Notes:


***

Propaganda, Not Policy: Explaining the PLA’s “Hawkish Faction” (Part One)
By Andrew Chubb

The regular appearance in the Chinese media of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) figures calling for aggressive foreign policy causes controversy and confusion among foreign observers. The most sensational remarks usually are made by academics at PLA institutions. Foreign media routinely pick up sensational quotes from these military officers—such as Major General Luo Yuan’s repeated suggestion for declaring the Diaoyu Islands a Chinese military target range or Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong’s recent call for a blockade of Philippine outposts in the Spratly Islands—and attribute them to senior military leaders, as their ranks seem to suggest (Beijing TV/Global Times Net [Huanqiu Wang], May 27; South China Morning Post, March 3; Tea Leaf Nation, February 25). Operational commanders, however, seldom comment in public on policy issues. Prominent foreign policy analyst Wang Jisi has publicly complained about “reckless statements, made with no official authorization” which had “created a great deal of confusion” (Asian Wall Street Journal, July 1, 2012). In April, recently-retired deputy military region commander Wang Hongguang wrote military pundits had “misled the audience” and caused “interference with our high-level policy decision-making and deployments” (Global Times, April 20). This two-part series assesses who these outspoken PLA officers represent and the implications of their hawkish statements through an evaluation of their backgrounds, affiliations and statements on their work.

Debate about belligerent public remarks from military personnel often surrounds the extent to which they might represent the voice of hawkish PLA constituencies, pressuring the leadership to adopt more aggressive policies. Some analysts tend to dismiss such bluster as largely irrelevant on the basis that military media pundits have no operational military authority, despite their high rank. Others, however, emphasize how continued outspokenness by military figures presupposes high-level party or military support, and that they thus give voice to behind-the-scenes political struggles. A third view proposes that the hawks are the voice of the PLA as an institution, pushing the military’s policy preferences (“Hawks vs. Doves: Beijing Debates ‘Core Interests’ and Sino-U.S. Relations,” China Brief, August 19, 2010) [1]. Analysis of scattered biographical information on the most prominent hawkish PLA media commentators, plus comments regarding their own work, suggests each perspective is partially right. None is a general in a conventional military sense, yet they are far from irrelevant. Their backgrounds, affiliations and positions, however, indicate their role probably has more to do with the regime’s domestic and international propaganda work objectives than political debates.

Luo Yuan

The most famous PLA “hawk” is retired Major General Luo Yuan. His biography suggests he has operated, and continues to do so, in the areas of Taiwan affairs, intelligence and military propaganda. Son of intelligence czar Luo Qingchang, Luo Yuan joined the PLA in 1968 (Southern People Weekly, March 26). He often has stated that he fought on the front lines in Laos against the United States in the early 1970s, and his official biography states that he was a squadron (bu) and platoon (pia) leader (People’s Net [Renmin Wang], February 20, 2012). In 1978, he returned to Beijing to begin his academic career and entered the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), where he has been affiliated for the bulk of his career (Southern Weekend, April 9, 2012). He attained the rank
of major general in 2006.

Luo has a strong background in “united front” activities, especially related to Taiwan. Until March this year, Luo Yuan was a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)—China’s paramount advisory body and a “people’s patriotic united front organization”—where he tabled high-profile proposals for a unified coastguard as well as a law on soldiers’ benefits and social status (China Today, March 4; PLA Daily, March 14, 2012; March 10, 2010). He was a member of the CPPCC Committee for Liaison with Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and Overseas Chinese, for which his principal work was “to contribute to cross-strait exchange, the strengthening of military trust and the peaceful reunification of the motherland”, according to a 2011 article in the official PLA newspaper that quoted him at length on the topic (PLA Daily, March 4, 2011). His current position is the Executive Vice President and Secretary General of the China Strategy Culture Promotion Association (CSCPA), a self-proclaimed non-governmental think tank formed in 2011 as a platform for friendly exchange of “research on international issues, Taiwan issues and culture issues” according to the CSCPA website. Its President Zheng Wantong is a former United Front Work Department deputy director and CPPCC vice chairman (Xinhua Reference, January 24, 2002).

Official accounts of Luo’s career also suggest cordial relations with military intelligence. He has visited more than 20 countries, was an assistant military attaché in Denmark between 1992 and 1993 and he was a visiting scholar at George Washington University from 1999 to 2000 (People’s Net, February 20, 2012). PLA publications frequently refer to Luo as “former deputy director of the AMS World Military Research Department” ahead of his PLA CPPCC delegate title, suggesting research on foreign militaries was the subject of his most important position (PLA Daily, November 1, 2012; March 3, 2012; March 4, 2011). Similarly, a notable activity of the CSCPA, Luo’s current institution, is the publication of annual assessments of U.S. and Japanese military power. The published reports carry the specification “public version” (minjian ban), implying the existence of internal-circulation versions. With both internal and external dimensions, the CSCPA reports appear to straddle the intersection of military intelligence and public diplomacy aimed at both domestic and overseas audiences. This combination mirrors Luo Yuan’s career more generally.

