Why ‘Non-Combat’ PLA Operations Are Vital for China’s Regime Stability
By M. Taylor Fravel

In recent years, the People’s Liberation Army has increasingly focused on non-combat operations, principally domestic disaster relief and managing internal unrest. This may seem odd to those who would expect a rising power like China to project military force abroad, but coping with internal issues brought on by the stresses of surging growth is crucial to maintaining regime stability, argues M. Taylor Fravel, an expert on the Chinese military at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

IN A SPEECH to the Central Military Commission in December 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao, who also chairs the commission, urged China’s armed forces to greatly expand its ability to conduct non-combat operations. In particular, Hu instructed the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the People’s Armed Police (PAP) and militia “to develop capabilities to deal with many kinds of security threats and complete diversified military tasks.”

To be sure, conventional military combat operations still constitute the most important mission for China’s armed forces, especially the PLA. At the same time, however, Hu called on the military to be able to conduct non-combat operations (fazhanguan lilun xuexi zhinan) — the use of the armed forces for purposes other than warfare.

This growing emphasis on non-combat operations is puzzling. Scholars of international relations typically believe prosperous states will tend to use their growing wealth to generate military power to prevail in armed conflicts, especially wars with other states. The majority of past rising powers have behaved thus, investing solely or primarily in combat capabilities. But in China, the PLA has begun emphasizing non-combat operations even though the modernization of its combat forces is far from complete. In 2009, for example, the Pentagon classified only 25 percent of China’s naval surface combatants and fighter aircraft as “modern.” In addition, most non-combat operations described in authoritative PLA writings stress internal or domestic missions, such as managing natural disasters and social unrest, and not projecting power overseas, though international peacekeeping missions also receive attention.

**COPING WITH GROWTH**

I argue that in China’s case the relationship between economic growth and political stability accounts for the decision to stress non-combat operations, especially domestic missions. Leaders craft national policies to deal with their most pressing threats, including not just external threats but also internal threats to a leader or a regime’s power. Political survival is as important as national survival abroad.

Growth, especially rapid growth, is usually a source of legitimacy for leaders in developing countries such as China. Such growth, however, also generates new sources of instability in the form of income inequality and corruption that can fuel societal unrest, which in turn may jeopardize continued growth and ultimately legitimacy. Under these conditions, as Samuel Huntington noted several decades ago, the need for continued growth creates a powerful interest in preventing the spread of social unrest. Thus, developing countries such as China may use their armed forces to manage or prevent domestic unrest as well as to provide services that the state lacks, such as emergency disaster relief.

In China today, there are abundant sources of structural political instability. Since 1979, the percentage of the population living in urban areas has increased from 19 to 43 percent. Internal migration has mushroomed, as a roving population of migrant workers now exceeds 130 million people. Amid these demographic changes, employment remains a challenge. Although the official jobless rate is low, hovering around 4 percent, it measures only a portion of the labor force; a 2010 white paper suggested that true unemployment, including surplus labor in rural areas, was around 20 percent.

At the same time, income inequality continues to rise. When Deng Xiaoping started his reforms, the gini coefficient (a measure of the inequality of income distribution on a scale of 0 to 1) was 0.30, which suggested a relatively equal distribution. By 2006, however, it had jumped to 0.46. Although lower than many other developing countries such as Brazil and Mexico, this change nevertheless reflects a fairly substantial shift in the fabric of Chinese society.

Concerns about challenges to political stability created by rapid growth are reflected in China’s military strategy. To be sure, the importance of some long-standing goals, such as unification with Taiwan or defending claims in other territories, have not diminished. Nevertheless, rapid growth has pushed Chinese leaders to stress factors related to development in addition to traditional security concerns. As Hu Jintao explained in 2004, the PLA “must pay attention not only to protecting national survival interests but also to protecting national development interests.”

**WHATEVER ELSE YOU DO, MAINTAIN REGIME STABILITY**

One goal receiving renewed attention has been the paramount importance of regime security and social stability. In an important speech outlining the PLA’s “historic mission” at the start of the 21st century in October 2004, Hu Jintao instructed China’s armed forces “to provide an important powerful guarantee to consolidate the party’s ruling status.” Although defense of the Communist party as a key mission predates even Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, it was re-emphasized by Hu because of the new challenges that the party faces as the transition from a planned economy to a market economy continues. These challenges include a dramatic increase in the number of “mass incidents” of social unrest (from 8,700 in 1993 to potentially as high as 170,000 in 2009), violent unrest in ethnic minority frontier regions (including Tibet in 2008 and Xinjiang in 2009) and devastating natural disasters such as the...
A Domesticated Force

Key measures of recent military and paramilitary involvement in domestic disaster response and construction, according to Chinese government white paper China’s National Defense in 2010.

