

RESEARCH NOTE

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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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*).¹ 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

¹ 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.² 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.³ 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.

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

³ “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.”⁴ 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.⁵ Brief follow-up reports surfaced over the next month confirming preparations but did not provide details.⁶ 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.⁷

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

⁴ “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.

⁵ Junmei Fan, “Earthquake Pushes Early Debut of MND Spokesperson” ≈ http://www.china.org.cn/government/central_government/2008-05/29/content_15542040.htm.

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

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