

**THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE
MILITARY IN CONTAINING
COVID-19 IN CHINA**

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Executive Summary

1. In containing COVID-19, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) deployed 4,000 military medics to staff three major hospitals in Wuhan to treat critically ill COVID patients, and mobilised military and civilian resources for logistical and medical support against COVID-19.
2. The PLA's 4,000 military medics in containing COVID-19 are moderate as compared to the much larger civilian contingent of medical professionals in Wuhan and Hubei; its manpower support to Wuhan is also quite small compared to PLA operations to provide relief to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, where 117,000 PLA troops were deployed.
3. The PLA support to Wuhan, however, is robust as only military medics who were trained in critical specialties of internal medicine were selected; this is different from the Sichuan earthquake relief where a large number of combat troops untrained for earthquake relief were deployed. These specialists are highly qualified to treat COVID patients, thus enabling the more robust and optimal PLA operations in Wuhan.
4. The level and type of PLA support to combat COVID-19 can be accounted for by two sets of considerations, one concerning domestic governance and the other national security.
5. On domestic governance, the fear of political vulnerability stemming from an over-reliance on the military for containing COVID-19, which could have been exploited for political advantages by the military, led the civilian leadership to deploy the level and type of military support that were deliberately measured and technically specialised; the timings of this support were also carefully planned.
6. Rather than domestic disaster relief, the top priority of the PLA is to safeguard China's national or external security; national security considerations thus constitute

another explanation for the level and type of military support deployed against COVID-19.

7. COVID-19 presented two critical and interrelated challenges to the central role of the PLA in safeguarding China's national security. The first is whether the epidemic will cause significant infections among the PLA ranks that may trigger a serious decline in PLA combat readiness. The second is whether the epidemic will seriously hamper PLA response to perceived external security challenges.
8. COVID-19 has not caused significant infections among PLA ranks; the epidemic has been under control in the PLA since it has not seriously hampered PLA response to the perceived external challenges to China's national security.

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE MILITARY IN CONTAINING COVID-19 IN CHINA

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PLA's Role: The Diverse Views

- 1.1 A few early analyses were done on the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in containing COVID-19 in China. A prevalent view shared by these analyses is that the PLA was "missing in action" and that "the PLA's failure to respond to the epidemic has proved that it is not up to the task of serving as a ... provider of humanitarian and medical aid". The PLA's "anemic" response, according to this view, contradicts the decades-long effort of the PLA in building up its humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) capabilities and in conducting "military-civilian contingency response mobilization".¹
- 1.2 This view, however, may have critical flaws. One such analysis provides scant empirical evidence to support its major assertions.² More importantly, this view is based on the premise that a top priority of the PLA is to fulfil its non-traditional security missions, including its domestic and international HADR.
- 1.3 One analysis, for instance, claims that the PLA Navy (PLAN) acquired the 300-bed hospital ship *Peace Ark* in 2007 because the PLA wants to "become a medical and humanitarian assistance powerhouse".³ However, the primary reason for the PLAN to acquire *Peace Ark* is not fundamentally different from the reason for the US Navy to acquire USNS *Comfort* and USNS *Mercy*. It is to develop capabilities to provide

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¹ See Elizabeth Phu and Anish Goel, "China's Military Can't Deliver on Humanitarian Promises", *Foreign Policy*, 26 February 2020 and Peter W Singer, Peter Wood and Alex Stone, "As Coronavirus Spreads, China's Military is largely MIA", *Defence One*, 6 February 2020.

² See Phu and Goel, "China's Military Can't Deliver on Humanitarian Promises".

³ Ibid.

mobile, at-sea medical and surgical services to support naval combat operations; HADR only constitutes its secondary mission. This premise thus may be based on a misperception of the evolving strategic priorities of the PLA.

- 1.4 Later analyses were more focused on the military implications of the PLA role in combating COVID-19, including the impact of possible infection of military personnel on PLA combat readiness and the functioning of the PLA logistics system.⁴ Since these studies analyse the specific aspects of the PLA role in containing COVID-19, they fall short of offering a comprehensive analysis of this role.

Evolving Role of the PLA in Containing COVID-19

- 2.1 In the 2002-2003 SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak, the PLA played a role in concealing the spread of the virus since some early SARS patients were hospitalised in military hospitals. Jiang Yanyong, the whistle blower, for instance, was a military medical doctor who worked at the General Hospital of the PLA in Beijing.⁵ In comparison, there is no evidence that the PLA played any role in the bungled and delayed government response to the spread of COVID-19 from late December 2019 to mid-January 2020, largely as a result of bureaucratic cover-ups; the early COVID patients were hospitalised in civilian hospitals in Wuhan. However, immediately following a more decisive central government response based on a critical reassessment of the epidemic by public health professionals on 20 January, including the lockdown of Wuhan on 23 January,⁶ the PLA began to play a role in containing COVID-19.

⁴ See Joel Wuthnow, “China’s Military Claims to be Virus-Free”, *Foreign Policy*, 20 March 2020 and “Responding to the Epidemic in Wuhan: Insights into Chinese Military Logistics”, *China Brief* (Vol. 20, No. 7, 2020).

