

Modernizing China's Military: A High-Stakes Gamble?

by Howard M. Krawitz

Key Points

China is committed to modernizing almost every aspect of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). But military modernization may be more of a high-stakes gamble than Beijing realizes. Politics and professionalism may not mix well.

No matter how carefully crafted, modernization inevitably will alter the PLA sense of identity and change its relationship over time with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Modernization may foment friction between military and civilian authorities competing for political primacy and limited resources or create within the PLA divisive social issues similar to those dogging Chinese civil society generally.

The CCP struggle to define its future in a changing society makes the problem more complex. The PLA could become a truly national army, unwilling to be a tool for enforcing party dicta or policing internal security. Or PLA factions could end up vying for power. The resulting instability, if not outright anarchy, could threaten all of Asia.

The final nature of an empowered, modernized PLA is anyone's guess. In one worst-case scenario, the PLA is an aggressive, nationalistic entity fueled by radical Chinese militarism. In a positive scenario, a more professional PLA with enhanced capability and self-confidence might become a safer, less insular military that is cognizant of the need for disciplined action and measured responses, bound by well-understood rules of engagement and, overall, a more potent force for preserving regional stability.

China's accelerated push to modernize the People's Liberation Army (PLA) raises two important questions: What impact will such change have upon the PLA image, status, and role in Chinese society? And how will Chinese military modernization affect the strategic interests and security concerns of the United States and China's neighbors in the region?

Making the PLA into a more professional, technologically proficient force would certainly strengthen its capability to perform national defense, regional security, and other externally oriented missions more effectively. But modernization could also significantly change internal PLA demographics, resulting in a drastic alteration of the social contract that has traditionally existed between China's military and civilian society.

The aftereffects of major changes in the historic social contract remain a large and potentially dangerous unknown. Conceivably, substantive change could create conditions leading to political competition between civilian and military authorities or wrangling over limited resources. It might promote within the PLA itself a rise in divisive issues similar to those now plaguing Chinese society in general as a result of two decades of uneven economic reform: intensified urban-rural distinctions, rifts between haves and have-nots, and increasing divisions between the educated and uneducated, the privileged and unprivileged.

For the PLA parent entity, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), modernization represents a double-edged sword. It promises the party a more effective mechanism for maintaining domestic primacy and enhancing international prestige. Conversely, the modernization process could equally well create a military increasingly unwilling to be seen as a

tool for enforcing party dicta or policing internal security—in effect, working against party interests. The PLA could evolve into a national military with loyalties to the state as a whole rather than to one specific political element within the state (the CCP), as is the case today. Or the PLA itself could even develop into a distinct political element, brokering power and seeking organizational advantage at other political entities' expense.

Changes wrought through PLA attempts to carry out a revolution in military affairs have potentially far-reaching implications for the Asia-Pacific region and especially for U.S. security interests. A more professional PLA could become a safer, less insular military that is cognizant of the need for disciplined action and measured responses, bound by well-understood rules of engagement and, overall, a more potent force for preserving regional stability. But a darker version of this picture also exists: the distinct possibility that enhanced capability and self-confidence will encourage the PLA to evolve into an aggressive, nationalistic entity fueled by a radical Chinese militarism that encourages risk-taking and adventurism, both in the region and in dealings with the United States. In a worst-case domestic scenario—unlikely but not inconceivable—PLA factions could end up vying for power. The resulting chaos could easily produce a dangerous state of instability, if not outright anarchy, that would threaten all of Asia.

The party's ongoing struggle to define its future and control its evolution in a changing society makes the problem even more complex. For China, military modernization is as much (maybe even more) a political conundrum as it is a scientific and technological problem. Although they display the overt trappings of a pro-modernization mentality, the most senior

PLA leadership remains basically politically inflexible, unimaginative, and probably ignorant of the actual requirements and effects of real change, even as younger generations of field-grade officers—who are likely to be the primary enactors and beneficiaries of modernization—have begun to exhibit nationalistic tendencies and interpretations of PLA roles in strategic deliberations and foreign policy increasingly at variance with those traditionally held by their elders.

