

# The Chinese Military's Earthquake Response Leadership Team

James Mulvenon

On 12 May, China was rocked by a 7.9 earthquake, epicentered just north of Chengdu in Sichuan Province. The People's Liberation Army was quickly mobilized to deal with the national disaster, as it has been throughout the PRC's history. This article examines the military leadership team involved in the earthquake rescue and recovery operation, assessing the implications of the natural disaster for the PLA's domestic image, civil-military relations, and international posture.

## Introduction

On 12 May, China was rocked by a 7.9 earthquake, epicentered just north of Chengdu in Sichuan Province. Between 50,000 and 100,000 people are estimated to have perished in the resulting destruction, which primarily occurred in mountainous terrain, greatly complicating relief efforts. According to official media, the military response to the earthquake was rapid, as the first Chinese military rescue team reportedly headed for the disaster area within 14 minutes after the strong earthquake began. Serendipitously, Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice-Chairman Guo Boxiong [郭伯雄] was inspecting units in nearby Kunming on the day of the quake.<sup>1</sup> Accompanied by Ge Zhenfeng [葛振峰], deputy chief of the general staff, and Wang Guanzhong, director of the CMC General Office, Guo reportedly took initial command of the situation, ordering units from the Air Force, Chengdu Military Region, Jinan Military Region and the Armed Police Force, as well as "a certain airborne unit," to quickly proceed to the stricken areas to rescue quake victims.<sup>2</sup>

Within a week, China's armed forces had reportedly dispatched more than 100,000 soldiers and armed police to help with rescue operations in earthquake-hit areas, dividing their units into three geographical rescue zones. Chinese propaganda organs provided the usual statistical information to support the contention that the PLA response was "orderly and efficient," asserting that military transport aircraft and helicopters had made 1,069 flights during the first week of operations, supplemented by 92 military trains and about 110,000 military vehicles, cranes, rubber boats, portable communication devices, and power generators.<sup>3</sup> The military units in question had allegedly pulled 21,566 people both dead and alive from the debris, treated 34,051 injured people and transferred 205,370 people to safety. A military spokesman claimed that 115 medical teams were sent to the disaster zone, and quilts, food, medicine, and tents weighing 780,000 tons were distributed. The armed forces also airdropped 307 tons of relief supplies and repaired 557 kilometers of damaged roads, he said.

## Organization of the PLA's Response

The overall government rescue and relief effort is being overseen by the State Council Headquarters for Resisting Earthquake and Providing Disaster Relief [国务院抗震救灾总指挥部], led by Premier Wen Jiabao.<sup>4</sup> Two later articles described Li Keqiang<sup>5</sup> and Hui Liangyu<sup>6</sup> as “deputy commanders” of the State Council organ, supported by Ma Kai (State Councilor), Meng Jianzhu (Minister of Public Security), and “responsible persons of the relevant departments.”<sup>7</sup> An internal circular describes nine working groups: Emergency Management and Relief Provision Group, Masses’ Livelihood Group, Seismic Monitoring Group, Sanitation and Epidemic Prevention Group, Propaganda Group, Production Restoration Group, Safeguarding Infrastructure and Post-Disaster Reconstruction Group, Water Resources Group, and the Public Order Group.<sup>8</sup> Of these, six have military or paramilitary organizations assigned to them. Given its local command role, the Chengdu Military Region is understandably a major player on the Emergency Management and Relief Provision Group. The People’s Armed Police is seemingly the busiest, participating in the Public Order Group, the Sanitation and Epidemic Prevention Group, and the Emergency Management and Relief Provision Group. Among the General Departments, the General Staff Department’s Operations Department is tasked with supporting the Water Resources Group, and the General Logistics Department is involved with the Sanitation and Epidemic Prevention Group. The former COSTIND, now known as the Ministry of Industry and Informatization’s Bureau of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense, is naturally involved with the Production Restoration Group as well as the Seismic Monitoring Group.

