Chinese Military-Related Think Tanks and Research Institutions

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ABSTRACT The national security research community in Beijing is dominated by think tanks and other research institutes affiliated with specific governmental institutions. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) maintains its own set of internal and affiliated research institutions, performing a variety of intelligence, exchange and research functions. The growth and professionalization of the Chinese military think tank community, combined with the widening degree of interaction between PLA researchers and foreigners presents a new set of challenges and opportunities for scholarly research. On the one hand, the new environment complicates the task of outside scholars as they seek to understand the biases and reliability of new sources of information. At the same time, it offers foreign scholars an unprecedented opportunity to test theories, delve into new research and improve understanding of the PLA. This article examines the roles, missions and composition of the units in this system, assesses the influence, authoritativeness and utility of the output from these organs, and offers some preliminary implications for Western study of the Chinese military.

Trying to understand the role and impact of military-related think tanks in China poses special challenges for scholars studying the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and Chinese defence issues. In the first instance, almost all matters military are treated with particular caution in China, rendering the subject opaque at best. Moreover, certain topics in particular, such as weapons development and nuclear weapons, are deemed particularly sensitive by the Chinese (likewise in other countries), and are often “off limits” to direct avenues of foreign inquiry. The quest becomes, often, in the words of one of the deans of Chinese military studies, Ellis Joffe, a matter of “seeking truth from unavailable facts.”

However, as noted elsewhere in this volume, there are more open sources of information available in China today than ever before, and this is true as well for matters military. In particular, the steady loosening of information control in China has combined with some 20 years of ongoing interaction between China and the outside world to create greater access than ever to persons and institutions associated with the Chinese military. Increased exchanges of military-related delegations, visiting scholarships for Chinese military personnel abroad, graduate-level education opportunities in the United States and elsewhere, increased exposure to foreign cultures and thinking, opening of Chinese military academies and institutes to foreign visitors and students, and – perhaps most importantly – the steady establishment and consistent re-evaluation of longstanding, personal relationships have dramatically increased the potential to transcend China’s traditional concealment of matters military. In ways simply unheard of in the past, scholars are able to have greater access to military think tanks, one-on-one exchanges with military officers, tours of military bases and other facilities, and opportunities to
spend lengthy periods of time in conversation and analysis with persons associated with the Chinese military. As an overview, this article introduces a number of Chinese military-related think tanks, and offers information as to their role and influence.

**Military Think Tanks and Their Role**

PLA think tanks and research organs can be divided along a number of useful typological axes. First, the institutional affiliation of a given unit is a highly correlated indicator of the focus and even world-view of a given research organ. For instance, the Academy of Military Sciences seems much more focused on the future of warfare than the National Defence University, whose mandate is primarily to educate the senior officer corps about the present world. Further, the political officers from the General Political Department’s Centre for Peace and Development see the world in a very different way from the intelligence officers at the China Institute for International Strategic Studies. Secondly, PLA-related think tanks and research organizations can be identified roughly by mission, including intelligence analysis, weapons research and arms control, exchanges, and research. In some cases, one will find overlap and shared responsibilities of these missions across the various institutions.

Some overarching generalizations can be made about the military think tank system. First, the system has undergone a significant evolution over time. According to Michael Swaine in 1999:

> Most military research, analysis, and intelligence prior to the reform period was highly ideological in approach, overly cautious, internally fragmented, and generally lacking in rigor. Only during the past decade or so has it become more dynamic, creative, pragmatic, and collaborative. This trend toward greater professionalism and sophistication continues today, according to informants.¹

Secondly, the output of this research system does reach the top civilian and military leadership. Most reports produced by PLA research units for internal consumption are routed through the Central Military Commission General Office (CMCGO) before they can be sent to the top defence policy, foreign policy and national security policy organs. The CMCGO evaluates, summarizes and distributes these reports. Occasionally, individual PLA institutes will submit less formal analytical reports or yaobao directly to the offices of Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) members, as in the civilian sphere. In addition, military strategists often attend, on an informal basis, various internal discussion meetings and report preparation conferences convened by civilian research institutes and departments. These activities indicate that a significant amount of interaction occurs between military and civilian strategists.

