As China’s new Communist Party leaders take power, they face a more outspoken military brass.

China’s military hawks go on the offensive

BY DAVID LAGUE
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It was supposed to be a relaxed evening for a group of senior international military chiefs. Gathered at Melbourne’s Crown Casino, they had changed out of uniform for dinner and discussion.

China’s Lieutenant-General Ren Haiquan took the podium in a room overlooking the Yarra River last Oct. 29 and began diplomatically enough. But as he neared the end of his speech, he went on the offensive.

“Some people” had ignored the outcome of World War Two and were challenging the post-war order, he told counterparts from 15 other nations. It was a pointed reference to Japan’s claim over islands in the East China Sea that Beijing insists are Chinese.

“One should never forget history and (should) learn from history,” Ren said, according to a copy of his speech. “Flames of the war ignited by fascist countries engulfed the whole region, and many places, including Darwin in Australia, were bombed.”

In a jarring coincidence, say officers in the audience, fireballs belched into the sky as he spoke, part of the casino’s hourly fireworks display.

Visibly displeased at the dig, the senior Japanese officer present, army Lieutenant General Yoshiaki Nakagawa, left with his fellow officers as soon as the speeches concluded, people in the audience said.

Neither Ren nor Nakagawa were available for comment.

“KILL A CHICKEN”

Ren’s provocative dinner talk was no isolated outburst. His message was typical of the increasingly hawkish rhetoric coming from senior officers in the People’s Liberation Army.

At issue these days are the disputed islands known as the Diaoyu (in China) or Senkaku (in Japan) and a string of islets in the South China that China is contesting with various Southeast Asian nations.

But the combative streak speaks to profound shifts in Chinese politics and foreign policy that transcend the heat of the moment. The more provocative of these officers call for “short, sharp wars” to assert China’s sovereignty. Others urge Beijing to “strike first”, “prepare for conflict” or “kill a chicken to scare the monkeys”.

They routinely denounce the Obama administration’s recent “pivot” to Asia - without naming the United States, Ren in his Melbourne speech accused “external countries” of complicating disputes in Asia.

In a political system where civilian officials hew to tightly scripted public positions, these uniformed pundits, both serving and retired, appear free to go well beyond the official line. Almost all of the most-outspoken generals are military academics or theorists.

Foreign military analysts are uncertain if the hawks represent a majority opinion in the 2.3 million-strong military or exercise real influence over foreign policy. It is also unclear if operational commanders share the views of these so-called “activist officers.”

However, there is one generally agreed explanation for their prominence: The PLA now has something to talk about. The military budget has soared to almost $200 billion, according to some Western estimates - the world’s second-highest military budget behind the United States. That money has paid for the warships, strike aircraft and missiles allowing the PLA to plan for distant conflict. For the first time in its modern history, China has the firepower to contest control of disputed territory far from its coastal waters.

Over the same period, China has emerged from decades of isolation to...
become a powerful trading nation with a complex global web of commercial and diplomatic ties. That means military planners are increasingly concerned with security of sea lanes – particularly in the South China Sea – that carry manufactured exports and imports of vital energy and raw materials.

“Until quite recently, China didn’t have a lot of overseas interests,” said Li Nan, an analyst of the Chinese military at the United States Naval War College. “It didn’t get involved in foreign-policy crises.”

“PEACEFUL RISE”

For some Chinese foreign policy researchers, the emergence of the hawks is part of Beijing’s “good cop–bad cop” strategy to influence diplomatic negotiations over the disputed territory.

For anxious neighbours, though, the tough talk backed up with firepower delivered over a three-decade military buildup, is sending an unnerving signal that a rising China may be ready to use force. It also conflicts with repeated assurances of a “peaceful rise” from the civilian leadership in Beijing.

“There appears to be a discord between this peaceful rise language and the comments from senior PLA officers,” said Li of the U.S. Naval War College. “There is no doubt about that.”

A Japanese Foreign Ministry official, noting Lt-Gen Ren’s remarks in Melbourne and similar comments from China, stressed Japan’s own peaceful rise from the ashes of World War Two.

“China itself clearly stated in the Japan-China joint statement, issued in May 2008, that it highly regards Japan’s history as a peaceful nation for more than 60 years after the war,” the official said.

Japan's Defence Ministry has flagged the Chinese armed forces' growing role in shaping foreign policy as a security risk. In its annual defence white paper last July, Tokyo said some believe relations between the PLA and the Communist Party leadership were “getting complex”. The degree of military influence on foreign policy decisions could possibly be changing, the paper said, adding: “The situation calls for attention as a risk management issue.”

STRONG NATIONALIST

The relationship will be closely watched as China’s new leader, Xi Jinping, begins to stamp his authority on the Communist Party and the military. Xi, the “prince-ling” son of late party leader, military commander and economic reformer Xi Zhongxun, has clearly signaled he will be a strong nationalist. His first speeches after taking power in November had a strong patriotic flavour, with appeals for a “renaissance” of the Chinese nation.