Following past practice, the PLA also set up an ad hoc command organization, described in the military press as a “PLA Command Group for Resisting the Earthquake and Providing Disaster Relief” [军队抗震救灾指挥部],<sup>9</sup> to coordinate the military’s earthquake rescue and relief effort. Chief of the General Staff Chen Bingde [陈炳德] heads the command, assisted by CMC Vice-Chairman Xu Caihou [徐才厚].<sup>10</sup> Other notable leaders include PLAAF Major General Ma Jian, deputy director of the General Staff Department’s 1st Department/Operations Department, who frequently addressed the domestic and international press corps on behalf of the military. Defense Minister Liang Guanglie, for his part, performed an appropriate role by meeting with foreign military officials offering aid, transport, or supplies.<sup>11</sup>

The PLA Quake Relief Command Group held its first meeting shortly after the earthquake, and its second meeting on 15 May.<sup>12</sup> CCTV video coverage of the event showed a dozen or so senior military officers meeting in a large, ornate conference room, with another dozen or so straphangers in the back chairs.<sup>13</sup> Press coverage of the event highlighted party-military relations as much as earthquake relief work, leading with the statement that the PLA was studying “Chairman Hu’s important instructions on advancing and improving the earthquake disaster relief work” and would exert “great efforts into carrying on the fine tradition of the military in obeying the party’s instructions, serving the people, being brave and skillful in battle, making persistent efforts, continuing the fight, being unafraid of exhaustion, stubbornly fighting with all their might, and being determined to fight this tough battle of earthquake disaster relief

and definitely not fail to live up to the great expectations of the party and the people.”<sup>14</sup> Further emphasizing the point, Xinhua felt the need to highlight PLA allegiance to Hu Jintao by name again, asserting that “all levels are now implementing the instructions and determination of the party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Hu.”<sup>15</sup> Chen Bingde summarized the goals of the military’s intervention in the crisis, asserting that “the PLA must further strengthen organization of and command over the rescue and relief operations, do everything possible to save the lives of the people, carry out emergency airlift and airdrop of relief materials, and organize well the post-disaster epidemic prevention work. In addition, it must fully foresee the tasks they are likely to undertake and the difficulties the troops are likely to encounter in their actions, and must strive to have more initiatives and be more scientific in their rescue and relief operations.”<sup>16</sup> Befitting his role as the CMC Vice-Chairman responsible for political work, Xu Caihou argued that “it is now crunch time for the earthquake rescue and relief work, thus the PLA must carry out political mobilization uninterruptedly, call on the whole army, especially the troops directly involved in the earthquake rescue and relief operations, to resolutely carry out the decisions and instructions of the CPC Central Committee and President Hu Jintao, throw all-out efforts into earthquake rescue and relief work. Meanwhile, it must do all its best to strengthen various supports including personnel, medical, material and equipment so that the troops would be able to accomplish their missions successfully.”<sup>17</sup>

Following this meeting, the PLA General Staff Department and General Political Department jointly issued a directive, ordering all military and armed police units to carry out earthquake disaster rescue and relief work.<sup>18</sup> The directive called upon all military units to “resolutely respond to the calls issued by the Party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission, and Chairman Hu and win this tough battle of quake disaster rescue and relief.” Specifically, the directive instructed military units to:

give top priority to rescuing the masses trapped in the disaster, regard timely rescue as the principle, break with conventions, handle special cases with special methods, make every minute and every second count, rush to worst-hit townships and towns at top speed, and do everything in their power and use every means to maximally rescue the lives and properties of the masses of people. It is necessary for military units to help by every conceivable means local governments make adequate arrangements for the daily life of the people in quake-stricken areas, actively assemble and transport food, drinking water, clothes, blankets, tents, and other supplies urgently needed in disaster areas so as to effectively solve the problems of food, water, clothing and shelter in quake-stricken areas. It is necessary to follow unified command in stepping up repair of roads, electricity, communications, and infrastructural facilities, beginning by reopening roads leading to the disaster areas so as to ensure the smooth progress of the rescue and relief operations.<sup>19</sup>

Organizationally, the directive chopped responding units to “the unified command of the Chengdu Military Region [MR] in line with the chain of command clearly defined by the CMC and the General Department.” Upon arriving in the disaster area, “military units must promptly establish contact with the local government,” and “military districts [MD] and people’s armed forces departments [*renwubu* or militia] shall take the initiative to direct military units to designated locations so that there will be a military unit in every town and township.” Other open sources revealed that units established frontline headquarters [前线指挥部], and immediately started emergency movements by vehicle, rail, and air from northwest China, north China, southwest China, and the central plain to the Wenchuan earthquake disaster area. PLA media asserted that every service branch supplied forces to the effort, including the Second Artillery, which operated a contingency combat operations readiness coordination group [应急作战准备协调组] to command their rescue operations.