Beijing's Blueprint

China's grand ambition is to be the premier power in Asia by 2015 and to wield considerable worldwide authority by 2050. It has partially achieved this ambition through a combination of skillful diplomacy and a relatively successful program of domestic economic reform. But it still lacks the third leg of the tripod that supports any great state: a respected, competent military capable of credibly projecting power outside national borders and reinforcing policy initiatives in the international arena.

Beijing has long realized that a powerful military component is a prerequisite to achieving global prominence. But despite this recognition, for over two decades, China's leaders, including its military commanders, opted for a pragmatic approach to national development that subordinated large-scale military modernization to what were perceived as higher-order needs.

Forcefully advocated by late Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping, the subordination of military to national developmental priorities occasionally led to heated internal debates on the direction of economic reform or the scope of infrastructure development. But throughout, there generally was consensus that, absent needed improvements in the nation's economic, scientific, and social foundations, the PLA would be unable to embark on any meaningful, maintainable modernization program. This policy may also have offered an added, if indirect and inadvertent, benefit: while it constrained China's military development over the short run, it almost certainly provided a respite during which China's military establishment could adjust to changes in Chinese society overall, gain practical experience in diplomacy

and international military affairs, and become generally better prepared to absorb the additional social and philosophical changes that will inevitably accompany future structural and other professional changes in the PLA.

Deng's Legacy

Deng Xiaoping's developmental formula, with its focus on science, technology, and economics, largely continues to guide China's modernization process. Still, the formula has experienced a notable change in emphasis, dating from the 1991 Gulf War, as civilian and military leaders in Beijing began to understand the implications of the events they had witnessed. And if the Gulf War was a wake-up call, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization air campaign in Kosovo was the dash of cold water that brought China's leaders fully awake. Since then, Chinese military spending has grown in both absolute and relative terms.

The current leadership has improved Deng's *quality over quantity* reform concept. It has strengthened both military training and general education requirements for many members of the armed forces. It has put more resources into acquiring cutting-edge military technology, superior weapons systems, advanced support equipment, and new infrastructure. It has shifted its military modernization priorities slightly in response to new requirements posed by the changing face of the modern warfighting environment. Today, China's air, sea, and other specialized forces, long the unappreciated lesser siblings of the politically powerful PLA land forces, receive greater attention and measurably larger slices of the military resources pie. This, in turn, is stimulating a gradual evolution of the PLA as an institution, prompting new questions about its nature and its mission.

Chinese defense white papers (themselves a sign of change) speak of preparing for regional conflict under high-tech conditions and, increasingly, provide data giving a clearer picture of Chinese military development trends. Admittedly, these documents hide the true amounts and obscure the real priorities of Chinese defense spending. Even so, the overall spending trends shown by the documents are instructive in revealing China's commitment to achieving its goal (see accompanying illustrations).

While still relatively minor in comparison to the massive social and economic changes that have swept through Chinese civilian society in general, similar (if somewhat less easily observable) changes also have occurred in the PLA over the past decade and can be expected to be even greater in the foreseeable future. This, in turn, pulls into new focus potentially sticky sociopolitical issues concerning the effect successful modernization will have on the PLA image, status, and role in society.

Political Acceptability

The ambitious modernization program that China's leaders have mapped out could, if successful, transform the PLA into a streamlined, high-quality national fighting force that most likely would have a new worldview. To reach proposed modernization goals, the PLA will have to undergo major structural changes in its approach to personnel recruitment and management, logistics and support operations, organization and maintenance of specialized units, professional military education, and doctrine, to name just a few areas. Even more, China's military establishment will likely experience tremendous social change internally. But the PLA might not be ready for such changes, which might even be considered contrary to China's best interests when examined in the context of the CCP traditional political-ideological viewpoint.

