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The Legacy of Li Peng in Chinese Politics

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Introduction

Amid a flurry of late July news stories related to China—to include continuing unrest in Hong Kong, U.S.-China trade talks, and joint Sino-Russian military flights over the Sea of Japan that touched off a confrontation with Republic of Korea aircraft ([China Brief](#), July 30)—the death of former People's Republic of China (PRC) Premier Li Peng (李鵬) received minimal attention in the international press. However, Li's passing on July 22, succumbing to an unspecified illness at the age of 90, was treated with great solemnity by the authorities of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): flags around the country were flown at half-staff, and the country's top CCP officials lined up to pay official respects at memorial events held at Beijing's Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery ([China Daily](#), July 30).

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Li Peng's official obituary was filled with effusive praise for an "outstanding Communist Party member, a loyal Communist warrior who endured many trials, a prominent proletarian revolutionary, statesman, and brilliant party and national leader" ([People's Daily](#), July 24). However, in stark contrast to the plaudits offered to Li's memory by PRC state media, Li had been widely reviled at both home and abroad as the "Butcher of Beijing" for his prominent role in the bloody suppression of pro-democracy protests in 1989. He had also attracted deep unpopularity for his dour image, his stalwart opposition to political reform, and the nepotism and alleged corruption involved in the prominent positions held by his children in state-controlled industry (*see further discussion below*).

Whatever the assessment of Li Peng's career, he was a significant figure in the history of the PRC as a link between the revolutionary generation of CCP leaders represented by Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, and the current generation under CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping. Li Peng was a prominent contributor to decisions made in the top echelons of the CCP in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s—decisions that set the trajectory for Chinese politics down to the present day.



Image: The PRC flag flies at half-mast in Tiananmen Square in official remembrance for former PRC Premier Li Peng, who died on July 22. (Source: [Xinhua](#))

Li Peng's Early Career

Li Peng, like so many others who rose to prominence in PRC politics from the 1980s onwards, was a princeling: he was the adopted son of Zhou Enlai, the PRC's longtime premier and a skilled political survivor of the purges that destroyed many other prominent Communists of the revolutionary generation. Li Peng spent the years 1948-1955 training as a hydraulic engineer in the Soviet Union, and then spent the next quarter century as an engineer and party official managing hydro-electric and power plant projects throughout

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China. Li entered leadership politics in the early 1980s with appointment as the PRC Minister of Power Industry, and a seat on the CCP's 12th Central Committee ([China Vitae](#), undated).

Under the patronage of then-paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, Li was appointed PRC Premier in 1987 following the removal of CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang, who was sacked from his position due to high-level opposition that formed in the Party against Hu's reformist policies. This likely provided another lesson to Li that success lay in cultivating close allegiance to Deng, and in avoiding the taint of any "bourgeois" inclinations towards political reform. Furthermore, as Hu Yaobang was also one of the leading patrons of a rising young official named Hu Jintao (no relation), these events may have set the stage for future enmity between Li Peng and Hu Jintao (*see further discussion below*).

Li's Role in the June 1989 Massacre

In the spring of 1989, mass anti-corruption, pro-democracy protests swept throughout China following the death of Hu Yaobang. The senior CCP leadership was deeply divided over the protests, but Li sided firmly with a hardline group of party elders—to include Yao Yilin, Chen Yun, Yang Shangkun, and Deng himself—who favored imposition of martial law and the use of the military to disperse the demonstrations by force. [1] In late April 1989, while then-CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang was away on a trip to North Korea, Li Peng played a prominent role in guiding the party leadership towards a hardline stance on the protests, leading to the landmark April 26, 1989 *People's Daily* editorial that officially condemned the demonstrations as "turmoil" (动乱, *dongluan*). [2]



Image: Li Peng during a May 18, 1989 meeting in Beijing's Great Hall of the People with student leaders of the spring 1989 protest movement. The meeting turned confrontational, with protest leaders berating Li and other government representatives, and Li angrily stating that Beijing was slipping into chaos. Li's personal humiliation from the experience likely reinforced his intent to deal harshly with the protestors.

(Source: [ABC News/Youtube](#))

As state premier, Li issued the May 20, 1989 order for the imposition of martial law in Beijing ([China Brief](#), June 4), and defended the decision in a fiery televised speech as a necessary step to save China from anarchy ([Youtube](#), speech dated May 20, 1989). These steps helped to make Li the public face of the martial law decree and subsequent June 4 massacre. Li Peng certainly bears a strong share of culpability for the Tiananmen Massacre, but in 1989 he possessed less real authority than did more powerful figures who pressed forward the military crackdown from behind the scenes. However, Li's television appearances, arrogant demeanor, shrill voice, and harsh rhetoric all made him the perfect figure upon whom both domestic and foreign audiences might affix blame—rather than directing anger at the more charismatic “architect of reform” Deng Xiaoping, and his fellow elders ([SCMP](#), July 25).

Li Peng's Role in the Jiang Zemin Years

One of the most lasting aspects of Li Peng's legacy was his loose alliance with Jiang Zemin while the two men were in office together (Li as PRC Premier from 1987-1998, and then Chairman of the National Peoples' Congress from 1998 until 2003; and Jiang as CCP General Secretary from 1989-2002). Early in Jiang's tenure, Li was reportedly dismissive of his nominal superior—and wielded a powerful voice that sometimes trumped that of Jiang on major policy issues. However, Li Peng's attitude and actions gradually shifted throughout the 1990s as Jiang shored up his position as party leader. Li benefitted from Jiang's support in assuming the NPC chairmanship, and he returned the favor by backing Jiang in 2002 when the latter resisted calls from within the Party for his full retirement, thereby allowing Jiang to direct the military for two more years ([China Brief](#), October 10, 2014). [3]

Li Peng was an advocate of firm state control over the economy, and during his tenure as premier took a conservative approach to the restructuring of state enterprises. Li Peng also offered support to conservative officials, as with the example of Wu Bangguo (a protégé of Jiang Zemin, who later rose to number two in the CCP hierarchy under Hu Jintao), who emerged to prominence in the late 1990s as vice-premier in charge of state industry. Li supported both Wu's go-slow approach to state enterprise reform, as well as Wu's rigid position on maintaining the CCP's absolute control over politics and Chinese society ([China Brief](#), October 10, 2014).

Li Peng in Retirement

In 2007, the opinions of CCP elders were reportedly a decisive factor in Xi Jinping's selection as the *de facto* leadership heir apparent at the 17th Party Congress, at the expense of candidates more favored by then-General Secretary Hu Jintao. [4] These deliberations remain opaque, but the domination of Politburo appointments in 2007 and 2012 by officials linked to Jiang Zemin's patronage network indicated Jiang's continuing influence—and quite likely, that of his political ally Li Peng. In the lead-up to the 18th Party Congress in 2012, Li Peng and Jiang Zemin were reportedly prominent among the elders who worked to

block Hu Jintao's protégés Wang Yang and Li Yuanchao from receiving seats on the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) ([China Brief](#), October 23, 2014).

Li Peng's Princeling Children and Allegations of Corruption

Just as Li's own career was facilitated by family connections, his children have leveraged Li's status to rise to prominent positions in the party-state hierarchy and in state-controlled industry. Li's eldest son Li Xiaopeng (李小鹏, or "Little Peng") spent most of the 1990s and 2000s as a senior official with the state-owned China Huaneng Power Corporation, eventually rising to become the company chairman. In 2008 he shifted from industry to politics, becoming the Vice-Governor of Shanxi Province; he subsequently advanced to Governor in 2012, and received a seat on the CCP Central Committee in 2017. In 2018 Li Xiaopeng was appointed the PRC Minister of Transportation ([China Vitae](#), undated).

Li's daughter Li Xiaolin retired in 2018 from her position as Vice-President of China Datang Power Corporation, capping off a 35-year career in the state-owned electrical power industry ([Sina News](#), May 23, 2018). In 2014, her name circulated in international news stories (censored in the PRC) after investigative journalists identified Li Xiaolin as one of many CCP princelings operating shell companies in the British Virgin Islands and other tax havens in order to hide financial resources of undetermined origin. [5]

China's energy sector, where the Li children built powerful fiefdoms, has long been one of the most corrupt sectors of PRC state-controlled industry ([Reuters](#), September 21, 2018). Although the Li family would hardly be unique in facing allegations of corruption, its members have been particularly high-profile examples—and as such, helped to shape a normative example of corruption in the upper reaches of the CCP. The Li family also illustrates the nexus between princelings and corruption in state industry and resistance to economic and political reform: potential reforms in either state industry or the political system could threaten well-connected princelings, who exercise influence accordingly to protect their entrenched interests. [6]

Li Peng's Funeral and the Absence of Hu Jintao

All seven current members of the PBSC—Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, Li Zhanshu, Wang Yang, Wang Huning, Zhao Leji, and Han Zheng—reportedly paid their respects to Li Peng at the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery, the traditional resting place for high officials who die in the official good graces of the Party. They were reportedly joined in this by former PBSC member Wang Qishan and former CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin. Pointedly omitted from this list was former CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao—who, per state media, was “not in Beijing, [but] sent a wreath to express his condolences” ([China Daily](#), July 30).