**Intelligence Analysis Think Tanks**

**China Institute for International Strategic Studies.** The premier intelligence analysis think tank in the Chinese military is the China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CIISS), directly subordinate to the General Staff Department Second Department (Intelligence) though it is often publicly and incorrectly identified as the Ministry of National Defence’s major research unit on international affairs. Founded in 1979 as the Beijing Institute for International Strategic Studies, the institute is located in north-central Beijing. Typically, the Chairman of CIISS is also the Deputy Chief of Staff whose portfolio includes foreign intelligence (formerly Generals Xu Xin and Wu Xiuquan have served as chairmen; currently it is General Xiong Guangkai). The staff of CIISS consists of a mixture of senior retired intelligence officers, such as General Chen Kaizeng (former PRC Defence Attache to the United States), active-duty intelligence officers, and permanent research staff in mufti. According to Swaine, the institute was formed “primarily by transferring to it, on a temporary or permanent basis, some of the best military analysts from the Second Department.”

According to the official description, CIISS “offers consultancy and policy advice to and undertakes the task of preparing research papers for relevant departments of the Chinese government, the army and other institutions ...” There are approximately 100 research personnel appointed to CIISS, drawn from “active and retired officers, diplomats, experts and scholars ...” Support for CIISS comes from the government and military, but also from “consultancy services.”

CIISS is primarily charged with analysis of China’s external threat environment, including the capabilities of foreign militaries and especially the United States military in Asia. According to Shambaugh, these reports circulate to the General Staff Department and throughout the PLA senior leadership. The institute also publishes an open, unclassified journal, entitled *Guoji zhanlue yanjiu* (*International Strategic Studies*). CIISS is also an important interface between the military intelligence apparatus and foreign experts, with regular interactions both at home and abroad.

In certain instances, individuals from CIISS have had a hand in shaping Chinese arms control and nonproliferation policies. For example, it was tasked in the early 1980s to track developments between the United States and Russia in the negotiation of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. Those same persons were later tapped to serve on the negotiating teams which concluded the border disarmament agreements with Russia and three other former Soviet republics now codified in what became known as the “Shanghai Five” process. Arms control specialists from CIISS also served as military specialists on the Chinese delegation to the United Nations Conference on Disarmament. Several prominent CIISS

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3. The “Shanghai Five” is now known as the Shanghai Co-operation Organization.
researchers were responsible for putting together a 300-page neibu faxing (internal circulation) volume entitled Junbei kongzhi yu guoji anquan shouce (Arms Control and International Security Handbook), published in 1997 by the Shijie zhishi Press.

Centre for Peace and Development. A less significant intelligence analysis think tank is the Centre for Peace and Development Studies (CPD) of the China Association for International Friendly Contact, which is affiliated with the General Political Department’s Liaison Department (zongzheng lianluobu). Because of this department’s principal interest in Taiwan issues, the institute is reported to have developed an important analytical expertise in this area, though Swaine argues that it is also strong on strategic analysis and intelligence related to Hong Kong and Macau. The author asserts that this reputation originated during the pre-liberation period, when Red Army political operatives and intelligence agents were very active in all three areas. By all accounts, however, the CPD is still a second rank player, especially when compared with CIISS. It contains few full-time researchers and thus must often employ specialists from other units, including the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

Weapons Research and Arms Control Institutions

The PLA has hundreds of weapon-related research institutes, but they are mostly strictly off limits to foreigners. However, in some cases, especially on issues related to arms control, weapon research and development organizations have opened their doors to interactions with outsiders.

