

Party-Military Coordination of the Yushu Earthquake Response

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On 14 April 2010, a 6.9 magnitude earthquake struck Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in China's southern Qinghai Province. The quake killed over 2,000 people and destroyed most of the buildings in the area. As in other recent Chinese natural disasters, such as the May 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan Province, the Chinese People's Liberation Army was mobilized to lead rescue and recovery operations. This article examines the organization of the response effort, and assesses its implications for party-military relations.

Earthquake!

On 14 April 2010, a 6.9 magnitude earthquake struck Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in southern Qinghai Province. The epicenter was Rima Village in Shanglaxiu Township, about 30 km away from Jiegu Township, the government seat of the Yushu Prefecture, and about 800 km away from Xining, the provincial capital.¹ The strong quake and a string of aftershocks toppled houses, temples, gas stations, and electric poles; triggered landslides, damaged roads, cut power supplies, and disrupted telecommunications.² The China Earthquake Administration immediately designated the earthquake as a "class-one" disaster, mandating that relief funds allocated by the country's financial departments should be delivered to affected areas no later than 24 hours after the quake.³ Initial relief efforts confronted a highly hostile environment, hampered by high altitudes (4000m), strong winds and sleet.

Within hours of the quake, the People's Liberation Army began to play a key role in the rescue and relief operations. A *Liberation Army Daily* commentary issued six days after the quake summarized the scope of the PLA's remit:

Troops engaged in earthquake relief must do the following: 1) make continuous efforts; 2) do all they can to continue to search for and rescue people stranded beneath the rubble; 3) minimize the losses caused by the disaster; 4) rigidly follow policy related to ethnic and religious affairs and mass discipline; 5) respect the customs and habits of ethnic minorities; 6) establish an excellent image of our military by being strong and civilized troops; and 7) make new contributions to the strengthening of ethnic solidarity.⁴

Later editorials summarized the specific contributions of the four General Departments in Beijing and the armed services, as well as specialized units from military regions around the country and manpower from local units. At the national level, the General Staff Headquarters and the General Political Department of the PLA

immediately issued an urgent circular to all PLA and Armed Police Force units, urging them to “spare no effort” to support the rescue and relief mission, and the GSD Operations Department coordinated the mobilization of units and equipment.⁵ The General Logistics Department immediately appropriated special disaster relief funds for the military units stationed in the disaster-afflicted areas, assembled a large amount of disaster relief materials (tents, medicines, fuel, and food), and organized medical and transportation units.⁶ The General Armament Department provided special equipment and tools to the units responsible for the work of fighting against earthquake disasters and providing disaster relief.⁷

Various Army, Air Force (PLAAF), Second Artillery⁸, Navy (PLAN), and People’s Armed Police (PAP) units were sent to Yushu from military regions all over the country. The local People’s Armed Police unit in Yushu was first on the scene, acting as a first responder to the disaster.⁹ Additional PAP units arrived later, establishing public order, managing traffic, and carrying out additional rescue and relief.¹⁰ Two hours after the earthquake, the Lanzhou Military Region issued an order instructing designated military units to make preparations to move to the area.¹¹ Over the following weeks, combat and engineering units from all of China’s military regions joined the effort. The PLAN sent a remote sensing aircraft,¹² transmitting data back to the Chinese Academy of Sciences for processing.¹³ The PLAAF re-established air traffic control and communications at the damaged local airports, and provided ten Il-76 aircraft to transport personnel and material to the effort.¹⁴ In total, thousands of PLA and PAP personnel participated in the rescue and relief efforts.

