to articulate a vision of global security in which China is a driving force for “world peace,” and to establish clear red lines on China’s core “sovereignty, security, and development interests.” While unsparing in its critique of power politics and “hegemonism,” this document also calls for China’s armed forces to “adapt to the new landscape of strategic competition.” Although the paper includes some notable information regarding the modernization and development of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), these issues will be examined specifically in a later article.

While caution is required against over-interpreting a document intended for messaging to a global audience, certain themes provide important takeaways. In particular, “China’s National Defense in a New Era” offers insights into how the PRC leadership imagines a world order characterized by greater multipolarity, its aspirations to exercise leadership within that “community of common destiny,” and the strategic objectives on which Beijing will brook no compromise. This paper reveals Beijing’s intentions to reshape the current architecture of the global order towards a future more favorable for its interests, which are expanding into new domains around the globe.

Dreams of a New Global Order

“China’s National Defense in a New Era” continues an official narrative on China’s emergence as a great power with global influence. While this latest defense white paper reflects the PRC’s response to new directions in U.S. national security strategy, there are striking differences in how Beijing and Washington portray the dynamics of a time when the strategic landscape is undergoing “profound changes.” In discussing the security situation in the Asia-Pacific, the claim that countries in the region are “increasingly aware that they are members of a community with shared destiny” (命运共同体, mingyun gongtongti) asserts a narrative in line with Beijing’s ideological inclinations. Similarly, in a 2017 white paper on Asia-Pacific security cooperation, the PRC had articulated its commitment to “shoulder greater responsibilities for regional and
global security, and provide more public security services to the Asia-Pacific region and the world at large” (State Council Information Office, January 2017). [1]

Relative to prior defense white papers, certain staple messages from Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda are featured more prominently. The framing of this white paper links China’s defense directly to the notion of a “community of common destiny for humanity” (人类命运共同体, renlei mingyun gongtongti), often rendered in English as a “community of a shared future for mankind.” [2] While the 2015 NDWP had also described a “community of shared destiny,” the 2019 edition directly describes Chinese power as the underpinning of that community.

As a theory of global governance, this concept has been clearly elevated in importance under Xi Jinping's leadership, emerging as a major element of PRC diplomacy. In particular, Xi Jinping has featured the “community of a common destiny for humanity” in many of his major speeches on international relations (China Brief, July 16). This phrasing is assessed to encapsulate “Beijing’s long-term vision for transforming the international environment to make it compatible with China’s governance model and emergence as a global leader.” [3] The prominent placement of this vision within this latest NDWP is unsurprising, yet nonetheless significant.

**China’s “Strong Military Dream” in a New Global Order**

This white paper links Xi Jinping’s discourse on the “China Dream” (中国梦, Zhongguo Meng) with this vision for a new world order. The “strong military dream” (强军梦, qiang jun meng) is often characterized as an essential element to secure the China Dream; that narrative is now expanded to argue that a more
powerful Chinese military is equally essential to this global dream (Qiushi, December 1, 2013). The paper attempts to reframe the trajectory of Chinese military modernization by claiming: “A strong military of China is a staunch force for world peace, stability and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.” This assertion attempts to reframe the trajectory of Chinese military modernization, which has progressed at a speed that has often provoked regional concerns, as instead a boon for China’s neighbors. The Chinese military is characterized as playing a role that is constructive, directed to “actively participate in the reform of [the] global security governance system.”

Although the PRC’s aspiration to exercise a leading influence in global governance and contribute to reforms of that system are hardly surprising, this is the first time that China’s armed forces have been so directly and officially connected to that agenda. It continues to be debated whether this intention to reform the world order should be considered a hallmark of revisionism, or a rightful assertion of greater influence commensurate with growing capabilities. However, the articulation of the Chinese military’s intention to “contribute to a security architecture” is a more novel framing of the PRC’s national defense policy. The call for such a new architecture to be characterized by equality—or literally “inclusivity” (包容, baorong)—implies a shift away from the current global system of alliances. This apparent objective is rendered even more explicit by the advocacy of “partnerships rather than alliances.” Consistently, China has criticized U.S. efforts to strengthen military alliances as “adding complexity to regional security.”