The command group held a third meeting on 17 May. Xu Caihou took the opportunity to directly link PLA activities to Hu Jintao’s speech earlier in the day, which has been identified subsequently by state media as the official “line” of the party and government:

At the critical moment of the quake relief campaign, Chairman Hu personally went to the first line of the work to comfort the victimized masses, met with the PLA officers and men, and directed the rescue and relief work. This was a tremendous inspiration and stimulation to the masses in the disaster areas as well as to the PLA officials and men working there. At present, the PLA units involved in the quake relief campaign have fully unfolded their work. The broad masses of officers and men should take more resolute action than ever to save people’s lives and property at all costs and in every conceivable way so that they will not fall short of Chairman Hu’s instruction and the people’s earnest expectations.<sup>20</sup>

Xu’s comments squared the political and ideological circles, invoking Hu’s concept of “scientific development” as the primary methodology:

In accordance with the actual conditions of the officers and men working continuously on the disaster-relief front, attention should be paid to the principle of using troops in a scientific way and mobilizing them ideologically without a letup so that our PLA units will maintain their work capabilities at all times.<sup>21</sup>

## Criticism of “Armchair Generals”?

One of the interesting political subtexts to emerge in early Chinese media reporting was an implied criticism of the unwillingness of military leaders to “lead from the front” and

personally command their units' response to the quake in the affected area itself. A 15 May staff commentary in *Liberation Army Daily* attacked this mindset:

In order to strengthen organization and command, leaders must personally go to the frontline and command at the frontline. Firm leadership is a form of strength. Lives are the top-priority issue and hesitation and delay cannot be tolerated. Leaders at all levels should work on site, make decisions on site, command on site, solve problems as soon as they are found, and improve the efficiency of rescue work. The command of leaders at the front line is a silent call and a soundless order that can greatly stimulate the morale of the rescuers and inspire the fighting will of the rescuers. Leaders at all levels should move ahead of soldiers, set examples and use their actions to inspire troops to overcome all risks and difficulties, to save as many stranded people as possible and to submit an "examination paper" that meets the requirements of the Party and the people.<sup>22</sup>

By 19 May, however, military media were filled with accounts of the "80 generals" personally engaged in the relief effort, though the descriptions were colored with the predictably exaggerated language of socialist realism.<sup>23</sup> Major General Xu Yong, commander of an unidentified Chengdu Military Region group army, led a 33-person assault team that "moved by land and water, braved being overturned by huge waves or crushed by falling rocks and collapsing cliffs, taking the lead in advancing on foot to Yingxiu Township at the epicenter of the earthquake in Wenchuan County."<sup>24</sup> Major Generals Cui Changjun and Zhang Gongxian of another unidentified Chengdu Military Region group army led an assistance group of 300 people that "moved on foot 60 kilometers, crossing twelve high mountains, encountering dozens of mudslides and collapsed mountainsides, leading the way into the county seat of Mao County to deploy for assistance actions."<sup>25</sup> Along the way, 54-year-old Cui Changjun reportedly went into shock due to dehydration. When "he came to he ignored his comrades' urging to give it up, and instead continued at the very head of the group . . ." On the afternoon of 13 May, the Air Force Political Commissar, General Deng Changyou, "braved the rain to go to the wreckage of a collapsed six-story building in the urban area of Dujiangyan and direct unit rescue efforts. Though over 60 years old, Gen. Deng ignored gravel sent tumbling down by aftershocks and bent down to shout encouragement to a 20-year-old girl [as published] named Jia Zhengjiao who was buried in the rubble: 'Child, hang on, you will be all right!'" Jinan Military Region Deputy Commander Lieutenant General Ye Aiqun was "one of the first general officers to go into action in the earthquake relief effort." General Ye had been reportedly "fighting for seven days and nights," driving himself until his "gums were swollen for having gone four days without being able to eat, and his officers and soldiers urged him to see a doctor." But he selflessly replied: "In this disaster area are several hundred thousand people waiting for us, what does my little illness matter?" The actions of these general-grade officers will no doubt be enshrined in the subsequent mythology of the PLA's response to the Sichuan earthquake, alongside the documented military martyrs.