⁵ See Tai Ming Cheung, “The PLA and the SARS Crisis: Implications for Civil-Military Relations”, *RUSI*, 14 June 2004.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the deliberation process leading to the more decisive response, see “Li Lanjuan Reveals for the First Time the Details of the Decision to Lock down Wuhan” (“Li lanjuan shouci pilu wuhan fengcheng xijie”), *China Health Magazine* WeChat Public Account, 27 March 2020. This is an interview of Li by *China Health Magazine*. Li, an infectious disease specialist, is a member of the Senior Experts Group of the National Health Commission.

Establishing Command and Control

- 2.2 The Central Military Commission (CMC), for instance, activated the “contingency response mechanism” (“应急机制”) and established a PLA Leadership Group in Handling the Epidemic Work (军队应对疫情工作领导小组), which was tasked to (i) prevent and control the epidemic in the PLA and (ii) coordinate with the State Council in providing military support to civilians combating COVID-19.
- 2.3 This leadership group dispatched a PLA Front Command and Coordination Group (军队前方指挥协调组 or FCCG) to Wuhan to coordinate with its civilian counterpart, the Central Guidance Group dispatched to Wuhan (中央赴湖北指导组), in offering military support. A PLA local chain of command comprising the FCCG, PLA Joint Logistics Support Force (联勤保障部队 or JLSF) and first-line medical force thus had developed.⁷
- 2.4 Headquartered in Wuhan and reporting directly to the CMC, the JLSF played a critical role in coordinating and operationalising military support. Established in the post-2015 military reform, the JLSF runs a base in Wuhan and five Joint Logistic Support Centres (联勤保障中心) nationwide, and “oversees a vast array of resources, including mobile logistics brigades, refueling stations, supply depots and military hospitals”. It also deploys hundreds of military representatives to China’s rail and air transportation networks to enable the trans-theatre movement of PLA troops, armament and material.⁸ JLSF thus was able to coordinate the construction and maintenance of modular hospitals in Wuhan, selection and deployment of military medical professionals to Wuhan, shipment of military medical personnel and supplies to Wuhan, lease of hotels and dormitories to accommodate military medics in Wuhan and finance of PLA operations to contain COVID-19.⁹

⁷ See “News Conference on the Military Assisting Civilians to Resist the Novel Coronavirus Epidemic” (“Jundui zhiyuan defang kangji xinguan feiyan yiqing xinwen fabuhui”), people.cn, 2 March 2020.

⁸ Wuthnow, “Responding to the Epidemic in Wuhan”.

⁹ See “An Account of JLSF Fully Devoted to the Battle to Prevent and Control the Epidemic” (“Lianqin baozhang budui quanli touru yiqing fangkong zhujizhan jishi”), *Liberation Army Daily*, 12 March 2020.

Operationalising Military Support

- 2.5 Reportedly authorised by Xi Jinping himself, the PLA took major steps to provide concrete military support. Allegedly “within hours”, for instance, the JLSF had worked out a plan with the provincial and municipal governments to construct and reconfigure three hospitals in Wuhan to be fully staffed by PLA medics for treating the COVID-19 patients. They include the 1,000-bed Huoshenshan Hospital, the 860-bed Taikang Tongji Hospital, and the 700-bed Guanggu Campus of Hubei Maternity and Child Healthcare Hospital; the latter two were civilian hospitals that had been under construction before the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁰
- 2.6 On 24 January, the first batch of 450 military doctors and nurses from the hospitals affiliated with Medical Universities of the PLA Army (PLAA), PLAN and PLA Air Force (PLAAF), were airlifted to Wuhan from Chongqing, Shanghai and Xian; they joined three civilian hospitals in combating COVID-19. So did the Wuhan-based General Hospital of the PLA Central Theatre which dispatched two medical teams.¹¹
- 2.7 On 1 and 2 February, the second batch of 950 military medics was deployed to Wuhan by air, rail and highways; they were joined by the first batch of 450 to staff the newly built Huoshenshan Hospital.
- 2.8 On 13 and 17 February, another two batches of 1,400 and 1,200 military medics were sent to Wuhan by air and rail. These two batches were to staff the newly reconfigured Taikang Tongji Hospital and Guanggu Campus Hospital.¹² The PLA deployment took a phased approach because different batches of military medics were to match the different time lines for completing the construction and reconfiguration of the three hospitals.
- 2.9 The second, third and fourth batches of military doctors and nurses were carefully selected from the hospitals of the PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF, PLA Rocket Force, PLA

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid and Jun Weimin, “Fighting Courageously on the First Line of the Struggle to Prevent and Control the Epidemic” (“Fenzhan zai fangkong yiqing diyixian”), *Qiushi*, 2 March 2020.

Strategic Support Force, JLSF and People's Armed Police (PAP). All military medics specialise in disciplines and specialties that are suitable for treating COVID-19 patients. These specialties include intensive care, infectious disease, infection control, respiratory system, digestive system, cardiology, nephrology, gastroenterology, geriatrics, disinfection and supplies, testing, radiology, anesthesia and drugs and equipment. Many military medics have had experience in containing SARS in 2002-2003, providing medical relief and aid in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and combating the Ebola outbreak in Africa.¹³ A total of 4,000 PLA medics nationwide were deployed to Wuhan.

