

# “Like Donkeys Slaughtered After They Are Too Old to Work a Grindstone”: PLA Veterans Protests and Party-Military Relations Under Xi Jinping

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People’s Liberation Army (PLA) veterans are a revered and honored class in China, and the political leadership is very sensitive to perceptions of their treatment and their potential for anti-regime collective action. The recent uptick in veteran protests over benefits is understandably alarming to Zhongnanhai, and the government has undertaken swift bureaucratic and coercive measures to isolate and curb their proliferation. This article explores the origins and scope of the veteran protests and assesses their implications for party-army relations and Xi Jinping’s personal political fortunes.

## Intro

According to PRC government statistics, there are approximately 57 million PLA “veterans,”<sup>1</sup> defined as anyone who served in the active-duty military or reserves or militia since 1927. Within this group, the veterans of the 1950-53 Korean War, the 1962 border war with India, and the 1979 invasion of Vietnam are particularly revered by the propaganda apparatus, but their combat experience also creates higher expectations for treatment by the state. Statutorily, Clause 3 of the Military Pensions Priority Regulations requires governments to ensure that the standard of living and social situation of all demobilized PLA soldiers, not just war veterans, doesn't fall below the national average.<sup>2</sup> The other sensitive class within the veteran cadre are soldiers demobilized as part of major downsizing and reorganizations. These occurred in 1985, 1997, 2003,<sup>3</sup> and most recently the 300,000 cuts announced by Xi Jinping<sup>4</sup> in the 2015 reorganization detailed in my contribution to *China Leadership Monitor*.<sup>5</sup> For these personnel, State Council Document No. 75 (1978) is the operative policy statement, which promised to find jobs for demobilized military personnel.

Since 2015, there has been a striking uptick in the number of reported veteran protests in China, though the accounts come from dissident media and the Hong Kong press, since the official state media and the propaganda apparatus ruthlessly suppress information on the subject in newspaper, TV, and online sources. Overall, the veterans’ complaints range from dissatisfaction with low-end jobs to unemployment after cutbacks. They are upset about poor medical care, and insufficient pensions or stipends. One of the main structural problems historically is that veterans’ benefits are not nationally distributed. Instead, cash-strapped local government offices are responsible for their welfare, and treatment varies widely across the country. While the government requires that their incomes be marginally higher than the average in their home regions, that is often not the case, especially in the countryside where most veterans live and are provided with as little as 400 yuan (US\$60) per month.<sup>6</sup> Professor Zeng Zhiping, a military law expert at Nanchang Institute of Technology in Jiangxi province, said miscommunication between

the PLA and local governments, as well as a lack of transparency within the PLA, was to blame for the long-standing veterans issue and the difficult relations between ex-military personnel and local governments. Specifically, Zeng argues that “in China, there is not a channel for local governments to ask the PLA to provide the help and information they need [to identify veterans] ... so local officials often regard [protesting] veterans as troublemakers... The central government should give local authorities the legal right to demand that information from the PLA.”<sup>7</sup>

Of course, soldiers and ex-soldiers griping about their treatment is a long-honored tradition among warriors throughout the ages. So why are PLA veterans taking to the streets and risking the predictable crackdown from the security apparatus? To answer this question, we must first understand the scope of the current protests. While the data are understandably fragmentary, the main examples of the escalating activity are:

- 11 October 2016: A thousand or more veterans protested in front of Ministry of National Defense headquarters in Beijing. They sang "In Unity is Our Strength" and marched for hours before being taken away in buses.<sup>8</sup> The Ministry promised that “the temporary living difficulties of a portion of retired soldiers will gradually be resolved.”<sup>9</sup>
- February 2017: Two days of protests were staged outside the Beijing headquarters of the party’s anti-corruption watchdog, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, over unpaid retirement benefits.<sup>10</sup>
- 22 May 2018: More than 1,000 veterans gathered in Luoding, Guangdong to protest the beating of 60-year-old Liu Tianrong, who had planned to travel to Beijing to protest the treatment of veterans.<sup>11</sup>
- Late May and early June 2018: As many as 10,000 veterans from Sichuan, Zhejiang, Shandong, Anhui, and Hebei gathered for days in Luohe, a city in central China, after accounts spread that a former soldier’s wife had been detained by the police after she joined veterans who had gone to Beijing to demand better treatment.<sup>12</sup>
- 20-24 June 2018: Five days of demonstrations in Nanmen Square in Zhenjiang City, Jiangsu Province,<sup>13</sup> protested security guards beating of PLA veteran Wang Yihong. “Arranged in neat rows, in blocks according to region of China, and carrying ruling Chinese Communist Party flags and banners identifying their time and place of service, the veterans waited as organizers patrolled the protest, issuing instructions through megaphones.”<sup>14</sup> A military source close to the provincial government said that "more than 10 officials" involved in the rally in Zhenjiang were punished for their handling of the event.<sup>15</sup>
- Late July 2018: Hundreds of people staged protests outside veterans' affairs offices in Shandong, Hebei and Jiangsu provinces.<sup>16</sup>

