

PLA's Disaster Relief Works: Review and Reform

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Since the Sichuan earthquake in mid-2008, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), due to its hard work on disaster rescues, has been under international spotlight once again. This earthquake has been considered the most destructive in China since 1949, with a toll of 69,227 dead, 374,643 injured and 17,923 persons missing by 25 September 2008. On the other hand, the rescue scale undertaken by PLA had been impressive. Within days of the earthquake eruption, more than 130,000 soldiers of the PLA and armed police were rushed to the earthquake frontier and immediately engaged in rescue works.

SINCE 1949, THE People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been tasked with the handling of China's disaster rescues. In particular, when China launched its new reform in 1978, the disaster rescue works of PLA had likewise been reformed to include a series of institutional mechanisms.

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PLA's Disaster Relief Works in History

It is estimated that, over the six decades since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the PLA has been engaged in emergency disaster relief works on more than 420,000 occasions. In total, more than 20 million PLA men were deployed for the relief works and some 100,000 air flights were organised to evacuate more than 12 million endangered persons and transport several hundred million tons of materials out of the disaster areas. Below are some of the noteworthy ones.

The Tangshan Earthquake in 1976 with a death toll of 242,419

According to the statistics of China's Military Encyclopedia more than 100,000 troops were mobilised for the earth shock area where 50,000 people were buried alive. In addition, the troops had to provide medical treatment for over 200,000 people

who were sick or wounded and rescue the properties of quake victims worth over 900 million RMB.

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The 1996 devastating floods

In 1996, many provinces across China were flooded seriously. In the struggle against the floods, according to the statistics of PLA General Political Department, "from June through 12 August, in the country's campaign to combat the devastating flood, 194,000 PLA soldiers and the Armed Police, together with 5.04 million militia and reserve force, had been mobilised. At the same time, the army deployed 25,000 vehicles

and 370 vessels to help local victims. The Air Force had made 270 flights to deliver aid to the victims".

PLA's disaster relief works in the 1998 floods

In 1998, the Yangtze River region in the middle of China, the Songhua and Nenjiang River regions in northeast China were completely deluged in rain, resulting in huge casualties. As a consequence, the army had to make massive mobilisations to fight against the floods. "The Military Commands of Guangzhou, Nanjing, Jinan, Shenyang and Beijing, and the Air Force, the Navy, the Second Artillery Force, the Armed Police altogether, had mobilised 300,000 troops, deployed more than 2200 aircrafts and more than 12,500 vehicles."

"Over five million militia members and reservists have also been sent to this summer's battle against the worst floods since 1954". In terms of the use of equipment and troops, the disaster rescue operation this time has been the country's biggest since 1949. Several army soldiers were drowned in the rescue work.

The disastrous ice and snowstorm in early 2008

In early 2008, some southern provinces in China were plagued with disastrous ice and snow, causing massive traffic and electricity disruptions. According to a military official, who were interviewed by the Xinhua News Agency in end January 2008, “In order to undertake the disaster relief works, PLA and the Armed Police has sent 207,000 persons, and mobilised 594,000 militia people”. Tanks and other heavy military equipment were used to get rid of heavy ice and snow in railways and roads, to allow the mass transportation nationwide to resume.

The Sichuan Earthquake in May 2008

The official English weekly in China gave a general description about PLA’s disaster relief works in Sichuan Province as follows:

“By July 17, about 138,000 relief forces from the army and armed police had rescued 3,336 people from the earthquake rubble and evacuated 1.4 million as well as cleared over 19.42 million cubic metres of rubble and disinfecting 1.55 billion square metres of ground. Military medical forces had treated over 1.19 million injured, and military aircraft had flown 4,684 times and transported 7,474 tons of material.

Besides physical aid, the military brought mental relief. The General Political Department of PLA sent the first team of therapists from military forces to the earthquake zone, which offered psychological therapy for 895 people and trained 216 therapists for local medical institutions and earthquake relief forces.

The military also acted as the guardian of civil society when on 20 May, a unit of military relief forces dug cash, bankbooks, jewelry and securities worth nearly 10 million *yuan* (\$1.4 million) from the debris in Ya’an City, Sichuan Province and handed them over to their owners.”

