

Dennis E. Blasko. The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation For the 21st Century. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Jerremie Clyde, University of Calgary

The Chinese Army Today provides a comprehensive and detailed description, as well as some limited assessment, of China's current ground forces. Over the past 25 years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been increasing its efforts to reform and modernize all aspects of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The Chinese Army Today places the current PLA ground forces within the context of both the ongoing reforms and the traditions that continue to endure from its beginnings over seventy years ago. This is done through not only focusing on what the PLA is now, but also on the past six years of intensive changes and how they have shaped its membership, order of battle, missions, doctrine, equipment and training. Blasko paints the picture of a unique military force that has transformed itself in significant ways; aware of its own shortcomings, but with a clear plan in place to address them. For more than twenty years, the author served as a military intelligence officer and foreign area officer in the United States Army, specializing in China. He was also an army attaché in Beijing and Hong Kong from 1992 to 1996. Currently, he is a China Specialist for CNA Corporation's Project Asia team. The author of several articles dealing with the PLA, this latest work makes a valuable contribution to PLA studies and clearly builds on some of those earlier publications.¹

This work provides a solid foundation and starting place for anyone working in PLA studies or related areas. Its focus on China's ground forces, comprised of the PLA

ground forces, People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) airborne infantry, the People's Armed Police (PAP), and militia forces, is unique. Much of the current scholarship regarding China's military focuses on the military-industrial complex, arms sales, arms procurement, weapon systems, defense policy, PLA decision making, civil military relations, threat perceptions, strategy, and the role of the PLA in Chinese international relations.² Those works that focus on the military itself often focus on the PLAAF, People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), or the strategic missile forces and how well they compare to other regional or international forces such as those of Japan or the United States. The major theme that runs through many of these works is China's ability and willingness to project force. The limited role that the PLA ground forces might play in projecting force past China's borders to the East and South has meant that it has received very little attention. Simply by focusing on the ground forces Blasko has made a valuable contribution to the field. This work gives scholars and analysts something to work with when doing comparisons to other militaries, judging the cost or effectiveness of reforms, and its potential to project force.

The work starts with a short history of the PLA going back over the past seventy years, with particular attention to the past two decades. This provides some crucial context, as it outlines many of the trends that impact the PLA ground forces' modernization and reform efforts of the past six years that is the main focus of the work. Building on the introduction, the work then begins to define the current ground forces by focusing on the what, who and where of the PLA.

The chapter "What Is The PLA?" provides an excellent portrayal of China's military and paramilitary forces. This includes describing the Ministry of Public Security

(MPS) and the Ministry of State Security (MSS) and how to differentiate peace officers from military personnel. This is important as even experienced China observers, and the Chinese media itself, often fail to differentiate between the various civilian, paramilitary and military forces. In giving the numbers of personnel in the various forces the author pairs up estimates with an evaluation of the numbers and the factors that went together to form them. He explains that determining forces sizes is a difficult task; not only is it a moving target, with the numbers changing regularly, but finding reliable sources for the numbers is nearly impossible.

Blasko goes into detail on the various ground forces because they were all impacted by China's military modernization program of the past twenty years, which in turn has set the stage for the past six years of reform. Running throughout this work is the idea that the PLA is moving from quantity to quality. This has led to significant force reductions and manpower reallocations. Blasko suggests that this massive shift in manpower, and the shift in duties that came with it as new forces were created, to a large degree defines the PLA's ground forces today. Blasko provides an excellent description of the PLA's tactical formations and their varying roles. He also describes who the PLA is not, meaning, to a large degree, Chinese civilians who work in the defence industries. This is important because many of these defence industry bodies were previously part of the PLA and restructured as civilian agencies as China demobilized millions of PLA personnel.³

The following chapter, "Who Is The PLA?" gets more specific, looking at the actual personnel of the PLA ground forces. He pays particular attention to the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) as the NCO ranks have gone through significant change,

becoming much more professional, in the past six years. He also outlines the duty positions, related ranks, and equivalent unit levels for the office corp. This is a useful chapter as the reforms of the past several years and the PLA's use of terminology, which often lacks a clear Western equivalent, can make it difficult to untangle the PLA's command structure.

The entire chapter "Where is the PLA?" sets out and analyzes the order of battle including why certain regions have the formations they do and what that might mean regarding their perception of threat or intended use. The organization charts, military region descriptions, and PLA force composition discussions are all well done, detailed and seemingly comprehensive. The discussion of the PLA order of battle is particularly impressive and the author is careful to note when a unit's presence is confirmed. This section is critical and may well be the main area of interest for many readers, validating the work as a whole for them.