During the latter half of the 20th century, a number of countries carried out far-reaching military restructurings with minimal social or political mishap. In several cases—the United States, Great Britain, France, and Canada, for example—the changes were especially deep-reaching, transforming the armed forces in these nations from large, socially mixed, and regionally diverse forces heavily dependent on national conscription to quantitatively smaller, qualitatively superior, all-volunteer services. In these cases, most major issues involved the technical and professional problems associated with restructuring and changing the missions of existing military forces historically controlled by and accountable to national governments. Social problems, while not entirely nonexistent, were largely secondary issues. Where such problems existed, the democratic philosophies and principles underpinning these societies and the existing organizational structures in these militaries generally served to handle them.¹

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China's Annual Defense Expenditures, 2000–2002

(in billions of U.S. dollars. 1 U.S. dollar = 8.3 ren min bi)

Year	Personnel	Maintenance and Operations	Equipment	Total
2000	4.89	4.97	4.69	14.55
2001	5.56	5.85	5.96	17.37
2002	6.51	7.00	6.90	20.41

Source: PRC White Paper: China's National Defense in 2002

China is likely to be different. In many respects, it lacks the cultural background, social mechanisms, and military structural organization that would permit change to occur as easily as it did in the above-named nations. More importantly, unlike the above examples and in clear contrast to most other major military organizations in the world, the PLA—an entity whose very identity is deeply rooted in a political ideology—occupies a special place in postmodern Chinese history and has played a unique role in society since the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Touchstone: The Party

To understand the dilemma faced by the CCP and PLA, it is necessary to understand how military reform potentially undermines the very foundation upon which the PLA rests. Building a modern, world-class military means attracting and retaining relatively well-educated, comparatively sophisticated personnel capable of accepting responsibility and thinking for themselves. But this is not where PLA military tradition lies.

Perhaps uniquely, when compared to any other modern major state, the PLA is not a central state military organization. It is the military organ of the CCP, dedicated to preserving and defending the party, not the state. The Party Central Military Commission (CMC), not the state Central CMC or the Ministry of Defense, exercises the equivalent of national command authority over most aspects of PLA operational, logistical, and support activities for warfighting and internal security operations. (China's Ministry of Defense has authority only over non-operational training, some higher education, research and development, and certain infrastructure/construction activities in support of China's national defense agenda.)

This distinction may be blurred, or even inconsequential, in the PLA performance of its everyday duties and operations because commanders filling state and party military leadership positions have been one and the same in the PRC history to date. But it is a

distinction that exists, is well understood by PLA cadre, and becomes meaningful in times of crisis, especially in cases of internal crisis. The primary PLA allegiance is to the party. It has always filled its ranks with politically dependable members drawn from those in Chinese society most willing to accept the party's authority and most susceptible to manipulation through propaganda. Party-directed political education and indoctrination along with party discipline have been key elements in keeping Communist China's armed forces from playing roles as "kingmakers" and power brokers. These elements remain essential aspects of PLA life and identity, even today.

But politics and professionalism may not necessarily mix well. Taken to extremes, the side effects of the modernization process could foster an environment that weakens party loyalty and perhaps even creates an armed entity with loyalty to none save itself. Obviously, any move in this direction poses a serious conflict of interest for, if not an outright threat to, the CCP, which certainly wants China to

have a strong, competent, respected military, but not at its own expense. For China's leaders, the Indonesian military experience serves as a constant reminder of the possibilities for this sort of worst-case scenario.

Among the many wake-up calls party leaders received during the Tiananmen events, the Beijing regiment's balking at quelling the disturbance was one that sounded loud and clear. Following that incident, political indoctrination and nationalistic propaganda were intensified in the PLA, as well as in institutions of higher learning from which future military officers are likely to be drawn, including civilian universities and professional colleges.

But attempts to ensure ideological correctness and unswerving loyalty create their own contradictions to creating technologically oriented, competent armed forces: rigid political indoctrination and blind discipline stifle adaptability, flexibility, and creativity, cornerstones of the modern, professional force that Beijing professes to want.