This critique of military alliances is interesting when juxtaposed against the deepening of defense cooperation between China and Russia. This complex relationship, categorized as a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era,” is characterized in this document as possessing significance for “maintaining global strategic stability”—perhaps an implicit allusion to the function of this deepening alignment in balancing against the United States. Strikingly, this partnership is starting to take on certain features of a military alliance, involving “the sound development of exchange mechanisms at all levels, expanded cooperation in high-level exchanges, military training, equipment, technology, and counter-terrorism.” This military cooperation has notably extended to the PLA’s participation in Russia’s Vostok exercise in September 2018. The joint air patrols by strategic bombers that entered South Korea’s airspace in July 2019 illustrate another evolution of this partnership to target a U.S. ally (Eurasia Daily Monitor, July 25).

In this “new era,” China’s armed forces are called upon to take on new global missions in an unprecedented manner. Although the rise and rapid growth of China’s military power has provoked concern, this NDWP argues that “China’s armed forces have responded faithfully to the call for a community with a shared future for mankind,” through “actively fulfilling the international obligations of the armed forces of a major country.” Such discourse indicates that the Chinese military today may be preparing to undertake the role of “global policeman” that the U.S. military has traditionally shouldered in providing “public security goods,” including contributing to the security of global passages (e.g., sea lanes). Notably, there is even an allusion to plans to “play a constructive role in the political settlement of hotspot issues”—a questionable claim given China’s
recent actions, such as boycotting resolutions to address the Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar (Reuters, December 17, 2018). At the same time, the notion that China “is opposed to interference in the external affairs of others” is belied already by an extensive body of evidence of influence revealing activities intended for precisely that purpose, prominently in Australia and Singapore (China Brief, May 9; China Brief, July 16).

Signaling of Red Lines and Resolve

“China’s National Defense in a New Era” is clearly intended to send strong signals to a global audience. However, this communication of redlines and resolve often stands in stark contradiction to the discourse on China’s commitment to “world peace,” and claims that its policy and strategic intentions are purely defensive (Xinhua, July 24). PRC warnings regarding Taiwan are highly prominent. The NDWP adopts a tone that is much more strident compared to the 2013 or 2015 editions, potentially indicating a response to trends in Taiwan's politics, and increased skepticism over the viability of “one country, two systems” as a model in light of the situation in Hong Kong. Noting “the fight against separatists is becoming more acute,” this official document includes the following statement: “To solve the Taiwan question and achieve complete reunification of the country is in the fundamental interests of the Chinese nation and essential to realizing national rejuvenation.”

By this logic, China’s goal of “national rejuvenation” by 2049 will remain incomplete until and unless Taiwan is “reunified” with the PRC. [4] Decrying “any foreign interference” (i.e., potential support from the United States), the statement of inevitability is again repeated: “China must be and will be reunited.” In a warning that comes across ominously, “We make no promise to renounce the use of force, and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures.” Although such threats are a frequent feature of Chinese propaganda, the tone and language are heightened significantly compared to earlier NDWPs. The signaling is directed just as much against the United States as against Taiwan, considering such decisions as the recent $2.2 billion U.S. arms sale to Taiwan (Xinhua, June 6). These threats, intended to be reinforced by the “stern warning” of “sailing ships and flying aircraft around Taiwan,” may backfire and are ironically juxtaposed with the claim that China will “never seek hegemony, expansion, or spheres of influence.” From Beijing’s perspective, the notion of “reunification” may be justified and described as defending national sovereignty, but such an objective is inherently offensive and involves expansionism relative to the status quo.

Ambiguities of Language in the 2019 NDWP

Although this NDWP is clearly intended for a global audience, the official English translation of this paper seems lacking. Certain discrepancies between English and Chinese versions of official PRC documents can be telling as to different narratives intended for internal and external audiences. However, the official English translation appears contradictory in ways that can be confusing, whether deliberately or unintentionally, to those who cannot reference the original Chinese version to clarify meaning. [5] Notably, the paper stresses
that the Chinese military’s missions include “effectively protect[ing] the security and legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese people, organizations and institutions” (emphasis added).