Hu Jintao's reported absence from the memorial ceremonies has led to speculation that the 76 year-old former CCP leader may be in poor health ([Nikkei Asian Review](#), July 30). However, other explanations are also plausible. Li Peng was never a patron to Hu Jintao, and animosity between the two may date all the way

back to the downfall of Hu Yaobang in 1987, when Li benefitted from the sacking of Hu Jintao's primary patron. Furthermore, throughout Hu Jintao's tenure as CCP General Secretary (2002-2012), Li Peng acted in apparent cooperation behind the scenes with Jiang Zemin to curtail Hu's authority, and to advance the interests of Jiang's factional supporters at Hu's expense.

Additionally, Hu has kept a very low profile since handing over his office to Xi Jinping in 2012—although in the rare instances when Hu did appear in public early in Xi's tenure, it was often assumed to have political significance ([SCMP](#), April 10, 2014). Aside from a *pro forma* appearance at the 17th CCP Party Congress in October 2017, Hu has been virtually invisible in recent years—an arrangement that likely suits Xi Jinping, the current holder of Hu's former offices, quite well.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that Li Peng retired from his last official office in 2003, his legacy continues to exert a lasting influence over Chinese politics. Li threw his weight into the collective decision to unleash the military against pro-democracy protesters in 1989; the resulting massacre and repression that followed set the PRC on a political course that continues to the present day ([China Brief](#), June 4). Li Peng's official obituary reinforces the fact that the CCP under Xi Jinping remains as rigid as ever regarding the verdict on Tiananmen: Li was praised for "adopting resolute measures to stop the turmoil, to suppress the counter-revolutionary rebellion, to stabilize the country's domestic situation, [thereby] playing a major role in this great struggle for the future destiny of the party and country" ([People's Daily](#), July 24).

Many of the salient aspects of contemporary PRC politics—the prominent role of princelings, continued state domination of the economy, assertive nationalism, and a renewed drive for CCP control over virtually all aspects of public life—can be traced back to the political trajectory that commenced in 1989 and continued through the 1990s, when Li's authority was greatest. Li Peng was only one figure within a broader collective leadership, but he wielded an influential voice in steering the country in the direction of statist economics and resistance to political reform.

Li Peng's most lasting legacy of all may be his facilitation, alongside Jiang Zemin and other elders, of Xi Jinping's rise to power. Although Xi's vast and ongoing anti-corruption campaign *cum* political purge may have given Jiang Zemin and other patrons reason for buyer's remorse, Xi's tenure has embraced the policy positions favored by Li Peng, Wu Bangguo, and other conservatives of the Jiang era. If Xi Jinping is indeed able to make himself a paramount leader for life, as signaled in 2018 by the removal of term limits for the PRC Presidency, then the legacy of Li Peng could endure for many decades more.

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Notes

- [1] Larry Wortzel, "The Tiananmen Massacre Reappraised: Public Protest, Urban Warfare, and the People's Liberation Army" in *Chinese National Security Decision-Making Under Stress* (Wortzell and Scobell, eds.), U.S. Army War College (2005), pp. 55-83. <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/PUB623.pdf>.
- [2] Central Intelligence Agency, "The Road to the Tiananmen Crackdown: An Analytic Chronology of Chinese Leadership Decision-Making," report dated September 1989 (declassified March 2000), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB47/doc13.pdf>; and "We Must Raise the Banner to Clearly Oppose Turmoil" [*Bixu Qizhi Xianming de Fandui Dongluan, 必须旗帜鲜明地反对动乱*], *People's Daily*, April 26, 1989, http://news.ifeng.com/history/today/detail_2010_04/26/1089387_0.shtml.
- [3] Andrew Nathan and Bruce Gilley, *China's New Rulers: The Secret Files* (New York Review of Books, 2003), pp. 173 and pp. 72-73.
- [4] International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), "Leaked Records Reveal Offshore Holdings of China's Elite," Jan. 21, 2014, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/offshore/leaked-records-reveal-offshore-holdings-of-chinas-elite/#>; and ICIJ Offshore Leaks Database, entry for Li Peng / Li Xiaolin, undated, <https://offshoreleaks.icij.org/stories/li-xiaolin>.
- [5] See: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2012 Annual Report to Congress*, pp. 436-438 and pp. 441-442, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/annual_reports/2012-Report-to-Congress.pdf; and China Digital Times, "Wikileaks: From Xi Jinping's Rise to Jiang Zemin's Buddhism," June 21, 2011, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2011/06/wikileaks-from-xi-jinpings-rise-to-jiang-zemins-buddhism>.
- [6] Comments to the author by Dr. Willy Lam; and David Barboza and Sharon LaFraniere, "China 'Princelings' Using Family Ties to Gain Riches," *New York Times*, May 18, 2012. <https://www.pulitzer.org/files/2013/international-reporting/princelings518.pdf>.

Will Xi Jinping Deploy the PLA Garrison to Quell Hong Kong's "Turmoil"?

By Willy Lam

Introduction: The CCP Confronts "Turmoil" in Hong Kong

A central question surrounding the Hong Kong protests is whether People's Republic of China (PRC) President and Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping will deploy the local People's Liberation Army (PLA) garrison to quell the "turmoil" in the Special Administration Region (SAR). Under the instructions of late patriarch Deng Xiaoping, who negotiated Hong Kong's 1997 change of sovereignty with then-British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, a garrison of an estimated 6,000 troops is permanently stationed in the territory. The anti-government agitations in Hong Kong started in early June in response to the introduction of an "Extradition Bill," which would send suspected fugitives hiding in the SAR back to the mainland for trial ([China](#)

[Brief](#), June 26). Given that SAR Chief Executive Carrie Lam has indefinitely shelved the bill—although she has refused to irrevocably withdraw it—the goals of the protestors have morphed into two broad demands: to investigate police violence, and more importantly, to realize the civil and democratic rights guaranteed in the Beijing-approved Basic Law, Hong Kong’s mini-constitution.

Although the number of protestors—who climaxed at 2 million in a June 19 march—has declined to the hundreds of thousands, they have fine-tuned their actions and put their emphasis on strategic targets such as staging rallies at the Hong Kong Airport, blocking up highways and tunnels, and barricading police stations. The identity of the protestors has been well hidden, but there is a consensus among observers that Hong Kong’s college and even high-school students are presenting the biggest challenge to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since 1997. While most of the demonstrators have hewed to a strict ethos of non-violence, a radical fringe believes in using varying degrees of force to make their point—especially during confrontations with anti-riot squads from a police force prone to excessive violence. So far, the police have fired more than 2,000 tear-gas canisters and detained a few hundred protestors for alleged crimes including illegal assembly, attacking law-enforcement officials, and rioting. On August 5, when protestors attempted to stage a territory-wide strike, 148 of the “trouble-makers” were arrested ([Ming Pao \[Hong Kong\]](#), September 11; [South China Morning Post](#), August 9; [Hong Kong Economic Times](#), August 6).

The situation has been exacerbated by the fact that the city administration under Carrie Lam has refused to engage in a dialogue with the protestors. The SAR government has even vetoed the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry to examine police misbehavior. In her infrequent public appearances, Lam has doubled down on the protestors’ responsibility for pushing Hong Kong to “the verge of a very dangerous situation” ([HK01.com](#), August 5; [VOA Cantonese](#), August 5). Since June, the official PRC media has labelled the “turmoil” in Hong Kong as an example of a “color revolution”—meaning that “hostile foreign forces” (a code word for the United States) are colluding with anti-Beijing elements in the SAR to challenge the “one country, two systems” model and even to undermine CCP rule in mainland China ([Global Times](#), August 10; [People’s Daily](#), August 8; [Xinhua](#), August 7).