- 2.10 The PLAAF played a critical role in airlifting the military medics and supplies to Wuhan. Three IL-76 military transport aircraft belonging to a Hubei-based division of the PLA Central Theatre Air Force, for instance, airlifted the first batch of military medics and supplies to Wuhan on 24 January. On 2 February, eight Hubei-based IL-76s transported 795 military medics and 58 tons of medical supplies from Shenyang, Lanzhou, Guangzhou and Nanjing to Wuhan.¹⁴
- 2.11 On 13 February, 11 heavy and medium military transports, including six Yun-20s, three IL-76s and two Yun-9s, transported more than 900 military medics and several-dozen tons of medical supplies from Urumqi, Tianjin, Shenyang, Xining, Chengdu, Chongqing and Zhangjiakou to Wuhan; the Yun-20s were from a Henan-based division of the PLA Central Theatre Air Force and a Sichuan-based division of the PLA Western Theatre Air Force. The other 400 medics and 45 tons of medical supplies reached Wuhan on the same day by high-speed rail from 12 locations, including Shanghai, Guangzhou, Jinan and Taiyuan.¹⁵

¹³ Jun, "Fighting Courageously" and "An Actual Account of Curing Critically Sick Novel Coronavirus-Induced Pneumonia Patients by the Army Medical Team supporting Hubei" ("Jundui zhiyuan hubei yiliaodui jiuzhi xinguan feiyan zhongzheng huanzhe jishi"), *Liberation Army Daily*, 29 March 2020.

¹⁴ "Eight Air Force Heavy Transports Arrive in Wuhan with Medical Personnel and Supplies" ("Kongjun bajia daxing yunshuji xie yiliao duiyuan wuzi dida wuhan"), Air Force WeChat Public Account, 2 February 2020.

¹⁵ "Following the Order and Moving to reinforce Wuhan" ("Wenling erdong zengbing jiangcheng"), *Liberation Army Daily*, 13 February 2020 and "Indigenously Built Air Force Yun-20 Transports Arrive in Wuhan with Medical Personnel and Supplies" ("kongjun guocan yun-20 yunshuji xie yiliao duiyuan wuzi dida wuhan"), *guancha.cn*, 13 February 2020.

- 2.12 On 17 February, eight military transports, including four Sichuan-based Yun-20s, one IL-76 and three Yun-9s, airlifted 676 military medics and tons of supplies from Shenyang, Zhanjiang, Lanzhou, Datong, Chengdu, Shanghai and “an airport in Xinjiang” to Wuhan; other military medical personnel and supplies reached Wuhan by high-speed rail.¹⁶
- 2.13 With a maximum takeoff weight of 220 tons, the Yun-20s are China’s indigenously built heavy transports comparable to the C-17s of the US Air Force; they have been commissioned in the PLAAF since 2016. The employment of Yun-20s in the current operation thus is described as the first-time deployment of the aircraft to major PLA non-war military operations (非战争军事行动).¹⁷
- 2.14 The PLA also took other measures to contain COVID-19. Sixty-three military hospitals nationwide, including four in Hubei, were to receive and treat COVID-19 patients (定点收治医院), offering 3,000 hospital beds and involving 10,000 medical professionals. “Expert groups” from major PLA hospitals, including the PLA General Hospital in Beijing, conducted “remote” and “joint” diagnosis of critically ill COVID-19 patients and offered medical guidance via 5G networks. The PLA Disease Prevent and Control Centre assisted in establishing procedures and protocols for personal protection and management, disinfection, ward zones setup, and infection prevention and control. JLSF coordinated the production and shipment of a massive number of personal protective equipment (PPE).¹⁸
- 2.15 Finally, scientists from major PLA medical research institutions, including the Academy of Military Medical Sciences (AMMS) of the Academy of Military Science, undertook major research projects in developing diagnostic and antibody testing capacity, treatment drugs and methods and vaccine. In the early days of the crisis, for instance, Chen Wei, a major virologist from AMMS, led a group of

¹⁶ “Yun-20 Went into Action Again” (“Yun-20 zaici chudong”), thepaper.cn, 17 February 2020.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See “News Conference”, “An Account of JLSF” and “Fighting Courageously”.

military scientists to Wuhan and reportedly worked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology on the treatment and vaccine against the COVID.¹⁹

“National Defence Mobilisation”

2.16 The post-2015 PLA reform led to a reconfigured chain of command dedicated to national defence mobilisation. This chain includes a newly established CMC National Defence Mobilisation Department at the top, which oversees the provincial and local military authorities such as the provincial military districts (MD), municipal garrison districts, prefectural sub-military districts and county-level people’s arms departments. These provincial and local military authorities run the PLA reserve units and militia units, and are tasked to mobilise civilian and military resources for contingency response. This system also played a critical role in containing COVID-19.

2.17 The post-2015 guideline for national defence mobilisation work is “coordinating military and civilian resources to serve the three military services” (“协调军地，面向三军”).²⁰ By “serving the three military services”, the emphasis of this guideline is for the provincial and local military authorities to mobilise civilian resources to support military operations. Numerous national defence mobilisation exercises were conducted in the past few years in China, including the two against MERS in Wuhan earlier in 2019 to support the hosting of the World Military Games in October 2019. Civilian medical resources, for instance, were hypothetically mobilised in these two exercises to support the PLA-hosted games. However, since COVID-19 is a civilian society-based epidemic, the emphasis of the guideline is somewhat reversed. Rather than civilian resources, military resources had been mobilised for this civilian emergency.