Here, a literal and accurate translation would be "overseas Chinese citizens" (海外中国公民, haiwai Zhongguo gongmin), and that difference is significant. The assertion of a mission to defend the rights and interests of those who are ethnic Chinese (中华, Zhonghua) non-citizens would be newsworthy, presenting a striking parallel to Russia’s assertion of an obligation to defend ethnic Russians in other countries. On the other hand, a commitment to protecting overseas Chinese citizens or nationals is hardly surprising and reflects consistency with the 2013 defense white paper (Xinhua, April 16, 2013). However, it remains unclear whether that choice of translation was deliberate, or simply reflected a lack of precision in phrasing. Regardless, the conflation may be telling regarding the CCP’s perspective.

**China’s Concept of National Security**

For this new era, concerns of political security remain of tantamount importance for the regime. [6] This document highlights the imperative for China’s national defense to “safeguard the political security, the people’s security and social stability” (保卫国家政治安全、人民安全和社会稳定 / baowei guojia zhengzhi anquan, renmin anquan he shehui wending), listed second only to “to deter and resist aggression.” In this context, the introduction of the concept of “people’s security” (人民安全, renmin anquan), which is seen as the “soul” and core purpose of national security, alludes to the factors required for improvement of the “people’s well-being,” reflecting underlying connections between national defense and continued development (PLA Daily, April 20, 2018). Increasingly, there are also concerns about threats to social stability in new domains, especially cyberspace. The security and survival of the regime is an absolute imperative for the CCP, and China’s armed forces are required and expected to defend it if necessary.

Although CCP concerns over social stability appear to remain intense, this latest NDWP claims that “China continues to enjoy political stability, ethnic unity and social stability,” asserting a “notable increase” in “resilience to risks.” At the same time, this document escalates linguistically to call for actively “cracking down on proponents of separatist movements such as “Tibet independence ” and the creation of “East Turkistan,” rendering the more coercive approach that has been tragically displayed a matter of official policy. Against this backdrop, the surprising assessment about unity and stability may reflect greater confidence in the growing coercive capacity of the state, including enhanced surveillance and powerful paramilitary capabilities. For instance, the People’s Armed Police (PAP), which has primary responsibility for internal security missions, has been elevated bureaucratically and functionally to be situated under the command of the Central Military Commission (CMC) as of December 2017. [7] In addition to the PAP, the PLA also “supports the civil authorities in maintaining social stability, provides security for major events, and responds to emergencies in accordance with the law.” This statement, when juxtaposed with signaling about potential military intervention in Hong Kong, may convey an ominous message.
Conclusion

This “new era” of China’s national defense is characterized by both changes and consistency in the PRC’s global outlook and interests. At a time when U.S. strategy is highlighting a new era of great power rivalry, the 2019 NDWP may appear at first glance to present a much more conciliatory perspective. However, the intention to “reform” the system of global governance and create a new security architecture revealed in the document are nonetheless concerning. China may soon encounter new tests of this vision for “world peace” and security, as leaders in Beijing confront intense protests in Hong Kong and ponder the potential outcomes of presidential elections in Taiwan set for January 2020. In the meantime, China’s military power continues to increase in a manner justified as commensurate with its global standing and interests.

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Notes
[1] This white paper on Asia-Pacific security cooperation was released in 2017 through the State Council Information Office. Although the issues that it discusses pertain to defense, this document was not considered or characterized as a national defense white paper because its subject pertained to regional diplomacy, rather than defense. Nonetheless, it makes for an interesting comparison to this latest 2019 national defense white paper.
[2] This concept did not originate with Xi Jinping and was initially featured in Hu Jintao’s report to the 18th Party Congress in 2012 (People’s Daily, August 15, 2017).
[4] To be precise, the actual and accurate phrasing is “unified” (统一), particularly considering that Taiwan has not ever been subject to the sovereignty of the People’s Republic of China in its modern history.
[5] As another example, elsewhere in the document, there is an allusion to progress that China’s armed forces have “innovated in military doctrine.” Since the PLA does not appear to have formally released a new generation of its equivalent to doctrine, known as operational regulations (作戰条令) since 1999, this update could appear to be quite notable. However, the actual phrasing here is better translated as “military theoretical innovation” (军事理论创新), and thus does not appear to be an indication that the PLA has actually completed its full doctrinal revisions.