In general view, PLA disaster relief works since 1949 has covered an array of disaster fields, ranging from earthquakes, floods, forest fires, droughts, ice and snowstorms, to typhoons, hurricanes, shipwrecks and epidemics.

When epidemics erupted, the PLA has acted immediately to control plague and to cure the sick. In the spring of 2003, for instance, SARS epidemic battered China. “At the critical moment, the Central Military Commission has mobilised 1,383 doctors and nurses from 14 military hospitals in affiliation with 13 big military units quickly, and built

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in Beijing's outskirts a designated hospital specially for SARS victims. The named Xiaotangshan Hospital have treated 680 SARS patients, with a high cure rate of 98.8%".

Apart from disaster relief works, the PLA has also been deployed to safeguard large-scale facilities, such as communications centres, large water projects, power stations and telecommunications infrastructure. For example, "on 2 June 2005, the Hengyang section of the Beijing-Guangzhou Railway was destroyed by floods. However, thanks to quick actions taken by more than 1,700 soldiers and militia from the Hunan provincial military command, the damaged railway was quickly returned to normal operation".

PLA's Disaster Relief Works in Function

Conventional wisdom would have disaster relief works falling apart in the hands of an army. But in China's case indeed, its army, mainly the People's Liberation Army, has been the main force behind disaster rescues in the last 60 years. The PLA's disaster rescue function distinguishes it from the armies of other countries. An analysis of the PLA's functions will throw light on this phenomenon.

Maintaining fight capability in peaceful times

Since the end of the border war between China and Vietnam in early 1979, China has enjoyed peace with its neighbours for 30 years. Meanwhile, since the end of 1978, China has launched new reforms and opened itself up to the world, requiring a peaceful international environment for its domestic economic development. In keeping abreast with the ever changing mission, Deng Xiaoping concluded that the country has been fundamentally transformed from war and revolution to peace and development, and that massive world-scale war could be avoided. As a result, in the following years, China embraced the world, integrated itself with the world economic order and participated in the world political order with caution, implying that China remains as a status quo actor in the world.

Since 1979, substantial changes have been made in China. In the current time of peace, how did PLA redefine itself? The mainstream idea is to modernisation. Beginning in the 1980s, the emphasis was to focus on quality instead of quantity. In 1985, China went through a massive disarmament exercise in which one million personnel in various military forces were slated for transfer to civilian works.

Changes were not restricted to PLA's manpower, but also applied to its field of duties.

How to trim quality troop in peaceful times? As is known, a soldier's alertness and agility are reduced if he lacks practice and training for too long time. Chinese leaders surely know of the truth. In 1986 and 1987, when it was at war with Vietnam in the Lao mountain and Faka mountain near to the border regions, China had mobilised its troops in a variety of military commands, and sent them group by group into the battle strongholds on an alternate basis. It was obvious that China intended to keep its troop prepared in the battlefield.

Since the 1990s, China has no arms conflict. Naturally and logically, doing rescue works, in which the expected casualties could be equivalent to the scale of a military

strike, became an alternative for keeping the PLA combat-effective. In the rescue works, the rapid reaction and mobilisation, the manpower deployment, the delivery of different military vehicles and equipment, and all other combat capabilities, would be overhauled, verified and updated.

In the Sichuan earthquake, the combat capabilities of PLA had been tested to their maximum. Just 13 minutes in the wake of the earthquake and the emergency response system of PLA was turned on. This was how the Chinese official English weekly describes it:

“On the morning of May 13, less than 24 hours after the earthquake, a lead team headed by Chen Bingde, Chief of General Staff of PLA, was formed to lead the recovery and relief efforts. By early morning on May 15, PLA and armed police forces had dispatched a total of over 130,000 personnel to Sichuan. Helicopters and military cargo-transport planes flew more than 300 sorties to transport food and disaster relief troops to areas in need. On the day the 8.0-magnitude earthquake struck Sichuan province troops quartered around the county immediately dispersed over 13,600 soldiers into the surrounding areas to start the disaster relief effort.”