2.18 Requested by the Wuhan municipal government to make up for the civilian manpower shortage and approved by the CMC, for instance, the Hubei provincial

¹⁹ See “Meet the Major General on China’s Coronavirus Scientific Front Line”, *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), 3 March 2020 and “Chinese Military Scientists Record Promising Results from Coronavirus Vaccine Trial”, *SCMP*, 23 May 2020.

²⁰ See “Seeking the Secret Code of National Defence Mobilization to Combat the ‘Epidemic’” (“Tanxun guofang dongyuan zhan ‘yi’ mima”), *Liberation Army Daily*, 8 April 2020.

MD organised a “joint” military transportation support convoy including 130 military trucks and 260 PLA personnel on 2 February. The equipment and manpower came from the Hubei-based PLA organisations including the PLAAF Airborne Corps, the PLAAF Wuhan Base, a PLAAF air division, the PLAAF Early Warning Academy, a pontoon bridge brigade of the PLA Central Theatre Army Force, the training base of the PLAA Logistics University and the Wuhan Garrison District. This support convoy was charged with shipping logistical supplies to major supermarkets in Wuhan including Walmart. The vehicles of the convoy reportedly were deployed 3,000 times.²¹

2.19 On 12 February, the Hubei provincial MD also coordinated the deployment of two Z-8 helicopters from the PLAAF Airborne Corps to lift medical supplies to Xiangfan and Yichang, the two cities in Hubei; two military helicopters were used again on 17 February to ship medical supplies to Enshi and Shiyan, another two cities in Hubei. Nationwide, a daily average of 200,000 militiamen were deployed to localities to enforce social distancing, check temperature, trace contacts, staff checkpoints, disinfect vehicles and sites, deliver supplies, disseminate information for preventing and controlling the epidemic, and resume production.²²

2.20 The provincial and local military authorities also mobilised civilian resources to contain the epidemic. Before the epidemic, the Wuhan Garrison District had compiled a database for heavy construction equipment and skilled workers in Wuhan that could be mobilised for national defence, including excavators, bulldozers, cement mixers, electricians, plumbers and up-fitters. The database was used to identify and mobilise the equipment and workers to build the PLA-managed Huoshenshan Hospital.²³

2.21 Similarly, the PLA Shanghai Garrison District (SGD) leveraged the Shanghai National Defence Mobilisation Alliance (上海国防动员联盟), a network of 128 active-member and 3,800 reserve-member companies (80% of which are high and

²¹ See *ibid* and “Hubei-based Military Units Organizes Transportation Support Convoy against the Epidemic” (“Zhuer budui zhujian kangyi yunli zhiyuandui”), *Hubei Daily*, 3 February 2020.

²² See “Seeking the Secret Code” and “News Conference”.

²³ See “Seeking the Secret Code”.

new technology-based), to contain the epidemic. Coordinated by the SGD, these civilian companies undertook production of medical equipment, PPEs and biological ingredients for the nucleic acid tests. They also provided hospitals with more than a hundred robots for disinfection, delivery and medical diagnosis as well as 3D remote-diagnostic systems. One shipping company, a member of the alliance, even flew a helicopter to Wuhan to deliver the PPEs.²⁴ Zhejiang, Hebei, Jiangxi, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia and Jiangsu provincial MDs leveraged similar networks in their provinces to ship medical supplies to Wuhan.²⁵

Accounting for the Role of the PLA in Containing COVID-19

3.1 The PLA role in containing COVID-19 is moderate but relatively robust. It is moderate for three reasons. First, the PLA contribution of 4,000 military medics is quite modest compared to a much larger civilian contingent of 38,000 medical professionals sent to Hubei from other Chinese provinces and the more numerous local civilian medical professionals in Wuhan and Hubei.²⁶ Second, PLA manpower support to Wuhan is quite small compared to PLA operations to provide relief to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake where 117,000 PLA troops were deployed.²⁷ Finally, the employment of a PLA convoy of 130 trucks and 260 troops to ship supplies to the supermarkets in Wuhan is quite symbolic; it is too small to make a major difference in the livelihood of a city of 11 million residents.

3.2 While moderate, the PLA support to Wuhan is relatively robust. Unlike in the Sichuan earthquake where the PLA deployed a large number of combat troops untrained for earthquake relief, only military medics were sent to Wuhan. More importantly, rather than the general practitioners, only those who were trained in

²⁴ See “The Support Team is up and Coming to Combat the ‘Epidemic’” (“Zhan‘yi’houyuantuan zhanlou toujiao”), *Liberation Army Daily*, 18 March 2020.

²⁵ “Seeking the Secret Code” and “National Defence Mobilisation System Resists Novel Coronavirus-induced Pneumonia Epidemic” (“Guofang dongyuan xitong kangji xinguan feiyan yiqing”), Xinhuanet, 11 March 2020.

²⁶ See “An Actual Account of the Return of the First Medical Team Supporting Hubei” (“Shoupi yuaner yiliaodui fancheng jishi”), Xinhuanet, 20 March 2020.