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Assessing Mental Health Challenges in the People’s Liberation Army, Part 1: Psychological Factors Affecting Service Members, and the Leadership Response

By Zi Yang

Editor’s note: This is the first part of a two-part article that addresses the efforts of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to deal more effectively with the challenges of mental health, which can have serious impacts on the morale and readiness of individual service members—and therefore, on the combat readiness of the PLA as a whole. Part 1 of this article will provide a summary overview of psychological issues in the PLA as revealed by internal surveys and assessments by Chinese military medical personnel, as well as discussion of the policy responses under consideration by PLA leaders. Part 2 of the article, to appear in our next issue, will provide a more detailed examination of the stresses presented by particular operating environments, and the resulting impacts on the psychological health of service members assigned to those environments.

Introduction

The soldiers of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) have consistently been represented in official propaganda as the best of Chinese society: brave, loyal and dedicated individuals always on guard to protect the national interest. The image of PLA soldiers presented in Chinese media is one of selfless individuals ready to sacrifice for the people, and resolute fighters overcoming all difficulties in training for war. However,
like any other member of society, soldiers are emotional human beings rather than cold, steely war machines. Beyond the fierce public image, what is going on in the minds of PLA service members when serving out their daily duties?

The PLA is now giving more attention to the morale and mental well-being of servicemembers and their families. One possible explanation for this is that the PLA high command has recognized the challenges it faces regarding military mental health: according to studies conducted by China's leading military psychologists, over a quarter of service members in the PLA—which has not fought a war since 1979—are experiencing some kind of psychological problem. [1] This is a percentage comparable to the U.S. military, which has been engaged in global combat operations for nearly two decades (U.S. Defense Health Agency, January 2017).

Writing in the Journal of Third Military Medical University, China's most esteemed military psychologist Feng Zhengzhi, and co-author Liu Xiao, state that a service member's mental health is defined by “the servicemember’s adaptation to the military environment in a positive and cheerful way. This is specifically expressed in good cognition, positive and stable emotions, noble feelings, strong will, good character and harmonious interpersonal relations.” [2] This definition stresses the importance of a service member’s coping mechanisms, and the ability to adapt to a fast-changing military environment. Especially useful are the six criteria used to assess the mental wellbeing of a service member: cognition, emotion, feelings, will, character and interpersonal relations.

Military mental health is a topic rarely explored topic in the field of PLA studies, but it is critical to troop morale and combat readiness—and therefore to overall military capabilities. Given the high tempo, intensity, and stressful nature of modern warfare, military mental health cannot be disregarded. This article is focused on several key questions: What is the state of mental well-being in the PLA? What are the trends and patterns? Why do problems persist? What are the challenges facing leaders seeking to ameliorate the situation? And, how are the challenges being addressed amid China’s comprehensive military reforms?

Research for this article draws extensively from medical and mental health surveys conducted by Chinese military doctors. This research contends that despite major reforms to the military system since 2016, old problems still exist in the realm of military mental health, to include: shortages of mental health service professionals; conflicting leadership interests; a lack of high-level attention in improving the mental health care system; and disagreements between competing advocates of professional psychological assistance and ideological conditioning. Notably, reform in the PLA’s mental health sector has adopted a bottom-up strategy, wherein the top leadership has given theater commands a free hand in devising solutions to mental health problems.
Trends in PLA Mental Health as Revealed by Comprehensive Surveys

To produce an accurate picture of mental health patterns and challenges among its two million members, the PLA requires comprehensive surveys. The most extensive and recent survey of PLA mental health is one published by Feng Zhengzhi and colleagues in September 2016. The researchers interviewed 53,847 service members, who were randomly chosen from 56 units among five components of the PLA: the Army, Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force, and Strategic Support Force. [3] The surveys indicated that 29.7 percent of respondents experienced “various kinds of minor adverse psychological reactions” (gezhong qingwei de buliang xinli fanying, 各种轻微的不良心理反应). Moreover, 7.1 percent of interviewees showed signs of “obviously visible mental problems” (mingxian xinli wenti, 明显心理问题). These rates were higher compared to the previous major survey in 2005, which found the prevalence of mental problems among 14,300 PLA service members to be 16.5 percent. [4]