Touchstone: The Peasants

Another special aspect of the PLA is its deeply rooted peasant tradition. Mao Zedong and Red Army founder Zhu De transformed the military's image from despised oppressor of the people into a powerful and positive political tool, the cutting edge of which was the image of the soldier-peasant. PRC leaders have never lost sight of the importance of identifying the

Percentage of China's Annual Defense Expenditures in Gross Domestic Product, 1995–2001



Source: PRC White Paper: China's National Defense in 2002

PLA with the people. The people's army concept resonates within the PLA even to this day.

Until recently, the PLA drew its strength, officers and ranks alike, predominantly from China's politically acceptable poor and middle-peasant classes. The PLA lived among and farmed alongside the peasants, providing most of its own needs. It helped peasants at harvest time, provided critical aid (mostly manpower) during natural disasters, and generally lived a life not too different from that of peasants throughout rural China.

This role remains essentially unchanged. Many PLA units continue to be stationed throughout the countryside and are expected to be a self-sufficient and contributing part of rural life; China's military is still the primary responder to natural disasters. The great PRC propaganda model, Lei Feng, was a peasant soldier who died a hero—not in combat, but while performing tasks on behalf of peasants in the region where he was stationed. Lei was meant to enhance PLA prestige, but, equally importantly, he served as a role model and, through the focus on his peasant origins, emphasized the close PLA bond with the people.

In return, China's peasants identified with the PLA, drawn as it was primarily from their fathers, brothers, and sons. In many cases, rural families and villages benefited directly for having members in the PLA, often receiving subsidies and special privileges. The PLA even came through the Great Cultural Revolution with its reputation relatively unscathed, despite its early role in having helped start the worst social cataclysm since the founding of the People's Republic.

These are important themes, germane to any question about possible reform-induced demographic changes in China's armed forces. Since its inception, the PLA has been solidly loyal to the party, thanks to its staffing by members of a politically acceptable class with historically low levels of education, readily susceptible to political indoctrination. It has been widely perceived, especially among rural folk, as an organ that directly benefits the Chinese people as well as the national defense, even as it was used to reinforce party primacy and authority within China. Whether the PLA actually deserves its positive image or whether it never sought benefit for any groups except the party and itself is beside the point. The important thing, as with many things in China, is perception, and the PLA has generally

enjoyed the benefits of a positive reputation among the Chinese people.

Viewed against this background, far-reaching modernization has the potential to jeopardize the PLA standing in society. There is tangible risk that modernization will introduce factors that could stimulate a reemergence of class distinctions and class frictions and subsequently alter traditional perceptions, both within the armed forces and between the armed forces and society at large.

Changing the Mix

For the PLA, any serious attempt at modernization means remaking itself as much as it means upgrading itself. It means moving from a predominantly low-tech, ground-force-oriented organization to a force structure that prizes higher technology, seeks a more balanced mix of air-land-sea forces, and pays more attention to joint operations among these three branches. To do this as quickly and efficiently as possible, the PLA will want to attract better educated, more sophisticated personnel but will find this increasingly difficult to do if it continues to draw from its traditional labor pool.

Thus, the PLA will have either to pour more resources into basic education for recruits to prepare them for more advanced job-related training, or shift its focus to recruiting from China's larger urban areas, where it will be easier to attract a higher caliber of personnel already primed to assimilate advanced training. Given limitations imposed by time, finances, and other resource constraints, the temptation is to shift the recruiting focus. In times of prosperity, the PLA might have to compete aggressively with China's civilian economy for the talent it seeks to attract. Depending on circumstances, this might mean special recruitment and retention incentives that could set the military farther apart from its traditional base. It could cause resentment and division within the military itself, as discrepancies grow between spending and treatment accorded favored units or personnel and those accorded run-of-the-mill elements. It could also cause antagonism and division between the military and the civilian government bureaucracy if the latter, already reeling from relentless, reform-mandated downsizing, comes to believe it is increasingly being forced to cede scarce resources to the former.

