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THE CHINESE MILITARY: ATTEMPTING TO CHANGE?



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THE CHINESE MILITARY: ATTEMPTING TO CHANGE?

BACKGROUND: Based on the division of topics among the China Regional Study group, the questions in this paper focus on the Chinese military and will be asked to military personnel during the military portions of the visit to China.

QUESTION 1 BACKGROUND: The Chinese military is trying to transform itself from a land-based power, centered on a vast ground force, to a smaller, mobile, high-tech military capable of mounting offensive and defensive operations beyond its coastal borders.¹ China began a massive reduction of 500,000 military personnel in 1997 over a two-year period that included a reduction of the Army by 18.6%; the Navy, 11.4%; the Air Force, 12.6%; and the Strategic Missile Force, 2.9%.² (Note that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) includes Ground Forces, Navy (includes Marines and Naval Aviation), Air Force, Second Artillery Corps (Strategic Missile Force), and the People's Armed Police (internal security troops)).

QUESTION 1: The People's Liberation Army has undergone a significant manpower reduction and restructuring over the past five years. What have been the biggest challenges during this reduction and restructuring?

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: Do you expect future reductions in force size as modernized equipment reduces manpower requirements?

¹ The World Factbook, China, 2/28/2002, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/bgn/2742pf.htm>

² China's National Defense in 2000, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, October 2000, Beijing

QUESTION 2 BACKGROUND: A significant part of the PLA's force structure transformation involved the development of a Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) and a Resolving Emergency Mobile Combat Force (REMCF). The RRF is a 100,000-man unit that is a mission-oriented task force designed to meet the PLA's revised strategic perceptions for the post Cold War era.³ The REMCF was developed from lessons learned after the 1989 Tiananmen operation demanded that the PLA improve its operational efficiency. The REMCF includes 300,000 forces trained in border defense, internal armed conflict, public disorder and disaster response.⁴ The establishment of RRFs and REMCFs has clearly affected the PLA's existing force structure and operational doctrines. Frequent and aggressive combined arms exercises have encountered little criticism within the PLA, an indication that there is widespread consensus among top commanders and officers in supporting these new force units. Clearly, RRF and REMCF will be the backbone force of the PLA in the near future. At the same time, these new units create challenges in terms of force coordination, logistic support, and command, control, communications and information.⁵

QUESTION 2: How effective have the Rapid Reaction Forces and Resolving Emergency Mobile Combat Forces been and do you believe they will continue to increase in size? How will the transportation, communications and logistical support be enhanced?

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: What are the biggest challenges in rapidly transporting the forces?

³ The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age, RAND, 1999

⁴ Ibid p. 56.

⁵ The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age, RAND, 1999

QUESTION 3 BACKGROUND: As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China has been committed to the maintenance of international peace and security. In order to guarantee their success and sound development, UN peacekeeping operations must strictly adhere to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, especially the principles of respect for state sovereignty and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs.⁶ China has participated actively in numerous UN peacekeeping activities with approximately 522 military observers, liaison officers or advisors and 800 engineers having been involved through calendar year 2000.⁷ While official Chinese government publications, like the one cited above, will applaud its involvement in peacekeeping operations, it is clearly a very minor participant considering it fields the largest armed forces in the world. The Chinese government is concerned about the sovereignty of the state and interference in internal affairs of other states, to the detriment of their UN involvement. Compared with other countries, China's current level of involvement in peacekeeping remains minimal. China contributes less than 1% of both the overall UN budget and the UN peacekeeping budget. Over 35,000 UN military personnel are currently involved in 18 different missions, yet China fills only 53 of these slots on five of these missions.⁸

QUESTION 3: What are the biggest concerns the PLA has in conducting United Nations-mandated peacekeeping operations? Do you anticipate an increase in your involvement in UN peacekeeping operations around the world? Do you see a larger role for the UN in a post – 9/11 world?

⁶ China's National Defense in 2000, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, October 2000, Beijing

⁷ Ibid p. 56.

⁸ Sovereignty, Intervention and Peacekeeping: The View from Beijing, Bates Gill and James Reilly, *Survival*, Vol. 42, no. 3, Autumn 2000, pp. 41-59.

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: To what extent might Chinese forces become involved in UN peacekeeping duties in Afghanistan?

QUESTION 4 BACKGROUND: “Despite a history of condemning American incursions abroad and a chronic fear of encirclement by the West, the Chinese government has expressed strong support for the new American war on terrorism.”⁹ The Chinese even seem to accept the idea of limited American military strikes in China’s own neighborhood.¹⁰ China has demonstrated an unprecedented amount of cooperation in the War on Terrorism including the sharing of terrorist-related intelligence information and the closing of its border with Afghanistan during the conflict.¹¹ Some would say that the cooperation is based on China’s own concerns with terrorism from its Muslim populated regions, or their concerns with terrorisms’ effect on the 2008 Olympics they will host. Regardless of the reason, this cooperation offers a chance to develop a stronger, more effective relationship with the United States that should benefit China in the future. “If the United States doesn’t act too unilaterally in this anti-terror campaign - - if China and Russia can feel that they are included - - then they won’t have so much incentive to join together in opposition to American hegemony.”¹²

QUESTION 4: Since 11 September, we have seen increased cooperation between China and the United States in the fight against terrorism. What do you see as the key aspects of this cooperation that will allow it to increase and continue to improve?

⁹ China’s Support for U.S. on Terror Is a Dramatic About-Face, Erik Eckholm, *The New York Times*, September 30, 2001.

