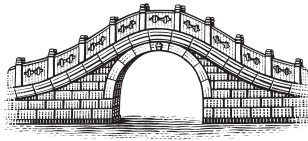


RESEARCH NOTE

# Media Relations in China's Military: The Case of the Ministry of National Defense Information Office

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**KEYWORDS:** CHINA; MEDIA; MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE; PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY; TRANSPARENCY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This article overviews the available information on China's Ministry of National Defense Information Office (MNDIO), a media relations organ established in 2008 to serve the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and explores possible motivations behind the office's creation.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

The development of a spokesperson and press office for the PLA appears to reflect a realization by the Chinese defense establishment that in today's highly mediated environment, conspicuous silence on matters of public interest is no longer a viable public relations strategy. In this context, the MNDIO can be understood in two ways: (1) as a mechanism through which the PLA can more clearly and effectively interface with the outside world and (2) as means for the PLA to generate a favorable public consensus on issues of strategic or political concern. Countering negative perceptions and promoting the image of a capable, responsible, and transparent military has become an important task for the PLA. The MNDIO advances this cause by serving as a vehicle to project centrally approved messages about the PLA and its actions, thereby allowing the PLA to more effectively tell its own story.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The creation of the MNDIO is a small step in China's progress in engaging the international community and improving military transparency. Insofar as the office represents conformity to international norms by improving access to reliable, timely, and authoritative information regarding PLA activities and policy positions, the U.S. should welcome the MNDIO.
- The MNDIO's apparent role in managing public opinion in the service of political and strategic ends is more problematic. Institutional mechanisms in China already limit the ways in which public debate on Beijing's strategic choices can deviate from centrally formulated orthodoxy. Furthering the reach and power of such mechanisms warrants concern because the resulting deficit of informed, rational public debate increases the possibility of miscalculation or escalation in the event of crisis or confrontation involving the U.S.
- Although the MNDIO currently appears to be a relatively inchoate project, the U.S. should be prepared for increasingly sophisticated PLA efforts to engage the domestic and international media in the future.

During past crises involving the People's Liberation Army (PLA), such as the 2001 EP-3 collision or the 2003 SARS epidemic, both Chinese and international journalists have struggled to obtain timely information on developing events. On January 8, 2008, members of the Chinese media were surprised, therefore, by a press release issued for the first time in the name of the "Chinese Ministry of National Defense Information Office" (MNDIO; *Zhongguo guofangbu xinwen shiwuju*).<sup>1</sup> Several months later, in the wake of the Wenchuan earthquake, a spokesperson for this office unexpectedly came forward to provide the domestic and international media with news of PLA rescue operations underway. Over the course of the next several months, uniformed officers representing the MNDIO began regularly releasing statements, conducting interviews, and holding press conferences in a manner unprecedented in PLA history.

Based on an extensive review and analysis of publicly available information, the present article will describe the MNDIO's actions to date and explore the possible motivations behind the creation of the office. An investigation into this issue sheds light on the broader interplay of two pressing agendas in the PLA: the need to better inform the public and the need to better persuade the public.

First, the development of an MND spokesperson and press office appears to reflect a realization by the PLA that in today's highly mediated environment, conspicuous silence on matters of public interest is no longer a viable public relations strategy. In the past a deeply entrenched tradition of secrecy and institutional insularity hampered the PLA's efforts to communicate productively with anyone outside the Chinese military. This shortcoming has generated cynicism at home and suspicion abroad that has tarnished the PLA's reputation and undermined Beijing's broader strategic ambitions. In this context the MNDIO can be understood as an effort on behalf of the Chinese defense establishment to better interface with the outside world.

Second, the MNDIO appears to serve as an instrument for the PLA to generate a favorable public consensus on issues of strategic or political concern. The PLA depends on domestic popular support to a degree that is unusual for a military and increasingly must consider its image abroad. Countering negative perceptions and promoting the image of a capable, responsible, and transparent military has become an important task for the PLA. The MNDIO advances this cause by serving as a vehicle to project centrally approved

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<sup>1</sup> The MNDIO is also occasionally referred to in China's English language media as the press office of the Ministry of National Defense.

messages about the PLA and its actions, thereby allowing the PLA to more effectively tell its own story. This role takes on added significance given increased PLA attention in recent years to the strategic utility of favorable public opinion. In this way, the creation of the MNDIO is indicative of Beijing's acceptance of certain responsibilities—as well as propaganda opportunities—that come with increased engagement with the world.

This study is divided into four main sections:

- ≈ pp. 100–106 overview the available details regarding the activities, staff, and institutional organization of the MNDIO
- ≈ pp. 107–110 explore certain general trends in People's Republic of China (PRC) statecraft that may have inspired the MNDIO's creation
- ≈ pp. 111–116 focus on possible determining factors for the creation of the office that are specific to the PLA
- ≈ pp. 117–120 assess the MNDIO's activities and their implications for U.S. policy

#### DESCRIPTION OF MNDIO ACTIVITIES, STAFF, AND INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION

##### *MNDIO Activities to Date*

By the admission of Senior Colonel Hu Changming, office director and chief spokesperson, the MNDIO is currently in the early stages of its development.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the more established press briefing system at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the MNDIO does not currently appear to hold briefings on a regular basis. The office has instead engaged the media in the wake of certain high profile events related to the PLA, typically by way of press releases, interviews, or formal press briefings. Though there is currently no MNDIO website, Hu has indicated that preparations for one are currently underway.<sup>3</sup> It should also be noted that the great majority of news relevant to the PLA occurs without comment from the MNDIO, including day-to-day military news and some higher profile events such as multilateral military exercises. The specific conditions under which the MNDIO is charged to act are currently unclear.

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<sup>2</sup> “Hu Changming: Guofangbu fayanren shouxian shi yi ming junren” [Hu Changming: MND Spokesperson is Foremost a Soldier], *Renmin Wang*, January 20, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> “Hu Changming: chongfen liyong wangluo” [Hu Changming: Take Full Advantage of the Internet], *Renmin Wang*, January 20, 2008.

At the time of writing, events prompting MNDIO activity have included: the Wenchuan earthquake in May 2008, the Beijing Olympics and 80th anniversary of the PLA in August 2008, the U.S. weapons sale to Taiwan in October 2008, the deployment of PRC warships to the Gulf of Aden in December 2008, the release of China's 2008 national defense white paper in January 2009, the altercation involving Chinese ships and the USS *Impeccable* in March 2009, and the issuance, also in March 2009, of the U.S. Department of Defense annual report to Congress on the military power of the PRC. MNDIO responses to these events have been typically directed at both domestic and international audiences, though on certain occasions the office has engaged Chinese audiences alone. The following is an empirical overview of the available information concerning MNDIO activities to date.