The Narrative of “Color Revolutions” and Other Signals from Beijing

In a rare speech early this month in Shenzhen to a gathering of 500 “patriotic” community leaders from Hong Kong, Zhang Xiaoming (张晓明), the ministerial-level Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the PRC State Council, said that the Hong Kong protests carried “obvious characteristics of color revolution” and that the top priority of both Beijing and the SAR government was to *zhibaozhiluan* (止暴制乱), or “stop the turmoil and control the chaos.” “Turmoil” and “chaos” were the same words Beijing used to describe the pro-democracy student demonstrations in 1989 ([China Brief](#), June 4). While Zhang made no reference to the use of the PLA, he quoted Deng on the fact that the Hong Kong Garrison was set up to “safeguard national security.” Deng was also quoted as saying that “if there are attempts to turn Hong Kong into ‘a base for

opposing the mainland under the guise of ‘democracy,’ then Beijing would have no choice but to intervene in Hong Kong affairs ([Ming Pao](#), August 8; [RTHK.HK](#), August 7; [China News Service](#), August 7).



Image: Zhang Xiaoming (center), Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office of the PRC State Council, presiding over a meeting of “patriotic” Hong Kong community leaders held in Shenzhen on August 7. Zhang warned about the need to “stop the turmoil and control the chaos” in Hong Kong. Wang Zhimin (right), Director of the PRC Central Liaison Office in Hong Kong, was also present. (Source: [China News](#))

For the first time since 1997, the Commander of the Hong Kong Garrison has issued a stern warning to the public. General Chen Daoxiong (陈道祥) said in late July that the garrison would not tolerate the protesters’ violent tactics: “We strongly condemn the extremely violent incidents which have impinged upon the base line of ‘one country, two systems.’” At the same time, the garrison’s public relations video was updated to include footage of the Hong Kong-based soldiers in anti-riot operations. Under the Basic Law, the garrison could be deployed to restore order if the SAR government makes such a request to the central government, or if the PRC National People’s Congress declares a state of emergency in Hong Kong ([Thestandnews.com \[Hong Kong\]](#), July 31; [Phoenix TV](#), July 31; [New York Times Chinese Edition](#), July 26).

Reasons for Beijing to Keep the PLA in its Barracks

According to conversations that this author has had with three party sources familiar with Beijing’s Hong Kong policy, it is unlikely that Xi, the Chairman of the CCP Central Military Commission, will give the go-ahead for the Hong Kong Garrison to quash the “turmoil.” [1] Under such a scenario, the CCP administration—and particularly Xi—would stand to lose a lot of face. It would demonstrate that the CCP has failed to win hearts and minds among Hong Kong’s 7.5 million residents after 22 years of rule; and overt intervention would show Beijing’s willingness to resorting to brute force to quell opposition to PRC rule. It is possible that Washington might react by cancelling the 1992 Hong Kong Policy Act, which grants Hong Kong the status of a separate customs territory apart from the mainland ([Harbourtimes.com \[Hong Kong\]](#), August 23; [Asia Times](#), June 24).

The economic fallout of such an act would be even more devastating. Despite the rise of Shanghai as a regional financial center, the Chinese economy is still dependent on Hong Kong to raise money for its ambitious modernization programs. In 2018, 71.5 percent of the foreign direct investment absorbed by China came through Hong Kong. Moreover, Chinese companies are now the biggest investors in the SAR: as of the end of 2018, mainland companies, including state-owned enterprises, took up 67.5 percent of the marketization of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange (Mofcom.gov.cn, January 15; [Hong Kong Stock Exchange Fact Book 2018](#)).

Covert Deployment of Mainland Police into Hong Kong

Moreover, Beijing has a better option than deploying the PLA's Hong Kong Garrison: much of the same impact can be achieved through surreptitiously stationing in the SAR Chinese police officers from neighboring Guangdong Province, who have started working seamlessly with indigenous police in Hong Kong. During one recent anti-riot operation, a squad officer was overhead addressing his colleagues as *tongzhimen* (同志们), or “comrades”—a mainland Chinese term almost never used in Hong Kong (HKCNEWS.com, August 8; AM730.com.hk, August 6; [Apple Daily \[Hong Kong\]](http://Apple Daily [Hong Kong]), July 29).

According to Hong Kong Baptist University political scientist Jean-Pierre Cabestan, since the Umbrella Movement of 2014, Beijing has deployed mainland police—as well as members of the paramilitary People's Armed Police (PAP)—into Hong Kong. “Beijing has secretly added to the Hong Kong police force, which is 30,000-strong, a number of policemen who speak Cantonese like Hong Kong [sic] from neighbouring Guangdong province, so that they can better integrate,” Cabestan said. Cabestan also believes that, while the Hong Kong police follow Carrie Lam's orders on paper, “in reality, they listen to instructions from Beijing via the Central Liaison Office (CLO).” [2] The CLO is the mission of the Central Government in Hong Kong; it also acts as the leadership center for the underground Chinese Communist Party of Hong Kong ([China Brief](#), July 31).

That Chinese law-enforcement officers based in the Pearl River Delta might be called upon to suppress flare-ups of disorder in Hong Kong was demonstrated on August 6, when some 12,000 Shenzhen-based police staged anti-riot operations. The officers were seen on local TV subduing young scofflaws dressed in black T-shirts, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Hong Kong protestors (DWNews.com, August 6; [South China Morning Post](#), August 6). Lest anyone miss the point, PRC media has also signalled potential new deployments of PRC police into Hong Kong with video footage of PAP vehicle convoys on the move near Shenzhen (*see accompanying image*).



Image: PRC state media has signalled the possibility of PAP intervention in Hong Kong, as with this August 10 video clip of PAP armored vehicles in convoy near Shenzhen. The accompanying text noted that, under PRC law, “the [PAP] shall participate in handling riots, disturbances, severe violent crimes, terrorist attacks, and other incidents disturbing social peace.” (Source: [CGTN Twitter](#))

Beijing’s Most Likely Courses of Action

According to the Chinese sources cited above, the CCP administration’s policy is to wait for public opinion to turn. With Beijing stonewalling their demands, the young protestors could resort to more violent tactics to disrupt law and order—and thereby end up alienating large swathes of Hong Kong’s silent majority. Carrie Lam and her colleagues also hope that declining economic numbers will pit members of the Hong Kong business community—many of whom are diehard opponents of the Extradition Bill—against the protestors. According to the SAR government, Hong Kong’s export, retail and tourism sectors have been hard hit: for example, given that 22 countries have issued travel alerts on Hong Kong, tourist arrivals in the SAR in early August declined by 31 percent year on year ([BBC.com](#), August 9; [Ming Pao](#), August 9; [HKTVB](#), August 8).

Short of deploying mainland police, the CCP leadership may also be expected to use medium- to long-term efforts to change the political landscape of Hong Kong. Firstly, more power will be given to the CLO, which is grooming a cadre of Cantonese-speaking loyalists—including underground Communist Party members—for senior slots in the SAR administration. Since Carrie Lam became a lame duck following her inept selling of the Extradition Bill, more major policy initiatives in the territory seem to be coming from the CLO. The wily and ambitious head of the CLO, Wang Zhimin (王志民), who is a member of the CCP’s ruling Central Committee, could become the *de facto* principal policymaker of the SAR ([Apple Daily](#), July 15; [Thestandnews.com](#), July 11).

In the longer term, Beijing’s most potent weapon is to change the make-up of Hong Kong’s 7.5 million strong population. Since the change of sovereignty in 1997, some 1.5 million mainlanders have been given

permanent residence and voting rights in the SAR. Opinion polls on the political inclinations of these new immigrants have shown they are more sympathetic toward Beijing's harsh line of taming Hong Kong's democratic aspirations. Both Beijing and the SAR government are encouraging Hong Kong's graduates and young professionals to build their careers in the Pearl River Delta and other Chinese cities. Hong Kongers working north of the border might be able to enjoy incentives such as tax concessions and even rental subsidies (PPRD.org.cn, June 26; Radio French International, February 20; HK01.com, February 19).

Promoting “patriotic education” is also a major focus of Beijing's policy toward the SAR. At a press conference early this month, a spokesperson for the Hong Kong Macao Affairs Office said “there are indeed problems in the national education” provided to Hong Kong youths. He added that through patriotic education, “Hong Kong people should from a young age realize comprehensively, deeply and objectively the relationship between themselves and the nation and the people—and to understand their history and culture” (Xinhua, August 6; Global Times, August 5). However, given that the anti-Extradition Bill and pro-democracy movement has fully exposed the many inadequacies of the CCP order, it is difficult to imagine how Beijing could successfully inculcate nationalism and fealty to the party among Hong Kong's increasingly rebellious youths.

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Notes

[1] Author's telephone and e-mail interviews with three Beijing cadres with the rank of department head or above, August 5 and 6.

[2] Author's e-mail interview with Professor Cabestan, August 8.