¹⁰ Ibid p. 10

¹¹ China Has Closed Border With Afghanistan for Security, Beijing Zhongguo Xinwen She in Chinese, China’s Official News Service for Overseas Chinese, 8 October, 2001.

¹² China’s Support for U.S. on Terror Is a Dramatic About-Face, Erik Eckholm, *The New York Times*, September 30, 2001.

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: To what extent were Muslim extremist groups within China trained in Afghanistan or elsewhere?

What is China doing now to prepare Olympic security for 2008?

QUESTION 5 BACKGROUND: “To keep pace with the development of the Socialist market economy and meet the needs of the armed forces’ quality construction, the Chinese armed forces have carried out a series of reforms in logistical work. In December 1998, the PLA ceased to engage in commercial activities. Most of the more than 6,000 enterprises run by the military were closed down or handed over to local authorities.”¹³ Many would dispute this claim by the Chinese government that the PLA is no longer involved in commercial activities. The PLA relied upon a wide variety of state owned enterprises to keep the Army operating, and most China scholars believe the PLA is still involved in commercial activities, but in a more limited manner. These commercial activities are of interest because of their effect on unit readiness, as soldiers operating hotels, airlines and many other commercial activities would find it very difficult to maintain a trained and ready force. Additionally, the loss of funds from these activities could cause problems in the budget, or lead service members to illegal activities to maintain the funding levels.

QUESTION 5: To what extent does the PLA require income from military controlled enterprises to sustain defense budgets? What effect on funding and unit training has the loss of approximately 6,000 State owned enterprises run by the military had on the PLA?

¹³ China’s National Defense in 2000, Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, October 2000, Beijing.

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: What has been the most difficult aspect of the transition away from business to a purely military role? How well can the “private sector” support PLA military requirements?

QUESTION 6 BACKGROUND: U.S. military to military relations with China have been inconsistent over the past fifty years. These relations have always rested on bilateral political factors, and minor incidents can sometimes stop a productive exchange program instantly, despite the long-term consequences. There are competing views on the value of military to military relations; one side believes they are valuable to build trust and enduring relationships that will assist during a crisis, while the other view is that military exchanges benefit the Chinese more, due to their ability to gain valuable information from the United States’ advanced technical and tactical capabilities.¹⁴ China has put a significant emphasis on military exchanges with numerous countries around the world. “Over the past two years, China has sent more than seventy high level military delegations to over sixty countries, and hosted some 160 high-level foreign military delegations.”¹⁵ “The PLA is as suspicious of the U.S. military as it believes the U. S. military is of the PLA.”¹⁶

QUESTION 6: Would the PLA like to increase or decrease military to military exchanges with the United States and what do you see as the key aspects of a successful exchange program?

¹⁴ Dr. Paul Godwin, Professor Emeritus NWC, PLA Conference at NDU, 30-31 October 2001.

¹⁵ China’s National Defense in 2000, Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, October 2000, Beijing.

¹⁶ Engaging DoD: Chinese Perspectives on Military Relations with the United States, David Finkelstein and Michael McDevitt, The CAN Corporation, 2001.

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: Which country do you have the most successful military to military exchange programs with? What makes these successful from your vantage point?

QUESTION 7 BACKGROUND: “To meet the requirements of an evolving socialist market economy, and the restructuring of government organs, the PLA has gradually set up a new weaponry management system since 1998. Based on the strategy of invigorating the armed forces by reliance on science and technology, Chinese armed forces are quickening the pace of new weapons research and development of their armaments by means of scientific and technological innovations.”¹⁷ At the same time, military modernization is the fourth priority in the current regime. It falls far enough below several economic programs to make the effective modernization of the military difficult. Most experts agree that even with the recently increased Chinese defense budget, it will take the Chinese at least twenty years to significantly modernize their military.

QUESTION 7: Given your President’s current priorities and the fact that modernization of the military is the fourth in importance, how do you intend to effectively modernize the Chinese military in a timely manner?

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: What are the PLA’s top three modernization priorities?

¹⁷ China’s National Defense in 2000, Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, October 2000, Beijing.

QUESTION 8 BACKGROUND: (This question will be controversial in nature and will only be asked if the situation allows based on gaining an effective rapport with several PLA counterparts). Several studies and readings for the Sino-American Relations class emphasized the Chinese distrust of Americans and their desire for the United States to stay out of Asia. “The PLA views itself as the “torch bearer” for remembering the “Hundred Years of Humiliation” at the hands of foreigners. The PLA views this historical legacy as the justification for Chinese defense modernization, the reason why the PLA (in its view) has never fought a foreign war of aggression, and the precedent explaining why China never will fight a war of aggression and will follow a defensive military strategy.”¹⁸ At the same time, several articles on the PLA stated that the PLA views itself as a backward military force compared to the U.S. military and that on a strictly professional basis, the PLA admires the U.S. military. The purpose in asking the opinion of PLA officers while not in a group setting would be to determine how much of the U.S. distrust is a standard “party line” and how much is deeply-rooted in the PLA.

QUESTION 8: To what extent do you view the United States military as a threat to the sovereignty of China? To what extent can the presence of United States military forces in Asia help stabilize the region?

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: In your opinion, do more Chinese view the United States as a peer competitor or as a strategic partner?

¹⁸ E David M. Finkelstein, “Military Relations Through Chinese Eyes” (Unclassified Summary) (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analysis, 1998): p.2.

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