*Creation of the MNDIO* ≈ PRC retrospective accounts assert that the decision to create the MNDIO came from the Central Military Commission (CMC) in “the second half of 2007.”<sup>4</sup> The first public evidence of the development occurred in December of that year, when Cai Wu, then minister of the State Council Information Office (SCIO), declared that relevant preparations were underway.<sup>5</sup> Brief follow-up reports surfaced over the next month confirming preparations but did not provide details.<sup>6</sup> Several months passed without word from the MNDIO, even as two major events—the winter blizzard in southern China and the March unrest in Tibet—required the emergency deployment of military personnel and equipment. During this time, however, the online news portal run by *Jiefangjun Bao* created a special link publicizing the creation of the MNDIO.<sup>7</sup>

*Wenchuan earthquake* ≈ The MNDIO's first high profile activities took place in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake of May 12, 2008. Three days after the earthquake, an unidentified MNDIO spokesperson issued a statement detailing PLA and People's Armed Police (PAP) rescue operations underway. According to a general with the Academy of Military Science, this debut came earlier than had been planned: “We recognize that the devastating earthquake requires that we accelerate the pace of communication processes.... This sudden disaster has raised the priority level...we will do our best even

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<sup>4</sup> “Hu Changming: shenghuo zhong renqingwei hen nong de guofang bu xinwen fayan ren” [Hu Changming: Living and Warmly Human Ministry of National Defense Spokesperson], Xinhua, May 18, 2008 ≈ [http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2008-05/19/content\\_8204981.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/mil/2008-05/19/content_8204981.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Junmei Fan, “Earthquake Pushes Early Debut of MND Spokesperson” ≈ [http://www.china.org.cn/government/central\\_government/2008-05/29/content\\_15542040.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/central_government/2008-05/29/content_15542040.htm).

<sup>6</sup> “China's Defense Ministry Info Office Under Preparation,” Xinhua, January 18, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> This website can be found at *Zhongguo Junwang* ≈ <http://www.chinamil.com.cn/site1/2007ztpdd/2007gfbjlxwfyrd/index.htm>.

if we are not yet completely prepared.”<sup>8</sup> Three days later, Hu appeared for the first time in his capacity as MNDIO director and spokesperson to convene an unprecedented press conference in which several officers made statements and answered questions from the media.<sup>9</sup> Topics covered during the press conference included the PLA’s response time during the crisis, the organization of rescue operations, and the equipment used to facilitate rescue work.<sup>10</sup>

*Olympics security* ≈ Hu hosted a second MNDIO press conference for select foreign and domestic journalists on August 1 at the Sixth Armed Division of the Beijing Area Command.<sup>11</sup> Hu and the participating officers addressed the issues of threats during the Games, forces and equipment deployed for the Games, ongoing PLA participation in UN peacekeeping operations worldwide, and PLA earthquake rescue efforts to date. In addition to a question and answer session, journalists were treated to a tour of the barracks facility, which was largely devoid of personnel.<sup>12</sup>

*Taiwan arms sale* ≈ The MNDIO issued two statements over five days condemning the U.S. arms sale to Taiwan that had been announced on October 3.<sup>13</sup> Issued on October 4 and 9, both statements were widely carried in the PRC press. The second statement was issued by Senior Colonel Huang Xueping in an interview with PRC media, his first public action as MNDIO deputy director and secondary spokesperson.

*Gulf of Aden deployment* ≈ On December 17 Huang told the *Financial Times* that China would likely deploy warships to the Gulf of Aden in order

<sup>8</sup> Fan, “Earthquake Pushes Early Debut of MND Spokesperson.”

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the press conference was held in the briefing room of the SCIO, presumably because preparations for a similar facility at the MND were incomplete at the time. In addition to Hu, the following officers attended the briefing: Major General (PLA Air Force) Ma Jian, deputy chief of the Operations Department of the General Staff Headquarters; Senior Colonel Guo Zengkui, deputy chief of the Mass Work Office, the General Political Department; Senior Colonel Xie Weikuan, director-general of the Operational Logistic Planning Bureau, Headquarter of the General Logistics Department; Senior Colonel Ma Gaihe, director general of the Operational Logistic Support Bureau, the General Planning Department of the General Armaments Department; and Senior Colonel Zhang Jinliang, director-general of the Operations Bureau, Headquarters of the People’s Armed Police Force.

<sup>10</sup> “China Deploys 113,080 Armed Forces for Earthquake Rescue,” Xinhua, May 18, 2008 ≈ [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/18/content\\_8200061.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-05/18/content_8200061.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Also in attendance were Senior Colonel Chen Xuewu, commander of the Sixth Armed Division of the Beijing Area Command; and Colonel Tian Yixiang, director of the Military Affairs Department under the Security Command Center for the Beijing Olympics.

<sup>12</sup> For a non-PRC media assessment of this tour, see Mark Magnier, “And on Your Left, the Chinese Army Being Completely Open about the Olympics,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 2, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> “China Denounces Proposed Arms Sale to Taiwan,” Xinhua, October 4, 2008 ≈ [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-10/04/content\\_10148477.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-10/04/content_10148477.htm); “China’s Defense Ministry Express Strong Indignation over U.S. Proposed Arms Sale to Taiwan,” Xinhua, October 4, 2008 ≈ [http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-10/10/content\\_1116690.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-10/10/content_1116690.htm); and “Chinese Defense Ministry Condemns U.S. for Taiwan Arms Sale,” Xinhua, October 10, 2008 ≈ <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90785/6512521.html>.

to combat piracy there. Three days later Hu Changming officially announced that three PLA Navy warships would embark for the Gulf of Aden the following week. Huang then convened the MNDIO's third press conference on December 23—his first press conference and the first to be held in the office's new briefing facility—to address the issue of the imminent deployment.<sup>14</sup>

Comments from officers present at the briefing yielded particulars on relevant ship types, mission goals, training and equipment, cooperation and communication with other navies, length of mission, rules of engagement, and possible plans on behalf of the PLA to build an aircraft carrier.<sup>15</sup> Huang discussed the deployment once again during an exclusive interview with English-language state newspaper *China Daily* on January 16, 2009, during which he also addressed China's rising military budget.<sup>16</sup> The MNDIO has since provided press releases to update the media on ongoing developments in the Gulf of Aden deployment.<sup>17</sup>

*Release of the 2008 national defense white paper* ∞ On January 20, the same day as U.S. President Barack Obama's inauguration, Hu Changming held a press conference to announce China's biannual white paper on national defense.<sup>18</sup> Hu and the officers articulated a synopsis of the white paper and addressed questions from the domestic and international media concerning relations with Taiwan, military ties with the United States, the upcoming National Day military parade, the Gulf of Aden deployment, and military political work and logistics building.<sup>19</sup>

*USS Impeccable incident* ∞ On March 11, three days after an altercation between the USS *Impeccable* and several Chinese ships in the South China Sea, the MNDIO faxed a statement to reporters condemning U.S. actions and

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<sup>14</sup> Also present at the news conference were Rear Admiral Xiao Xinnian, deputy chief of staff of PLA Navy; and Senior Captain Ma Luping, director of the Navy Bureau of the Operations Department of the General Staff Headquarters.