50,000
Troops staffing eight state-level emergency-response units created in 2009, specializing in flood control and rescue, earthquake rescue, nuclear, biological and chemical emergency, urgent air transport, rapid road repair, maritime search and rescue, emergency mobile communication, medical aid and epidemic prevention.

1.6m
The number of manpower work days allocated for PLA and PAP troops in 2009 and 2010 for national construction work. Much was for development of China’s poorer western region. The troops helped in over 600 infrastructure projects relating to energy, transportation, hydropower and communications.

1.85m
The number of troop deployments for disaster relief operations including floods, earthquakes, droughts, typhoons and forest fires, in 2009 and 2010.

630
Estimated number of military personnel sent to help overseas nations’ disaster relief efforts since 2000.

2008 Wenquan earthquake in Sichuan Province that killed around 90,000 people.
Consistent with this goal, the types of non-combat operations most frequently discussed by Chinese military strategists are various internal missions to help the state maintain public order and, ultimately, defend the CCP. A survey of 12 books written by PLA scholars on non-combat operations demonstrates the dominant role of domestic non-combat operations, which can be grouped into three broad categories. The first is disaster relief and rescue, such as the operations that the PLA conducted after the Wenquan earthquake. The second is maintaining social stability, including containing the spread of demonstrations, riots, uprisings, rebellions and large-scale mass incidents that would upset social order, especially in ethnic minority regions. A third category includes counter-terrorism, which primarily addresses domestic terrorism, such as heightened concerns about terror attacks during the 2008 Olympics or the 60th anniversary of the People’s Republic in October 2009.

The deployment of military forces reflects the emphasis on internal missions. Between 2006 and 2010, for example, approximately 2,445,000 PLA and PAP troops participated in various disaster relief operations. As noted PLA analyst Dennis Blasko has observed, these deployments represent the largest use of Chinese soldiers since China’s 1979 invasion of Vietnam. During the ice storms that swept through 21 provinces in January 2008, Chinese soldiers helped to clear 32,000 kilometers of roads and restore power in 21 provinces. Following the Wenquan earthquake, soldiers rescued 3,338 individuals and evacuated more than 1.4 million people. PLA and especially PAP soldiers were also involved in managing recent episodes of ethnic and social unrest, though data on their participation are unavailable.

KEEPING THE PEACE
Another goal shaped by economic growth and regime security is maintaining a stable external environment for development. This means ensuring peace on China’s immediate periphery, where China has active disputes with other states that, if they became militarized, could harm growth. In addition, however, China also now values stability in many other regions of the world to ensure it has access to raw materials and other inputs for the economy.

China also stresses the importance of the sea lanes of communication, as more than 90 percent of China’s trade travels by sea. Therefore, as part of its new historic mission, Hu urged the PLA both to “provide a strong security guarantee for protecting the great period of strategic opportunity for national development” and to “play an important role in maintaining world peace and promoting common development.”

Consistent with the goal of external stability, the two most frequently discussed international non-combat operations are peacekeeping and disaster relief. In addition to enhancing China’s international image, these operations play an important role in maintaining a stable external environment to facilitate China’s development and ultimately bolster regime security. Nevertheless, when compared with internal non-combat operations, the international arena involves only a small number of troops. Between 1990 and 2010, for example, 17,390 Chinese troops participated in UN peacekeeping operations, less than one percent of those in recent domestic disaster relief operations. Although China has dispatched medical or search and rescue teams to eight different natural disasters in other countries since 2000, the total number of personnel involved was only around 630. Likewise, roughly 6,160 sailors and marines have participated in anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden since December 2008.

THE IMPLICATIONS
The role of non-combat operations in China’s evolving military strategy carries several important implications. To start with, it demonstrates the PLA’s continued domestic role as a party-army under the leadership of the CCP. By contrast, scholars frequently view the PLA’s focus on non-combat operations principally as a tool of statecraft designed to strengthen China’s international influence. In addition, it underscores that the most potent threats to the CCP lie within.

Finally, the PLA’s emphasis on non-combat operations suggests that China will develop traditional combat capabilities more slowly than might otherwise be the case, especially if domestic political instability remains an issue in the coming decade. Although detailed budgetary data are unavailable, the organizational changes necessary to conduct non-combat operations indicate that the PLA is devoting fewer resources to long-range force projection than analysts expected a decade ago. As a result, the continued domestic orientation of the PLA should help to dampen concerns raised by other countries over China’s rise as a great power.

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