China Defence Science and Technology Information Centre. This centre (CDSTIC) is an overt intelligence collection and clearinghouse operation, gathering together all manner of information from across the world on military-technical affairs. According to its official information, it was founded in March 1959 and has a “strong strength in scientific research with extensive links with the outside, rich information resources and advanced technical tools.” CDSTIC has approximately 400 senior and mid-level researchers who focus on the development of weapons systems, defence technology management and defence conversion. Within it is a small shop known as the Programme on Arms Control and Disarmament which among other items has conducted research on the fissile material cut-off treaty for use by the military, as well as on broader issues of arms control and disarmament. During the spring 1998 reorganization of China’s weapons production and procurement system, oversight for the CDSTIC was transferred from the Commission on Science, Technology and Industry for National Defence (COSTIND) to the PLA’s General Armaments Department (GAD). CDSTIC nevertheless retained its facilities on the military compound on Fucheng Road in the Haidian district of Beijing.
Research results and policy advice from CDSTIC and GAD are probably provided to the Chief of the General Staff for use in inter-agency discussions, and to PLA representatives in the field at overseas embassies and at multilateral disarmament organizations such as within the United Nations system. In addition, with the establishment of GAD in April 1998, it absorbed a number of other COSTIND academies – such as the Command Technical Academy and the Aerodynamics Research and Development Centre – which would have some technical research input to procurement and arms control policies and decisions.

Chinese Academy of Engineering Physics. With the reorganization of COSTIND and GAD in early 1998, a number of weapons R&D and scientific research organizations came under the aegis of GAD, especially those portions of the organizations working directly on weapons R&D. For example, the Chinese Academy of Engineering Physics (CAEP), formerly known as the Ninth Academy and located in Mianyang, Sichuan province, is the equivalent of China’s strategic weapons laboratory, and has a number of subsidiary research institutes and programmes falling under GAD. For example, the Institute for Applied Physics and Computational Mathematics (IAPCM), based on the north side of Beijing, has produced numerous specialists interested in arms control and nonproliferation questions, as well as the training and research group, the Programme on Science and National Security Studies. Another group associated with CAEP, the Northwest Institute of Nuclear Technology (NINT), was charged with nuclear weapons testing R&D and now consults the government on issues related to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Certain individuals within CAEP, IAPCM and NINT play important roles in providing research and advice to higher-level arms control and nonproliferation decision-making authorities in China. Other institutes under CAEP (and probably, to the degree they are concerned with weapons, associated with the PLA’s GAD), include the Institute of Fluid Physics, the Institute of Nuclear Physics and Chemistry, the Institute of Chemical Materials, the Institute of Structural Mechanics, the Institute of Electronic Engineering, the Institute of Machinery Technology, the Institute of Applied Electronics, the Institute of Computer Application, and the Institute of Laser and Plasma Physics.

Exchange-Related Think Tanks

Foundation for International Strategic Studies. The Foundation for International Strategic Studies (FISS) is a critical interface for military and security-related exchanges between foreigners and the PLA. FISS a semi-independent research group with ties to the Second Department (er bu, intelligence) of the PLA General Staff Department. It serves as a kind of liaison organization between foreigners and the Chinese military, conducts its own wide range of research and contract research projects, convenes meetings, seminars and conferences, and helps facilitate dialogue between the Chinese security research and decision-making bureau-
cracies and outside analysts from abroad. Founded by a former Second Department officer in 1989, Zhai Zhihai, FISS began as a forum for international exchange and policy research. According to formal statutes approved in January 1990, FISS is supported by “donations and contributions from government institutions, civilian organizations, enterprises, financial institutions, and individuals” … “institutions of strategic studies and other academic organizations of other countries” … and “from foreign and domestic foundations and financial institutions.”

Under the leadership of Chen Zhiya, FISS has reaffirmed and expanded its commitment to facilitating international exchanges with foreign groups, convening meetings, and conducting both internal and for-profit research. The work of FISS also includes the conduct of research projects, organizing domestic and international conferences, providing financial support to Chinese scholars, arranging visits by foreign scholars to China, and providing “consultation services in international and strategic studies.” FISS has successfully brokered the quasi-official William Perry–Ashton Carter meetings on confidence-building measures for cross-Taiwan Straits relations and was involved in Perry’s consultations with Beijing about the North Korean issue. In terms of internal research for the military, the institute also reportedly submits an annual year-end analytical report similar to those prepared by China’s civilian institutes. Occasionally, FISS submits less formal analytical reports directly to the offices of PBSC members. The institute, for example, is closely associated with the effort to build an inter-agency, crisis management-oriented “national security council”-type organization within the government. On the commercial side, the institute is also involved in commercial publishing, including contract research on a 22-volume set on the history of the 20th century (sections include international affairs and science and technology) and other books. FISS had planned to move its facility from east Beijing to near the CISS facility in north-central Beijing, but the institute lost the land site when it was chosen for future Olympics preparations. It is currently exploring new options for expanding its facilities.