<sup>15</sup> For a transcript of the event, see Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China ∞ [http://www.gov.cn/xwfb/2008-12/23/content\\_1185458.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xwfb/2008-12/23/content_1185458.htm).

<sup>16</sup> Jiao Wu and Kuang Peng, "No Threat from Military Development," *China Daily*, January 16 ∞ [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-01/16/content\\_7403124.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-01/16/content_7403124.htm).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, "Chinese Naval Frigate Comes to Escort Released Filipino Tanker in Somali Waters," Xinhua, April 26, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Also participating were Colonel Cai Huailie, deputy director-general of the Strategic Planning Bureau of the Operations Department, General Staff Headquarters; Senior Colonel Shi Chujiing, vice chief of the Mass Work Department, General Political Department; Senior Colonel Xue Yongkang, deputy director-general of the Planning Bureau, Headquarters, General Logistics Department; and Senior Colonel Fan Jianjun, deputy director-general of the General Planning Bureau, Planning Department, General Armament Department.

<sup>19</sup> For a transcript of the event, see Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China ∞ <http://www.gov.cn/wszb/zhibo300/>.

demanding that the U.S. Navy halt patrols in the area.<sup>20</sup> The MNDIO was not the first PRC organ to comment on the matter; the MFA spokesperson criticized the U.S. actions during a regular briefing the day before the MNDIO statement.<sup>21</sup>

*The U.S. Department of Defense report* ≈ Hu Changming made statements to the PRC press on March 26 criticizing the U.S. report on the Chinese military and demanded that the Defense Department stop publishing the report or else risk damaging military relations between the two countries.<sup>22</sup> The MFA made similar remarks on the same day.<sup>23</sup>

*Actions aimed at a domestic audience* ≈ The MNDIO staff has also directed certain actions exclusively to a Chinese audience. Hu Changming has given personal interviews to Chinese magazines and news outlets, and in January 2009 he and two other officers fielded questions from Chinese netizens on *Strong Nation Forum*, a discussion forum hosted by *Renmin Ribao's* online portal *Renmin Wang*.<sup>24</sup> During the session Hu and the officers addressed a variety of military and defense related issues in some detail, including certain criticisms raised by the audience. Hu suggested that such sessions could occur regularly in the future.<sup>25</sup>

### *Institutional Orientation and Staff*

In name at least, the MNDIO is attached to the Ministry of National Defense (MND). Since its inception in the early 1980s, the MND has served as a government mechanism through which the PLA interfaces with foreign defense officialdom. As such, the MND is largely considered a symbolic front that lacks independent authority and a full dedicated staff. The MND's distinctively outward orientation is perhaps misleading when considering the MNDIO, however, in the sense that the latter's pronouncements, briefings, and related messaging are typically intended to reach domestic as well as international audiences.

<sup>20</sup> "China Demands U.S. Navy End Surveillance Missions," Associated Press, March 11, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> "FM: U.S. Naval Ship Violates Int'l, Chinese Law," Xinhua, March 10, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> "Strong Dissatisfaction Voiced over U.S. Military Report," Xinhua, March 26, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> "China Expresses 'Resolute Opposition' to U.S. Military Report," Xinhua, March 26, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> For an example of such an interview by Hu, see Tian Feng, "Yirenweiben, jiu fang jianbei, kexue fazhan—ben kan du jia zhuangfang guofangbu fayanren Hu Changming" [Put People First, Both Save and Defend, Develop Scientifically: An Exclusive Interview with Ministry of National Defense Spokesperson Hu Changming], *Zhongguo Geti Fanghu Zhuangbei*, no. 3, (2008): 5–7. The other officers in the January interviews were Senior Colonel Chen Zhou and Senior Colonel Wen Bing, both researchers at the Institute of War Theory and Strategy, Academy of Military Science.



<sup>25</sup> For a transcript of the session, see *Renmin Wang* ≈ <http://military.people.com.cn/GB/52578/52579/144256/index.html>.

Details concerning the staff and structure of the MNDIO are difficult to find. Evidence suggests the office boasts a modest staff of approximately twenty individuals, largely culled from the MND Foreign Affairs Office (FAO). The MNDFAO is the public face of the organ in the PLA General Staff Department (GSD) that coordinates China's defense attachés, security-related exchanges, and exercises with foreign militaries. The most important credential for MNDIO's senior staff appears to be experience dealing with foreigners. The Chinese media have only mentioned by name Hu Changming, the office director and spokesperson, and his deputy, Huang Xueping, who also serves as a spokesperson. Both appear to have had extensive experience in the foreign affairs work of the PLA, and their selection as spokespersons is likely based on the calculation that their experience among foreigners will allow them to more skillfully handle an international press corps and audience.

According to a biography released in the Chinese press, Hu has visited more than 50 nations on five continents and thus has ample experience dealing with foreign officials and military personnel. He has served in a media relations capacity in each of China's bilateral and multilateral military exercises between 2002 and 2007, including Peace Mission 2007—among China's highest-profile military exercises ever. Hu has also participated in the planning and coordination of each of China's white papers on national defense, published biannually since 1998. In mid-2007 he was given a small staff principally culled from the ranks of the MNDFAO and was tasked with spearheading preparations for the MNDIO.

Less information is available about Huang Xueping. Scattered data indicates that Huang spent much of his career at the MNDFAO. Since the late 1990s, Huang has worked in the FAO's General Planning Bureau, then in the America and Oceanian Affairs Bureau.<sup>26</sup> There is also evidence that during this time he served as a defense attaché in the West, indicating a possible link to the GSD's intelligence branch.<sup>27</sup>

There is some indication that the MNDIO maintains institutional linkages to the Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, "All ARF Confidence Building Measures - Detailed," ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), December 20, 2004  <http://www.aseansec.org/ARF/cbmdb.pdf>; and "Remarks with Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff Ma Xiaotian," Beijing, China, May 11, 2008  [http://hongkong.usconsulate.gov/uscn\\_state\\_2008051101.html](http://hongkong.usconsulate.gov/uscn_state_2008051101.html).

<sup>27</sup> On Huang as a defense attaché, author's conversation with a former U.S. defense attaché and acquaintance of Huang's, Washington, D.C., November 3, 2008. Though it is billed as part of the MNDFAO's portfolio, most funding and personnel for China's military attaché program comes from the GSD Second Department, the PLA's intelligence bureaucracy. See David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 125–26.

(CCPPD).<sup>28</sup> The SCIO, under whose auspices the MNDIO was created, is itself an organ of and subservient to the CCPPD.<sup>29</sup> The MNDIO staff has representation from the PLA General Political Department (GPD), whose propaganda function within the PLA is also beholden to the CCPPD. Given such connections, the CCP propaganda operation likely plays a role in supervising and coordinating the MNDIO's messaging.