The PRC's Future Naval Base in Cambodia and the Implications for India

By John Foulkes and Howard Wang

Introduction

At the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, People's Republic of China (PRC) Defense Minister Wei Fenghe dismissed a question on whether the PRC is seeking a future military presence in Cambodia (VOA Cambodia, June 3). This question arose following an assessment by the U.S. intelligence community that autocratic developments in Cambodia—particularly the single-party dominance of Cambodia's legislature, which has extended Prime Minister Hu Sen's tenure and made possible a constitutional amendment

permitting a foreign military presence in the country—had increased the possibility of a Chinese military presence on Cambodian soil ([Senate Select Committee on Intelligence](#), January 29). Cambodian officials exacerbated these concerns in June when they withdrew a 2017 request to the United States for funds to upgrade facilities at the Ream naval base near Sihanoukville ([Radio Free Asia](#), July 2; [Observer Network](#), July 2).

Recent media reports have indicated that Cambodia signed a “secret agreement” giving the PRC use of Ream, where it may station military servicemen and warships, for 30 years ([WSJ](#), July 22). Although Cambodian and Chinese officials vehemently deny the existence of this agreement, gaining access to Ream is broadly consistent with Chinese foreign policy. The PRC appears to be employing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) funding to further strategic cooperation with Cambodia through the construction of potential dual-use infrastructure. Ream naval base is the latest in a network of regional security projects—including Cambodia’s Dara Sakor investment zone and Thailand’s Kra Canal—which, taken together, significantly improve Chinese power projection into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

News of the Ream agreement raises the specter of increasing Chinese maritime militarization at a time of intense unease in Southeast Asia. Conspicuously silent in this latest controversy is India, which has significant economic and military interests in Southeast Asia. This article will discuss the security infrastructure China is building in Cambodia and its implications for Indian interests in the region.

Chinese Investments in Southeast Asian Security Infrastructure

China’s 2019 National Defense White Paper (NDWP) emphasized developing far seas capabilities and overseas logistical facilities so that the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) can ensure Chinese maritime interests and secure strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs) globally ([Ministry of National Defense \(China\)](#), July 24). The most critical SLOC passes through the Malacca Strait, on which the PRC is heavily dependent for energy imports ([China Brief](#), April 12, 2006). More naval basing options near the Strait—and opportunities to circumvent it altogether—would improve China’s naval power in the region, and may position the PLAN to project presence further into the IOR.

The PRC is pursuing several infrastructure investments that would significantly increase its naval capabilities in and beyond the Gulf of Thailand. The oldest is Dara Sakor, a 139 square mile territory comprising 20 percent of Cambodia’s coastline, where Chinese companies have secured a 99-year lease. A significant BRI investment, Dara Sakor is the target of \$3.8 billion in Chinese investments to build an international airport, a deep-water port, and an industrial park alongside resort facilities ([Bangkok Post](#), July 20; [C4ADS](#), April 17, 2018; [People’s Daily](#), December 26, 2016). U.S. analysts have long suspected that the investment holds dual civilian and military purposes: the airport has an unusually long runway able to support any plane in the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), and the deep-water port, when constructed, would be large enough to host PLAN warships ([SCMP](#), March 5).

The Dara Sakor airport and projected seaport sit at the edge of the Botum Sakor peninsula, across the Bay of Kompong Som from the Ream naval base. Between the two sites is Sihanoukville, which houses Cambodia's only current deep-water port and where Chinese entities invested over \$1.1 billion in 2018 ([SCMP](#), August 7, 2018). Reinforcing the PRC's interest in Sihanoukville, three PLAN warships made an official visit to Sihanoukville in early 2019 and docked for four days ([Phnom Penh Post](#), January 7). Although the Sihanoukville port is unlikely to be used for Chinese naval operations, the positive relationship the PRC has cultivated with the Sihanoukville Autonomous Port authority will support coordination around the Bay of Kompong Som should PLAN warships begin operating out of Dara Sakor or Ream.

While these ports and potential naval bases would significantly bolster PLAN naval projection on their own, the PRC is also leveraging BRI funds to advocate the construction of the Kra Canal across the Gulf of Thailand ([The Independent](#), October 2, 2016). The canal would create SLOCs which effectively bypass the Strait of Malacca and improve access to the IOR: passage through the canal would reduce the distance Chinese ships currently must sail to reach Indian ports by nearly 750 miles ([Firstpost](#), November 5, 2018).

The Threat to India's Presence in the Andaman Sea

Current PLAN presence in the IOR has already raised concerns for India. At the 2019 Raisina Dialogue, Indian Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba commented that at any time, there are six to eight PLAN submarines patrolling the IOR—ostensibly to protect Chinese trading vessels and conduct anti-piracy operations ([Economic Times](#), January 10). Indian analysts have long suspected this presence was an excuse for the PRC to gather intelligence on “the underwater operating environment in the sub-continental littorals” ([ORF](#), February 9).

The Indian response to increasing PLAN presence in the IOR is militarizing the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI). An Indian Union territory, these islands are strategically located approximately 620 miles from the Malacca Strait and 400 miles from the projected Kra Canal. India has also been making regular arms purchases to equip its three bases on the ANI. In 2009, the United States sold India eight P-8I aircraft, a long-range maritime patrol plane with extensive monitoring, intelligence-gathering, and anti-submarine capabilities. New Delhi has since purchased further P-8Is in 2016 and June 2019 ([Swarajya](#), June 26). The United States recently sold India twenty-four MH-60R Seahawk helicopters with anti-submarine capabilities, and has offered twenty-two MQ-9 Guardian drones for maritime surveillance ([Economic Times](#), April 3; [Hindustan Times](#), June 9). India has reportedly approved a 10-year, \$700 million plan to fund additional facilities for troops, warships, aircraft, drones, and missile batteries for the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), the Indian Armed Forces tri-service theater command based on the islands ([Times of India](#), January 26).

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Although India is improving its capabilities to track and engage PLAN presence in the IOR, as of 2018 the Indian Navy only had 137 ships, while the PLAN has more than 300 ([Economic Times](#), July 8, 2018; [SCMP](#), May 26). PLAN operations out of Dara Sakor and Ream would further tilt the regional balance of power in China's favor. First, local basing options will increase the already-growing number of PLAN warships and submarines entering the IOR through the Malacca Strait. Should the Kra Canal be constructed, Chinese vessels will have better access to the Andaman Sea, putting significant pressure on India's capacity to monitor the increased traffic. Indian military planners are reportedly worried about China's interest in the canal for precisely this reason ([SCMP](#), July 19).

Further, Dara Sakor airport is approximately 740 miles from ANC military bases, putting Indian forces well within range of Chinese strategic bombers. If Chinese air and naval bases at Ream and Dara Sakor become a reality, India will likely face urgent tests of its already-underfunded military ([The New York Times](#), March 3; [The Straits Times](#), March 5).



*Image: Cambodian Navy personnel on a pier at the Ream Naval Base, July 2019.
(Source: [Phnom Penh Post](#))*

Fear of China and Growing Indian Influence in Southeast Asia

India has sought multilateral solutions to address Chinese presence in the IOR. In December 2018, then-Defense Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the opening of an Information Fusion Center for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) based outside New Delhi. Friendly nations were invited to post liaison officers to share information and organize responses to developing situations. The United States, Japan, and Singapore were among the first to express interest in posting officers. To expand its outreach and joint capabilities, India should make meaningful efforts to encourage Southeast Asian countries that are threatened by China's aggressive actions—including Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand—to post liaison officers. Such a move would increase military-to-military connections between these countries ([The Week](#), December 22, 2018).

A heightened PLAN presence in Cambodia could push Southeast Asia closer to India. Over the past several years, India's investments and outreach to the region have bred goodwill. The Modi administration's "Act East Policy" places the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at the center of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. In the recent ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said, "We want to see a strong, unified and prosperous ASEAN playing a central role in the emerging dynamic of the Indo-Pacific as it contributes to India's prosperity and security as well" ([Times of India](#), August 2).

India has increasingly invested in infrastructure and military projects in the region commensurate with its economic interests, emphasizing port construction and infrastructure projects connecting Southeast Asia with India's northeastern states ([Economic Times](#), December 12, 2017; [MEA.gov.in](#), August 2018). In May 2018, Indonesia agreed to give India economic and military access to the strategic Sabang Port, which neighbors Indian facilities on the ANI and is located approximately 310 miles from the Malacca Strait. Luhut Pandjaitan, Indonesia's coordinating minister for maritime affairs, noted, "the port's 40-meter depth is suitable for all kinds of vessels, including submarines" ([Hindustan Times](#), May 17, 2018). An Indian naval warship, INS Sumitra, and coast guard ship, ICGS Vijit, have since visited the port in July 2018 and March 2019, respectively ([Economic Times](#), March 20).