It was argued that this large-scale non-war military operation has been rare since the founding of PRC. In terms of size, distance, collaborative action and follow-up services, the scale of the mobilisation of the armed forces was indeed almost equivalent to an engagement in a large-scale war.

With time, disaster relief works became a routine and regular duty of the PLA. According to the authoritative White Paper “China’s National Defense in 2006”, which was released by the State Information Council, over the past two years (2005 and 2006), PLA and the Armed Police have taken part in a variety of disaster rescue operations in more than 2,800 occasions, deployed more than 340,000 officers and soldiers, mobilised vehicles in more than 40,000 occasions, and dispatched aircraft (including helicopters) in more than 2,000 occasions, evacuated more than 3.4 million people, and rescued properties worth billions of *reminbi*.

Providing support to the CCP in peaceful times

In China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rules and guides the PLA. It has been absolutely an unshakeable principle since 1927, when Communist Party established the army for its own and kicked off the long march to seize power from the then ruling Kuomintang.

The CCP’s vision is to liberate the Chinese people. Therefore, as an army of the

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Party, the PLA strives for nothing other than the welfare and lives of the the Chinese people. For this reason, disaster relief works become an imperative function of the PLA. When the Chinese people are in danger, the PLA would be obliged to offer help to them. So the popular metaphor in China that portrays the close link between the army and people: the love feelings between fish and water.

To add, China does not have Western-like disaster relief mechanisms or institutions like professional workforces in disaster relief. In recognition of this fact, the Chinese government has built up small-scale professional rescue workforces to tackle small-scale disasters. However, for large-scale disasters, it still requires the assistance of the PLA.

An important force for dealing with non-traditional security issues

With the conclusion of the Cold War, non-traditional security issues have evolved into one major threat to peace, and domestic issues captured more international influence.

For China, in addition to standing ready for possible conflict with Taiwan, the focus of China's armed forces is now on the strategic strength of armed deployment in a desired short time for ensuring social stability, such as anti-terrorism and disaster rescue works.

Consequently, tackling the various types of non-traditional security issues, such as natural calamity, gradually takes the top spot of the leadership's agenda for the army in many countries. In recent years, many countries are strengthening its army's function on disaster rescues.

As early as in 1993, the US proposed a concept of "non-war military operation", indicating the importance of humanitarian works in natural disasters and international peace maintenance for its army. In Japan, the Law of Japan's Self-defense Corps listed military deployment in disasters at domestic and international levels as one of its military operations.

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stability, such as anti-terrorism and disaster rescue works.

PLA's disaster rescue works have stretched overseas. For instance, the navies of US and China conducted a large-scale exercise of disaster rescue to improve mutual co-ordination in the occasion of maritime rescue in the year of 2006. Moreover, in the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2005, and in the Pakistan and Indonesia earthquakes in 2006, the PLA was deployed to do rescue works. Especially in January 2010, China's Defence Ministry organised a special group of medical treatment and epidemic prevention personnel to provide humanitarian assistance to earthquake victims of Haiti. All the 40

group members came from the military hospitals. China hopes to become a bigger contributor to the well-being of the world as a growing power. However, its participation in overseas disaster rescue is in strict compliance with the framework of multinational or regional mechanism, like United Nations for fear of arousing the “China’s threat” argument again.

PLA’s Disaster Relief Works: A Legal Institution Now

From 1949 to 1978, the PLA was the main force behind domestic disaster rescues. For a long time, the PLA’s decisive role in disaster rescues was part of its moral obligations or political tasks. However, the requirements of moral obligation or political task are not without their flaws: what are the rights and rational interests of the army personnel participating in disaster rescues and what is exactly the PLA’s responsibility in dealing with disaster rescues, which were often vague or ignored. There are no clear guidelines or regulations as to the way and degree the PLA rescue efforts should be. As a result, PLA’s disaster rescue efforts look more like an informal undertaking, which has no legal and institutional guarantees.