## Conclusions

The devastating earthquake in Sichuan, which caused horrific human loss and suffering, has nonetheless also offered some fascinating silver linings. Foreign media accounts are filled with analyses of how the government's response has erased some of the tensions from the earlier Tibet crackdown, renewed the confidence of the Chinese people in the effectiveness of the CCP's governance, and even highlighted the positive spiritual effect of the crisis on China's self-obsessed, materialist "Me" generation. Less discussed are the positive consequences for domestic perceptions of the PLA, civil-military relations and foreign military-to-military relations.

In terms of domestic perceptions, the PLA's massive response to the earthquake reinforced its popularity among the Chinese people, building upon the positive imagery of the PLA's efforts during the 1998 flood fighting and the 2007 ice and snow storm. For most of the population, these events have arguably erased most, if not all, of the taint from the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Instead, the PLA is now proudly seen as the nationalist vanguard of China's emerging great power status. These positive perceptions were further reinforced by the relative transparency of the PLA's response to the quake, which even the official media contrasted with the inadequate transparency of the PLA's response to the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, the SARS epidemic, and its military crackdown in Tibet earlier in the year.<sup>26</sup> There was widespread media coverage of the PLA's relief effort, multiple press conferences, and public PLA command group meetings, prompting Central Military Commission Vice-Chair Xu Caihou to praise PLA journalists for the aggressiveness of their reporting.<sup>27</sup>

In terms of civil-military relations, the PLA's response to the quake also reinforced the perception of complete CCP control of the military and Hu Jintao's unrivaled leadership of military affairs. As discussed earlier, the latter was particularly clear in the PLA's prompt trumpeting of Hu's 17 May instructions. For his part, Hu lavished praise upon the PLA:

On behalf of the CPC Central Committee, State Council, and Central Military Commission, I wish to extend my heartfelt regards to you . . . In the face of the deadly disaster, you have resolutely implemented the instructions of the CPC Central Committee, State Council, and Central Military Commission and firmly kept in mind that the disaster is an order and time is life. You have made great contributions by rushing to the frontline of the quake-hit areas and going all out, plunging into the struggle to combat the disaster and provide relief. You have used your practical action to let the masses of the disaster-stricken areas feel their hope, see their confidence, and increase their strength.<sup>28</sup>

There was no external evidence of any shift in PLA allegiances to other Party leaders such as Wen Jiabao, despite the latter's high profile during the crisis and his seemingly competing status with Hu Jintao.

Finally, the earthquake relief effort provided opportunities for China to deepen its military-to-military relations with other countries, including the United States. In the inaugural press conference of the Ministry of Defense's Information Office, spokesman Hu Changming addressed an audience of 61 attachés from 47 countries, confirming that Beijing would welcome "aid and support from foreign governments, people and militaries to the areas affected by the quake in Sichuan."<sup>29</sup> Hu also sought to reinforce the image of PLA transparency in the process, asserting: "I believe you have seen a more open and confident Chinese military." To underscore the point, the press conference was also attended by several other senior officers, including Major General Ma Jian, deputy director of the Operations Department of the General Staff Headquarters, Air Force Senior Colonel Cheng Junxiang, and the Armed Police headquarters' Senior Colonel Zhang Jinliang, all of whom made public statements.

In terms of Sino-U.S. military-to-military relations, high-level contact was initiated in a phone call between Deputy Chief of the General Staff Ma Xiaotian and PACOM Commander Keating on 17 May, utilizing the newly established Defense Telephone Link (DTL).<sup>30</sup> Shortly thereafter, a US military plane carrying more than \$700,000 worth of aid landed in Chengdu, where it was greeted by U.S. defense attaché General Charles Hooper. In subsequent weeks, senior U.S. military leaders, including Secretary of Defense Gates, even publicly contrasted China's relatively open response to outside offers of assistance with the feckless and murderous dallying by the Burmese junta after Cyclone Nargis.<sup>31</sup> Overall, the Chinese military's relative openness and the swift response of U.S. forces to the disaster have created a positive atmosphere for Sino-U.S. military-to-military relations writ large, which hopefully the two sides will be able to build upon in the future.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wang Shibin, "Guo Boxiong visits quake-stricken sites to command rescue operations; he stressed need to go all out, seize every second, fight continuous battles, and rescue survivors at any cost," *Jiefangjun bao*, 15 May 2008, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The details in this paragraph are drawn from "China Focus: China Deploys 113,080 Armed Forces for Earthquake Rescue," Xinhua, 18 May 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Sun Chengbin, "Hu Jintao presides over meeting to study and make arrangements for resisting earthquake and providing disaster relief on first line in mianyang," Xinhua, 16 May 2008. In addition to Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, the meeting in Mianyang was attended by Hui Liangyu, member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, vice premier of the State Council, and deputy chief commander of the Headquarters for Resisting Earthquake and Providing Disaster Relief; Guo Boxiong, member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and CMC vice chairman; Ling Jihua, member of the Secretariat, and director of the General Office, of the CPC Central Committee; Wang Huning, member of the Secretariat, and director of the Central Policy Research Center, of the CPC Central Committee; Ma Kai, state councilor and concurrently secretary general of the State Council; and Meng Jianzhu, state councilor.

