



Colloquium Brief

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THE “PEOPLE” IN THE PLA: RECRUITMENT, TRAINING, AND EDUCATION IN CHINA’S 80-YEAR-OLD MILITARY

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KEY INSIGHTS:

- China’s ideal “new type” of military officer is university educated and possesses the technical competence and physical ability to handle actual combat against a modern, high-tech adversary.
- Driven by the understanding of the critical and integral role of soldiers to the success of military modernization, China’s professional military education (PME) system is undergoing rapid changes, focusing on science, technology, and the development of leadership skills.
- Underpinning China’s drive towards a more high-tech military is the concept of “informatization” (*xinxihua*), a sophisticated idea about aligning capabilities and requirements in the face of an increasingly hybridized force.

On September 28, 2007, more than 60 leading experts on China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) convened at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, for a 2-day discussion on “The ‘People’ in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China’s 80-Year-Old Military.” The 2007 PLA Conference, conducted by The National Bureau of Asian Research and the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, sought to investigate the 80-year-old military’s human infrastructure, identifying trends in PLA recruitment, education and training, demographics, and historical perspectives.

Fueled by double-digit growth in spending over the past 15 years, China’s PLA has undergone a staggering transformation from an anachronistic, unwieldy vestige of the Mao era to a more mobile and high-tech military force able to engage in an increasing number of joint exercises, multilateral peacekeeping operations, and deterrence-oriented activities. The acquisition of new weapons and combat capabilities has been a large part of this modernization, to be sure, but hardware and force structure alone tell us little of the institutions, doctrines, and people underlying such development. As systems become more complex and gaps between PLA service programs widen, the human elements of China’s military—officer training, education, and mobilization—have become an increasingly important part of the modernization equation. How is the military’s personnel system changing to meet the needs of a force able to “win local wars under informatized conditions,” as the Chinese now proclaim? What types of officers is the PLA currently grooming, and what do its ideal officers look like? Knowing *who* comprises the PLA’s modern force gives us further insight into *how* it is run—and what its priorities will be in the future.

WHAT TYPE OF OFFICER? AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Decades before the PLA itself was officially established in 1949, the idea of a “political PLA” – an army that could seize power for China as a political force – had taken root. Sculpted initially from the doctrines of the Whampoa Military Academy, under whose auspices many of the PLA’s founding marshals were educated, China’s original PME system emerged from the notion that politics and the military were inextricably intertwined. In the 1950s, the modern academic system began to evolve, drawing heavily from the Soviet model for inspiration, content, and structure, and modifying its objectives to concentrate on defense of the party rather than the extraterritorial usurpation of power. After a peak in the number of military academies in 1955 (253), schools began to react violently to Soviet reliance, culminating in an “anti-dogmatism” campaign that led to a massive downsizing of schools and greater uncertainty about what kind of officer they wished to cultivate.

The PLA did not begin to recover until the 1980s, thanks in large part to Deng Xiaoping, whose 1985 decision to change the strategic direction of the country shifted the military’s focus to long-term building of human capital. Punctuated by the establishment of the National Defense University (NDU) – China’s first joint-service academy – that year, the new strategic trajectory facilitated the introduction of new colleges, training from the civilian sector, and the development of innovative officer exchange programs. Over the past 20 years, these changes have been accompanied by an unremitting reevaluation of PLA doctrine and personnel management – an intense period of defining and redefining what kind of war the PLA may fight, and what kind of people they want to fight it. In 1993, Jiang Zemin promulgated the current guidelines, the “Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Period,” which directed the PLA to change from its 1985 tasking to prepare for “local, limited war” to preparing for “local war under modern high-

tech conditions.” These were followed in 1999 by the New Generation Operations Regulations, which focused on the campaign-level of war to provide guidance for the joint and single-service operations required for the effective conduct of high-tech warfare.

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS: THE PLA’S “NEW TYPE” OF MILITARY OFFICER

What types of officers is the PLA now seeking to develop? Where do they come from, how do they enter the system, and how are they being trained? Since the reforms of 1985, the PLA has tapped two sources for its next generation of “new type” officers: the formal military academy system, of nearly 70 commissioning academies, and civilian universities, employing the national defense education program. Last year, 116 schools participated in the national defense education program, which integrates military training and field exercises into high-school and university coursework. Roughly half the output of new officers now seems to be coming from civilian universities, predominantly from the hard sciences – and in particular, engineering. These changes comport with a new military mantra, the so-called “Strategic Project for Talented People,” that values quality over quantity and places a high premium on academic credentials and technical expertise.

Trends in Noncommissioned Officers/Soldiers.

Another key source of human capital for the PLA lies in its burgeoning Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) corps, which may number in the hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Selected from conscripts who volunteer to extend their duty near the end of their second year of conscripted service, NCOs are increasingly targeted for their professional qualifications. The PLA has expanded educational and training opportunities for NCOs to hone key technical skills, and for the first time, NCOs are undertaking additional

leadership responsibilities previously performed by junior officers – sometimes on the level of third and fourth-year conscripts. Sustained, focused investment in NCO training seems to signal a departure from the predominantly conscript force of old and towards a more equal mix of conscripted and NCOs. It is a path-breaking effort toward realizing the concept of the NCO as a “soldier-officer” (*shiguan*).