Party-Military Organization of the Earthquake Response

First Responders

The first military units to respond to the earthquake were 400 personnel from the Yushu Military Sub-District, the Yushu Prefecture People’s Armed Forces Department, and the Yushu Prefecture People’s Armed Police *zhidui*, who excavated several hundreds of people trapped by the earthquake and relocated them to the remains of their facility, setting up a temporary medical station.¹⁵ Wu Yong, commander of the Yushu Area Military District Command, gave an initial assessment of the situation to Xinhua on 14 April:

We are now putting up tents and transporting oxygen to prepare for treating the injured. But roads leading to the airport have been damaged, hampering the rescue efforts. We have to mainly rely on our hands to clear away the debris as we have no large excavating machines. We have no medical equipment, either.¹⁶

One of Wu’s civilian counterparts, Huang Limin, deputy secretary-general of the Yushu Prefecture government, issued a similar report:

We have set up rescue headquarters in Jiegu. Soldiers have been dispatched to save the people buried in the collapsed houses.

Telecommunications were temporarily cut after the quake, but have been restored.¹⁷

Wake Up the President!

At the time of the earthquake in Yushu, CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao was on an overseas visit, to Latin America. He immediately decided to cut his trip short, postponing visits to Venezuela and Chile to return to Beijing.¹⁸ Chinese official media took great pains in the following days to portray Hu as strong and in charge, describing how he issued “important instructions” within the first hour.¹⁹ Premier Wen Jiabao was in China at the time of the quake, but decided to delay state visits to Brunei, Indonesia, and Myanmar scheduled for April 22 to 25.²⁰

Send Our Best Man (Or the Best We Have)

On the same day as the quake, the State Council dispatched Politburo member and State Council Vice Premier Hui Liangyu to the disaster area, accompanied by “responsible cadres of relevant State Council departments and the military and armed police forces” to “express condolences to the masses affected by the disaster and direct the earthquake relief and rescue work.”²¹ To facilitate the latter, Hui assumed command of the State Council’s General Headquarters for Earthquake Relief (国务院召开抗震救灾总指挥部), charged by Beijing with overall responsibility for “disaster relief, epidemic prevention, seismic monitoring and public security.”²² On 15 April, Hui presided over a joint session of the State Council General Headquarters and its Qinghai provincial counterpart in Gyegu, a town worst hit by the earthquake, “to study major issues in rescue relief work, formulate policies for the resettlement of victims, and further specify the timetables for various earthquake relief tasks.”²³ The State Council Headquarters then created eight subordinate working groups, including a disaster rescue group and a sanitation and epidemic prevention group. Other civilian and party entities set up parallel, subordinate headquarters for earthquake rescue and relief.

What are Grandpa Hu and Grandpa Wen Doing?

Senior CCP leaders remained fully engaged with the crisis, though the media coverage of their participation was likely shaped by domestic political concerns. From 15–16 April, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who was rumored to have angered Hu Jintao during the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake by cultivating too prominent a media profile, conducted a two-day visit to the quake zone, “visiting quake-devastated schools, orphanages, monasteries and temporary shelters for quake-affected people, and consoling and sympathizing with the victims on behalf of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council.”²⁴ After a nearly 25-hour flight, Hu Jintao presided over a 17 April meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee, receiving a report about the earthquake rescue and relief work and leading discussions of the plans for the next phase.²⁵ The next day, Hu traveled from Beijing to the disaster area with a large delegation, including Hui Liangyu; Guo Boxiong, Politburo member and vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission; Ling Jihua, secretary of the CCP Secretariat and director of the CCP General Office; Wang Huning, director of the CCP Research Office; as well as Chen Bingde, CMC