As chairman of the Central Military Commission and head of the party, Xi takes command of the PLA after years of cementing close ties with influential senior officers.

One of his jobs after graduation from university was personal secretary to Geng Biao, a revolutionary military commander who became defence minister after the Cultural Revolution.

Xi is close to two influential and outspoken officers who like him are themselves princelings, or offspring of senior leaders: army general Liu Yuan, and air force general Liu Yazhou. (The two are not related.)

Xi can even be said to be married to the military. His wife, celebrity folk singer Peng Liyuan, is a civilian member of the PLA, holding a rank equivalent to major general.

Some analysts say Xi’s family background and his own experience will enable him to

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**Claims on the South China Sea**

Six Southeast Asian nations and China contest all or parts of the Spratlys and Paracel islands in the South China Sea

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Claims on the South China Sea

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Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of State, Middlebury College, National Geographic

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exert more control over the PLA than his predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin.

“Xi has nothing to prove to the military,” said former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, a Mandarin speaking ex-diplomat who has held talks with the new Chinese leader on several occasions. “There is no reason for him to overcompensate for them.”

While it is too early to say if Xi will encourage or tolerate his outspoken generals, political analysts agree the hawks can be silenced when it suits the political leadership. When Chinese President Hu Jintao visited the United States in early 2011, it was important to Beijing that the high profile visit go smoothly and Hu receive state honours in Washington. Hawkish talk among the officer pundits died down in the run-up to that trip.

“All of a sudden, bam, these guys got turned off,” said Scott Harold, a China analyst for the Santa Monica, California-based Rand Corporation.

STAR MEDIA PERFORMERS

Ren, the vice president of China’s Academy of Military Science, is far from the most hawkish officer in the PLA.

Among the most bellicose are in a group of about 20 military officers who have become star media and online performers in recent years, including Air Force Colonel Dai Xu, retired army Major General Luo Yuan and Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong.

Their commentary and blogs get widespread coverage in state-owned media, military publications and specialist websites that cater to a vast domestic audience eager for news and opinion about China’s growing military power.

“It also serves to instill a sense of pride and patriotism that China under the present government has become strong and a force to be reckoned with by the big powers,” said Sun Yun, an expert on Chinese foreign and security policy at the Washington-based Stimson Centre.

Their commentary is in demand as part of the extensive coverage devoted to the new warships, tanks, missiles and strike aircraft now entering service with the PLA. The impact of these new weapons is endlessly analyzed, particularly in scenarios where China is at war with the United States and its regional allies.

For retired officers on modest PLA pensions, this market for commentary and analysis provides extra income and the gratification of a high profile in the media, Chinese military experts say. And, serving officers can advance their careers if their views strike a chord with the military hierarchy.

SHORT, DECISIVE WAR

The Air Force Colonel, Dai Xu, is renowned for his regular calls to arms. With China in dispute for much of last year with Japan in the East China Sea and Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea, Dai argued a short, decisive war, like China’s 1962 border clash with India, would deliver long-term peace. He also said Washington would not risk war with China over these territorial spats.

“This includes Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan, who are the three running dogs of the United States in Asia,” added Dai, a researcher at Beijing University’s China Centre for Strategic Studies. “We only need to kill one, and it will immediately bring the others to heel.”

An animated speaker with a shock of thick black hair that’s slightly long for a military man, Dai sometimes appears for television interviews in fashionable civilian clothes. On other occasions he appears on the state-controlled military channel, CCTV 7, in his neat, sky-blue air force
uniform giving lectures to junior officers on air power or conflicts in the Middle East.

He is also the author of popular books on China’s strategic outlook. His 2009 best seller, “Sea Totem, China’s Carrier,” argues that China’s new aircraft carrier, commissioned in September, is a symbol of the nation’s maritime rejuvenation.

In “C-Shaped Encirclement,” published in 2010, Dai describes how an entrapped China must break out from the curving perimeter around China the United States and its allies have established from northern Japan, through South Korea, Taiwan, South East Asia, India and up to Afghanistan. Dai did not respond to a request for comment on this article.

“EXPRESS YOUR BOTTOM LINE”

Retired army Major General Luo Yuan is a gruff, plain-speaking member of China’s top government advisory body, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Luo, who often appears in uniform for his television appearances or panel discussions, has built up a strong online and media following with frequent hard-line advice for dealing with maritime disputes.

His suggestions, however, that Taiwan and mainland China should send hundreds of fishing boats to the Diaoyu islands to fight a “people’s war at sea” and to turn the tiny, uninhabited islands into a firing range appear to have been tongue in cheek.

“Chinese aircraft can bomb the islands on Monday, Wednesday and Friday,” Luo said at a seminar in Hangzhou on September 29, “while the Taiwanese can launch attacks on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.”

Mixed in with his sometimes combustible rhetoric are practical suggestions, including his recent recommendation that China form a coastguard on the U.S. model to unify the nine government agencies that have overlapping jurisdiction over maritime policing.