Since 1980s, with PLA’s move from quantity-building to quality-building, the PLA’s duty of disaster rescue has been documented. On 24 August 1990, the People’s Republic of China State Council and the Central Military Commission issued the notice titled, “On strengthening the unity and handling well the relationship between troops and civilians”, stressed that “all troops should unflinchingly take part in the disaster rescues, the safeguard works of national estate and people’s lives and property”.

In May 1995, the CPC Central Committee promulgated “Regulations of People’s Liberation Army Political Work”, stipulating that the armed force should do disaster rescue works. Two years thereafter, the Central Military Commission promulgated the “Regulations of People’s Liberation Army Command”, officially making emergency disaster relief and disaster relief efforts as an indispensable part of the military mission of PLA.

The “PLA Casualties Insurance Provisions” took effect on 1 August 1998. Soldiers who died or are injured in a military battle or on duty are entitled to the benefits of casualty insurance. The provision of casualties insurance was applied for the first time in the national struggle against floods. The first batch of casualty insurance benefits was given to 19 martyrs who sacrificed their young lives during their rescue works in the flood. According to the provision, the family of the deceased was compensated at the amount of 200,000 *yuan*. Without this provision, the family would have gotten the pension only at the amount of 10,000 *yuan*. The casualty insurance was a booster to a soldier’s enthusiasm on undertaking rescues against flood.

The breakthrough in the legal and institutional guarantee for PLA’s disaster rescue works came with the approval of the “Regulation of Military Participation in Disaster Relief”. In June 2005, the State Council and Central Military Commission in China passed this regulation stipulating that “the armed force is a shock brigade on disaster rescues, and it is an important mission for the armed force to undertake the task of disaster rescue given by government.” In a certain sense, this regulation is a law. It is of

great significance as it details every aspect of disaster rescues including the mission, organisation, coordination, logistics and so on for the troop clearly. The army now knows exactly when, where and what it is going to do with in times of a disaster.

In a press conference about this regulation, General Ge Zhenfeng, the deputy chief of the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army, talked of three motives for voting in favour of this regulation: "Firstly, it sums up the successful experiences of the military and civilian disaster rescues in a long time, providing a legal guarantee on disaster mitigation when soldiers and civilians work together. Secondly, the army's doing in disaster rescues is a non-war military mission, requiring proper settlement over the relationship between the army and the local government in accordance with laws and regulations. Thirdly, when the army takes part in disaster rescues, it would involve a

number of insurance issues, and requires the build-up of corresponding rules and systems as a fundamental solution..."

Of note, the regulation stipulates that if the army takes part in disaster rescue works organised by the State Council, all resulting expenditures would be paid by the central government; if the army takes part in disaster rescue works organised by local governments, all resulting expenditures are to be paid by the local governments. The regulation also requires the local government to provide rescue equipment, materials, security and health care and so on for the troop.

Because of the legal guarantee of the regulation, PLA's capability in disaster rescues has improved substantially. For instance, in summer 2006, a massive forest fire blanketed Great Xingan Mountains in northeastern China. On 31 May, the local government called on eight civil aviation planes and deployed more than

1,000 forest officers of the Yunnan People's Armed Police Corps to Qiqihar city by planes and then transported them by train immediately to the forest fire frontiers.

To improve on the effectiveness and efficiency of the PLA's disaster rescue efforts, China's Central Military Commission has made a major decision to build up a professional force on emergency disaster rescues. The PLA now has 19 professional emergency rescue forces. The specialised troops have not only improved the efficiency of disaster rescue and thus reduced the number of casualties, but also cut off the troop's loss during its engagement in disaster rescues.

Although the army plays a legal role, the regulation in a strict sense is still not a law authorised by China's People's Congress. It implies that there is still a long march ahead for PLA to acquire more degrees of legal and institutional guarantees.

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Though there are repeated calls for a law on military insurance, it has still been under discussion since 2000. After the coming into effect of the “PLA Casualties Insurance Provisions” in 1998, only two important regulations were approved in 2005, which are “Regulation on standardised management of the military insurance”, and “Regulation on the management of military insurance funds”. The two regulations pushed forward the implementation of the military insurance. The working draft of the Law of Military Insurance was finally announced in 2009. There is a high likelihood of the law coming into effect in the near future. ㉓