member and director of the General Staff Department.²⁶ Wen Jiabao returned to Yushu on 1 May, presiding over a meeting to study post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction.²⁷ Politburo Standing Committee member and State Vice-President Xi Jinping, whose failure to be elevated to the Central Military Commission was the subject of my contribution to *China Leadership Monitor* no. 30,²⁸ did not visit the area until 1 June, accompanied by Politburo member Li Yuanchao, who heads the CCP Organization Department. Official Chinese media described Xi's visit as an opportunity to "express regards to the people and cadres of various ethnic groups and personnel engaging in post-disaster reconstruction there and to inspect the work for the resettlement of the people and post-disaster reconstruction." While in Yushu, Xi reportedly demonstrated fealty to Hu Jintao by declaring "the necessity to use the scientific development concept as guidance in planning, promoting and inspecting reconstruction, put ensuring and improving the people's livelihood in a prioritized position, regard making proper arrangements for the production and livelihood of the quake-hit people in the transitional settlement period as the most important work at present, carefully and properly organize counterpart assistance work, and properly and quickly build a new Yushu according to central requirements."²⁹ Xi's late arrival on the scene was not befitting to his status as heir apparent to Hu Jintao, raising further questions about the automaticity of his elevation at the 18th Party Congress in 2012.

The Great Wall of Steel

In Beijing, the Central Military Commission took command of the PLA's response to the earthquake, with the Office of the PLA Leading Group for Handling Emergencies (军队处置突发事件领导小组办公室) coordinating the effort.³⁰ Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, Politburo member and the other vice-chairman of the CMC, who was on an investigation and study tour of some units stationed in other places, immediately mapped out plans for the participation of the armed forces in the earthquake fighting and disaster relief operations. They requested that the armed forces firmly implement and put into practice Chairman Hu's important instructions, make saving lives their top priority, and immediately mount a rescue and relief campaign.³¹ To oversee the coordination of the military response, the CMC established the Joint Headquarters of the Chinese PLA and the People's Armed Police (PAP) for Yushu Quake Rescue and Relief. The General Staff and Political Departments jointly issued a circular on 15 April asking all military and armed police troops to resolutely implement Chairman Hu Jintao's important instructions and "spare no effort and save every second" to support local earthquake relief and rescue efforts.³² The leaders of the Central Military Commission met on 17 April to review the status of PLA and PAP support.³³ Eventually, five key missions were identified for the military: (1) continuing the great efforts to search for and rescue survivors from the rubble of houses; (2) providing medical treatment for and transferring the wounded persons; (3) making proper arrangement for disaster-stricken people; (4) building more tent-classrooms for students to resume schooling as soon as possible and building temporary hospitals to restore normal medical treatment; and preparing for the construction of a living support base.³⁴

As Close as Lips and Teeth

From the outset, central and regional party, government, and military organizations established mechanisms to facilitate party-military cooperation on earthquake response. According to the GSD/GPD circular on 15 April:

We must improve communication and contact with local party committees and governments, establish sound military-civilian command and coordinating mechanisms, and foster an overall combined force for earthquake relief and rescue efforts.³⁵

Chinese media reports clearly suggest that the PLA was integrated with civilian and party response organizations at every level. According to a “responsible officer” of the Office of the PLA Leading Group for Handling Emergencies, the State Council General Headquarters assigned the Lanzhou Military Region, the People’s Armed Police and the GSD Operations Department to support the “disaster rescue group” and added the GLD to the sanitation and epidemic prevention group. The Office of the PLA Leading Group for the Handling of Emergencies reportedly coordinated its activities with the State Council Emergency Management Office, China Seismological Bureau, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Health, the Civil Aviation Administration of China, the Ministry of Transport, the State Administration of Work Safety and many others.³⁶ The Military-Civilian Joint Command Center for Yushu Post-Quake Reconstruction was established on 3 May, billeted at the barracks of the training camp of the Yushu Military Sub-District under the Qinghai Provincial Military District.³⁷ Zhao Jianzhong, commander-in-chief of the PLA Joint Headquarters, and Shen He, secretary-general of the General Office of the Qinghai Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China, led the ceremony. Zhao Jianzhong said that the ceremony indicated the “formal start of the post-quake reconstruction in Yushu Prefecture,” which he estimated would last for two to three years.³⁸