The security apparatus has not appeared to have any problems containing the veterans’ protests, which is not surprising given their deep experience handling farmers’ protests and other “mass incidents.” Authorities try to contain the protests upstream by preventing groups from travelling to the protest. Neil Diamant, a professor of Asian law and society at Pennsylvania’s Dickinson College who studies veterans’ protests, argues that the authorities work to ensure some veterans are satisfied, thus keeping them from forming a

united front. They also arrest emerging veterans' leaders, infiltrate the groups and monitor their communications, detaining large numbers if necessary. "So far, this has allowed them to muddle through...My guess is that they just wait them out, hoping that age will eventually prevent many from becoming overly feisty."<sup>17</sup>

Their appearances outside government offices are met with a firm though non-confrontational response from the security forces, who in Beijing tend to load them onto buses and drive them to the outskirts of the city where they are detained until agents from their local governments arrive to take them home.<sup>18</sup> According to most accounts, the central government's response has been to fob them off onto local authorities, who then fail to act on their complaints: "Governments in other provinces and cities have been on high alert to prevent any similar protests from being organized...To prevent any possible petitioning, household registration authorities have started calling [at people's homes] and updating the information they have about veterans, to make sure they know their whereabouts."<sup>19</sup>

Zeng Zhiping, a military law professor at Nanchang Institute of Technology in Jiangxi province, criticized the authorities for being more concerned with breaking up protests than finding a solution to the veterans' problems: "It's such a stupid and short-sighted move to highlight how much social unrest the authorities have successfully tackled... This kind of approach may be a credit on local officials' lists of political achievements, but it will stir up more conflict between veterans and local authorities and sow the seed for more trouble."<sup>20</sup> But the crackdowns have not deterred the protests, leading the government to explore other structural bureaucratic and policy responses.

## Bureaucratic Responses to Veterans' Protest

In March 2018, the State Council established a Ministry of Veterans Affairs, in part to respond to veteran protests.<sup>21</sup> According to Vice Premier Sun Chulan, "The ministry should provide better service and protect the legal rights and interests of veterans so that military service can be one of the most dignified careers." The new minister is Sun Shaocheng, who was director of the resettlement department under the Ministry of Civil Affairs ministry from 2001 to 2009.<sup>22</sup> The new ministry is aimed at setting up a centralized system to formulate policies and regulations to care for veterans, including handling their pensions and retirement benefits.<sup>23</sup> The ministry is also tasked with helping former soldiers find new jobs and providing them with training. Other duties include tending military memorials and graves.<sup>24</sup> The duties were previously handled by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the and political work and logistics support departments of the Central Military Commission.<sup>25</sup>

Reaction to the establishment of the ministry has been mixed among veterans. Professor Diamant, who has conducted academic research on the subject, told the *New York Times* that many veterans seem "highly skeptical that the establishment of a new ministry will matter much, and interpret it as a symbolic concession...A new ministry gives veterans an address, but no more power...They remain supplicants for state largess — and this is

exactly how the government wants it to remain.”<sup>26</sup> A now-deleted message on a veterans internet chat room complained that “if the ministry is just decoration, the same old medicine in a different broth, then no number of iron stallions of stability preservation will be able to stop the great army of rights defense.”<sup>27</sup>

After the Jiangsu protests, the *South China Morning Post* reported that the Ministry of Veterans Affairs convened a meeting to discuss efforts to “usher in a new phase” for veterans.<sup>28</sup> Deputy Minister Qian Feng gave assurances that despite teething problems, they were working to streamline and improve policies, according to the People's Liberation Army's official website. “The new ministry was inaugurated two months ago, so it is starting from scratch and being built from the ground up,” he was quoted as saying. “We're having to overcome personnel shortages and difficult office conditions, working overtime to ensure the smooth progress of all the work.”<sup>29</sup> Qian outlined measures the ministry was taking, including boosting on-the-ground research, pushing for better local implementation of existing policy measures, trying to get the online complaints system up and running, and drafting a law to protect veterans. The deputy minister also said there was still much work to be done for veterans, who have “devoted their youth to defending the country” and continue to “fight for socialist modernization.” The ministry meeting was followed by a two-day conference held from 30 June to 1 July in Hebei, chaired by Vice-Premier Sun Chunlan and attended by security chief Guo Shengkun and police chief Zhao Kezhi.<sup>30</sup> The three state leaders shared “best practices” on veteran affairs with provincial authorities and bureaucrats. Delegates from ten municipal and provincial governments also spoke at the conference, including from Beijing, Tianjin, Shandong, Hebei, Hunan and Guizhou, to share their experiences with the “important political task” of managing veterans.<sup>31</sup> Addressing the conference, Sun and other leaders pushed for a better service system, educational and training support, and poverty assistance for veterans.<sup>32</sup>