Meeting educational needs in a more modern and professional military will also be a challenge. In Maoist thinking, the people's

military transcended class, even going so far as to dispense with overt trappings of rank for part of its history. Traditionally, officers rose through ranks; if educated at all, they were educated in PLA schools where political indoctrination heavily influenced the culture and training. Enlisted personnel, most of whom had primary school educations at best, received little schooling beyond political indoctrination and the basics needed to maintain an infantry-oriented land force; political indoctrination remains a cornerstone of PLA existence. Even the earliest steps toward modernization showed how inadequate this model would be in allowing the PLA to evolve into a more sophisticated force.

Today, the PLA seeks college-educated officers—a major divergence from its revolutionary tradition—and, increasingly, enlisted personnel with high school diplomas or equivalent levels of education. The PLA has improved the quality of its own schools and academies: China's 2000 and 2002 Defense White Papers both go into great detail about projected in-service education programs. More and more, officers reaching certain ranks and specialists in certain fields are expected to pursue advanced schooling in PLA academies or postgraduate education in outside universities, including, increasingly, study abroad. Education levels within the PLA—especially for the officer corps, specialized technical personnel, and those military units that have already benefited from reform—far surpass those in mainstream Chinese society, a gap likely to widen significantly as the PLA proceeds along its proposed modernization course. Elitism, already noticeable in the behavior of younger officers and special units, and its associated social problems loom as a potential risk.

These or similar social problems (and subsequent frictions) might also be replicated within the PLA ranks if, as some analysts have postulated, China's military modernization blueprint ends up superimposing a core force of several hundred thousand elite troops on a mass of nondescript conscript forces.² These core elements will be better equipped, better trained, and oriented toward the types of external (morale-enhancing) missions normally associated with national military forces. They will require and receive more resources than average PLA units. They will likely be divorced from the difficult, labor-intensive, quasi-rural lifestyle that is typical of most PLA units. They probably will be exempt from unglamorous internal security duties, another aspect that will

set them apart from the bulk of their PLA comrades. It is not out of the question that such divisions and the resultant envy could cause serious morale and discipline problems within the ranks.

The Social Contract

Aspiring to a better-educated military force also refocuses target areas for recruitment from the countryside to the cities and from poorer areas to wealthier ones, mirroring the evolution occurring throughout Chinese society as the nation's changing economic and social structures force new labor market practices. In China, most universities and other institutions of higher learning are found in large, usually relatively wealthy, urban areas. More importantly, most students attending adequate secondary schools or institutions of higher learning come from urban areas where schooling is better and where individuals are more likely to have an opportunity to attend school. By contrast, a middle school education remains the norm for much of rural China; in very poor areas, in fact, many children do not even reach or make it past primary school. By some estimates, there may be as many as 30 million illiterates in China today.

Conversely, there are already clear signs that a new privileged class is arising in China's wealthier urban enclaves, formed from the children of party cadre, government officials, military officials, and successful entrepreneurs. Children from these "better families" have significant potential advantages: private tutors, special schools, a head start in networking, greater access to news and information about the outside world, and even more opportunities for direct contact with foreigners. In time, disadvantaged social classes, seeing the military door increasingly closed to them, could come to feel they have lost a traditional economic escape route. They could begin to resent perceived losses of opportunity, especially if economic reforms do not live up to expectations about improving the quality of life in rural and poorer urban areas, and if those opportunities are lost to those envied as already being much better off.

A related potential danger lies in the possible consequences of a backlash from retired old-order military retirees if, as is likely, these individuals lose the benefits and influence they traditionally enjoyed through networking and if social and economic gulfs

widen between them and the new PLA generation. Once disaffected, this group poses a tangible threat to internal stability: they represent the one segment of Chinese society most likely to be capable of organizing, planning, and acting on their own.

Indeed, for China's leaders, one of the most worrisome aspects of the Falun Gong movement in China is the number of older, disaffected individuals with military and paramilitary backgrounds active in the organization.³ Falun Gong, an unsanctioned popular movement (now officially banned), seemingly sprang full blown onto the Chinese stage almost overnight. The movement exhibited a high degree of organization and discipline—a shock to Chinese officials, who quickly saw it as a potentially serious political danger. The added realization that Falun Gong had gained these strengths because of its strong appeal for that segment of the Chinese population most likely to possess organizational and tactical skills only added to the nightmare.