Conclusions and Implications

Beijing’s response to the Yushu earthquake offers important insights about the party-military relations, primarily in three respects. First, as discussed in *China Leadership Monitor* no. 27,³⁹ natural disaster relief operations fall under the rubric of Hu Jintao’s “new historic missions” and “diversified military tasks.” The PLA’s embrace of this mission and the absence of any public complaining about “distractions” from purely “military” missions, suggests institutional acceptance of (or at least acquiescence to) Hu’s concept. Second, the organization of the Yushu earthquake rescue and relief effort, especially the establishment of ad hoc headquarters organs combining party, government, and military elements, displays the interlocking nature of the military’s relationship with national, regional, and local civilian authorities. Third, the PLA has largely rehabilitated its reputation since the Tiananmen massacre through effective responses to natural disasters like the floods in the late 1990s, the 2008 snow and ice storm, and the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan Province. The latter is an especially important benchmark to judge the Yushu response, because there was widespread public criticism

of the PLA's poor command structure, inadequate equipment, and slow response to the Sichuan crisis. According to an article in the *South China Morning Post*,

A lack of large cargo planes and helicopters and bad weather delayed the arrival of the first batch of 1,300 PLA soldiers in Wenchuan County, close to the epicenter of the earthquake, until 24 hours after the quake. Premier Wen Jiabao, who went to the disaster zone a few hours after that quake, once made a tearful call to the army to send helicopters to save people, but there was no response because the army takes its orders only from the Central Military Commission, and Wen has no military rank. The PLA eventually directed helicopters to the disaster area, but only after President Hu Jintao, the CMC chairman, issued the order on May 14, two days afterwards.⁴⁰

Sensitivity to this criticism explains why the military and party media repeatedly emphasized the rapidity of the Yushu response, as well as the mobilization of specialized equipment and personnel.

How is the PLA attempting to improve its national disaster response capabilities? During the Yushu relief effort, *Liberation Army Daily* announced that the PLA “will build eight state-level specialized emergency rescue units with 50,000 servicemen in total and the eight units will form emergency rescue capabilities by the end of 2010.”⁴¹ These new units will focus on seven areas: (1) mechanisms for military-civilian disaster information sharing (the military reportedly received the Yushu earthquake notification from the China Seismological Bureau 12 minutes after the earthquake happened); (2) the improvement of emergency response command institutions (the Emergency Response Office of the General Staff Department has absorbed more staff members and defined more clearly the responsibilities of its subordinate sections); (3) strengthened mechanisms for military-civilian coordination (the Ministry of National Defense has established a joint conference system with 20-plus departments under the State Council); (4) proposals to establish an emergency response special force (the “Plan on PLA’s Capacity Building in Military Operations Other than War” issued on 5 January 2009 specified the guidelines, principles, objectives, size of strength, and measures for the building of the forces to perform military operations other than war [MOOTW]); (5) laws and regulations on emergency response (the proposed “Regulations of the PLA on Emergency Command in Handling Contingencies” will outline the principles, content, procedures, and requirements of various MOOTW including disaster relief); (6) innovation in disaster-relief equipment; and (7) strengthened political work in MOOTW.⁴²

Notes

¹ “At Least Five Dead, Many Buried Under Debris After 7.1-Magnitude Quake Hits,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010.

² “China Focus: At Least 67 Dead After 7.1-Magnitude Quake Hits China’s Qinghai,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010.