Indicating a long-term investment on behalf of PLA authorities, MNDIO staff have drawn up an undisclosed plan to develop information dissemination and press briefing work for the PLA over the next five years. In addition, an MNDIO delegation was funded and authorized to visit the United States in September 2008 in order to study public affairs operations in the U.S. military and government. Led by Hu Changming, the delegation attended briefings from public affairs officials at the Pentagon, the State Department, the Defense Information School, and the headquarters of Pacific Command. According to their U.S. handlers, members of the delegation were most curious about how information was authorized for release and the institutional structures that allowed for coordinated messaging across military and civilian bureaucracies. They also indicated an interest in how the U.S. military was incorporating new and emerging media into public affairs work. The MNDIO's interest in these logistical matters is not surprising as the PLA aims to improve a track record of stonewalling and delayed or dissonant messaging.

One member of the delegation was a professor from the PLA's premier officer training academy, the National Defense University. This fact, together with the delegation's visit to the Defense Information School, reflects an interest on behalf of the PLA in better training the military's officer corps in public affairs-related expertise. Also indicative of this shift was the March 2009 graduation of 51 PLA officers from an inaugural two-week public relations training course held at the PLA's Nanjing Institute of Politics.<sup>30</sup> Currently, the ubiquitous public affairs officers in the U.S. military have no functional equivalent in the PLA, and in contrast to their U.S. counterparts, most PLA officers receive little, if any, training in public affairs.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This body is also referred to in PRC English-language press as the Publicity Department, due to the negative connotation in English of the term "propaganda." No such negative connotation exists for the word in Chinese.

<sup>29</sup> Chen Wu, minister of the SCIO, serves concurrently as a deputy director of the CCPPD. See Alice L. Miller, "The Central Committee Departments Under Hu Jintao," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 27 (Winter 2009): 5.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Bodeen, "China Military Trains First Public Relations Team," Associated Press, March 21, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Author's conversation with U.S. Defense Department staff charged with handling the MNDIO delegation's visit, Arlington, Virginia, October 30, 2008.

## GENERAL MOTIVATING FACTORS BEHIND THE CREATION OF THE MNDIO

### *The Drive for Information Disclosure*

The establishment of the MNDIO is among the more recent manifestations of a trend in the PRC to make government information more accessible to the public. Evidence suggests that at least as early as the mid-1990s government leaders became aware of the dangers of excessive secrecy in handling matters of public concern. PRC accounts of this rising awareness cite, for example, the Qianhu Island incident of 1994, in which a PRC investigation into the deaths of several Taiwanese tourists appeared shrouded in conspiracy. This perception precipitated an anti-mainland swing in Taiwanese public opinion that significantly upset cross-strait relations.<sup>32</sup> Failing to manage information in a manner that appeared accessible and responsive, the PLA learned, could compromise a variety of strategic and public policy objectives. Nevertheless, officials continued to balk at institutional reforms aimed at addressing this problem, citing the potential for “panic among the citizens” were the government to be overly forthcoming on sensitive issues.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, sufficient bureaucratic momentum for the cause had accrued by early 2003 that draft regulations on information disclosure were sent to the Legislative Office of the State Council. Even then, however, the regulations were deemed “category 2” legislation and not subjected to speedy review.<sup>34</sup>

The status of the issue changed dramatically in the wake of the SARS crisis that unfolded during the first several months of 2003. The initial government response to the epidemic was widely criticized at home and abroad as belated, stumbling, and rife with deliberate attempts to misinform the public. The crisis revealed an embarrassing lack of coordination both among government bureaucracies and between the state apparatus and the military.<sup>35</sup> The ensuing public relations disaster exacted a heavy toll on the government’s reputation. Internationally, Beijing appeared to have failed to

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<sup>32</sup> Chen Kaihe, “Zouxiang ‘yangguang shidai’: cong kangzhen jiuzei huishou Zhongguo xinwen fayaren zhidu” [Moving toward a ‘Sunlight Period’: Looking Back from the Earthquake Rescue at China’s Spokesperson System], *Shijie Zhishi* 13 (2008): 55.

<sup>33</sup> He Yong, “Shenru tuijin zhengwu gongkai, wei fazhan shehuizhuyi minzhu zhengzhi zuochu xin gongxian” [Extensively Promote the Transparency of Government Affairs and Make New Contributions to the Development of Socialist Democratic Politics], *Qiushi*, no. 10 (May 16, 2008) <http://www.qsjournal.com.cn/qs/20080516/GB/qs%5E479%5E0%5E1.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Several observers have analyzed this issue at length. See, for example, “China and SARS: The Crisis and Its Effects on Politics and the Economy” (conference held at the Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., July 2, 2003) <http://www.brookings.edu/comm/events/cnaps20030702.pdf>.

live up to China's self-billing as a responsible player in the global community. Domestically, the government's apparent dissembling inflamed public opinion and raised questions about the regime's capacity to rule responsibly. Indicative of the Chinese leadership's sensitivity to such perceptions, a wave of sackings followed in which over 120 officials, including the minister of health and the mayor of Beijing, were fired for dereliction of duty.<sup>36</sup>

PRC accounts published after the fact point out that "traditional methods" were to blame for the government's untimely release of inaccurate data that caused "confusion" about its handling of the SARS outbreak.<sup>37</sup> The widespread fallout in public opinion enabled the freshly installed Hu Jintao administration to push through several disclosure-oriented reforms aimed at avoiding such imbroglios in the future. The once-languishing draft regulations on disclosure of government information suddenly shifted from "category 2" to "category 1" legislation, thereby moving them on to the fast track for review and promulgation.<sup>38</sup> In July 2003 the Leading Small Group for Transparency in Administrative Affairs was formed to coordinate central directives concerning "government transparency." Representatives from a number of civilian bureaucracies composed the group along with "relevant comrades" from the Central Military Commission (CMC), the top decisionmaking body in the PLA.<sup>39</sup>

In the ensuing months evidence of the shift emerged at the highest levels of government. In his first annual work report to the National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2004, Premier Wen Jiabao departed from previous work reports to highlight the need to "keep the people informed so they can oversee government work" by instituting "a system of public information" in the government.<sup>40</sup> In September of the same year the Sixteenth CCP Central Committee echoed this assertion after its fourth plenum, issuing a draft decision on improving the party's ruling capabilities that emphasized the need to "better disseminate general information and improve reporting in response to major unexpected events."<sup>41</sup> After debate and review, these

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Fewsmith, "China's Response to SARS," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 7 (Summer 2003): 5.

<sup>37</sup> Chen, "Zouxiang 'Yangguang Shidai,'" 56.

<sup>38</sup> He, "Extensively Promote the Transparency of Government Affairs."

<sup>39</sup> These bureaucracies include: the Ministry of Supervision, the General Office of the State Council, the Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Personnel, and the State Council Information Office. He, "Extensively Promote the Transparency of Government Affairs."

<sup>40</sup> Wen Jiabao, "2004 Work Report," Tenth National Party Congress, 2nd sess., March 5, 2004 ~ <http://www.china.org.cn/english/government/90522.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> Chen, "Zouxiang 'Yangguang Shidai,'" 56.

directives were codified in two different laws, the Emergency Response Law and the Provisions on the Disclosure of Government Information, which entered into force in August 2007 and May 2008, respectively.