Luo Yuan’s consistent presence in the mass media in recent years suggests, at a minimum, an excellent relationship with propaganda authorities. He appears to be a part of, rather than a user of, the system, despite his apparently outspoken views. On September 12, 2012, for example, the day after the Japanese government made its Diaoyu Islands transaction and as the propaganda machine cranked into overdrive, Luo was given the plum task of penning a commentary for the official PLA newspaper. The article’s key remark, that China “will take all necessary measures to protect sovereignty” was quoted and re-quoted across state-run print, broadcast and online media for several days afterwards, demonstrating that support for the article extended to the civilian propaganda system (CCTV, September 15, 2012; China News Service, September 13, 2012; China Radio International, September 12, 2012; PLA Daily, September 12, 2012).

Far from engaging in contention over policy, Luo has stated the “rational hawk” role that he and others play must be “designed properly at the highest level” (Global Times Net, May 4). Indeed, Luo has said he adheres strictly to rules governing PLA staff [2]. In 2010, for example, when revised PLA internal work rules banned PLA staff from engaging in internet discourse, Luo Yuan immediately discontinued his highly popular blogs (Southern Weekend, April 9, 2012). He longed to open an account on Weibo, the new “public opinion battlefront,” as he termed it, but only did so in February this year, when the rules were relaxed for certain military scholars “in frequent contact with media [or] participating in foreign-related activities.” The premise for this permission, Luo emphasized, was strict adherence to rules and discipline. Luo described the decision as “an embodiment of the reform and progress of the Chinese military’s external propaganda work” (People’s Net, February 25). According to Phoenix Weekly military affairs journalist Zhong Jian, Luo Yuan is in fact an “external propaganda expert” authorized by the PLA General Political Department—an assertion supported by his citation in PLA and party media on the topic (blog.ifeng.com, March 13; PLA Daily, November 1, 2012).
Dai Xu

PLA Air Force Senior Colonel Dai Xu’s career seems to have been almost purely in the realm of military political work. A short biography on one of his defunct blogs states he “undertakes both physical sciences work and political work.” Even more provocative in recent years than Luo Yuan, especially in his frequent use of violent language against a multitude of foreign enemies and Chinese traitors, his written output is enormous with eight published books, innumerable newspaper and magazine articles, almost daily television appearances, several frequently-updated blogs and dozens of weibo (microblogs) each day. At age 24 in 1988, Dai entered the PLAAF Political Academy in Shanghai and, according to a recent profile, “completed his transition from military work to political work when the Berlin Wall fell” (Southern Weekend, April 18). In 1995, he was working for the State Council Office of Ex-Servicemen and Retired Officers’ Settlement (Jun An Ban). He published his first book, Air War in the Twentieth Century in 2003. By 2005, he was a staff reporter with a PLAAF magazine called Air Force Military Science, where he increased his profile with a long and candid discussion on the Iraq War with General Liu Yazhou (China Defense Blog, August 14, 2010). After General Liu became Political Commissar at the PLA’s National Defense University in December 2009, Dai followed two years later. Dai Xu had been relatively quiet ahead of his NDU appointment, leading some observers to speculate he may have “lain down his armor and returned to the fields” [3]. At a Global Times forum broadcast online, a seemingly livid Dai Xu called for the “extermination” of the troublemakers in the South China Sea, criticized the policy status quo and relentlessly attacked the international relations scholars on the panel (Tudou.com, 2011).

Despite his apparent sincerity, however, Dai Xu also has indicated that he is not necessarily seeking to directly influence policy, but is rather in the business of information gathering and propaganda. In 2009, in his introductory remarks preceding lecture at his alma mater, the PLAAF Political Academy in Shanghai (now part of the PLA Nanjing Political Academy), Dai explained:

“In all these years in so many different places, being involved in many secret work units, writing a lot of internal reports, providing a lot of internal reference material to the highest leaders, on one hand doing internal work, on the other doing external work, I have always firmly grasped the two strands: there is nothing off-limits in thinking, but propaganda is subject to discipline. This is the most precious thing I learned at PLAAF Political Academy. And as a result, even though I have done a few things, it has never caused any trouble” [4].

Dai did not specify whether the lengthy talk he was about to give, entitled “2030: America Dismembers China,” was internal or external work, thought or propaganda. He did, however, say his role is as a provocateur rather than a teacher: “I believe my role is to be the spark plug for people’s thought engines.” The audience on the day apparently included Nanjing Political Academy leaders and teachers, but the main content was almost identical to a public lecture he was giving around the country at that time, expounding the thesis of his book, C-Shaped Enscelment. After all, the book’s biographical notes and interviews at the time called Dai a “PLA external propaganda expert” (Global Times Net, November 12, 2009).

Dai’s “internal report” was uploaded to the internet, where it created a firestorm of attention among military enthusiasts as a purported rare glimpse inside the PLA’s secretive political training institutions. Given that the unabridged video remains available on numerous mainstream China-based video websites four years later, the “leak” appears to have been either intentional or viewed as convenient, given the regime’s determination to maintain secrecy in internal military matters. The logical conclusion is that, like all Dai Xu’s public statements, it was propaganda masquerading as PLA thought.

Zhang Zhaozhong

Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong is best known among domestic Chinese audiences for his erratic analyses of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi’s chances of overcoming their opponents in 2003 and 2011 (Global Voices Online, August 30, 2011). Other often-cited quotes include “I can send several dozen small fishing boats loaded with explosives” to destroy the U.S. Zumwalt