Concrete manifestations of these new priorities quickly appeared in law and government appropriations. In July 2018, the National People's Congress passed a new veterans law, consisting of 11 chapters and 83 articles. The law reportedly grew out of two high level meetings in Beijing after the Jiangsu protests. In order to socialize the new law with stakeholders within and without the military, the drafters and an expert in military law scheduled a review workshop in Beijing with ten representatives from both the People's Liberation Army and veterans' groups.<sup>33</sup> On 27 July, China's finance and veterans' ministry announced a 10 per cent increase in pensions for those soldiers who fought in either the Vietnam or Korean wars.<sup>34</sup>

While these new policies and expenditures have not had enough time to change the plight of veterans, some metrics of governance success are visible. On 31 July 2018, Veterans Affairs Minister Sun Shaocheng briefed that the ministry has received almost 20,000 complaints lodged via its petitioning system since March 2018.<sup>35</sup> He claimed that the new ministry would help 120,000 ex-servicemen and women find new jobs in 2018, and provide improved welfare packages for 10,000 retirees and disabled former soldiers.<sup>36</sup> Yet there is still a mailed fist within the velvet glove. At the same press conference, Vice Minister of Veterans Affairs Fang Yongxiang warned: “We also hope that everyone can

rationally and moderately report problems, to ensure an even better resolution and prevent radical words and resolutely stop and prevent them from being used and coerced by people with ulterior motives... We oppose the use of extreme methods to petition or the carrying out of mass petitions... I hope that every veteran respects the law.”<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion and Implications

The continuing incidence of veterans’ protests, despite significant coercive pressure and bureaucratic measures, must be a source of intense anxiety for Xi Jinping and the leadership. Not only does the existence of aggrieved veterans run counter to the CCP propaganda narrative and call into question its governance capacity, but the prospect of collective action by groups with combat training is discomfiting. Rather than simply responding to the protests with sticks, however, Beijing has been remarkably nimble with the provision of carrots, but only time will tell if the sweet words from the new ministry are matched in policy execution.

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- <sup>1</sup> 2017 *China Statistical Yearbook*, National Bureau of Statistics, Beijing, accessed at: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2017/indexh.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> See summary in *Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China*, accessed at: [http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/13/content\\_1383961.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/13/content_1383961.htm)
- <sup>3</sup> Thanks to Dennis Blasko for his expertise on PLA downsizing.
- <sup>4</sup> Minnie Chan and Liu Zhen, "China's PLA Reforms Slash Political Posts as Part of a 300,000 Cut in Non-Combat Personnel by 2017," *South China Morning Post*, 29 November 2015, accessed <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/1884839/chinas-pla-reforms-will-see-many-political-posts-go>.
- <sup>5</sup> James Mulvenon, "China's 'Goldwater-Nichols'?: The Long-Awaited PLA Reorganization Has Finally Arrived," *China Leadership Monitor* 49, Winter 2016, accessed at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-goldwater-nichols-long-awaited-pla-reorganization-has-finally-arrived>.
- <sup>6</sup> "Chinese PLA Veterans' Protests for Pensions Pose Test for President Xi Jinping's Modernization Plans," *Associated Press*, 17 October 2016, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2028726/chinese-pla-veterans-protests-pensions-pose-test>.
- <sup>7</sup> Minnie Chan, "Chinese Military Veterans' Rally For Better Welfare Ends As Armed Police Move In," *South China Morning Post*, 24 June 2018, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2152247/chinese-military-veterans-rally-better-welfare-ends>.
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- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Catherine Wong, "China's military veterans ministry opens after pension protests," *South China Morning Post*, 16 April 2018, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2141894/chinas-military-veterans-ministry-opens-after-pension>.
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- <sup>12</sup> Chris Buckley, "Marching Across China: Army Veterans Join Ranks of Protestors," *New York Times*, 25 June 2018.
- <sup>13</sup> "Chinese Military Veterans Converge on Zhenjiang as Protests Swell," *Radio Free Asia*, 22 June 2018, accessed at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/chinese-military-veterans-converge-on-zhenjiang-06222018111306.html>
- <sup>14</sup> "Chinese Military Veterans Converge on Zhenjiang as Protests Swell," *Radio Free Asia*, 22 June 2018, accessed at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/chinese-military-veterans-converge-on-zhenjiang-06222018111306.html>
- <sup>15</sup> Minnie Chan, "China's Military Veterans Warned Not to Spoil 91st Anniversary Party for PLA," *South China Morning Post*, 1 August 2018, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2157672/chinas-military-veterans-warned-not-spoil-91st>
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<sup>20</sup> Minnie Chan, “China's Military Veterans Warned Not to Spoil 91st Anniversary Party for PLA,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 August 2018, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2157672/chinas-military-veterans-warned-not-spoil-91st>