### *A Proliferation of Information Offices*

An important element of these reforms has been the development of information offices with spokespersons throughout the government bureaucracy. Prior to the SARS crisis, there were only a handful of information offices in the Chinese government, the most prominent of which was created in 1983 for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1990 the central authorities created the SCIO to disseminate positive images of China abroad. The SCIO has since taken a leading role in coordinating the establishment of information offices in state and party organs. Pilot offices were established in mid-2003, and soon after the SCIO instituted the framework for a formal spokesperson system at the national, ministerial, and provincial levels.<sup>42</sup> To properly staff the proliferating information offices, the SCIO has also organized a continuing series of spokesperson training courses for officials nationwide.<sup>43</sup> By February 2008, according to a Chinese white paper on rule of law, 7 central party organs, 74 State Council ministries and offices, and all 31 provincial-level divisions had established information offices, boasting a total of 160 spokespersons.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the fact that the CMC was party to the Transparency in Administrative Affairs Leading Small Group, until 2008 the Chinese defense establishment was a conspicuous exception to the growing number of state and party bureaucracies with information offices and spokespersons. Zhao Qizheng, former minister of the SCIO and the architect behind the push for information offices, once stated that some officials resisted the reforms because they were blind to the reforms' utility or they feared that their missteps would be widely publicized.<sup>45</sup> Other observers have highlighted the institutional inertia typical of top-down bureaucratic centralism and the fact that many

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<sup>42</sup> Zhao Qizheng, interview by Wandu Jiang and Chen Chao, "Government Briefing and Spokesperson System," April 5, 2005, available at China Through a Lens website  <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/press/130538.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> "China Launches Spokesman Training Courses on Quick Response to Accidents," Xinhua, December 2, 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's Efforts and Achievements in Promoting the Rule of Law* (Beijing, February 28, 2008)  [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-02/28/content\\_7687418.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-02/28/content_7687418.htm).

<sup>45</sup> Zhao, interview.

PRC organs profit from secrecy and therefore guard it jealously.<sup>46</sup> It is likely that some mixture of these explanations applies to the PLA, an institution that is among the most conservative, secretive, and insulated in the Chinese state. The following section explores possible reasons why the PLA ultimately decided to follow the example set by the rest of the government.

## PLA-SPECIFIC MOTIVATING FACTORS

### *A PLA Image Problem at Home and Abroad*

Image is reality, and image is power; military image-building is an important part of national image-building. The establishment of the MND spokesperson system is an important measure in thoroughly implementing the scientific development concept, raising the military's soft power, and molding a good image for our military.<sup>47</sup>

More so perhaps than other militaries, the PLA is dependent on domestic popular support. Several factors account for this. Since its inception, the PLA has been a party military whose paramount mission has been to serve the interests of the CCP. Success in this mission has historically required the broad support of the civilian population. During the 1930s and 1940s, for example, the CCP and the PLA's military strategy during the Chinese civil war relied heavily on the support and cooperation of large numbers of ordinary citizens. To galvanize such support, the PLA was constantly required to reinforce its image as the "people's military." This strategic and operational dependency survived the founding of the PRC in the form of the "people's war," the centerpiece of PLA doctrine that required the rapid and widespread mobilization of civilians to defend the homeland in the event of invasion.

Today, while the centrality of the "people's war" concept in Chinese military strategy has waned, the importance of the PLA's public image has not. The CCP leadership views the PLA as the ultimate guarantor of political stability in China. For this reason, popular conceptions of the PLA have a direct bearing on the CCP's political fortunes. The PLA also relies on civilian organizations for many supply and logistics functions, and the military's

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<sup>46</sup> Shi Dong, "Zhengfu xinxi gongkai wangyangbulao" [Better Late than Never in Government Efforts to Publicize Information], *Caijing*, June 20, 2003, 34–38.

<sup>47</sup> "Guofangbu xinwen fayanren: changtaihua jianshe shi yi ge jieduanxing de mubiao" [Ministry of National Defense Spokesperson: Building Normalization Is a Goal Characterized by Incremental Steps], *Renmin Wang*, trans. author, January 20, 2009.

ambitious plans to modernize require the recruitment and retention of skilled personnel from civilian sectors.<sup>48</sup> To ensure that links to the public remain productive, the PLA conscientiously endeavors to maintain a positive public image. A network of organs in the General Political Department (GPD) have traditionally been tasked with coordinating a broad array of propaganda activities—television broadcasts, work in print and online media, cultural performances, and so forth—to cultivate the PLA's image both as a protector and servant of the Chinese nation and as a model of moral rectitude and bravery.

Despite these efforts, the PLA faces a number of challenges in managing its image at home. The military's reputation was severely damaged by the violent crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989, and the PLA has spent a great deal of effort attempting to repair its image ever since. This effort was complicated by public resentment throughout the 1990s over the PLA's once pervasive and notoriously venal business operations. Though the PLA is now largely divested from such businesses, analysts point out that popular resentment continues to fester. Another major public relations setback came amid the 2003 SARS crisis, when it was leaked that over a hundred hidden cases of the disease had been squirreled away in military hospitals.<sup>49</sup> Exposed to such scandals, an increasingly educated and cynical Chinese population has grown to associate stonewalling with corruption, lack of accountability, timidity, and incompetence. PLA authorities appear to have accepted that a culture of secrecy and institutional insularity in the military has become untenable, at least in its current form. Evidence of this shift was visible only weeks after the SARS crisis in the unprecedented PLA disclosure of details concerning a deadly submarine accident.

The PLA has been forced to adapt to similar realities as it emerges on the international stage. Until relatively recently, the PLA's image abroad was of marginal concern to leaders in Beijing. As China's interests have expanded overseas, however, so too has the role of the military tasked with protecting them. The steady rise in the PLA's international profile over the past twenty years has been well-documented, characterized by rising defense budgets, increased participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, a broadening array of bilateral and multilateral security agreements and

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<sup>48</sup> For elaboration on this matter, see David Finkelstein and Kristen Gunness, eds., *Civil Military Relations in Today's China: Swimming in a New Sea* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2006).

<sup>49</sup> James Mulvenon, "Crucible of Tragedy: SARS, the Ming 361 Accident, and Chinese Party-Army Relations," *China Leadership Monitor* (Fall 2003): 2.

exercises, more assertive military diplomacy, and the continued acquisition of increasingly capable weapons and equipment.

