

Chinese president demands army loyalty amid growing social discontent

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In an extraordinary move that reveals real fear of social unrest, Chinese president Hu Jintao recently held a meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC) to urge his senior generals to ensure that the army would follow the orders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) "under any circumstances". The CCP rule has always rested on standing army, currently 2.3 million-strong, together with the affiliated Peoples Armed Police with another 1.5 million.

Hu criticised the poor discipline among Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers, most of whom are conscripts or young peasants who join the army in the hope of securing a job in a state enterprise after completing their military service. The official Xinhua news agency reported the meeting on February 1, but did not specify its date.

Hu reportedly told the generals: "We must realise there are shortcomings in our work.... Sometimes we don't have comprehensive understanding of the latest developments. We need to strengthen our military discipline. At various levels, [some officials] have been lax in enforcing discipline.... We must take these issues seriously and find solutions."

Xinhua gave no examples of the poor discipline, but sketchy reports have appeared in the international media in recent months of demobilised troops clashing with police over unemployment. Unlike in the past, when state enterprises allowed the regime to arrange jobs for soldiers after their army service, former soldiers now must find employment for themselves. Unemployment is rising, with more than 20 million rural migrant workers losing their jobs this year, making it extremely difficult to find work.

Hu reportedly declared at the meeting: "We should unify the thinking of all soldiers and officials to the same direction as the central authorities. We must make sure the army will follow the instruction of the CMC and the Communist Party at any time, under any circumstances. We must always be sure of the army's stability and its unity."

The message was that the army must be absolutely loyal to the CCP, and ready to carry out its orders ruthlessly, especially in the face of a social explosion. Twenty years ago, in 1989, amid anti-government protests by workers and students in Tiananmen Square and throughout the country, local garrisons in Beijing expressed sympathy for the protestors. The regime had to transport tanks and troops from remote provinces. Even these troops had to be indoctrinated for days before the generals could count on them to open fire on the "counter-revolutionary hooligans".

Today, the loyalty of soldiers is even more doubtful. In 1989, people in the countryside remained largely passive toward the urban upheavals. This is unimaginable today. Not only has the social divide deepened in rural areas, but the flood of immigrants into the cities over the past two decades has created innumerable ties between urban factory workers and the rural population. Protests of injustices in the cities now threaten to reverberate in the countryside—and vice versa.

These profound social changes also echo inside the PLA. Many soldiers come from poor rural backgrounds but also have ties to the cities. Young soldiers are bound to have brothers, sisters or girlfriends among the millions of migrant workers being brutally exploited as cheap labour. All of these processes have undermined the CCP's ability to order another Tiananmen Square massacre.

Hu also visited the Peoples Armed Police headquarters during its New Year ceremony. He called upon the paramilitary forces to "engage in comprehensive military training, step up patrols, and boost their capabilities in handling emergency situations and combating terrorism". The most likely "emergency situations" will involve protests of workers and peasants, while "terrorism" refers to the unrest among the national minorities such as in Tibet and Xinjiang.

Some analysts have predicted that 40-50 million more jobs will be lost this year among the 200 million migrant labourers. Liu Shanying, a political scientist at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, warned: "The government should not sit idly

and disappoint the farmers. If they are unemployed for a long time, it will be a time bomb."

Chinese officials have expressed fears that discontent among students, who also face mass unemployment, could become a vehicle for a broader movement of the working people. About 1.5 million college graduates were jobless by the end of last year, and there will be 6.1 million new graduates searching for jobs this year.

According to the *Asia Times* on February 11, Chinese police chiefs have been debating over the past month or so how to suppress the social unrest. Chen Jiping, the head of the Central Office for the Comprehensive Administration and of Law and Order, which coordinates the activities of the police, state security agents and judicial departments, admitted that 2009 would see "an increase in social risks and the doubling of contradictions even as the law-and-order scenario becomes more severe and complex." He added: "Feelings of dissatisfaction toward [the existing] society have grown."

Zhou Yongkang, the police chief in the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, declared: "We must boost [abilities] to handle emergencies and strengthen professional units" in order to provide, "early resolution of various types of social contradictions". In other words, the police must suppress protests early, before they lead to large-scale unrest. Wang Shengjun, the head of the Supreme Peoples Court, called for speedy and heavy sentences for "enemies of the state", for the sake of "social stability and harmony".

Police recently conducted a "strike hard" campaign in Tibet, raiding Internet cafes, hotels and other places, in the name of preventing crime. The real aim was to intimidate and suppress popular opposition. At least 50 people were arrested. Xinhua also announced last week that 950 people involved in last year's protests in Tibet had been arrested, with 76 sent to prison.

In an interview with the *Financial Times* earlier this month, Premier Wen Jiabao admitted that as many firms had collapsed, millions of workers had lost their jobs. "Some Western countries may wonder whether this will be a source of social instability," he said. However, Wen claimed that migrant workers' plots of rural land would provide a degree of social protection. Yet most workers have left the cities precisely because they could not eke out an adequate livelihood from farming.

In his interview, Wen sought to reassure global investors, declaring: "Running our own affairs well is our biggest contribution to mankind." Demonstrating his awareness of the dangers of social inequality, he declared that he always carried a copy of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* by eighteenth century

British economist, Adam Smith. Wen recalled: "If the wealth of a society is concentrated in the hands of a small number of people, then this is against the popular will, and the society is bound to be unstable."

Attempting to put a human face on the CCP police state, Wen highlighted the government's handouts to the poor. Last month, Beijing gave 74 million people under the poverty line 100-150 yuan (around \$15-\$22) and raised pension benefits for state enterprise retirees by 10 percent. Salaries for 12 million middle and high school teachers were increased significantly. The main purpose of these measures is not to ameliorate social tensions but to boost consumer spending and arrest the rapid decline in economic growth.

The global economic crisis is rapidly undermining these limited attempts at social reform. Millions of workers have been flung out of work as global demand for Chinese exports slows rapidly. Moreover private employers are increasingly clamouring for the government to scrap the Labour Contract Law, introduced just last year, which requires employers to provide limited protections to workers.

The state unions, which police workers on behalf of the government, once loudly proclaimed that they would enforce the new labour law. Now the unions have changed their tune. In November, Kong Xianghong, the vice chairman of the Guangdong branch of the All China Federation of Trade Unions declared: "Since most companies are having a tough time at present, we will temporarily stop collective bargaining. It will be resumed depending on the economic situation." In other words, when it is most needed, the unions have declared their willingness to abandon any legal restriction on capitalist exploitation.

Behind Wen's empty moral posturing, the CCP is tightening its grip over the military in preparations for the eruption of class struggles. That is the significance of Hu's demand for army loyalty: it is not social reform, but state repression that is the fundamental instrument of CCP rule.



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