<sup>21</sup> “China Appeals to Military Veterans Not to Protest, Respect Law,” *Reuters*, 31 July 2018, accessed at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-defence-veterans/china-appeals-to-military-veterans-not-to-protest-respect-law-idUSKBN1KL0FU>

<sup>22</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun\\_Shaocheng](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_Shaocheng)

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Wong, “China’s Military Veterans Ministry Opens after Pension Protests,” *South China Morning Post*, 16 April 2018, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2141894/chinas-military-veterans-ministry-opens-after-pension>.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Wong, “China’s Military Veterans Ministry Opens after Pension Protests,” *South China Morning Post*, 16 April 2018, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2141894/chinas-military-veterans-ministry-opens-after-pension>.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Wong, “China’s Military Veterans Ministry Opens after Pension Protests,” *South China Morning Post*, 16 April 2018, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2141894/chinas-military-veterans-ministry-opens-after-pension>. See also Minnie Chan, “Chinese Military Veterans' Rally For Better Welfare Ends As Armed Police Move In,” *South China Morning Post*, 24 June 2018, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2152247/chinese-military-veterans-rally-better-welfare-ends>

<sup>26</sup> Chris Buckley, “Marching Across China: Army Veterans Join Ranks of Protestors,” *New York Times*, 25 June 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Chris Buckley, “Marching Across China: Army Veterans Join Ranks of Protestors,” *New York Times*, 25 June 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Zheng, “Chinese Leaders Gather For Back To Back Meetings After Military Veterans Protest,” *South China Morning Post*, 2 July 2018, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2153459/chinese-leaders-gather-back-back-meetings-after>

<sup>29</sup> Zhou Yanhong, “Qian Feng, Deputy Director of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, Stressed: Dare to Take an Active Role,” *China Military Online*, 29 June 2018, accessed at: [http://www.81.cn/jwgz/2018-06/29/content\\_8075589.htm](http://www.81.cn/jwgz/2018-06/29/content_8075589.htm)

<sup>30</sup> Sarah Zheng, “Chinese Leaders Gather For Back To Back Meetings After Military Veterans Protest,” *South China Morning Post*, 2 July 2018, accessed at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2153459/chinese-leaders-gather-back-back-meetings-after>

<sup>31</sup> “Conference Held to Better Protect Veterans' Rights, Interests,” *Xinhua*, 1 July 2018, accessed at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-07/01/c\\_137294072.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-07/01/c_137294072.htm)

<sup>32</sup> “Conference Held to Better Protect Veterans' Rights, Interests,” *Xinhua*, 1 July 2018, accessed at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-07/01/c\\_137294072.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-07/01/c_137294072.htm)

<sup>33</sup> Minnie Chan, “China Drafts New Law to Protect Veterans’ Welfare,” *South China Morning Post*, 21 July 2018, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2156223/china-drafts-new-law-protect-veterans-welfare-will-it>

<sup>34</sup> Minnie Chan, “China's Military Veterans Warned Not to Spoil 91st Anniversary Party for PLA,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 August 2018, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2157672/chinas-military-veterans-warned-not-spoil-91st>

<sup>35</sup> “China Appeals to Military Veterans Not to Protest, Respect Law,” *Reuters*, 31 July 2018, accessed at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-defence-veterans/china-appeals-to-military-veterans-not-to-protest-respect-law-idUSKBN1KL0FU>

<sup>36</sup> Minnie Chan, “China's Military Veterans Warned Not to Spoil 91st Anniversary Party for PLA,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 August 2018, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2157672/chinas-military-veterans-warned-not-spoil-91st>

<sup>37</sup> “China Appeals to Military Veterans Not to Protest, Respect Law,” *Reuters*, 31 July 2018, accessed at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-defence-veterans/china-appeals-to-military-veterans-not-to-protest-respect-law-idUSKBN1KL0FU>. See also Minnie Chan, “China's Military Veterans Warned Not To Spoil 91st Anniversary Party for PLA,” *South China Morning Post*, 1 August 2018, accessed at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2157672/chinas-military-veterans-warned-not-spoil-91st>.