In order to sustain these trends, the burden has been on Beijing to forestall suspicion and unfavorable strategic hedging on the part of other nations. As one PRC academic has put it, “a positive international environment and good-neighbor relations are necessary conditions for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and they have become important subjects for China to realize its defense and foreign policies.”<sup>50</sup> Unpredictable behavior and a conspicuous pall of opacity permeating the PLA inflame international anxiety and provide grist for noisy recriminations from the United States. In a typical example of such criticism, the U.S. Defense Department has pointed out that “there is a contradiction between the tendencies of China’s military establishment, which favors excessive secrecy, and the civilians’ stated goal of reassuring neighbors and existing powers about the peaceful nature of China’s development.”<sup>51</sup> As a consequence of such perceptions, the state-run newspaper *Wen Wei Po* admits, “people in foreign countries have misunderstood or misinterpreted China’s national defense policy.”<sup>52</sup>

PRC media heralded the new MNDIO throughout the early months of 2008, proclaiming that the office would serve as a “large and bright window”<sup>53</sup> into the PLA that would not only “better serve”<sup>54</sup> the international and domestic media but also fulfill the people’s “right to know.”<sup>55</sup> Official rhetoric and an assessment of the MNDIO’s roles and responsibilities to date, however, indicate that the rationale behind the office’s creation is born less of a newfound commitment to openness than of a perceived need to more deftly manage information and public perceptions.

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<sup>50</sup> He Qisong “China’s Military Diplomacy,” *Contemporary International Relations* 18, no. 2 (March/April 2008): 61.

<sup>51</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2009* (Washington, D.C., 2009), 16.

<sup>52</sup> Ni Erh-yen, “People’s Liberation Army Established News Release Channel,” *Wen Wei Po*, January 15, 2008, available through BBC Monitoring, January 17, 2008.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Yinan Hu, “More Party Organs Open to Media,” *People’s Daily*, December 31, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> “Sichuan dizhen cushi guofangbu xinwen fayan ren tiqian chulu: Hu Changming danren” [Earthquake Pushes Early Debut of MND Spokesperson: Sr. Col. Hu Changming], *International Herald Leader*, May 28, 2008.

## Combating “Information Hegemony”

We [of the MNDIO] are foot soldiers of information dissemination and public opinion guidance...[I]n the struggle for public opinion we are strategists and fighters.<sup>56</sup>

The rationale behind developing the MNDIO may also be based on the PLA's recent attention to “media warfare.” The CMC highlighted this concept when it approved the “three warfares” theory in 2003, which focuses on the non-combat aspects of military strategy.<sup>57</sup> Media warfare, according to a U.S. Defense Department report, refers to “the dissemination of information to influence public opinion and gain support from domestic and international audiences for China's military actions.”<sup>58</sup> Non-PRC analysts have argued that the concept appears rooted in Beijing's assumption that all states manipulate information for strategic ends.<sup>59</sup> According to this conviction, the United States, by virtue of alleged dominion of the world's information flows, maintains what is variously termed “information hegemony” (*xinxi baquan*) or “discourse hegemony” (*huayu baquan*). PRC analyses invoke the theory of information hegemony to explain the existence of certain notions in public discourse in and outside China that Chinese leaders find threatening. Among the most commonly cited of these are the “China threat theory” (*Zhongguo weixie lun*) and the “separation of the military from politics and the party” (*Jundui feidanghua, feizhengzhihua*), both of which have been attributed to coordinated campaigns run out of Washington.<sup>60</sup> According to this view, media objectivity is but a ruse deployed to better infiltrate global public opinion and subvert CCP rule.

A professor at the PLA's Nanjing Institute of Politics has offered an analysis of U.S. strategic information hegemony. According to his investigation, the U.S. military operates radio or television stations in every country in which the military is stationed and runs more than 1,800 print publications worldwide, many of which are directed at foreign audiences. By way of these vehicles, American values are transmitted to influential members of foreign governments and society. Evoking this as both a threat and a model for

<sup>56</sup> “Hu Changming: Guofangbu fayaren shouxian shi yi ming junren.”

<sup>57</sup> The other two “warfares” are legal and psychological.

<sup>58</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress 2009*, 16.

<sup>59</sup> For a more complete exploration into this notion, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2008 Annual Report to Congress*, 110th Congress, 2nd sess., October 28, 2008, Washington, D.C., chap. 5.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Peng Guangqian, “‘Zongguo junshi weixie’ cong he tanqi?” [Where Does Talk of the “Chinese Military Threat” Come From?], *Xinhua Banyuetan*, March 3, 2006.

emulation, the author asserts that “the methods of the American military warrant our serious attention...In the face of so large a country’s multifaceted cultural infiltration and information hegemony...we must seize the initiative in the realm of outward military propaganda to actively predict, actively disseminate, and actively seize the high ground in public opinion.”<sup>61</sup>

To counteract the influence of information hegemony, a consensus seems to have emerged among Chinese officials on the need for more sophisticated propaganda. In a January 2009 essay in the main CCP political journal *Qiushi*, CCP propaganda chief Liu Yunshan cited as an “urgent strategic task” the need to “[make] our communication capability match our international status.”<sup>62</sup> Seconding this theme, the dean of the Renmin University School of Journalism has asserted that “clichéd propaganda measures are useless” and cited the need for “bigger efforts with smarter communication skills.”<sup>63</sup>

These exhortations appear not to have been lost on the PLA leadership. The PLA press continues to give the idea of managing public opinion full play. A June 2008 editorial in *Jiefangjun Bao* praised at length a speech made by Hu Jintao during a visit to the paper’s headquarters. The editorial characterized the challenges facing military propaganda in this way:

With the expansion of mission responsibilities, great changes have occurred in the content and scope of military operations. Completing diverse military tasks has increasingly become an important method to exercise national military power. Because of the strong politicization, sensitivity, and abruptness of military activities, those at home and abroad pay a high degree of attention to them, military news dissemination must be open but also attentive to confidentiality, must be timely but also accurate, and must settle the minds of the people while also boosting morale. Only this way can we firmly maintain the dominant voice and initiative, and win the understanding and support of the masses and the international community.

To realize this end, the essay further stressed the need to “make the military news more audience friendly, compelling, and appealing; advance innovation and reform in military news dissemination to improve the effectiveness and direction of opinion guidance; [and] strengthen the

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<sup>61</sup> Shuai Qilang, “Zunxun dui wai xuanchuan guilu, shixian sixiang guannian zhuanbian” [Follow the Laws of Outward Propaganda, Realize a Transformation in Conceptual Thought], *Military Correspondent*, no. 11 (2008) ~ [http://www.chinamil.com.cn/site1/jsjz/2008-11/06/content\\_1536864.htm](http://www.chinamil.com.cn/site1/jsjz/2008-11/06/content_1536864.htm).

<sup>62</sup> Liu Yunshan, quoted in Russell Hsiao, “Towing the Party Line on Free Speech,” *China Brief* 9, no. 5 (March 4, 2009) ~ [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=34659&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=afe92e1d6f](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34659&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=afe92e1d6f).