Efforts to recruit and retain “new type” military talent have also shifted to meet the needs of a modern force, though it remains to be seen if such reforms will, in fact, translate into a more intellectually and physically capable PLA given the rapid pace of social, economic, and political change in Chinese society. In September each year, the Central Military Commission (CMC) and State Council issue their conscription orders, seeking to fill quotas by soliciting military districts, then subdistricts, and finally local armed forces departments to recruit interested youth. While exact numbers are not available on the open source record, quotas are generally established based on a breakdown of urban (roughly 30 percent today) to rural (roughly 70 percent) areas. Throughout this process, the local Police Armed Forces Departments (PAFDs) play arguably the most important role; PAFD personnel—responsible for enlisting the appropriate number of recruits for their districts and for deciding which new soldiers go into the PLA (Army, Navy, Air Force, or Second Artillery) or into the PAP (People’s Armed Police)—are effectively poised at the front lines of civil-military relations in China.

Personnel Management: Retaining the Best and Brightest.

Retaining the most talented recruits has also required changes in incentive structures. On the one hand, the expanding Chinese economy has given the PLA the money it needs to fund an increasingly high-tech officer corps. On the other, that same economy now challenges the PLA in competing for and retaining the most qualified candidates. To keep pace with the private sector,

the PLA last year increased starting salaries for new officers and NCOs by 80 to 100 percent and began offering an attractive package of additional tax-free subsidies and allowances. Yet, the efficacy of these reforms and of the recruitment process more broadly remains elusive; at present, it is hard to gauge how quotas and remuneration packages are impacting the quality of recruits and whether they will, in turn, provide the appropriate mix of skills. The number of civilian university-educated recruits still constitutes but a small fraction of the total enlistment figure, and questions regarding the physical fitness and obedience of city youth; the mushrooming cost of preparing the force for high-tech warfighting missions; and the motivations to join the PLA in an increasingly materialistic society remain unanswered.

Underpinning China’s drive towards a more high-tech military is the concept of “informatization” (*xinxihua*). More than just a convenient organizing principle, informatization is a sophisticated idea about aligning capabilities and requirements in the face of perpetual change and an increasingly hybridized, eclectic force. At the unit level, informatization is about training officers to be comfortable with high-tech warfare. Driven by the specter of future combat in which the enemy will have high levels of information and joint operation readiness, PLA officer training and education has focused on meeting real combat needs against a modern, high-tech adversary. In an environment of resource constraints, “informatized” training helps to narrow China’s vast geographical divides and enables critical skills development without resource exhaustion. Above all, it represents a logical extension of Hu Jintao’s recent rallying cry for greater scientific development, and a movement away from mechanized warfare towards the exploitation of an ever more complex command, control, communications, computers, information/intelligence, surveillance, targeting acquisition, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) structure that could be used as a force multiplier in future combat situations.

The increasing integration of advanced technologies and technical skills courses, mid-

career continuing education, and specialty training opportunities in the PME curriculum reflect this prerogative. At the PLA's command colleges, for example, schools have been bringing in more outside professors, including foreign guest lecturers knowledgeable about information operations and technology-based services. At the same time, they have been adding numerous technical skills and science courses each year while popularizing the use of case-based analyses and wargaming exercises as pedagogical tools in the classroom. These changes are ostensibly being driven by an overarching doctrine of security competition—specifically, an awareness of the vulnerability in the PLA's lack of technological expertise vis-à-vis potential adversaries—as well as individual proclivities in China's central leadership.

Another consideration when navigating the PLA personnel landscape is career progression. Moving up the hierarchy of ranks is predictable only insofar as intangibles such as connections and personal characteristics are kept out of the overall equation—though these factors seem to be playing less of a role as standards for promotion become more institutionalized. Across the PLA's five career tracks—military command, political, logistics, equipment, and technical—some experiments seem to be occurring to integrate technical and operational personnel functions, but these have not yet been incorporated into regulations. The idea of “jointness” appears to be gaining currency as the PLA grows more comfortable with officers pursuing dual tracks and even moving laterally across services.

TOWARD WHAT ENDS? CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

An exploration of the PLA's human capital sets the stage for a broader question: For what kind of army are the Chinese cultivating their officers? In the last few years, four main missions have emerged: (1) defending the territorial integrity of China; (2) becoming a great power; (3) asserting regional preeminence; and (4) dealing with Taiwan. Against this backdrop of objectives, the

PLA has sought to develop a more streamlined command structure, a more efficient logistical support system, and a more relevant and focused PME. Their “new type” officers—equal parts conscripted and noncommissioned—must possess the requisite education, technical know-how, and leadership skills to fulfill these tasks, and must ultimately be prepared for actual combat against a modern, high-tech adversary.

While China has no doubt moved forward with its reforms in recruitment, education, and training, actual progress must be appraised in light of the various changes occurring in Chinese society. What is the relationship between training and recruitment and the society within which it functions? In this regard, the PLA's success will depend, at the very least, on its ability to obtain adequate funding in the face of stiffening competition from other sectors and an increasingly expensive training and recruitment model. It must also overcome bureaucratic inertia, political infighting, and an assorted arsenal of advanced and throwback military equipment, among other factors, before it is able to utilize its people effectively for these missions. The face of China's armed forces is indeed experiencing a metamorphosis of sorts, but it will take considerable time for the people of the PLA to be fully integrated into a system that is attempting to “leap-frog” rapidly toward modernization amidst perpetual change and uncertainty.

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