The ascendancy of an urban educated class within the PLA has the potential to alter the basic focus of PLA networking activities. Networking is certainly not new to China's military: historically, networking focused on exploiting party relationships, internal factional alliances, and revolutionary bonds. But given the postulated evolution in the PLA population, it is not farfetched to suppose that PLA networking activities might take on a different focus, one that favors economic dealings and financial accommodations over traditional political and ideological arrangements.

Events in recent history lend credence to this supposition: the widespread and enthusiastic PLA foray into economic ventures—an activity that occupied the military's attention through much of the last decade—stimulated a new appreciation for networking that produced economic advantage and material gain. It also fueled an astonishing predisposition for corruption; local grapevines in many areas buzzed with reports of gun battles between business-rival units, strong-arm tactics against local civilian businesses, extortion, and payoffs.

These unwelcome side effects, deep reaching and corrosive, led China's most senior leaders to order the PLA to remove itself from the business arena. There is still vigorous debate about the exact degree to which the PLA obeyed orders to divest itself of economic-commercial

entanglements (or whether it simply dumped nonperformers and disguised "keepers").

It is interesting that senior PLA delegates to the 16th CCP Congress went on record as being squarely behind Jiang Zemin's call to welcome entrepreneurs and capitalists into the party and as being ready to "firmly establish the guiding principle of Jiang's Three Representations Theory in the army." The PLA accounts for a sizeable segment of CCP membership, and there is a growing implication that the party is shaping a new role for itself as China's main entrepreneurial facilitator and influence broker. Should the CCP experiment in this direction spin out of control, the PLA traditional value system could easily break down as its leaders become caught up in the "new" CCP identity. One possible, and ironic, outcome of the transformational process now taking place is that the PLA could evolve into the defender of and a stakeholder in a new Chinese plutocracy: the stakes for the CCP are high, perhaps involving even survival itself.

Looking Ahead

Possible PLA modernization scenarios are many and varied. The armed forces could end up differently than current leaders envision:

- From the party point of view, modernization in the best of all worlds not only produces a strong military but also reinforces existing PLA-CCP bonds (thus giving Beijing a more efficient and flexible tool for enforcing CCP political will at home), while simultaneously making China capable of assuming a respectable military posture internationally. This result is probably the hardest to achieve, as it implies a certain amount of sophistication in striking the fine balance between the different philosophies and worldviews appropriate for undertaking both external and internal missions within the same force, while minimizing frictions within that force and instilling trust between it and society in general.

- The PLA might become a professional, national military force, divorced from the party and loyal to the concept of the nation-state, forcing a restructuring of the relationship that currently exists between China's political and military establishments.

- The PLA could evolve into a CCP rival, insisting on substantial power sharing.

- Going a step further, the PLA might even appropriate to itself the role of China's premier authority, supplanting the CCP entirely and defining state needs and benefits as synonymous with its own.

- Less damaging to the party, but more harmful to China as a state, the PLA could stumble in its

march to modernization, saddling China with a relatively nondescript military—one sufficient to ensure party primacy but incapable of projecting real power abroad and ill-equipped to make Beijing a credible international political presence, even as China increasingly assumes the trappings of a global economic power.

Adding to the uncertainty is the extent to which China's military modernization experiment is dependent on and will be shaped by several key variables, some of which may lie outside the CCP or PLA ability to control.

Key Variables

First and foremost is economics. Reaching a certain level of economic success and achieving the critical mass needed for sustainable development triggered China's military modernization program and is the fuel that keeps it going. Thus, it is easy to imagine setbacks that could occur if growth were to falter or the economy were to experience a serious downturn: squabbling over resources, implosion of current programs, a return to the status quo ante, and stagnation.