<sup>63</sup> Yu Guoming, quoted in Jonathan Landreth, “China Plans \$6.6 Media Push,” Reuters, January 13, 2009.

development of mainstream media and emerging media to form a new design for public opinion guidance in military affairs.”<sup>64</sup>

A PRC analyst sheds further light on the perceived need to harness public opinion in a recent article concerning the stand-off that followed the April 2001 collision of a U.S. surveillance aircraft and a Chinese jet.<sup>65</sup> The author points out that during the first three days of the stand-off, U.S.-based media outlets—“the U.S. side,” in his words—published 51 reports on the incident, whereas the Chinese media published only 10. By his count these included 9 articles from Xinhua, including 3 in Chinese and 6 in English, and 1 commentary in the leading English-language party mouthpiece, *China Daily*. The author asserts that it was difficult for Chinese journalists to write on the issue because there was nowhere for them to acquire official statements. The Foreign Ministry, apparently ill-prepared to handle a crisis that principally involved the military, refused to answer reporters’ questions during a scheduled press briefing and instead instructed them to watch CCTV (China Central Television) to obtain an official line to cite. The resulting dearth of reporting precipitated a perceived loss in global opinion that in the author’s view limited the ways in which China could respond to the stand-off. Conversely, the United States had exercised its discourse hegemony to bend public opinion in U.S. favor, thereby enjoying a greater degree of freedom of action. In a perceived environment such as this, the PLA is therefore operating at a strategic disadvantage because it lacks the wherewithal to project favorable narratives in an ongoing battle for global and domestic public opinion.

To rectify this shortcoming, another PRC observer noted in early 2008 that “the Chinese military should normalize and systematize its publicity operations to help expand its influence in the world.”<sup>66</sup> Key to this endeavor is reducing what one Chinese journalist has called the “grinding period” during which the government ascertains the situation from the military and then crafts an appropriate message.<sup>67</sup> As alluded to in the above analysis of the aircraft collision, this delay has precluded state media from reporting on issues involving the military in a proactive manner, thereby leaving public opinion at the mercy of rumor and the perceived machinations of the West.

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<sup>64</sup> “Kaichuang junshi xinwen xuanchuan gongzuo xin jumian: renzhen xuexi guanqie Hu Zhuxi kaocha renmin ribaoshe de zhongyao jianghua” [Open Up a New Vista in Military Press and Propaganda Work: Conscientiously Study and Implement the Important Speech Delivered by Chairman Hu during His Inspection of the Renmin Ribao Office], *Jiefangjun Bao*, June 28, 2008, trans. author ~ [http://www.chinamil.com.cn/site1/zbxl/2008-06/28/content\\_1338718.htm](http://www.chinamil.com.cn/site1/zbxl/2008-06/28/content_1338718.htm).

<sup>65</sup> Chen, “Zouxiang ‘Yangguang Shidai,’” 56.

<sup>66</sup> He, “China’s Military Diplomacy,” 68.

<sup>67</sup> Ni, “People’s Liberation Army.”

Providing the military with spokespersons and press briefing capacities improves this situation by allowing the media direct access to designated PLA authorities. In addition to engendering the appearance of openness, this reduces the turnaround time required to issue authorized statements. Picked up by domestic and international media, these statements quickly appear in the pages of newspapers worldwide and reverberate through the echo chamber of the Internet. Instituting a spokesperson system thus has the effect of amplifying messages approved by the CCP.

## ASSESSMENT AND IMPLICATIONS OF MNDIO ACTIVITIES

### *Assessment of MNDIO Roles and Responsibilities*

Certain common themes in MNDIO actions and statements warrant further comment because they yield insight into the roles the office may be intended to play. These themes include: the MNDIO's efforts to publicize PLA activities in a positive light; the office's signaling of policy positions to foreign governments; and its role as a vehicle for various members of the PLA officer corps to engage the media.

*Publicizing PLA activities favorably* ∼ In certain respects the MNDIO appears to serve as a bully pulpit for the PLA, from which the military has issued a raft of highly partisan homilies on a variety of themes. Among these are the PLA's proactive and selfless service to the public, eternally defensive posture, increasing transparency, modest budget, and the destabilizing role of the United States in Asia. The standardized nature of such assertions suggests these messages may constitute a group of centrally approved talking points to be mentioned whenever practicable. At other times, the MNDIO has employed somewhat more nuanced strategies in keeping with a drive for "smarter communication." Hu Changming, for example, has gone out of his way to flatter journalists and air stories from his life that reflect humble roots and values.<sup>68</sup> These may constitute efforts to massage the press corps and showcase a softer, more humanistic side of the PLA.

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<sup>68</sup> "Hu Changming: junlushengya zhong dui wo yingxiang zui da de ren—nongmin, zhanshi he zhouwei de ren" [Hu Changming: Individuals in a Life of Military Service Who Have Made the Deepest Impression on Me—Farmers, Soldiers and Surrounding People], *Renmin Wang*, January 20, 2009; and "Hu Changming, junlushengya zhong yingxiang zui shenke de shi—nanwang zhongwai lianhe junshi yanxi, jizhe rang ren gandong" [Hu Changming: The Most Profoundly Affecting Moments in a Life of Military Service—an Unforgettable Multilateral Military Exercise and Emotionally Moving Journalists], *Renmin Wang*, January 20, 2009.

The MNDIO has also taken measures to defend the PLA's reputation by rebutting criticisms and dispelling potentially damaging rumors. During the January 2009 online question and answer session with Chinese netizens, for example, Hu Changming and two other officers addressed a number of criticisms about the PLA and corrected several apparent misinterpretations of the 2008 defense white paper. Shortly after the Wenchuan earthquake, Hu also preempted undue public suspicion and alarm by dispelling rumors regarding alleged damage to a local nuclear reactor and the death of PLA paratroopers in a helicopter crash during the rescue operations. Similarly, in January 2009 the MNDIO addressed public resentment over speculation that despite a tough economic environment, the PLA was planning a costly and grandiose parade for the PRC's forthcoming 60th anniversary celebration. During the MNDIO press conference, Colonel Cai Huailie of the GSD assured audiences that the parade would be "stately but frugal."<sup>69</sup>

According to certain PLA assessments, such efforts to engage the media have yielded tangible dividends. An analysis from a Shanyang Military Region newspaper arrived at the following conclusion concerning the Wenchuan earthquake relief work:

Information openness and transparency won the people's high trust and assessment of the party and the government...[and] united the confidence and power of the people to the extreme. The openness and transparency of information also brought the sympathy and support of the international community, and allowed for a beneficial external environment for earthquake relief. In consecutive days we received condolences and offers of support from many countries...[and] national leaders. All foreign media provided objective and friendly reports...We saw that the information openness and transparency and the rapid, accurate, and objective news reports not only eliminated the market for rumors and made all friendly and kind people of the world join us to aid the people of the disaster area, but also allowed the party and people to take control of the opinion dominance and the initiative in releasing information, allowing all the people of the world to better know about China, better understand China, and better support China.<sup>70</sup>

In light of such efforts, the MNDIO can be understood as a mechanism for rallying domestic and international opinion in a favorable way by maximizing the impact of favorable messages and minimizing the impact of unfavorable messages.

<sup>69</sup> "National Day Parade to Showcase Strength, Transparency," *China Military Online*, January 21, 2009.  [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/site2/news-channels/2009-01/21/content\\_1627225.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/site2/news-channels/2009-01/21/content_1627225.htm).

<sup>70</sup> Jin Weisen, "Xinxi gongkai de liliang" [The Power of Information Disclosure], *Qianjin Bao*, May 22, 2008, trans. author.