Female PLA service members have a higher prevalence of mental health problems (36.5 percent) than their male counterparts (28.6 percent). This differs from previous studies, where female service members consistently scored better than male service members with respect to mental problem prevalence. This anomaly is possibly due to ongoing military reforms, which are drastically altering the roles of female service members. Combat-focused restructuring has increased training intensity and downsized the numbers of non-combat personnel in entertainment and other roles (China Brief, October 16, 2016). Furthermore, the traditional burdens of maintaining a professional life and family obligations have also been augmented as a result of the ongoing changes, which have impacted women more than men. [5]

When ranked by service, the Strategic Support Force turns out to be the healthiest mentally, followed by the Army, Navy, Air Force and Rocket Force. This is likely due to the highly educated backgrounds of Strategic
Support Force members, a less pressured work environment, and a less physically demanding training program. [6] Compared to the Strategic Support Force, the Army, Navy, Air Force and Rocket Force face heavier demands in physical aptitude. Furthermore, their work environments are sometimes found in remote locations such as remote windswept plateaus, far-flung islets, underground facilities, etc. [7] (These factors will be addressed further in the second part of this article.)

When categorized by grades, the study finds that cadets and officers have higher mental health scores than noncommissioned officers and enlisted personnel. This is likely due to the relative number of negative experiences that noncommissioned officers and enlisted personnel encounter in the military: their lack of decision-making power in training, job assignment, upper level management, family affairs, and their own future career all create stress. [8]

A study assessing major life events among 10,505 PLA and People’s Armed Police (PAP) servicemembers also produced informative results. As an immediate source of stress, the report’s authors define life events (shenghuo shijian, 生活事件) as “various forms of life changes that people experience in the natural environment and in daily social life, such as promotion, divorce, death of relatives and friends, chronic diseases and sudden traumatic experiences.” [9] Studies have concluded that negative life events are closely associated with depression and suicide in the Chinese military. [10]

The report finds that 50.4 percent of respondents have experienced at least one negative life event when serving in the armed forces. [11] One in five interviewees are stressed about future employment, and believe that their current workload is heavy. The top five negative experiences are: pressure to secure long-term employment (19.1 percent); heavy academic and professional workload (17.8 percent); getting punished or criticized (14.6 percent); family difficulties (12.1 percent); and dissatisfaction with work or academic performance (12 percent). [12]

Members of the Navy tend to have more experiences with both positive and negative life events, while PAP troops have the least. Currently, the Navy is going through tremendous changes, with sailors training harder and going further abroad in their missions. However, the Navy also receives better benefits packages and high prestige, which explains the Navy’s lead in experiencing both positives and negatives. The PAP’s ties to local areas and ability to receive timely social support explains why its members experience the least number of negative life experiences. [13]

**Causes of Existing Problems**

According to one study, 90 percent of PLA service members interviewed would like to learn more about psychology, 77 percent would like to know more about their own mental well-being, 67 percent hope to receive psychological training, and around 20 percent are interested in speaking to a psychiatrist. [14] This proves that demand for professional mental health service is strong in the Chinese armed forces. However,
the PLA is facing complications in the realm of mental health services: namely, the shortage of mental health service professionals, conflicting leadership interests, and a lack of high-level attention in improving mental health services.

As of now, the number of trained military mental health workers is insufficient. In the PLA, there are about 700 professional mental service staff (zhuanye de xinli fuwu renyuan, 专业心理健康服务人员); 2,700 part-time psychiatrists (jianzhi xinli yisheng, 兼职心理医生); 4,000 psychological “backbone cadres” (xinli gugan, 心理骨干) (i.e., trained service members who provide mental health services at the platoon and squad level); and 2,800 certified national second-level counselors (guojia erji xinli zixunshi zige, 国家二级心理咨询师资格). [15] In other words, there is only one counselor per 714 PLA service members, and one psychiatrist per 740. Additionally, not all staff have received long-term professional training. Investigation of one work unit discovered that those with extended experience make-up only 14.3 percent of all counselors. [16] Fifty-seven percent of mental health service staff are part-time political workers, and 28.6 percent hold a part-time position in some other technical office. Furthermore, ten percent of staff are self-trained. [17]