Other Southeast Asian states may be following Indonesia's lead. Since 2014, Vietnam has conducted joint oil exploration with an Indian company in the SCS, despite protests from Beijing. New Delhi and Hanoi have a burgeoning defense relationship, recently holding a joint military drill in the Bay of Bengal and discussing arms sales in the past ([The Hindu Business](#), November 21, 2018). Thailand and Myanmar have both similarly engaged in talks to purchase weapons from India ([Economic Times](#), August 1; [Financial Express](#), July 21). Vietnam has a special incentive to balance against China: Ream would strategically encircle Vietnam with the Ream naval base to the west, the Paracel Islands to the east, and the Spratly Island bases to the southeast. These bases will likely give Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries a sense of strategic insecurity, which may convince them to join India in balancing against China.

Conclusion

Ream is the latest in a series of concerted steps China is taking to dominate the regional security architecture. So why the silence from New Delhi? Despite the Modi government's advocacy for a "rules-based order" in a "free and open Indo-Pacific," and its recent defense purchases, India simply lacks the economic and military capability to challenge the PRC. Immediately condemning China's secret agreement would upset Sino-Indian relations in the lead up to the Modi-Xi informal summit scheduled for October in Varanasi, India. The meeting is a follow up to the Wuhan summit that is credited with stabilizing relations after the Doklam crisis in the summer of 2017. The Varanasi summit's outcome should provide insight into the trajectory of Sino-Indian relations.

Both leaders will attend the summit with significant domestic support. PM Modi's party deepened its parliamentary majority in May and now faces a disorganized opposition. Xi is no longer subject to constitutional term limits and has no designated successor in place. The Indian government might see the leaders' positions as an opportunity to settle the long-running border dispute with China, but New Delhi's recent decision to change Kashmir's constitutional status and Beijing's insecurities over Tibet will complicate any negotiation on this issue ([China Brief](#), July 16; [The Hindu](#), August 6). Since the Wuhan summit, India and China have attempted to refocus the relationship from contentious issues between them to areas of cooperation and mutual benefit. The Varanasi summit will be a prime test of India's cooperative policy.

Some analysts predict that India and China will downplay geopolitical differences in favor of economic cooperation: India may reduce its trade deficit with China, which in turn may rely on India as a trade partner in the face of pressures from the United States ([Millenium Post](#), July 29). In this way India finds itself in the same position as the countries of Southeast Asia: concerned by Chinese actions, but unwilling to damage the economic relationship. However, a failure on Modi's part to advocate for India's Southeast Asian partners might damage India's attempts to portray itself as an effective alternative to Chinese economic and military assistance.

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The Chinese Military Reforms and Transforms in the “New Era”

By Elsa Kania

Introduction

The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been undergoing a far-reaching transformation with strategic implications for the military balance in the region and beyond. Starting in 2015, the PLA has been undertaking historic reforms that have involved extensive restructuring of the force. [1] The 2015 People's Republic of China (PRC) national defense white paper (NDWP), titled “China's Military Strategy,” had confirmed revisions to the PLA's military strategic guidelines, while previewing the direction that Chinese military reforms have since taken ([China Brief](#), July 2, 2015; [Ministry of National Defense](#), May 26, 2015). In July 2019, the PRC issued its first official NDWP in four years, “China's National Defense in the New Era” ([Ministry of National Defense](#), July 24). This new NDWP is directed towards purposes of signaling and

propaganda, while revealing PRC ambitions to reshape the global security architecture ([China Brief](#), July 31). However, it declines to provide much in the way of substantive transparency beyond only limited updates on PLA reforms. Nonetheless, a careful reading of “China’s National Defense in the New Era” reveals notable insights and indications of the evolution of PRC interests, the progression of PLA reforms, and new directions in Chinese military modernization.

Continued Evolution of PRC “Core” Interests

The PRC claims that its policy for national defense is inherently defensive. However, the scope and scale of what the PLA may be called upon to defend is expanding, motivated by the “fundamental goal” of “resolutely safeguarding China’s “sovereignty, security, and development interests.” This phrasing has replaced, and is tantamount to, earlier assertions of China’s “core interests” (核心利益, *hexin liyi*). There have been changes and a degree of consistency in the framing of these interests over time. [2] However, the characterization of the tasks of the Chinese military and objectives of Chinese defense policy have evolved slightly between the 2015 and 2019 NDWPs. [3] In particular, the PRC’s commitment to safeguarding “national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security” is expanding.

“China’s National Defense in the New Era” declares, “The South China Sea islands and Diaoyu Islands are inalienable parts of the Chinese territory.” Although the militarization of islands in the South China Sea has provoked serious concerns in the region, the PRC’s apparent confidence in its approach appears to have only increased. In 2015, “China’s Military Strategy” had highlighted the importance of “safeguard[ing] maritime rights,” calling for the PLA to “strike a balance between rights protection and stability maintenance.” By contrast, this 2019 NDWP lacks that emphasis on stability, and instead provides a direct defense of PRC actions: “China exercises its national sovereignty to build infrastructure and deploy necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea, and to conduct patrols in the waters of Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea.” The justification of such measures as defensive reflects the flexible concept of defense that animates China’s strategy of active defense, which involves an offensive approach at the operational level.

China’s national interests are continuing to expand into new domains and territories. The concern with threats and security interests in new domains, such as space and cyberspace, has been a consistent feature across the 2011, 2013, 2015, and now 2019 NDWPs. However, this latest document is more explicit in describing these as interests to be secured in China’s national defense, including not only outer space and cyberspace, but also the “electromagnetic space.” The PRC intends not only to improve its situational awareness in space but also to “enhance the capacity to safely enter, exit and openly use outer space.” The PRC’s future “use” (利用, *liyong*) of outer space could involve not only leveraging this domain for military purposes but also pursuing the exploitation of resources. At the same time, China’s attention to cyber security remains consistent with the concentration on cyber sovereignty, which requires reinforcing “national cyber border

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defense.” The emphasis on the electromagnetic space again highlights the spectrum as another domain for PRC interests.

China has continued to concentrate on safeguarding its “overseas interests,” which are expanding worldwide. This imperative has been relatively consistent across the past couple of NDWPs, but the language in this document indicates its heightened importance. In particular, China’s armed forces intend to “address deficiencies in overseas operations and support,” including “build[ing] far seas forces” and “develop[ing] overseas logistical facilities,” such as the base in Djibouti and a potential base in Cambodia, which may be the first such bases of a number to come ([China Brief](#), March 22). Inherently, China’s national defense requires supporting “the sustainable development of the country.” At a time when growth is slowing and depending ever more directly upon access to markets and resources worldwide, China’s future growth is directly linked to this global outlook. This concern justifies the call for the PLA to contribute to “global security goods,” which may see continued internationalization of China’s military power in ways that may start to challenge the United States.

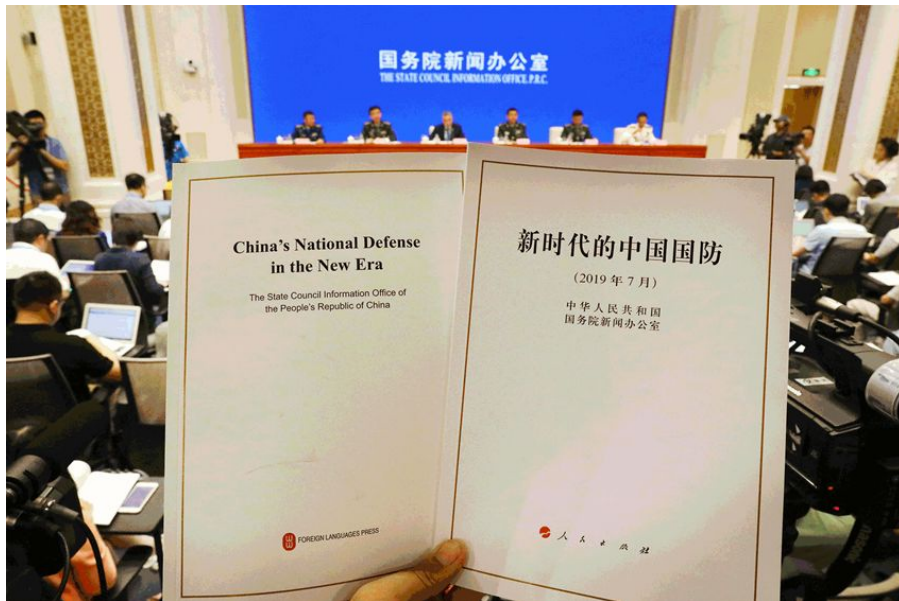


Image: A copy of the 2019 PRC defense white paper, “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” held up at the document release press conference at the PRC State Council Information Office on July 24.