<sup>5</sup> Zhang Xudong, "While directing and coordinating rescue and disaster prevention work in Sichuan's quake disaster zone, Li Keqiang stressed that it is necessary to make arrangements for the livelihood of the quake victims and prevent secondary disasters," Xinhua, 19 May 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Li Dadong, "Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao give important instructions on quake lake emergency rescue effort: put people first and give top priority to safeguarding the people's life and safety. Hui Liangyu goes to Tangjiashan barrier lake to inspect disaster area and plan rescue work," Xinhua, 27 May 2008.

- 
- <sup>7</sup> Li Bin, “Wen Jiabao presides over meeting of the State Council Anti-Quake and Disaster Relief Headquarters to plan current anti-quake and disaster relief work,” Xinhua, 17 May 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> “Circular on Formation of Working Groups of State Council’s General Headquarters for Earthquake Control, Disaster Relief,” Xinhua, 18 May 2008.
- <sup>9</sup> Cao Zhi, “PLA Quake Relief Command Group further studied rescue and relief work—Xu Caihou attended the meeting and delivered a speech,” Xinhua, 17 May 2008.
- <sup>10</sup> “Chinese military’s rescue in quake-hit areas ‘orderly’, ‘efficient’,” Xinhua, 18 May 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> “Chinese defense minister thanks Japan for quake aid,” Xinhua, 21 May 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> Cao Zhi, “In its second meeting, the Chinese Military Earthquake Disaster Relief Command Group emphasizes that it is determined to consistently put into practice the substance of the instructions of the Party Central Committee and Chairman Hu Jintao and to make persistent efforts in fighting the tough battle of earthquake relief; Xu Caihou is present at the meeting and speaks, and Chen Bingde convenes the meeting,” Xinhua, 15 May 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> Video coverage of the meeting can be found here: <http://video.cctv.com/opus/93674.html>.
- <sup>14</sup> “The PLA Commanding Group for Earthquake Rescue and Relief Work calls on troops to go all out to win anti-quake battle,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 16 May 2008.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> “(Military) PLA General Staff, general political departments issue directive asking all military and armed police units to further carry out earthquake disaster rescue and relief,” Xinhua, 15 May 2008.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Cao Zhi, “PLA Quake Relief Command Group further studied rescue and relief work—Xu Caihou attended the meeting and delivered a speech,” Xinhua, 17 May 2008.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Staff commentator: “Earnestly strengthening organization, command—third commentary on resolutely winning uphill battle of earthquake disaster relief,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 15 May 2008, p.1.
- <sup>23</sup> “80 general officers are fighting on the front line of earthquake relief in Wenchuan,” Xinhua, 19 May 2008.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Commentary, “Quick media response reveals transparent government in China,” Xinhua, 23 May 2008; and Ding Yuanzhu, a researcher with the Academy of Macroeconomic Research affiliated with the National Development and Reform Commission, “Crisis Management Ideas Come of Age,” *China Daily*, 20 May 2008.
- <sup>27</sup> Xu Sheng, “Xu Caihou visits military information units; urges military journalists to keep up their good work in reporting the fights of rescuing earthquake survivors; Li Jinai accompanies him during the visit,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 19 May 2008, p.1.
- <sup>28</sup> Sun Yuting, “Hu Jintao: You are worthy of the title of sons of the People’s Army,” *Zhongguo xinwen she*, 16 May 2008.
- <sup>29</sup> Jiao Xiaoyang, “China Welcomes Help From Foreign Militaries,” *China Daily*, 22 May 2008.
- <sup>30</sup> “Senior Chinese, U.S. military officers discuss disaster relief over phone,” Xinhua, 18 May 2008.
- <sup>31</sup> Secretary of Defense Robert Gates speech delivered at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, 31 May 2008.