²⁷ See Li Nan, *Civil-Military Relations in Post-Deng China: From Symbiosis to Quasi-Institutionalization* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming), Chapter 7.

critical specialties of the internal medicine were selected to support Wuhan. These specialists are highly qualified to treat COVID patients, thus enabling the more robust and optimal PLA operations in Wuhan. By 27 March, for instance, more than 5,000 critically ill patients had recovered from COVID-19 in the three PLA-staffed hospitals.²⁸

- 3.3 In May 2020, a second wave of infections involving 130 COVID patients and two deaths led to the lockdown of parts of the city of Jilin in Jilin province, affecting about 200,000 people.²⁹ The scale of this lockdown is rather limited compared to that in Wuhan. The numerous civilian government and non-government organisations, groups and individuals at different levels are sufficient to implement this lockdown. There thus is no evidence that the PLA is employed in this lockdown.
- 3.4 The level and type of PLA support to combat COVID-19 can be accounted for by two sets of considerations, one concerning domestic governance and the other national security.

Domestic Governance Considerations

- 3.5 Unlike Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, post-Deng top leaders such as Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping do not possess extensive political capital and entrenched personal networks in the PLA because they have never served or served briefly in it. They thus are highly unsure that the PLA would follow their orders if it is asked to handle a domestic political and social crisis of a massive scale like the one in 1989. The heightened sense of insecurity as a result has motivated these leaders to enhance civilian governance by promoting economic development along with political and social stability. Effective civilian governance helps to prevent a major political and social crisis that may incentivise the PLA to intervene in domestic politics. This sense of insecurity has also driven these leaders to confine the PLA to perfecting its functional and technical expertise and fulfilling its external missions.³⁰

²⁸ See “An Actual Account of Curing Critically Sick Novel Coronavirus-Induced Pneumonia Patients”.

²⁹ See “After New Coronavirus Outbreaks, China Imposes Wuhan-Style Lockdown”, *New York Times*, 21 May 2020.

³⁰ For a detailed discussion, see Li, *Civil-Military Relations in Post-Deng China*, Chapter 6.

- 3.6 These leaders understand that there are major political pitfalls for a civilian leader to leverage the military for domestic politics. The civilian leader's reliance on the military for political survival, for instance, signals the failure of civilian governance, or the incompetence of the civilian leader to resolve a major political and social crisis. This failure reveals a political vulnerability of the civilian leader that can be exploited by military leaders for political advantages. The expansion of the political role of the military as a result, including holding civilian governance positions by military officers, makes it difficult for the civilian leader to reestablish control of the military such as dislodging military officers from these civilian positions. The concern about these pitfalls explains why the post-Deng top leaders, including Xi Jinping, have attempted to minimise the domestic role of the PLA.³¹
- 3.7 There are, however, major exceptions to this clear functional division of labour between the civilian and military authorities in the post-Deng era, such as employing the PLA in relieving natural disasters such as flooding, earthquakes and epidemics. Like in other countries, the PLA is employed to relieve natural disasters not because of politics but because of the comparative advantages of the military in organisation and discipline.
- 3.8 The massive use of the military for disaster relief such as in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, however, revealed major difficulties in managing civil-military relations in China. They include the rising tension between State Council Premier Wen Jiabao and frontline PLA leaders in coordinating military relief effort, the lack of inter-agency coordination between local civilian authorities and deployed PLA troops, and the mismatch between local relief needs and deployed PLA capabilities in terms of training and equipment.³²
- 3.9 The lessons learnt from the PLA role in relieving the Sichuan earthquake clearly advise against the massive use of the military in handling domestic contingencies. The bungled initial response to the current epidemic also placed the competence of China's civilian leadership to critical test, which should have added a sense of

³¹ Ibid.

³² For a detailed discussion, see Li, *Civil-Military Relations in Post-Deng China*, Chapter 7.

urgency for this leadership to find a more effective but civilian-centred approach to contain the epidemic. Both should have informed the more robust government response to the epidemic after 20 January.

- 3.10 The post-20 January support to Wuhan took different forms, but a common feature they shared is civilian primacy. The government, for instance, sought advice from renowned civilian health experts, and sent tens of thousands of civilian medical professionals from other Chinese provinces to Wuhan and other cities in Hubei to combat COVID-19. It also built major civilian modular and makeshift hospitals to accommodate the COVID patients.
- 3.11 Numerous government-based, civilian grass-roots organisations carried out tasks such as screening the local population for infection, “enforcing lockdown and quarantine, sending patients to clinics and hospitals, and delivering food and supplies to the households”. Moreover, major civilian, non-state technology companies and small and medium firms as well as WeChat groups and individual volunteers offered helps ranging from providing major digital platforms for logistical and other operations against the epidemic, shipping medical supplies, transporting medical professionals to and from the hospitals, to purchasing and delivering groceries to the residents.³³ For public security, the civilian police played the central role. The para-military PAP, which is tasked to maintain China’s social stability, played a supportive but important role.³⁴
- 3.12 China’s civilian leadership is clearly conscious about the need to maintain the robustness of civilian response in order to present an image of leadership competence. It also helps to avoid the aforementioned pitfalls of an over-reliance on the military for containing the epidemic. The level and type of military support thus were deliberately measured and technically specialised. The timings of this support were also carefully planned; Xi Jinping issued an order for all military personnel to

³³ For a detailed discussion, see Zhao Litao and Kong Tuan Yuen, “Social Resilience and the Pandemic”, *EAI Commentaries*, 7 April 2020.

