



Demobilized and disaffected: another roadblock for China's military reforms by James Char

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On the same day that Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan welcomed foreign military officials to the 2016 Xiangshan Forum, groups of Chinese civilians dressed in camouflage uniforms surrounded the administrative headquarters of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) along Chang'an Avenue in Beijing last Tuesday. While media accounts differ on the actual turnout of petitioners – some reports indicate a few hundred while others claim as many as 27,000 – the sizeable group of PLA veterans singing military songs and waving flags was a sight to behold, considering the stability-obsessed Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) aversion to collective mass activities. The protest was both well-organized and also spanned China's geographical bounds: protesters hailed from nine (or more) different provinces.

As one of the largest mass incidents in Beijing in recent history, how so many people could find their way to the *Bayi* Building right under the regime's internal surveillance system before changing into military fatigues on arrival remains a mystery. While protests by demobilized soldiers over remuneration and pensions are not new, the massing of the CCP's former armed servants in Beijing's main thoroughfare to seek redress over perceived violations to their retirement benefits as well as "corruption related to their job allocation," points to the formidable challenges that must be overcome before the Chinese military can evolve into a fighting force comparable to the world's other advanced militaries.

Change and continuity in PLA reforms

The petitioners at this event – believed to be PLA officers who had been decommissioned during an earlier streamlining process between 1993 and 2001 – had left military service under a previous policy that offered a lump-sum payoff. Purportedly upset over what they now consider to be meager compensation, a lack of financial assistance from local authorities, as well as their current state of unemployment (after the enterprises they had been transferred to went bankrupt or were restructured), the veterans congregated in the capital to bring their plight to the attention of leaders at the apex of Chinese politics.

Conflicting accounts point to negotiations between the veterans' representatives and officials from the State Bureau for Letters and Calls (the body responsible for handling public petitions) and the Central Military Commission (CMC) General Office. According to unverified Chinese reports, Meng Jianzhu – Zhou Yongkang's successor as China's domestic security czar – who was in Jiangxi at the time of the protest, was concerned enough to comment on the incident. Alluding to the lack of research and policy planning by the relevant bureaucracies in the 1990s, Meng allegedly referred to the veterans as "comrades of the regime" who "ought to be in the same camp (as the regime)," before emphasizing that the authorities should "resolutely" refrain from treating these ex-soldiers as threats to 'stability maintenance' (维稳 *weiwen*).

Following troop cuts announced by Xi Jinping last September, much has been made of the seriousness of looking after the soon-to-be demobilized soldiers in the latest round of reforms, with the Chinese leader himself referring to those affected as "treasures of the Party and state" and declaring that "Party committees and governments at all levels should place special emphasis on the employment of demobilized officers." According to the commander-in-chief, "rejecting to provide positions for demobilized officers under any pretext is not allowed." If efforts to provide for Chinese veterans have been problematic, questions about the ability of local officialdom to look after soon-to-be retrenched PLA personnel ought to be taken seriously.

A new spanner in the works

The sensitivities of dealing with former guardians of the Party-state who have the potential to compromise its inner workings may explain the implicit acknowledgment by the authorities of the 'rights protection' (维权 *weiquan*) of the veterans as well as its uncharacteristic conciliatory approach. Moreover, Meng Jianzhu's considered calls not to push the former soldiers to 'the opposite side' – if he indeed said that – adds a new perspective to the prospects for China's latest military modernization drive. Notwithstanding authoritative commentaries in the *PLA Daily* stipulating that the key source of resistance to the reforms "comes from within," the protest last Tuesday highlights how former members of the CCP's coercive forces can fuel the resistance of those still serving.

Put simply, how the Party-state has treated its veterans will have a bearing on those 300,000 soldiers who are about to lose their rice bowls, in particular, their perception of, and response to, promises of a smooth transition back to civilian life. Uncertainty in their future prospects – given China's slowing economic growth – cannot be entirely ruled out. There is no official body in China analogous to the United States Department of Veteran Affairs, local authorities are responsible instead for veteran welfare and payouts vary across regions. This cannot be good for PLA morale, nor does

it support its efforts to recruit China's best and brightest. Looking further ahead, the PLA's status as the CCP's last line of defense may also become less straightforward.

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