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China's Military Modernisation: Constrained by One-Child Policy

By Loro Horta

SYNOPSIS

While the Chinese military has made significant progress in the development of modern military technologies, the quality of its human resources is struggling to keep up with its technological advances.

COMMENTARY

ON 20 AUGUST 2021 China announced several changes and modifications to its military service law. The last time China made changes to this law was a decade ago. The new changes put an emphasis on improving the quality of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers corps.

In the past decade the PLA has witnessed an impressive modernisation with the introduction of highly sophisticated weapon systems. The Chinese navy currently operates two aircraft carriers and will deploy two more modern aircraft carriers by 2030. The navy is also operating an increasingly large fleet of modern submarines. The air force is receiving sophisticated stealth fighters like the Chengdu J20, a fifth-generation fighter aircraft. The missile forces are operating thousands of ballistic and cruise missiles while sophisticated hypersonic missiles are now entering service with the PLA.

Attracting the Best

The rapid modernisation of the PLA has put enormous pressure on its ability to operate and maintain these sophisticated platforms. Any military force is only as good as the quality of its men and women. No amount of modern technology can compensate for a demoralised and untrained force.

China's leaders are well aware of this. For decades the PLA has relied on conscript peasants. An increasingly modern PLA can no longer do so. Peasants can't fly J20s or maintain hypersonic missiles.

The changes made to the military service law aim to reduce the number of conscripts and expanding the number of professional volunteer officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs). To operate and maintain sophisticated equipment the PLA needs to recruit from among the highly educated.

The modified law envisions the expansion of recruitment centres at universities and higher education institutions. Priority is to be given to recruits with hard science backgrounds such as engineering, mathematics and computer science.

However, attracting educated and ambitious young recruits into a life in the military is not easy. This is a problem not unique to China. Several Western militaries face similar problems. For decades China has witnessed impressive economic growth and the rise of large and successful companies, both state-owned and private. The PLA has found it very hard to compete with the civilian sector who pays better salaries and does not impose the same disciplinary obligations.

Extending the Carrots

To address this problem, in 2020 the Chinese government approved a 40 percent salary increase for PLA personnel, with certain specialties such as fighter pilots and submariners benefitting from even higher increases. Better healthcare, living facilities and family support are being improved. To ensure the retention of qualified personnel conscripts, becoming NCOs has been made easier.

To address the high divorce rate among PLA personnel, officers are now being allowed to live with their families in military units. Better housing, schools and health facilities to support military families are being expanded. To encourage NCOs to pursue a long-term military career retirement benefits are being improved. Under a 2020 law, companies that employ PLA veterans will be given tax breaks. Veterans are also to be given financial preferential treatment in the form of low interest loans.

As Beijing's territorial claims increase and its posture becomes more aggressive, relations with some of its neighbours have deteriorated significantly. China's vast territory, complex geography and hostile neighbours mean that PLA personnel are increasingly deployed in remote areas for long periods.

From the top of the Himalayas facing Indian troops to remote islets in the South China Sea, PLA personnel are being deployed on a regular basis for extended periods. To alleviate the hardships of serving in such areas the PLA is investing significant resources to improve living conditions and paying bonuses for those serving in such "hardship postings".

Following the example of the American military the PLA has also sponsored several action movies with good-looking actors playing the roles of officers. The navy and air force have invested the most in recruitment propaganda.

Constraints on Growth: One-Child Policy

While better salaries and living conditions are important to attract and retain top personnel for the PLA, there are problems that cannot be addressed by dishing out cash and producing TV series with handsome actors playing PLA officers. China's aging population and its one-child policy will pose a serious challenge for the PLA in coming years.

The one-child policy has created a situation in which one child has to look after two parents. As a result many families are reluctant to see their children follow a military career. According to a 2020 census the fertility rate in China was 1.3 children per woman. This is well below the 2.1 children per woman rate necessary to prevent population decline. Fewer children simply means fewer soldiers and officers.

As China's population ages the ratio of retirees to working people increases. In 2016 China had 16 retirees per 100 working people. Based on current projections by 2050 China will have 64 retirees per 100 working persons. Although Beijing has relaxed the one-child policy, it will take years to reverse its effects.

A declining population will mean that the PLA will have to compete even harder with the private sector for the best and the brightest. Some Chinese observers have also pointed out that the one-child policy has led to a spoiled generation of young Chinese with no stomach for the rigours of military life.

Health issues such as obesity, poor eyesight and emotional problems are common among recruits. The PLA will find solving these problems much harder than acquiring new fighter jets and other sophisticated equipment.

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