(Source: [China Daily](#))

China’s Response to Global Military Competition

“China’s National Defense in the New Era” reflects the PRC response to the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy, which centered on sharpening the U.S. military’s competitive advantage. [4] American initiatives have evidently provoked a powerful response in the PLA, spurring on Chinese defense innovation ([China Brief](#), October 4, 2016). As a result, the PLA has been greatly concerned with the risks of “technology

surprise attacks” (技术突袭, *jishu tuji*), wary of a “growing technological generation gap” that could emerge as a result of this competition. By its own assessment, the PLA “still lags far behind the world’s leading militaries,” and a failure to adapt could place the PLA in a position of dangerous disadvantage. This unfavorable situation necessitates innovation as a military, and indeed strategic, imperative.

The PLA is confronting the challenge and opportunity of the “Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA, 军事革命, *junshi geming*)” believed to be currently underway. This 2019 NDWP builds upon notable themes from the 2015 edition, which stated that the global RMA was “proceeding to a new stage.” In particular, those trends were assessed to involve the development of weaponry and equipment characterized as “long-range precision, intelligent, stealthy and unmanned.” In the “new era” described in the 2019 edition, China is particularly concerned with advances in cutting-edge technologies with promising applications in the military domain, especially artificial intelligence (AI), quantum information, big data, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things. As a result of these trends, the form (形态, *xingtai*) of warfare “is accelerating in its evolution towards informatized warfare, and intelligentized (智能化, *zhinenghua*) warfare is on the horizon.” [5]

The PLA’s recent reforms have introduced unprecedented transformation into a force once considered resistant to change. However, the PLA continues to confront considerable challenges as a result of the disparities that persist even within the force. Chinese military leaders must “promote the integrated development of mechanization and informatization and accelerate the development of military intelligentization.” [6] The PLA today must undertake all three processes simultaneously, which presents distinct difficulties and potential chances to leapfrog in its development. Notably, this innovation is reportedly extending to the development of new military theories that may be formalized eventually into new “doctrine” or operational regulations (作战条令, *zuozhan tiaoling*) ([The Diplomat](#), June 6, 2017). However, the PLA’s approach to the requisite technical and conceptual challenges is still taking shape.

New Paradigms of Chinese Military Power

Today, the PLA is changing its paradigm for military power: the PLA is “striving to transform from a quantity-and-scale model to that of quality and efficiency, as well as from being personnel-intensive to one that is S&T-intensive.” This objective has involved a significant downsizing of personnel, with 300,000 demobilized on the course of these reforms, and increased investment in human capital. At the same time, the PLA’s approach to military research has been restructured: the CMC Steering Commission on Military Scientific Research has been established, and a transformed Academy of Military Science ([China Brief](#), January 18) has been officially designated to lead the military scientific research enterprise. Guided by Lieutenant General Yang Xuejun (杨学军)—the former commandant of the PLA’s National University of Defense Technology, known for his expertise in artificial intelligence and supercomputing—AMS appears to be undertaking rapid recruitment of the talent required to promote defense innovation in emerging technologies. The “new” AMS is also leading a new initiative to facilitate the integration of theory and

technology (理技融合, *lǐjì rónghe*), which could enable the innovative thinking required to realize the potential of emerging capabilities ([Xinhua](#), February 14).

The PLA is also improving and modernizing its system for weaponry and equipment. The PLA, once described as the world's largest military museum, is phasing out older equipment while working towards introducing a new "system of systems" (体系, *tǐxì*) composed of high-tech weapons, such as Type 15 tanks, type 052D destroyers, J-20 fighters, and DF-26 intermediate and long-range ballistic missiles. The PLA's next-generation capabilities could prove to be more sophisticated, from higher levels of autonomy to hypersonics and a range of "new concept" systems, such as directed energy weapons. Whereas prior armaments development had been characterized by a lack of jointness, current initiatives mentioned in the 2019 NDWP are intended to improve capabilities by "coordinating the efforts of all services and arms," while "promoting the balanced development of main battle equipment, information systems, and support equipment" in order to increase "standardization, serial development and interoperability."

The PLA's apparent enthusiasm for technology and innovation can appear incongruous when juxtaposed against a concurrent attachment to tradition. For instance, Mao Zedong's concept of "people's warfare" (人民战争, *renmin zhanzheng*) was described in "China's Military Strategy" as a "magic weapon" (法宝, *fabao*) for the PLA. Even as China's national defense enters this "new era," the espoused dedication to "give full play to the overall power of the people's war[fare]" is again reiterated with calls for "innovating in its strategies, tactics and measures." This is not merely rhetorical, but rather reflects a core concept: "China's national defense is the responsibility of all Chinese people," as the 2019 NDWP declares. This approach may appear to be anachronistic in an age of informatized warfare, yet arguably possesses enduring relevance, from cyber defense to a whole-of-nation approach to national defense mobilization. [7] The juxtaposition of low-tech concepts and options with high-tech ambitions can be strikingly incongruous. For example, the much-derided discussion of the PLA's reintroduction of bugles in the 2019 NDWP can also be characterized as a measure with practical relevance, including to resolving the challenges of command and communications in a highly denied environment ([China Military Online](#), September 12, 2018). China's armed forces continue to attempt to reconcile such apparent contradictions.

PLA Reforms in Progress

The 2019 NDWP introduces certain updates regarding force structure that are worth highlighting. The PLA has apparently succeeded in overcoming considerable bureaucratic impediments to adjust its force structure—away from the prior dominance of the Army to expand the Navy and Rocket Force—while increasing investments in "new types of combat forces." This adjustment and rebalancing of China's armed forces has shifted resources to new priorities: there is a new focus on special operations, "all-dimensional offense and defense," amphibious operations, far seas protection and "strategic projection," with the objective to "make the force composition complete, combined, multi-functional and flexible."

As a significant innovation in force structure, the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) is a unique outcome of the reforms. The PLASSF has consolidated capabilities for space, cyber, and electronic warfare, contributing to Chinese capabilities to “fight and win wars in the information age.” At the same time, its supporting function is officially described as including battlefield environmental protection, information and communication assurance, and information security protection, as well as new technology testing. The PLASSF is called upon to “accelerate the integrated development of new-type combat forces,” which may allude to recognition of potential synergies in capabilities across these domains. In a notable indicator of progress, the PLASSF is “actively integrated into the joint operations system, and solidly carrying out new-type domains confrontation drills and emergency response training.” For instance, the PLASSF has engaged in exercises in which it acted as a “blue force” through engaging in electronic countermeasures.

Today, the PLA’s capabilities for “strategic deterrence” (战略威慑, *zhanlue weishe*) thus extend beyond the PLARF to emerging capabilities in new domains. In particular, the new strategic capabilities for space and cyber warfare have been consolidated through the PLASSF. [8] The PLA Air Force was described in 2015 as endeavoring to “build an air-space defense force structure that can meet the requirements of informationized operations.” However, this discussion of “air-space defense” is not included in the 2019 NDWP, potentially reflecting organizational decisions that have resulted in the space mission being primarily entrusted to the PLASSF. [9] This shift thus appears to reinforce the assessment that the PLASSF is more likely to possess responsibility for the PLA’s space mission, though there is a possibility that the PLAAF and/or PLARF may retain some role in kinetic counterspace capabilities.

The PRC’s capabilities for and strategic thinking on deterrence are evolving. The subtle changes in phrasing across these NDWPs convey notable nuances regarding the role of its missile forces. In 2015, the role of the former Second Artillery was described as involving “strategic deterrence and nuclear counterattack,” whereas in 2019, the PLARF was characterized as responsible for “nuclear deterrence and nuclear counterattack.” The fact that the PLARF is not described as the service with the sole role in strategic deterrence further confirms the shift in the PLA’s nuclear posture: from a monad to a triad, in which the PLA Navy and Air Force are also called upon to serve as newly “strategic” services in their own right. Also new to this defense white paper, the PLARF is called upon to “enhanc[e] strategic counter-balance capability” (增强战略制衡能力, *zengqiang zhanlue zhiheng nengli*). The meaning of this phrasing is not clearly defined, but it could be an allusion to the potential of new capabilities, such as hypersonics, intended to maintain deterrence in the face of missile defense.