³⁴ See Jun, “Fighting Courageously”.

return to the barracks immediately after the mission was accomplished.³⁵ Rather than domestic disaster relief, the top priority of the PLA thus is to safeguard China's national or external security.

National Security Considerations

3.13 COVID-19 presented two critical and interrelated challenges regarding the central role of the PLA in safeguarding what it perceives to be China's national security. The first is whether the epidemic will cause significant infections among the PLA ranks that may trigger a serious decline in PLA combat readiness and effectiveness. The second is whether the epidemic will seriously hamper PLA response to the perceived external security challenges.

3.14 On the possible impact of COVID-19 on PLA combat readiness, a PLA official claims that none of the military medics sent to Wuhan were infected,³⁶ but this statement may have been overly interpreted as "not a single PLA service member had been infected".³⁷ China's military analysts did identify critical vulnerabilities that may expose the PLA to the virus. They include visits of a large number of civilian dependents to their spouses in the PLA during the Spring Festival and return of a large number of on-leave military personnel from their hometowns to the PLA after the festival, the high personnel density-based living and working conditions in the PLA basic-level units, a large number of civilians who live in the military family quarters (家属院) of major military compounds and bases, and inadequate medical training and supplies in the basic-level units to prevent and control the epidemic.³⁸

3.15 The PLA thus took major measures to prevent and control the epidemic in the PLA. These include education and training on preventing and controlling the epidemic,

³⁵ See "Approved by CMC Chair Xi Jinping, Army Medical Team Supporting Wuhan Pulls out after Satisfactorily Accomplishing the Mission" ("Jing zhongyang junwei zhuxi xi jinping pizhun jundui zhiyuan hubei yiliaodui yuanman wancheng renwu huiche"), Xinhuanet, 16 April 2020.

³⁶ See "News Conference".

³⁷ See Wuthnow, "Responding to the Epidemic in Wuhan".

³⁸ See "How Do Officers and Men Prevent and Control the Epidemic?" ("Yiqing dangqian, guanbing ruhe fangkong?") *Liberation Army Daily*, 2 February 2020.

rigorous screening of those returning from leave for infection, mandatory quarantine, strict control of personnel leaving and entering military compounds, reduction of meetings and gatherings, and regular disinfection of public facilities on bases. Military training plans were adjusted to postpone large-scale and concentrated drills and highlight dispersed, individualised basic skills training and knowledge learning leveraging “informatised” and “intelligentised” means. Training programmes, time, sites and personnel thus were staggered to avoid congregation of personnel. Protocols for preventing and controlling the epidemic were also integrated into the training processes.³⁹

- 3.16 While there have been no official reports of infections in the PLA, there are press coverages of quarantines. One report reveals the quarantine of personnel of the PLA Eastern Theatre Naval Force, including captain of a guided-missile frigate in the guesthouse of his unit after he returned from leave; another story tells how a squad leader returned to vigorous military training after a 14-day quarantine.⁴⁰
- 3.17 Reports from Hong Kong claim that there were isolated infections in the PLA that had triggered the quarantine of hundreds of PLA paratroopers in Hubei and sailors in Hainan. Since these reports are impossible to verify or falsify, an alternative but critical indicator of PLA combat readiness is whether the epidemic has seriously hampered the PLA response to the perceived external security challenges. This indicator is useful because such response requires substantial logistical and manpower support, which would have become impossible if a large number of PLA personnel had been infected by the virus.
- 3.18 Several critical cases may show that the PLA response to the perceived external security challenges from January to April 2020 had stayed relatively robust, indicating that the virus may have been under control in the PLA and its negative impact on PLA capabilities and operations may have been limited.

³⁹ Ibid, “News Conference” and “Defence Ministry: All Officers and Men Have Not Slackened Epidemic Resistance and Stopped War Preparation” (“Guofangbu: quanjun guanbing kangyi bu shongxie beizhan bu tingxie”), *Liberation Army Daily*, 28 February 2020.

⁴⁰ See “Epidemic Resistance Has Not Held up Combat Effectiveness and Prevention and Control Have not Slackened War Preparation” (“Kangyi buwu zhangdouli, fangkong busong zhanbeixian”), *Liberation Army Daily*, 17 February 2020 and “How Have Foreign Militaries Become Epidemic Zones?” (“Waiguo jundui weihe chengle yiqing lunxianqu?”) *guancha.cn*, 14 March 2020.

3.19 The PLA Southern Theatre Naval Force headquartered in Zhenjiang, for instance, had deployed a naval task force that embarked on a voyage of 14,000 nautical miles from late January to 25 February. Composed of one guided-missile destroyer, one guided-missile frigate and one electronic surveillance ship and supported by a 45,000-ton replenishment ship, this naval task force travelled eastwards via the Bashi Channel deep into the Pacific Ocean and conducted more than 30 types of combat drills on the way. It crossed the International Date Line to the Western Hemisphere about 270 nautical miles south of Midway on 18 February, a location that is only about 647 nautical miles from Hawaii.⁴¹ The task force allegedly irradiated a laser beam against a US P-8 surveillance aircraft on 17 February, about 334 nautical miles west of Guam; the US aircraft reportedly conducted surveillance of the Chinese task force for over four hours and flew as close as 400 metres to the Chinese ships.⁴²