The chapters comprising the final two thirds of the work focus on how the PLA will fight, which means its doctrine, its equipment, its training, and its role in Chinese society. The first chapter in this section, "How Will The PLA Fight?" is an examination of the PLA's current doctrine and how it has developed. There is also some discussion of strategy and how the PRC may see the use of military force. When looking at the history and development of the PLA's doctrine, the author looks at Sun Tzu, the influence of foreign – particularly Soviet – advisors, and Mao's own military writings. China's long tradition of sectarian and/or local defence militias is not noted but probably should have been. The heavy use of excerpts from Mao and Sun Tzu, without significant interpretation and analysis by the author, disrupts the narrative flow of the work and

weakens this section. In contrast to this, the latter part of this chapter focusing on the past two decades is very well done. Overall this chapter is excellent as knowing how an army is organized, or how big it is, is not terribly useful unless you know what it is for and how it might be used.

The two chapters focusing on training and equipment answer another vital question of how ready that army is to implement its doctrine. Blasko looks at how structure and doctrine influence training, as well as weapons acquisition and deployment. Much of the technical information regarding the PLA's arms is available elsewhere but lacks meaning when divorced from force structure and doctrine. Blasko does a good job of placing both training and equipment in the context of the PLA doctrine and force structure. He also examines the challenges in assessing China's military based on what one sees of its training. He points out that it is often difficult to determine from media releases on training exercises if they are actual exercises, staged, or both. The PRC has been known to use large-scale training exercises or maneuvers as a show of force in an attempt to influence its neighbors, most notably Taiwan.

Sources in general, not just in regard to assessing training exercises, pose a problem for people working on the PLA. There is often only a limited amount of information available, and what is available can be extremely unreliable due to the propaganda value of the PLA. Blasko, however, seems well-equipped to deal with these challenges. He makes extensive use of Chinese language sources and his previous military career and professional experience has equipped him to handle them

effectively. Throughout the work Blasko freely admits when the sources are inadequate or where they seem to be especially problematic.

This is an excellent introduction to the PLA and can serve as a starting point for any scholar interested in China's modern military. It will also be an excellent tool for orienting professionals who may be working in the area. While it may not answer any of the larger questions around the PLA, it is a solid comprehensive work detailing who and what the PLA is and where it is going. While there are many different assessments of the PLA's strength, often at opposite extremes of the spectrum from hopelessly backward to a major threat, Blasko presents a more balanced view. In this work he assesses the PLA on its own terms and shows the reader a PLA that, if not currently an effective modern military force, at least has a clear plan to become one. By stopping to take stock of several years of transformative change in the PLA ground forces, The Chinese Army Today makes a valuable contribution to the challenging area of PLA studies.

Jeremie Clyde is the Liaison Librarian for History and Greek and Roman Studies at the University of Calgary. He completed both his MLIS and MA in history at the University of Alberta. He has a keen interest in Chinese military history and has spent time in the People's Republic of China as an advanced scholar at Nanjing University conducting research at the No. 1 Archives in Nanjing.

¹ Earlier works on the subject include Dennis Blasko, Philip T. Klapakis, and John F. Corbett, Jr., "Training Tomorrow's PLA: A Mixed Bag of Tricks," *China Quarterly* 146 (June 1996): 488-524 and Dennis Blasko, "Better Late Than Never: Non-Equipment Aspects of PLA Ground Force Modernization," in C. Dennison Lane, Mark Weisenbloom, and Dimon Liu, eds., Chinese Military Modernization (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1996).

² June Teufel Deyer's state of the field report highlights by omission the lack of work on the Chinese ground forces by failing to mention what has been done (if anything) and what still needs to be done. June Teufel Dreyer, "State of the Field Report: Research on The Chinese Military," *Access Asia Review* 1/1 (Summer 1997): 7-34. You Ji's major work on China's armed forces follows the general trend by focusing on air and naval forces and their strategic implications. You Ji, The Armed Forces of China. (New York, NY: I.B.Tauris, 1999).

³ Yitzhak Shichor provides a very good analysis of the force reductions, how even traditionally civilian ministries, such as the Ministry of Railroads and Ministry of Capital Construction grew during the demobilizations. Yitzhak Shichor, "Demobilization: The Dialectics of PLA Troop Reduction," *China Quarterly* 146 (June 1996): 443-463.