Research-Related Institutions

Academy of Military Sciences. Founded in March 1958, the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) is the “national centre for military studies” and is the premier military research organization in the PLA. It is directly subordinate to the Central Military Commission (CMC), but also receives direct tasking from the General Staff Department. According to its official description, the AMS conducts broad, academic research on “national defence, armed forces development and military operations,” consults the CMC and the PLA General Departments, and co-ordinates academic work throughout the PLA. With about 500 full-time researchers, it is the largest single research organization in the PLA.

4. From the official FISS brochure.
AMS researchers write reports for the military leadership, ghost-write speeches for top military leaders, and serve on temporary and permanent leading small groups as drafters of important documents like the Defence White Paper. The AMS also conducts analysis on foreign militaries, strategy and doctrine, and has consistently taken the lead role in the study of the future of warfare. The academy recently added a PhD programme, solidifying its reputation as the PLA’s primary theoretical institution. AMS researchers do not limit themselves to the ivory tower, however, as academy personnel regularly observe field exercises, making the AMS the closest analogue to the US Training and Doctrine Command. Moreover, some AMS researchers lecture at military education institutions around the country, and therefore serve as an important transmission belt of ideas from the regional military academies and schools to the national military leadership. The AMS also often organizes and channels the submission of reports from other military think tanks and research units to the CMC level.

National Defence University. By contrast, the National Defence University (NDU) is the PLA’s top professional military education institution, charged with educating the senior officer corps at the group army commander level and above. As such, its mandate is much more focused on the present state of the world and the current challenges facing the PLA, though its researchers have dabbled significantly in debates over the future of warfare. Within the NDU, the most important department for research is the Institute for Strategic Studies, which performs two functions: to produce analysis for the CMC and General Staff Department, and to conduct research and writing on strategic issues in support of the university’s officer instruction programmes.\(^5\) The previous head of the ISS, General Pan Zhenqiang, is one of China’s most respected strategic thinkers, and his successor, Senior Colonel Zhu Chenghu, assumed a prominent public and internal role during his tenure.

In addition to the AMS and NDU, the PLA has a large network of some 115 other academies, schools and research institutes.

Conclusions

The growth and professionalization of the Chinese military think tank community, combined with the widening degree of interaction between PLA researchers and foreigners presents a new set of challenges and opportunities for scholarly research. On the one hand, the new environment complicates the task of outside scholars as they seek to understand the biases and reliability of new sources of information. At the same time, the new environment offers foreign scholars an unprecedented opportunity to test theories, delve into new research and improve understanding of the PLA.

Rather than focusing exclusively on the “output” of military-related

decisions (arms build-ups, force deployments, hardware acquisitions) future scholarly research might look at the “input” side of such decisions: perceptions, decision trees, leadership nodes and attitudes, key bureaucratic players, and relative weights of important personalities and agencies in the decision-making process. In many respects these types of discussions with Chinese interlocutors may prove less sensitive, and could offer new understanding of decision processes, differences of opinion, the roles of individuals, and the menu of options and perceptions Chinese policy makers weigh when taking important military decisions.

Finally, one point that cannot be emphasized enough: more open interaction with Chinese military think tanks does not necessarily equate to better scholarship. Just as with any form of scholarship, foreign students of the PLA need to apply their understanding of the culture, bureaucratic infrastructure, sociopolitical relationships (guanxi wang), political context, perceptions and motivations in which their research topic is embedded.