*Signaling to foreign governments* ≈ Statements emerging from the MNDIO often appear intended to reassure, warn, welcome, or otherwise signal defense-related policy messages to foreign governments. Predictable examples include condemnations of the United States for arms sales to Taiwan, surveillance in the South China Sea, and releasing unflattering official appraisals of the PLA.

Signaling has occurred in a variety of less expected contexts as well. Huang Xueping, for example, announced in December 2008 that a forthcoming anti-terrorism exercise with India was not aimed at any third parties.<sup>71</sup> The MNDIO typically does not report on such matters, and Huang's statement may have been intended to reassure Pakistan, given the latter's alleged role in the terrorist attacks on Mumbai only days before. Huang and Hu Changming both aimed to reassure global audiences that China's deployment of warships to the Gulf of Aden had been done under the auspices of a UN mandate and did not represent a shift in China's military posture or policies.<sup>72</sup> Hu used the occasion of a MNDIO press conference in January 2009 to signal China's desire to resume military contacts with the United States that had been broken off in the wake of the U.S. arms sale to Taiwan.<sup>73</sup> During the same conference Hu also delivered an unprecedented overture to Taiwan by suggesting the PLA and the Republic of China military establish a "mutual trust mechanism."<sup>74</sup>

In one particularly resonant message, Huang alluded in December 2008 to possible Chinese plans to build an aircraft carrier, thus spurring urgent headlines around the globe. No PRC authority has ever officially confirmed or denied such plans, and no reference to the issue occurs in the 2008 national defense white paper, released weeks after Huang's comment. Similarly equivocal musings on China's carrier plans have occasionally emanated from the PLA for many years, and abundant speculation has tended to ensue. The true motivations for such remarks, however, will likely remain a mystery for some time.

That the MNDIO has been entrusted with delivering these signals, several of which regard highly sensitive matters, indicates a significant degree of inter-bureaucratic coordination and trust. The MFA, although still the most frequent harbinger of Beijing's official line on international affairs, has both

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<sup>71</sup> "China, India to Hold Joint Anti-Terror Military Training," Xinhua, December 4, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> "Hu Changming: huhang xingdong shi zai lianheguo kuangjia xia luxing guoji yiwu" [Hu Changming: Ship Escort Activities Are Carried Out under United Nations Framework], *Renmin Wang*, December 25, 2008; and "China to Use Force on Pirates," Agence France-Presse, December 23, 2008.

<sup>73</sup> Alison Klayman, "China Calls on Obama to Promote Stronger Military Ties," *Voice of America*, January 20, 2009.

<sup>74</sup> "Mainland Calls for Military Trust amid Warming Cross-Strait Relations," Xinhua, January 20, 2009.

echoed and referred to MNDIO statements, suggesting that the ministry has ceded turf in matters regarding national defense and military information. The MNDIO's statements appear to be equally authoritative, and there is little, if any, evidence to suggest that the MNDIO has contradicted the positions of any other government press office.

*Providing face time to PLA officers*  The MNDIO's four press conferences to date have afforded new visibility to members of the PLA's officer corps. Two such conferences—in the wake of the earthquake and at the release of the 2008 defense white paper—included representation from the four PLA departments: General Staff, General Political, General Logistics, and General Armament. Relevant officers from the PAP and PLA Navy also appeared in briefings on security during the Olympic Games and the deployments to the Gulf of Aden, respectively. Officers from the Academy of Military Science, the PLA's premier research institute, have also been featured in MNDIO-sponsored events. The presence of these officers may constitute an effort to provide audiences with a greater degree of authoritative detail, while also reinforcing the appearance of transparency and highlighting the role each body plays in the functioning of the PLA. With the exception of one major general and one rear admiral, none of the officers at press briefings have exceeded the rank of senior colonel. No member of the CMC has figured into any MNDIO briefings, reflecting the continued inaccessibility of the PLA's top brass.

### *Implications and Conclusion*

Alluding to the highly mediated nature of contemporary society, Hu Changming has said, “under informatized conditions, everyone is the media, everyone is a reporter, and everyone is an editor.”<sup>75</sup> The creation of the MNDIO appears to reflect an effort to both adapt to and take advantage of this environment. To date, the MNDIO's activities have been relatively infrequent. Given the MNDIO's interest in the U.S. military's public affairs operations, however, and what appears to be growing attention from the Chinese defense establishment to the strategic utility of favorable public opinion, these efforts are likely to expand in the future in one form or another.

The implications for the United States are mixed. The creation of the MNDIO is a small step in China's slow progress in engaging the international order. Patterns of this expanded public engagement have been visible in many of China's governing institutions since the country emerged from isolation in

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<sup>75</sup> “Hu Changming: Xinxi shifang shi shehui wending de ‘jianya qi’” [Hu Changming: Information Release Is a “Pressure Reducer” for Social Stability], *Renmin Wang*, January 20, 2009.

the 1970s. Possibly on account of new priorities of the Hu administration, this trend toward accessibility appears to have accelerated in the wake of the SARS debacle in 2003. The military has initiated the process of engagement more slowly. As the likely consequence of the PLA's expanding interactions with the international system and persistent international attention on the implications of Chinese military modernization, the PLA has made small steps to increase transparency, and the MNDIO seems to reflect this progression. Insofar as the office represents conformity to international norms by improving access to reliable, authoritative information on PLA activities and policy positions, the United States should welcome the MNDIO.

Potentially more problematic, however, is the MNDIO's place in a broader effort to market controlled information in a guise of openness in order to better appeal to audiences at home and abroad. The office appears born of the realization that public cynicism and suspicion of the PLA reflects badly on the regime in Beijing, thereby complicating the government's strategic goals at home and abroad. Chinese leaders appear to have concluded that generating a more favorable image for their military—one characterized by confidence, accountability, competence, and restraint—requires a more sophisticated and internationally oriented public relations strategy. The fact that comments emanating from the MNDIO are self-serving is not necessarily surprising—utterances by comparable authorities in other countries tend to be so as well.<sup>76</sup> Yet institutional mechanisms in China already limit the ways in which public debate on Beijing's strategic choices can deviate from centrally formulated orthodoxy. Furthering the reach and power of such mechanisms is cause for concern because the resulting deficit of informed, rational public debate increases the possibility of miscalculation or escalation in the event of crisis or confrontation involving the United States.

This article has focused solely on the creation of and intent behind the MNDIO. Further research is required to ascertain the extent to which this and similar organs across the party-state apparatus actually affect public opinion at the expense of U.S. interests. ◆

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<sup>76</sup> The U.S. Army, for example, has a large, well-funded public affairs operation designed to “establish the conditions that lead to confidence in America's Army and its readiness to conduct operations in peacetime, conflict, and war.” See “The Army Public Affairs Program,” Army Public Affairs, September 15, 2000, 9 ≈ [http://www.asaie.army.mil/Public/IE/Toolbox/documents/r360\\_1.pdf](http://www.asaie.army.mil/Public/IE/Toolbox/documents/r360_1.pdf).