3.20 China's military analysts believe that sending a naval task force deep into the Pacific Ocean is a logical PLA response to the emerging critical challenges to China's security. This deployment, for instance, allegedly was intended to explore the feasibility of a coordinated naval operation between the PLA Southern Theatre and its Northern Theatre to block the reinforcement of a "foreign power" to Taiwan from the Western Pacific in the worst-case scenario of a "war of reunification" with Taiwan. Moreover, the US military allegedly has leveraged an Indo-Pacific strategy to intensify its naval and air operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait and exerted intense pressure on the PLA in its "interior line". The PLA thus needs to conduct operations in its "exterior line", or beyond the Guam-centred second island chain and in the rear of US operations to regain initiative against US pressure. This task force allegedly simulated an "exterior line" operation.⁴³

⁴¹ See "Distant Sea Voyage to Hone the Force in the Pacific Ocean" ("Yuanhang libing taipingyang") *Liberation Army Daily*, 18 February 2020 and "Triumphant Return of the Far-Seas Joint Training Task Force of the Southern Theatre Naval Force" ("Nanbu zhanqu haijun yuanghai lianhe xunlian biandui kaixuan"), *Modern Navy WeChat Public Account*, 26 February 2020.

⁴² See "Irradiating the Laser Beam, Did We 'Play a Dirty Trick'?" ("Jiguang zhaoshe, shi woman zai 'shihuai' ma?") *guancha.cn*, 10 March 2020, Patrick Cronin and Ryan Neuhard, "Countering China's Laser Offensive", *The Diplomat*, 2 April 2020 and "Defence Ministry: Requesting the US Side to Stop the Provocative and Dangerous Action" ("Guofangbu: yaoqiu meifang tingzhi tiaoxunxing weixian xingdong"), *Liberation Army Daily*, 26 March 2020.

⁴³ Lieutenant General (retired) Wang Hongguang cited in "Why Did the Chinese Fleet Want to Close in on Hawaii?" ("Bijin xiaweiyi, zhongguo jiandui yiyu weihe?") *dwnew.com*, 21 February 2020, and Senior

- 3.21 Similarly, on 9 and 10 February, the PLA Eastern Theatre conducted a “long-distance” joint exercise involving a fleet of KJ-500 airborne early warning aircraft, H-6 bombers and J-11 combat aircraft and a naval task force of destroyers and frigates, and carried out “air-sea strikes” and “fire power support” near Taiwan. The PLA aircraft circled Taiwan “two days in a row” via the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait, and crossed the median line over the Taiwan Strait on 10 February. On 16 March, another batch of KJ-500 and J-11 aircraft flew “unprecedentedly” at night along the median line over the Taiwan Strait. On 10 April, a group of KJ-500, H-6 and J-11 aircraft circled Taiwan again by following the February route. These manoeuvres triggered the scramble of Taiwan’s F-16 combat aircraft.⁴⁴
- 3.22 Analysts from Taiwan believe that the PLA manoeuvres against Taiwan in February were driven by the attempt of the Chinese leadership to divert attention of the Chinese people away from its initial inability to contain the coronavirus. However analysts from mainland China claim that these PLA operations aimed to deter Taiwan from pursuing independence by exploiting the distraction of the Chinese leadership in combating the epidemic. According to these analysts, Taiwan’s push for independence is particularly assisted by US politicians; this assistance is reflected in Taiwan Vice President William Lai’s visit to Washington DC and his attendance of the National Prayer Breakfast on 6 February where Donald Trump was present. It is also allegedly reflected in the passage of the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act by the US Congress on 4 March, which was signed by Donald Trump on 26 March.⁴⁵

Captain Li Jie cited in “Expert: Breaking the Ideology of US Hegemony” (“Zhuanjia: dapo meiguo baquan sixiang”), *Global Times*, 27 February 2020. Wang is a former deputy commander of the PLA Nanjing Military Region, and Li is an analyst at the Naval Studies Academy of the PLA in Beijing.

⁴⁴ See “In the midst of Virus Battle, China Launches Provocative Military Flights around Taiwan”, *Taiwan English News*, 11 February 2020, “Eastern Theatre Conducts Joint Sea and Air Forces Drills in the Sea Area Southeast of Taiwan” (“Dongbu zhanqu zai tai dongnan haiyu shishi haikong bingli lianhe yanlian”), *Liberation Army Daily*, 10 February 2020, “Defence Ministry: Any Type of ‘Taiwan Independence’ Attempt and Behaviour Are Absolutely not Tolerated” (“Guofangbu: juebu rongren renhe xingshi de ‘taidu’ tumou he xingjing”), *Liberation Army Daily*, 26 March 2020 and “Multiple Types and Numbers of Naval and Air Forces Aircraft Conduct Patrol Circling Taiwan for the Third Time This Year” (“Jinnian disanci haikongjun duoxing duojia zhanji raotai xunhang”), *guancha.cn*, 10 April 2020.

⁴⁵ See “In the Midst of Virus Battle”, “In the Coronavirus Fog, Tussling over Taiwan Goes under the Radar”, *SCMP*, 27 March 2020, “Eastern Theatre Conducts Joint Sea and Air Forces Drills” and “Defence Ministry: Any Type of ‘Taiwan Independence’”.