In a telephone interview, Luo told Reuters from Beijing all soldiers had a duty to be “hawks”.

The chance of conflict in the South China Sea and East China sea this year is arguably high because rival claimants had enacted domestic laws to legitimise overlapping sovereignty claims and had deployed forces to prevent encroachments, he said. This meant China must take precautions to prevent clashes.

“It’s crucial to express your standpoint and bottom line so others will know that China is committed to the use of diplomatic measures to resolve the dispute but China is also not afraid of conflict,” he said.

That was basically the line from the Chinese Defence Ministry in a written reply to questions about the hawkish officers. The government would never waver in its determination to maintain China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, the ministry said. “At the same time, we have always upheld the peaceful resolution of international disputes and resolving problems with relevant countries through dialogue, negotiation and equal consultations.”

For some PLA watchers, the scope for these officers to voice controversial opinions is further evidence of expanding freedom of speech in China.

“It is a genuine debate,” said Patrick Ho, chief executive of the Hong Kong-based China Energy Fund Committee, a mainland-funded think tank that lists some outspoken military officers as consultants. “Even within the higher echelons of the military, there are conservatives and liberals, just like America and Europe. There are extreme views from each end,” added Ho, a former senior Hong Kong government official and now an advisor to Beijing.

A robust debate over national security is “normal” for a major power, Australia’s Rudd says. “In the U.S., the national security debate rages all the time. But we find it strange

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ROCKY RELATIONS: China and Japan have grown increasingly bellicose over this group of uninhabited islets and outcroppings known as the Diaoyu in China and Senkaku in Japan. REUTERS/TYRONE SIU
when it happens in another country."

Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozhong is the best-known of the hawk commentators, appearing frequently as a program host on CCTV 7 and other state-run television outlets.

Virulently anti-American, he has a low opinion of U.S. military capabilities and willingness to suffer casualties. The United States would "run like a rabbit" if China went to war with Japan over the Diaoyu Islands, he told state television on August 12.

Zhang, a professor at Beijing's National Defence University who has studied at Britain's Royal Military College of Science, is also disparaging about neighbouring countries' fighting capabilities.

Last year, during the Scarborough Shoal standoff, he told participants of a People's Daily Internet forum it would be a one-sided fight if China clashed with the Philippines. Manila's most potent warship was a 3,000-tonne, 1960s vintage former U.S. coast guard cutter, while China could deploy the 18,000-tonne amphibious landing ship, Kunlun Shan, he said.

"If there is a clash in the South China Sea, the possibility that foreign countries would intervene is low, and any conflict would not last long," he confidently predicted.

Zhang's reputation as a prognosticator, however, has taken a few lumps. He warned of a series of calamities for the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, predicting the attackers would be "engulfed in the vast ocean of a people's war." Later, in the face of online ridicule, Zhang was forced to concede on television he had insufficient "intelligence" about the disposition and strength of Iraq's forces other than what he learned on the Internet. More recently, Zhang also wrongly predicted Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi would prevail over the rebels seeking his overthrow.

Zhang was not available for comment.

On occasion, a battery of belligerent top brass will concentrate their firepower on a perceived challenge to China's territory or dignity. In September, three days after Tokyo outraged Beijing with its decision to buy the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands from a Japanese citizen who owned them, China's state media unleashed a propaganda broadside in a joint commentary from 10 generals including Dai Xu, Luo Yuan and Zhang Zhaozhong. Calling for a tough stand against Tokyo, they accused rightists in Japan of moving the country dangerously toward a revival of its World War Two militarism.

The drumbeat of threats and warnings from uniformed officers is contributing to regional apprehension about China's territorial intentions. Southeast Asian nations have welcomed the U.S. "pivot", Washington's stated intention of shifting more attention and military assets back to the region. They are strengthening ties with Washington and boosting military spending.

Right-wing voices in Japan calling for re-armament are gaining ground - a trend that solidified with December's landslide election of the hawkish Shinzo Abe as prime minister. Abe has proposed the first increase in Japan's defence budget in 11 years, citing repeated Chinese incursions into disputed waters.

In Melbourne, Ren explained that Beijing's military buildup was purely aimed at preventing a repetition of earlier foreign aggression that China had been too weak to resist. "To prevent a repetition of this historical tragedy, China has no other choice but to develop proper military strength," he said.

As PLA firepower mounts, China's political leaders will need to be careful the uniformed hawks don't go too far and increase the risk of conflict, security experts said. It might be difficult to make concessions or compromise in negotiations over disputed territory once public opinion gets whipped up.

"As nationalism is a double-edged sword," says Shen Dingli, a security expert at Shanghai's Fudan University, "the government could get hurt."

Additional reporting by Charlie Zhu, Editing by Bill Tarrant and Michael Williams

FOR MORE INFORMATION
David Lague
david.lague@thomsonreuters.com
Bill Tarrant, Enterprise Editor
william.tarrant@thomsonreuters.com
Michael Williams, Global Enterprise Editor
michael.j.williams@thomsonreuters.com