These numbers tell us that the PLA’s mental health staff is a mixed bag of trained, untrained, and self-trained individuals deeply associated with the political work establishment. Historically, political and ideological indoctrination have been used in the PLA as a substitute for counseling. Today, political work departments still lead mental health work in the PLA, and there is an ongoing debate between two opposing camps on how better to approach military mental health. The faction supporting the modern clinical approach appears to winning, but the school of prioritizing political and ideological indoctrination nonetheless has its supporters. [18]

The Leadership Response and Reform Experiments

An article penned by General Han Weiguo (韩卫国), the Commander of the PLA Army, demanded that service members must take leave and return home under three circumstances: when their parents are ill and dying, when their spouse is about to give birth, and when their children are going to take school entrance examinations. The article goes so far as to propose investigating service members who do not take good care of family members (CNR News, January 31, 2018). General Han’s article shows a noteworthy shift in thinking from previous times, when PLA service members were asked to sacrifice their own “small family” for the sake of the nation.

Although the armed forces reforms have a top-down approach with the Central Military Commission in the lead, reforms in the mental health service sector have been led by theater commands (zhanqu, 战区). Theater commands have been allowed to experiment with their own models of mental health service and to formulate their own mental health-related regulations, and they have produced a range of creative models. The most popular organizational model is one where professional psychiatrists work at the division, brigade
and regimental level; counselors work at the battalion and company level; and mental “backbone cadres” serve at the platoon and squad level (PLA Daily, May 20, 2018). In October 2018, Central Theater Command Air Force established its Mental Health Service Center (xinli fuwu zhongxin, 心理服务中心)—the first institution of such kind in the PLA Air Force—to centralize leadership in “counseling services, psychological emergency support, mental backbone cadre training, work guidance, and decision-making reference” (People’s Daily, October 12, 2018).

Helping service members de-stress after extensive work and training is first on the reform agenda. In the 80th Group Army of the Northern Theater Command, special forces are taking popular yoga courses to relax their minds and bodies (China Youth, December 30, 2017). One Army combined brigade has created games not only to help service members relax, but also to build team spirit and mutual support between soldiers. Mental health seminars and group therapy services are also being offered to servicemembers. The military has also enlisted the help of outside mental health professionals as part of its “double support” (shuangyong, 双拥) initiative to strengthen ties between the military and civilian mental healthcare communities. Psychologists and psychiatrists have been invited to give talks at military units, and to provide counseling and treatment to the troops (The Fourth School of Clinical Medicine, May 22, 2018). Besides online mental health consultation and hotlines, the PLA has also harnessed the power of social media. In January 2019, Northern Theater Command Air Force launched an online mental health service platform on its WeChat public account to provide confidential and convenient real-time interaction between servicemembers and mental health experts (PRC Ministry of National Defense, January 28).

Mental resilience training is also being conducted to condition troops for the shocking horrors of war. In the Eastern Theater Command, virtual reality technology is being employed to train troops for battle (PLA Daily,
January 17, 2017). In the 73rd Group Army in Xiamen, soldiers drill in specially built facilities with blood-spattered chambers and mannequins with gruesome wounds aimed to desensitize warfighters. Soldiers must face their fears in driving over dummies resembling fallen comrades, fight dizziness in rocking containers, learn how to calmly defuse explosives, and toughen up their minds by sleeping over at an unkempt graveyard (Sohu Military, June 13, 2018).

Conclusion

While the effectiveness of current reform measures will be proven in time, existing mental health problems will have multiple short-term implications. In spite of rapid advancements in hardware capabilities, the PLA’s wartime effectiveness could be impacted by persistent mental health issues. Although unmanned combat systems are on the rise, human combatants will continue to play the leading role in warfighting, and the high stress of a future conflict could add enormous pressure to PLA soldiers.

Within the PLA, modern ways of conceptualizing and grappling with military mental health have so far prevailed over traditional methods that emphasize political and ideological indoctrination. However, the latter approach still has supporters in the military establishment. Furthermore, the shortage of trained mental health workers, and the political work establishment’s continuing leadership role in mental health affairs, are both major hurdles for constructing a modern military mental health system. Current reform efforts, which have adopted a bottom-up approach, are conducive to encouraging experimentation in military mental health practices. Ultimately, however, further policy support from the Central Military Commission is needed—both to support successful models, and to tackle serious issues such as mental health stigma and discrimination.

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Notes


[4] Ibid.


[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

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