- 3.23 Chinese analysts also regard the frequent transits of US naval ships and overflights of US military aircraft in and over the Taiwan Strait as reinforcing Taiwan's push for independence. Such transits and overflights involved two B-52 bombers on 12 February, a US Navy cruiser on 15 February and a US Navy destroyer and an EP-3E surveillance aircraft on 25 March.⁴⁶
- 3.24 Finally, the PLA had deployed an aircraft carrier strike group to circle Taiwan and conduct combat drills in the South China Sea for the whole month of April. Consisting of the Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning*, two guided-missile destroyers, two guided-missile frigates and possibly submarines and supported by a 45,000-ton replenishment ship, the strike group traversed the Bohai, Yellow and East China Seas; it transited to the Western Pacific via the Miyako Strait on 10 April, circled the eastern and southern sides of Taiwan, and entered the South China Sea via the Bashi Channel. It had loitered and conducted combat drills in the South China Sea for more than a week and transited from the South China Sea to the Western Pacific via the Bashi Channel on 22 April. It had conducted combat drills in the Western Pacific before entering the East China Sea via the Miyako Strait on 28 April; the voyage was concluded on 30 April when the task force returned to Qingdao.⁴⁷
- 3.25 This deployment is clearly a PLA response to what it perceives as new and critical challenges to the security of Chinese interests in the South China Sea. These perceived challenges include the visit of US aircraft carrier *Roosevelt* to Vietnam from 5 to 8 March, a joint exercise conducted by the *Roosevelt*-led carrier strike group and an expeditionary strike group led by *America*, an amphibious assault ship, from 15 to 18 March in the South China Sea, and test firing of Standard Missile-2 from two US naval ships in the Sea of the Philippines on 19 March.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See "US Naval Ship Transits Taiwan Strait for the Third Time This Year" ("Jinnian disanci meiguo junjian youguo Taiwan haixia"), *guancha.cn*, 26 March 2020 and "Two US B-52s Show up in the Airspace of Taiwan Strait" ("Mei liangjia B-52 xianshen taihai kongyu"), *Global Times*, 12 February 2020.

⁴⁷ See "*Liaoning* Exits Miyako Strait and Enters Pacific Ocean" ("Liaoning chu gonggu haixia, shiru taipingyang"), *guancha.cn*, 11 April 2020, "Aircraft Carrier *Liaoning*-led Naval Task Force Conducts Trans-Theatre Manoeuvre Training" ("Haijun liaoning jian hangmu biandui zhuzhi kuaqu jidong xunlian"), *Modern Navy WeChat Public Account*, 13 April 2020 and "Aircraft Carrier *Liaoning*-led Task Force Completes Trans-Theatre Manoeuvre Training" ("Liaoning jian hangmu biandui wancheng yuanghai kuaqu jidong xunlian"), *Xinhuanet*, 1 May 2020.

⁴⁸ See "USS Theodore Roosevelt Arrives in Vietnam", *Stars and Stripes*, 4 March 2020, "Beijing May Step up Drills in South China Sea amid Rising Tensions with US Military", *SCMP*, 29 March 2020 and

- 3.26 The frequent US freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea are also perceived as critical challenges to the security of Chinese interests; such operations involve transits of US naval ships and overflights of US military aircraft through the waters and air space that are allegedly under Chinese jurisdiction. US destroyer *McCampbell*, for instance, transited near the Chinese-controlled Paracel Islands on 10 March, and an EP-3 surveillance aircraft and two B-52 bombers flew over the South China Sea on 18 March.⁴⁹
- 3.27 The PLA carrier strike group was deployed to the South China Sea also at a time when the two US aircraft carriers in the Asia-Pacific region, *Roosevelt* and *Reagan*, were immobilised due to the COVID-19 infection of a significant number of their sailors. It thus is plausible that China may deploy the carrier strike group to gain political advantages by exploiting US vulnerability as well as distraction of the Asian governments in combating the pandemic.
- 3.28 Furthermore, the PLA carrier deployment coincided with a brief standoff between a Malaysian oil exploration vessel and a Chinese survey vessel off the coast of Sarawak, which began on 20 April and lasted for several days. The Malaysian vessel was supported by US naval ships including the amphibious assault ship *America*, a cruiser and a destroyer, while the Chinese vessel was backed by Chinese coast guard ships and later naval ships including two destroyers and a frigate.⁵⁰ However, since the PLA carrier strike group conducted drills in northern South China Sea and left for the Western Pacific on 22 April or before the standoff wound down, the Chinese carrier deployment to the South China Sea may not be directly related to the standoff.
- 3.29 In the final analysis, however, a necessary condition for the PLA to deploy substantial military capabilities against what it perceives to be critical challenges to China's national security is that COVID-19 may have been under control in the PLA and its derelict impact on PLA capabilities and operations may have been limited.

"Defence Ministry: US Deploys Military Ships and Aircraft again and again to the South China Sea and the Chinese Side is Firmly Opposed to It" ("Guofangbu: meiguo yizai paiqian junjian junji qu nanhai tiaoxun, zhongfang jianjue fandui"), thepaper.cn, 26 March 2020.

⁴⁹ See "Defence Ministry: US Deploys Military Ships and Aircraft Again and Again".

⁵⁰ For details, see Euan Graham, "U.S. Naval Standoff with China Fails to Reassure Regional Allies", *Foreign Policy*, 4 May 2020.