Less obvious, perhaps, is the potential for danger that lies at the other end of the spectrum: what happens if economic growth and associated wealth accumulation accelerate appreciably? As mentioned earlier, fundamental changes in Chinese society and within the PLA over the last decade more or less have eroded the basic underpinnings of the PLA political philosophy and moral ethic. The failure of the "PLA, Incorporated" experiment of the 1990s shows the ease and rapidity with which an already shaky foundation could be further undermined. Coupled with the growing problems of greed and corruption rampant at all levels of PRC society today, China could again find itself deeply mired in conditions reminiscent of those that prevailed throughout the 1930s and 1940s—conditions that allowed the CCP and PLA to survive and later prosper.

An additional element of uncertainty injects itself here: the CCP itself is slowly being forced to change as it seeks to define a new role for itself and preserve its legitimacy (and its existence) in a rapidly changing Chinese society. But the CCP is basically unimaginative and saddled with political conservatism. It does not have a clear vision of where it wants to go and is foundering in its attempt to create one. It remains inflexible in redefining its concepts of power and primacy, seeking to rely on

superficial reforms to relieve pressure for change and substituting economics for politics in the hope of diverting attention from fundamental flaws in the system. The intimate PLA-CCP bond makes this a complicating variable because, at this juncture, changes in the CCP nature and/or focus could significantly influence the path of the PLA evolution, and the PLA leadership exhibits the same conservatism and rigidity of thought its parent organization demonstrates, often exacerbated by the higher incidence of ignorance and insularity prevalent among senior PLA officers and staff.

Lastly, there are the influences exerted by intangibles, such as China's cultural biases, political understanding, and perceptions of how the world works and China's place in it. Historically, the PLA has been an inwardly focused entity, often ill-informed about other global players such as the United States. Making the PLA more technologically capable and strengthening it operationally without simultaneously cultivating a more sophisticated and informed leadership corps inject additional uncertainty into the equation, with obvious implications for China's Asia-Pacific neighbors.

International Impacts

Would a strong, professional PLA be a plus or a minus for the region? A PLA that fails to revamp its outdated structure and capabilities will remain a flawed tool that denies China a strong voice in a region that is home to relatively strong actors (India, Japan, Korea, and even Russia) capable of banding together to check China. In some respects, this may be preferable, but it may also be a drawback. A China too inefficient or too weak to project power in a timely and credible manner would also likely be a China incapable of playing a decisive role in preserving peace and stability in the region should it be called upon to do so.

Conversely, a powerful military might encourage Beijing to challenge with confidence

perceived competitors in the region, elevating China to the status of hegemon in Asia. While Beijing-as-superpower might lend its efforts to guaranteeing peace and stability in the region, it might opt to do so regardless of its neighbors' wishes, enforcing a pax sinica of its own choosing. It also might overestimate its own capabilities, leading to adventurism and possible miscalculation in deciding how far it could safely go in testing limits or trying to further controversial foreign affairs policies.

Encouraging military-to-military exchanges and contacts between China and other nations, especially the United States, Japan, and European countries, may help guide and inject greater rationality into China's revolution in military affairs—or it may not. China's march to military prowess could produce armed forces with superior soldiering skills and equipment, strong nationalistic tendencies, and few restraints against regional, or even global, adventurism.

Many factors will have a role in determining the course of China's revolution in military affairs. Most will not be subject to external influence, but the world community will have great influence over one key factor: the extent to which the world's democracies commit to guiding China along this path through consistent and coherent military-to-military relationships.

Notes

¹ INSS colleagues John Carter, Gerald W. Faber, John A. Cope, and James J. Przystup provided valuable insights into the process and problems of change in Western and Japanese military forces.

² These divisions and tensions could become serious issues if, as David M. Finklestein in the Center for Naval Analyses has conjectured, the PLA is seeking to float a highly specialized core of elite forces designed to respond to international crises on a sea of average troops retained to meet internal security and other traditional needs.

³ David M. Finklestein in the Center for Naval Analyses provided valuable insights on military retirees.

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