As the PLA continues to improve “preparations for military struggle,” its capability to “fight and win” future wars will depend upon the realism and sophistication of its training. This “actual combat” (实战, *shizhan*) training appears to be improving across the services. [10] For instance, the PLA Navy has started to concentrate on training in the far seas, reportedly deploying its new aircraft carrier task group for its initial “far seas combat exercise” in the West Pacific. The PLAN has also introduced “live force-on-force exercises codenamed “Mobility” (机动, *jidong*). Significantly, the introduction of the theater commands (战区, *zhanqu*)

provides a critical mechanism to enable joint operations. This 2019 NDWP reveals that the theater commands have “strengthened their leading role in joint training and organized serial joint exercises codenamed the East, the South, the West, the North and the Central, to improve joint combat capabilities.” The existence of these exercises had not been previously disclosed, and their announcement is noteworthy as a new mechanism for improving joint combat capabilities.

Conclusions and Implications

Today’s PLA is very different from that of yesteryear. Chinese military power has increased dramatically over the past several decades, consistently surpassing the estimates of most analysts. The PLA is adapting to the challenges of military rivalry among great powers and pursuing new mechanisms for victory in future warfare. Of course, the PLA continues to confront numerous weaknesses and significant shortcomings—lagging behind the U.S. military, which is seen as the target of and teacher for these efforts. The apparent ambitions for the PLA to become truly “world-class” as a force by mid-century should not be dismissed. The gestures towards transparency, including new details on China’s defense budget, which reached RMB 1,043.237 billion (\$151.6 billion) as of 2017, should be welcomed, but hardly resolve concerns about PRC intentions and growing capabilities. Meanwhile, the PLA remains more opaque about its actual military strategic guidelines and operational regulations, which are not, and are unlikely to be, publicly disclosed. [11] However, it is clear that China is well on its way to creating a military commensurate with its global standing and interests in this “new era.” This latest NDWP thus provides one more piece of the puzzle of reckoning with the rise of China’s military power.

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Notes

[1] See this volume that provides significant assessments of major elements of the reforms: Phillip Saunders et al. (ed.), *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (National Defense University Press, 2019). <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/Chairman-Xi-Remakes-the-PLA/>.

[2] See these earlier assessments of the evolution and characterization of China’s “core interest” (核心利益) over time: Caitlin Campbell, Ethan Meick, Kimberly Hsu, and Craig Murray, “China’s ‘Core Interests’ and the East China Sea,” US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2013. Michael D. Swaine, “China’s Assertive Behavior: Part One: On ‘Core Interests,’” *China Leadership Monitor* 34, no. 22 (2011): 1-25.

[3] For instance, the only mention of the South China Sea in the “China’s Military Strategy” included the statement: “Some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China.” The question of whether the South China Sea was considered a ‘core interest’ was previously debated and debatable, but “China’s National Defense in the New Era” seems to settle that issue more conclusively.

[4] Department of Defense, “Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Advantage,” <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

[5] Potentially, the PLA’s military strategic guidelines may be revised someday to reflect its focus on preparing to fight and win future “intelligentized” wars.

[6] For more context on the Chinese military’s approach to intelligentization, see: Elsa B. Kania, “Chinese Military Innovation in Artificial Intelligence,” Testimony to U.S.-China Economic and Security June 7, 2019, https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/June-7-Hearing_Panel-1_Elsa-Kania_Chinese-Military-Innovation-in-Artificial-Intelligence.pdf?mtime=20190617115242

[7] For a more detailed assessment of China’s approach to national defense mobilization, see: Elsa B. Kania, “Testimony before the National Commission on Service’s Hearing on “Future Mobilization Needs of the Nation,”” April 24, 2019, https://www.inspire2serve.gov/_api/files/200.

[8] For initial assessments of the PLA Strategic Support Force, see: John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China’s Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, National Defense University Press, 2018; Elsa B. Kania and John K. Costello, “The Strategic Support Force and the Future of Chinese Information Operations,” *The Cyber Defense Review* 3, no. 1 (2018): pp. 105-122.

[9] As a potential indicator of inter-service rivalry or dynamics, it may be notable that the PLASSF’s new commander, Lt. Gen. Li Fengbiao (李凤彪) is a career PLAAF officer who formerly commanded the PLAAF Airborne Corps. Potentially, his selection is an indication that the PLASSF is becoming more joint as an organization. For context and confirmation of this change, see: “CCTV screen leakage of personnel adjustment” [央视画面泄密人事调整], Duowei, May 15, 2019, <http://news.dwnnews.com/china/news/2019-05-15/60133898.html>. For the original video of footage from the May 2019 conference, see: “Xi Jinping at the All-Nation Public Security Work Conference Emphasized” [习近平在全国公安工作会议上强调], CCTV, May 8, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQ7ytxpinT4&feature=youtu.be&t=507>.

[10] As for other services, the PLA Army has continued such major exercises as “Stride” (跨越) and “Firepower” (火力), the PLA Air Force has continued to engage in regular system-vs.- system exercises, such as “Red Sword” (红剑), and the PLA Rocket Force has focused on “force-on-force evaluation-oriented training” while continuing major exercises, such as “Heavenly Sword” (天剑).

[11] For a much more extensive discussion of the evolution of China’s military strategy over time, see: M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949*, Princeton University Press, 2019.

**Assessing Mental Health Challenges in the People's Liberation Army, Part 2:
Physical Operational Environments and Their Impacts on PLA Service Members**

By Zi Yang

Editor's note: This is the second 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, which appeared in our last issue, provided 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. This second part provides an examination of the stresses presented by particular physical operating environments, and the resulting impacts on the psychological health of PLA service members assigned to those environments.

Introduction

Modern life can be quite stressful. One 2017 poll found that 78.4 percent of China's young people aged 18 to 28 years reported feeling mentally fatigued, and 21.7 percent described themselves as heavily fatigued. Similar effects have been observed in the armed forces ([Xinhua](#), May 15, 2017). Stress and fatigue are primary determinants of health, and physical environments, in turn, may significantly impact stress levels ([Medical News Today](#), January 11, 2018). Chinese military medical researchers have identified four categories of environmental stressors:

1. The natural environment (e.g., heat, cold, altitude and humidity);
2. The artificial environment (e.g., acceleration, vibration, noise, and radiation);
3. The social and psychological environment (e.g., loneliness, and living and working in confined spaces);
4. The operational environment (e.g., continuous operation, inadequate sleep, and danger). [1]

The territory of the People's Republic of China (PRC) includes vast regions of rugged terrain, particularly in China's border regions. Today, PRC defense priorities focus on the southeastern seaboard opposite Taiwan; the South China Sea; and the Himalayan regions of the Sino-Indian frontier, where average elevations exceed 4,500 meters. The latter two regions have proven to be difficult operating environments in terms of soldiers' mental wellbeing. Additionally, conditions specific to certain types of units present environmental factors that place further stressors on PLA service members.

The High-Altitude Plateau Environment

According to Chinese researchers, the high-altitude plateau environment takes the greatest toll on military mental health. [2] Such locations are difficult to endure because of a range of factors, including: strong

ultraviolet radiation, thin air, scarce vegetation, unpredictable weather patterns, lack of water sources, and dramatic temperature fluctuations. Such harsh surroundings create vulnerabilities to disease and injury. One plateau unit reported its daily attrition rate due to diseases at 1.24 percent, with common illnesses including: upper respiratory tract infection, chapped skin, vitamin deficiencies, intestinal infection, and enterospasm. The daily attrition rate due to injuries was even higher at 3.42 percent; the leading injuries were skin and soft tissue injury, frostbite, spinal disc herniation, fatigue-related damages, and sciatica. [3] Sleep problems are also common: a 2017 study examining lowland troops participating in military maneuvers in Tibet described 25.3 percent experiencing poor sleep, and another study revealed that more than 50 percent of 326 service members deployed from lowlands to plateau environments suffered from sleep disorders. [4]

Furthermore, PLA soldiers experience loneliness and a lack of social support when stationed at these desolate locations. Although newly arrived enlistees show better results in mental health examinations, the plateau environment wears down service members over time: the longer one is deployed at high elevation, the more susceptible soldiers become to mental and physical health problems. [5] One study, measuring 4,631 service members of a unit posted on a high-altitude plateau, documents a 31.6 percent rate of depression. [6] Measuring 156 members of a transport unit at Qinghai Province's Golmud City (average elevation 2,800 meters), researchers found obvious symptoms of somatization, anxiety, phobic anxiety, and psychoticism. [7]

A service member's personality could change after prolonged deployment on the plateau. Noncommissioned officers (NCOs) posted at plateaus are more stubborn, sensitive, suspicious, worrisome, nervous, and easily agitated compared to counterparts elsewhere. They are more independent and can better cope with new environments; however, compared to lowland counterparts, plateau NCOs are less sociable, less imaginative, less willing to experiment, and lack self-regulation. [8]