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- ³ “China initiates first class emergency response for quake relief in Qinghai,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010.
- ⁴ Staff commentator, “Promoting Ethnic Solidarity With Concrete Action,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 20 April 2010, p. 1.
- ⁵ “General staff and political departments jointly issue circular asking all military and armed police troops to resolutely implement Chairman Hu’s important instructions and go all out to support local earthquake relief and rescue efforts,” Xinhua, 15 April 2010.
- ⁶ Li Xinguang and Li Yanzhong, “PLA logistic troops devoted to quake relief operations,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 19 April 2010; Dong Qiang, “PLA and APF send 6,300-plus troops to do quake relief in Qinghai,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 15 April 2010; “Quake relief in action: China’s armed forces continue efforts in quake zone,” Xinhua, 16 April 2010; “Rescue teams, relief materials sent to quake-hit Northwest China,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010; Wang Jingguo, Wang Yushan, and Fan Yongqiang, “18 military medical teams work in quake-hit areas,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 20 April 2010; “All PLA and Armed Police Force units resolutely carry out the instructions of the CPC Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Hu to play their role as a shock force,” Xinhua, 18 April 2010; “1,209 military medical workers sent to quake-hit Yushu,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 21 April 2010; “Altitude sickness poses biggest challenge for military rescuers,” Xinhua, 20 April 2010; and Li Wenlong, “First field shelter hospital realizes remote consultation,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 16 April 2010.
- ⁷ “All PLA and Armed Police Force units resolutely carry out the instructions of the CPC Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Hu to play their role as a shock force,” Xinhua, 18 April 2010.
- ⁸ Dong Qiang, “PLA and APF send 6,300-plus troops to do quake relief in Qinghai,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 15 April 2010.
- ⁹ “All PLA and Armed Police Force units resolutely carry out the instructions of the CPC Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Hu to play their role as a shock force,” Xinhua, 18 April 2010.
- ¹⁰ “Rescue teams, relief materials sent to quake-hit Northwest China,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010.
- ¹¹ “Chinese Armed Forces provide quick response, quake relief to Yushu,” Xinhua, 20 April 2010.
- ¹² “China initiates first class emergency response for quake relief in Qinghai,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010.
- ¹³ Zhong Kuirun, “PLA Navy’s remote sensing aircraft sends back survey data from quake-hit Yushu,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 15 April 2010.
- ¹⁴ “China’s Armed Forces assemble swiftly to rescue quake survivors in Qinghai,” Xinhua, 16 April 2010; Li Tianxia, “First set of emergency lighting systems guarantees night flight at airport,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 16 April 2010; “‘China Focus’: ‘About 400 Dead, 10,000 injured in 7.1-magnitude quake,’” Xinhua, 14 April 2010; “China’s Aviation Authority sends relief supplies to quake-hit airport,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010; “Rescue teams, relief materials sent to quake-hit Northwest China,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010; and “All PLA and Armed Police Force units resolutely carry out the instructions of the CPC Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Hu to play their role as a shock force,” Xinhua, 18 April 2010.
- ¹⁵ “All PLA and Armed Police Force units resolutely carry out the instructions of the CPC Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Hu to play their role as a shock force,” Xinhua, 18 April 2010.
- ¹⁶ “At least five dead, many buried under debris after 7.1-magnitude quake hits,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ “Chinese president pays silent tribute to quake victims,” Xinhua, 21 April 2010.
- ¹⁹ Sun Chengbin and Zou Shengwen, “Critical moment in the earthquake rescue and relief operation: Report on General Secretary Hu Jintao’s direction of earthquake rescue and relief efforts in the Yushu Earthquake Zone in Qinghai,” Xinhua, 18 April 2010.
- ²⁰ “Chinese president pays silent tribute to quake victims,” Xinhua, 21 April 2010.
- ²¹ “State Council establishes earthquake relief headquarters; Vice Premier Hui Liangyu rushes to disaster area with responsible cadres of relevant departments to direct earthquake relief and rescue work,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010; and “China’s Hu, Wen urge all-out efforts to save people in quake-hit zone,” Xinhua, 14 April 2010.
- ²² “‘China Focus’: ‘About 400 Dead, 10,000 injured in 7.1-magnitude quake,’” Xinhua, 14 April 2010.
- ²³ Yang Weihai, “Hui Liangyu Presides Over joint session of State Council’s General Headquarters for earthquake relief and Qinghai Provincial Earthquake Relief Headquarters in Gyegu to study major issues in

quake relief, formulate policies for the resettlement of victims, and further specify timetables for various quake relief tasks,” Xinhua, 15 April 2010.

