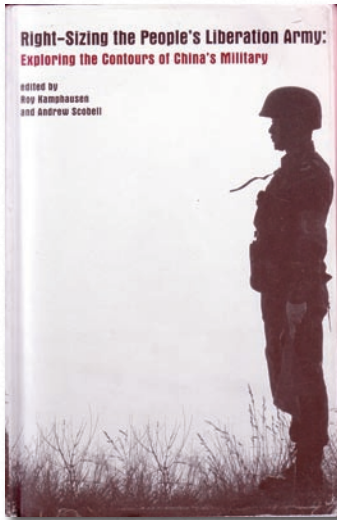


BOOK REVIEWS



RIGHT-SIZING THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY: EXPLORING THE CONTOURS OF CHINA'S MILITARY

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Review by Richard Desjardins

As any seasoned observer of the Chinese scene will know, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is in the midst of its deepest transformation in memory. It would be difficult to exaggerate the magnitude of the changes taking place when we know where the PLA was in 1976, when Chairman Mao died, and what the situation is today. Describing the current transformation as a *revolution in military affairs*, to use a popular term these days, is an understatement. If China is emerging as an economic power, the same cannot be said of its military. Not yet. However, as the book under review shows, the Chinese military is clearly aware of its inferiority and is working on filling the gap.

The Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College has been holding an annual conference on the PLA for a number of years now. On every occasion, the papers discussed at the conference have been published in book format. The book under review is the result of the 2006 conference. The fifteen contributors are all seasoned observers of the PLA. The field

has matured to the point where we can truly refer to it as *PLA studies*. If in the mid-1990s research on the PLA tended to have a general focus due to lack of precise information, then today the increasing openness of the Chinese military allows for greater specialization. The book under review is a clear indication of this change.

The driving issue of the 2006 conference was determining the appropriate size for China's military. The growth of Chinese defense expenditures in the past ten years has been the object of increasing concerns by the US military. Average annual increases of 15% in the past decade have led the US to question the motives of the Chinese government. Is China seeking to ascertain a regional stake or is it aiming to challenge the United States outright? In order to address these issues, the conference attendants have tried to identify China's short, medium, and long-term threats and to measure them against other priorities of the Chinese government. The result has been the elaboration of a

number of scenarios each outlining the form and size the Chinese military might take.

Modernizing the military was not a major priority of the Chinese government when the reformers consolidated their power in 1978. Rather, the focus was opening the economy to the outside world, downsizing the Chinese bureaucracy and privatizing state corporations. Beginning in 1985, the PLA was ordered to trim its ranks as well. By 2010, PLA ranks will have lost two million soldiers as a result of this reform. The resulting savings will have been put into increasing wages and buying new equipment.

The book under review provides a clearer picture of the priority areas facing the Chinese government. Ironically, the current external environment offers China a peace that it has not seen in a long time. Russia, its rival for many years, has also rearranged its priorities. Both countries are focusing on their respective domestic situation and now see each other as partners. The United States is no longer involved in a war on China's immediate borders (i.e. Vietnam and Korea) and both countries are increasingly integrated economically.

Rather, the threats facing the Chinese government are domestic. They include separatism in Tibet as well as Xinjiang (the northwestern autonomous region inhabited by the Uighur minority) and the instability caused by growing disparities in income between the coastal and inland provinces as well as between the rural and urban areas. These threats, according to the contributors, call for domestic police enforcement rather than military action.

There are other areas that provide greater challenges for the PLA. Taiwan is the obvious example. From China's point of view, Taiwan is a domestic issue. Should the rebel island province declare independence, a strong response would be required from the Chinese government. In fact, the Chinese government has repeatedly indicated that such a move would call for military intervention. The

greatest concern in that regard would be the role played by the United States. The Chinese military is developing scenarios and contingency plans to frustrate any US involvement. Both the Chinese Air Force (PLAAF) and the Navy (PLAN) would play major roles in that eventuality. PLA reliance in past wars on ground forces means that both the Air Force and Navy are largely untested. Furthermore, the coordination of all three branches in mutual support in a conflict has also been largely untested. China has seen, in the Gulf War and Iraq, what the US military can do with such coordination. These are areas where the PLA has been concentrating its efforts. As tensions rise and fall in the Taiwan Strait, China feels it needs to allocate more resources to prepare for such an eventuality.

Another major concern pertains to China's growing international economic interests which include access to oil supplies. While China's dependence on oil is still small compared to the United States', the trend is clear: economic growth will require larger imports of oil. The US position in the Middle East and US Navy dominance of the waters between the Middle East and Asia are seen as potential threats to Chinese access to oil. Discussions and scenarios are being developed to determine what form the Chinese Air Force and Navy should take and what their missions should be.

The contributors to this book have spent considerable time discussing the issues mentioned above. They have written at length on these topics here and elsewhere. Anyone seeking to understand what the PLA is up to would be well-advised to read this book. ■

Richard Desjardins is a Canadian civil servant. He holds an MA in Chinese politics and has been observing Chinese politics as well as its military for two decades.