Image: Personnel assigned to a brigade within the PLA Ground Force 76th Group Army fire FN-6 portable anti-aircraft missile systems during a training exercise on a “snow-covered plateau area at an altitude of 4,000 meters” in August 2018. (Source: [PLA Daily](#))

In recent years, however, the PLA appears to be experiencing a positive turn in dealing with some of these issues. A 2017 study examining PLA Army service members from 46 units garrisoned on the Tibetan Plateau found that, with the exception of worsening somatization, the remaining eight symptoms dimensions on SCL-90/Symptom Checklist 90 (obsessive-compulsive tendencies, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism) have improved, which the authors attributed to upgrades in the military mental health system. [9] A 2017 survey of 4,080 PLA service members based at positions 2,000 to 4,900 meters above sea level indicated that 7.8 percent of personnel showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder—an 8.7 percent drop from a corresponding study published in 2006. [10]

Island Environments in the South China Sea

When viewed from afar, the South China Sea islets do not seem like stressful places. However, heat, humidity, isolation, and operating in a constant state of alert pose genuine challenges to service members in these locations. Island garrisons lack social support, according to one article that assessed a unit of 254 personnel defending an island in the South China Sea (SCS) under the jurisdiction of Sansha City. [11] One study suggests that the mental well-being of island defenders is worse than warship and submarine crews. [12] In 2016, an examination of 299 service members from seven SCS island defense units found that 108 (36.12 percent) had been sick in the prior two weeks; 160 (53.51 percent) had suffered injuries during training in the past two years; 22.41 percent of personnel had experienced heatstroke; 227 (75.92 percent) had suffered seasickness during training; and 80 (26.76 percent) believed they had some kind of mental illness. [13] Overall, these are not desirable numbers for troops stationed in the SCS, which the PRC leadership views as a critical front line of China's national defense.

The installation of communications and radar jamming complexes on Chinese-held islands in early 2018 attracted criticisms from concerned parties about the militarization of the South China Sea. However, these developments also have implications for the health of service members. Exposure to electromagnetic radiation can have serious health consequences for those affected. Radiation can wear down troops constantly exposed to “high-density, high-intensity, multi-spectral electromagnetic waves released by various weapons and equipment,” especially when grassroots-level PLA officers and enlistees commonly lack basic knowledge on how to protect themselves ([The Diplomat](#), April 18, 2018). [14] Colorless, tasteless, and odorless, the complex electromagnetic environment (复杂电磁环境, *fuza dianci huanjing*) can “cause headaches, dizziness, muscle aches, blurred vision and other symptoms. Prolonged exposure to hazardous radiation kills large amounts of cells, [with] different degrees of influence on nervous, cardiovascular, blood, endocrine and other systems.” [15]

In a study of 460 electronic countermeasures (ECM) personnel and 180 air defense communication specialists, one PLA researcher found a prevalence of depression significantly greater than the PLA norm: 196 members had slight depressive symptoms, 67 had mild symptoms, and 13 showed serious symptoms,

for a total of 45.1 percent overall. [16] Another study of 89 members of an ECM regiment revealed higher than PLA average scores in somatization, anxiety and depression. [17] All in all, although new electronic warfare equipment could bolster Chinese capabilities in the SCS, it could further complicate the mental health environment for units operating in an already taxing natural setting.

Underground and Tunnel Environments

In a 2016 comprehensive study that surveyed 53,847 members from throughout the PLA, members of the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) fared worst in terms of overall mental health ([China Brief](#), July 31). As indicated by a June 2018 survey sampling 3,935 members of one PLARF unit, mental health problems of various degrees existed among 14.3 percent of participants. [18] In addition, the sample group had a higher total score than average on the PLA's 2016 SCL-90 results, indicating below average mental well-being. [19] The PLARF's sustained mental health challenges result from a combination of work-related stress and poor diet—as well as the enormous strain associated with handling radioactive materials, with eight out of every ten relevant personnel reporting feelings of “high psychological stress.” [20]

Among the biggest stressors for PLARF personnel are long periods spent underground. As keepers of China's tactical and strategic missiles, PLARF units must spend considerable time training and living in underground military facilities that host China's long-range precision strike weapons. Although portrayed as joyful places in PLA propaganda, the reality of tunnel living is decidedly different: besides significant temperature shift and prolonged isolation from the outside world, the lack of fresh air, food, and sunshine, as well as reduced oxygen levels, all make life difficult underground. [21] This is particularly true during training exercises, when the amount of oxygen is cut down to 80 percent of normal levels, and food rations are rolled back to one-third of normal supply ([Sina News](#), July 22, 2017).

According to researchers from the PLARF Disease Prevention and Control Center, members of units stationed underground are 22 percent more likely to get sick than their counterparts posted above ground. A PLARF-sponsored survey of one underground military complex in southeastern China found it to be damp, cold and uncomfortable. Moreover, in this facility, the amount of formaldehyde—a highly toxic and inflammable gas that may cause skin, throat, lung, and eye irritation, myeloid leukemia, and rare cancers—exceeds the national health standard by 30 percent. [22]

While missile launch brigades are almost always the focus of public attention, it is the less-publicized engineering units (工程部队, *gongcheng budui*) that build and maintain the PLARF's subterranean infrastructure. This group also experiences significant mental health impacts as a result of their workload and physical environment. One study of 651 construction workers in an unnamed engineering unit revealed a six-day workweek, with workers typically working 8 to 14 hours a day. However, those tasked with “frontline construction” (一线施工, *yixian shigong*) could work up to 13-14 hours daily. According to the study, 65 percent of 344 workers interviewed perceived their own health status as “okay or bad.” Seventy-four percent

believed that, compared to one year before, their health had slightly or significantly declined. Seventy-five percent out of 632 workers surveyed indicated that their labor demands were somewhat or very tiring. [23]



Image: A Chinese television image of PLARF personnel training at an unidentified underground “secret base” intended to “increase the PLA’s survivability in time of war.” (Source: China.com)

There are a number of occupational hazards for tunnel construction workers. Ninety-seven percent of 640 workers identified dust as the leading hazard, followed by noise (87 percent), toxic and harmful gasses (79 percent), dampness (76 percent), poor ventilation (73 percent), and vibration (44 percent). With regards to noise, 64 percent of respondents are irritated by construction noise, while 28 percent feel very irritated. There are also shortages of personal protective equipment; and to make matters worse, 37 percent of correspondents were dissatisfied with the quality of the protective gear available. [24]

Under such working conditions, members of PLARF engineering units are exposed to a range of illnesses. Subjective symptoms reported by 533 workers surveyed include frequent coughing or coughing-up phlegm (65 percent), irritation (53 percent), sore throat (46 percent), joint pain (45 percent), dry eyes (41 percent), bad memory (40 percent), decline in physical health (38 percent), decrease in appetite (33 percent), tightness in chest (32 percent), ringing in the ears (31 percent), declining vision (30 percent), and feeling depressed (29 percent). [25]

Food also affects mood and mental health—and for service members, the quality and quantity of rations can impact morale and mental well-being. Yet a November 2017 report showed that PLARF personnel have an imbalanced diet that undercuts everyday performance. Consumption of vegetable oil, meat, eggs and dried vegetables were above the military limit, exceeding the official standards by 120.2 percent, 23.9 percent, 68.6 percent, and 24 percent, respectively. [26] By contrast, the intake of cereal, poultry, fish, shrimp, milk, sucrose, fresh vegetables, fruits and dried edible fungi were below standards. (Only soy intake aptly met the standard.) There is an excessive consumption of protein, sodium, phosphorus and iron, and insufficient

intake of zinc and vitamin A, resulting in a high prevalence of deficiency symptoms. In addition, the survey found that 25 percent of participants were overweight or obese. [27]

Conclusion

While observers have witnessed positive changes regarding military life on the plateaus, high elevation still has the worst influence on service member mental health, followed by tropical maritime environments. In light of China's security considerations on its southern and western flanks, improving the welfare of plateau and island troops should continue to be a concern of the PLA leadership. More attention should likewise be dedicated to the PLARF service members confronting mental health troubles due to a poor diet, stressful work environment, and long periods spent underground ([Xinhua](#), March 29). Given the informational and psychological components prevalent in modern warfare, the role of morale and mental health in influencing combat effectiveness will become more and more consequential for a rapidly changing PLA. Military mental health will gain importance as China moves ahead with its military reforms, and the role of the PLA leadership in providing policy direction will be a pivotal factor.

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Notes

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