²⁴ “China’s all-out relief efforts in quake-hit Qinghai Province,” Xinhua, 16 April 2010; and “Chinese president pays silent tribute to quake victims,” Xinhua, 21 April 2010.

²⁵ “For the people, deploying troops to Yushu: Factual report on how CPC Central Committee and Central Military Commission command the officers and men of the three services in earthquake fighting and disaster relief operations,” Xinhua, 23 April 2010; Sun Chengbin and Zou Shengwen, “Critical moment in the earthquake rescue and relief operation: Report on General Secretary Hu Jintao’s direction of earthquake rescue and relief efforts in the Yushu Earthquake Zone in Qinghai,” Xinhua, 18 April 2010; and “Standing Committee of Political Bureau of CPC Central Committee convenes meeting to comprehensively map out plan on earthquake rescue and relief operations in Yushu of Qinghai, CPC General Secretary Hu Jintao chairs meeting,” Xinhua, 17 April 2010.

²⁶ “For the people, deploying troops to Yushu: Factual report on how CPC Central Committee and Central Military Commission command the officers and men of the three services in earthquake fighting and disaster relief operations,” Xinhua, 23 April 2010; Sun Chengbin and Zou Shengwen, “Critical moment in the earthquake rescue and relief operation: Report on General Secretary Hu Jintao’s direction of earthquake rescue and relief efforts in the Yushu Earthquake Zone in Qinghai,” Xinhua, 18 April 2010; and “PLA Chief of General Staff inspects quake relief troops in Yushu, Qinghai,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 19 April 2010.

²⁷ Zhao Cheng and Zhang Zongtang, “At a post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction meeting in Yushu, Wen Jiabao stresses scientific overall planning for doing a good job in earthquake relief and post-disaster reconstruction according to the law,” Xinhua, 2 May 2010.

²⁸ <http://www.hoover.org/publications/clm/issues/70522442.html>.

²⁹ Li Yajie, “Xi Jinping inspects quake-hit areas in Yushu, Qinghai, emphasizes giving full play to the role of Party organizations and Party members in post-disaster reconstruction,” Xinhua, 1 June 2010.

³⁰ “For the people, deploying troops to Yushu: Factual report on how CPC Central Committee and Central Military Commission command the officers and men of the three services in earthquake fighting and disaster relief operations,” Xinhua, 23 April 2010.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “General Staff and political departments jointly issue circular asking all military and Armed Police troops to resolutely implement Chairman Hu’s important instructions and go all out to support local earthquake relief and rescue efforts,” Xinhua, 15 April 2010; and “China’s armed forces assemble swiftly to rescue quake survivors in Qinghai,” Xinhua, 16 April 2010.

³³ “All PLA and Armed Police Force units resolutely carry out the instructions of the CPC Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Hu to play their role as a shock force,” Xinhua, 18 April 2010.

³⁴ Ding Haiming, “Quake relief troops to fulfill five key missions,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 20 April 2010.

³⁵ “General Staff and political departments jointly issue circular asking all military and Armed Police troops to resolutely implement Chairman Hu’s important instructions and go all out to support local earthquake relief and rescue efforts,” Xinhua, 15 April 2010.

³⁶ “For the people, deploying troops to Yushu: Factual report on how CPC Central Committee and Central Military Commission command the officers and men of the three services in earthquake fighting and disaster relief operations,” Xinhua, 23 April 2010.

³⁷ Sun Li and Sun Xingwei, “Military-civilian joint command center for Yushu post-quake reconstruction starts up construction,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 4 May 2010.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ <http://www.hoover.org/publications/clm/issues/37362544.html>.

⁴⁰ Minnie Chan, “Forearmed by Sichuan, military response swift,” *South China Morning Post*, 16 April 2010.

⁴¹ “State-level specialized emergency rescue troops to be established by late 2010,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 21 April 2010.

⁴² Ibid.