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China's Growing Military Transparency: the Domestic Factor

Li Mingjiang

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China has officially launched a spokesperson for the Ministry of Defence, an institution through which many expect to increase China's military transparency. The evolution of the military spokespersonship, although still a short history, had an origin in China's domestic socio-political developments and circumstances.

THE ISSUE of China's military transparency has been frequently brought up in various bilateral and multilateral meetings and forums. It was raised again at the Shangri-la Dialogue held in Singapore recently.

For the first time, a People's Liberation Army (PLA) officer provided a public press briefing at the Chinese Ministry of Defence. Senior Colonel Hu Changming, the PLA's first spokesman, debuted on 18 May to brief the press on the Chinese military's role in the rescue and relief efforts in the aftermath of the tragic earthquake that happened on 12 May in Sichuan Province. At the briefing, Hu provided detailed accounts about the PLA's activities as well as aid and assistance from foreign militaries for the rescue operation.

Hu's debut signifies the official launch of the Information Office of the Defence Ministry, an institution that observers at home and abroad expect to increase China's military transparency. A domestic perspective would be useful to understand the role of the PLA spokesman because the emergence of this institution had its origin in domestic socio-political developments and circumstances.

Post-SARS Political Openness Gives Birth to PLA Spokesperson

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed its first spokesman in 1983. Few government agencies however followed suit. The State Council, China's Cabinet, set up an Information Office in 1991, but its main mandate was to better China's image in international society. The Information Office usually found itself in an awkward position as it often had to beg other government agencies to provide information or to meet the press. Discussion on military transparency was almost a taboo.

The outbreak of SARS in 2003 made the traditional practice of tight governmental control of information no longer feasible. The covering up of information about SARS cases by local governments and the Ministry of Public Health exacerbated public panic and created problems for inter-agency coordination in tackling the pandemic. Rumours, aided by cell phones and internet, became rampant and for a short period of time the whole society seemed to be out of control. Public confidence in the government and China's international image plummeted.

The central leadership realized the danger and quickly switched gears. The mayor of Beijing and the minister of public health were sacked. Freer flow of information was provided. The lesson that the Chinese government learned from SARS was that a certain degree of transparency was needed for better policy making and social stability.

In subsequent years, China started to push for a system of spokesmen in Party and government agencies at various levels facilitated and supervised by the Information Office of the State Council. These efforts resulted in the official promulgation of the National Regulations on Government Information Opening, which went into effect on 1 May, 2008.

It was in this political context that the nomination of a spokesperson for the Chinese military occurred. Chinese military analysts, who had occasionally made the suggestion before SARS, now found that the political atmosphere favoured their proposal. Conservative military leaders became less resistant to the appointment of spokesperson because the central leadership supported the setting up such an institution at all ministerial level agencies. In December 2007, the Information Office of the State Council announced that the Ministry of Defence would soon have its own spokesperson to regularly brief the press on issues related to China's military.

Earthquake Brings the Military Spokesman to the Forefront

Soon after the State Council Information Office's disclosure, in January 2008, an announcement was made in the name of the Information Office of the Defence Ministry on the upcoming visit to China by Admiral Timothy J. Keating, the commander of the US Pacific Command. Reports followed, saying that the PLA spokesman would officially start in February. But that did not happen. In February, the Ministry of Defence Information Office, behind the scene, released information regarding the mobilization of the PLA for the rescue and relief during the ice storm disaster that swept many provinces in south China.

Then all of a sudden, Senior Colonel Hu appeared at the news briefing organized by the State Council Information Office on 18 May together with several other senior PLA officers to brief the press on the PLA's involvement in the earthquake relief work. The Chinese media, quoting senior Chinese military analysts, reported that Hu's debut was ahead of the official schedule. The Defence Ministry Information Office had been making preparations to begin its full operation at a later time.

A reason for the spokesman appearing at the news briefing was the emergence of false information about the rescue that was circulating widely and rapidly across China. Rumours claimed that some soldiers of the PLA's first batch of parachute troops died in the mission. Other rumours were saying that the PLA was not responding fast enough and was incompetent in disaster relief. Other gossip alleged that some nuclear facilities in the areas hit by the quake were damaged and posed a grave threat to people in that region. In general, there was also a popular demand from the public to know more about the rescue operations that the PLA was involved.

The PLA obviously felt the pressure to respond quickly to clear the rumours before it was too late. Mr. Hu's and other military leaders' comprehensive descriptions of the PLA's activities in the rescue campaign reassured the public, demonstrated the bravery of the soldiers, and effectively diminished

the negative impact of those rumours. But, as the Chinese media dubbed it, it was really the tremor that led to the unveiling of the spokesperson of the Defence Ministry.

Growing openness

In recent years, China has cautiously taken steps to increase its military transparency. For instance, it has issued defence white papers, participated in various joint exercises and initiated exchange programmes with foreign militaries. The establishment of the Defence Ministry spokespersonship is perhaps an even more significant step. It shows the pace and substance of China's moves in meeting international expectations of the PLA's transparency. It also shows that such gradual openness will depend not just on international conditions and pressures, but perhaps more importantly on domestic developments and circumstances.

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