

**DISTURBING BUT NOT  
POLITICALLY THREATENING:  
VETERANS' ACTIVISM  
IN THE XI ERA**

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In October 2016, more than 1,000 veterans rallied outside the Ministry of National Defence in Beijing in the People's Republic of China (PRC) to demand better government support. In February 2017, a similar incident occurred outside the offices of the Central Commission for Discipline and Inspection, also in the capital. The next year, more than 1,000 veterans from a dozen provinces gathered in Luohe city, Henan province, to support a fellow veteran whom they believed had been harassed by local police after petitioning Beijing over her husband's post-service job assignment. In June 2018, more than 2,000 veterans convened in Zhenjiang city, Jiangsu province, for a similar cause. In October that year, violence broke out in Pingdu city, Shandong province, when veterans armed themselves with wooden sticks and fire extinguishers and clashed with police.

These events highlight a growing sense of dissatisfaction among veterans 退役军人 (former members of the People's Liberation Army, including officers and soldiers) and frustration with the government's handling of their concerns. Such public displays of discontent on the part of veterans have gained the attention of international media, with the *Voice of America* describing such activism as a thorn in the flesh of the party-state.<sup>1</sup> A Hoover Institution report asserts that the ongoing activism 'must be a source of intense anxiety for [President] Xi Jinping and the leadership'.<sup>2</sup> Kevin J. O'Brien, a China expert at the University of California, Berkeley, cautions that when such 'disaffected insiders' feel that the system is not serving them well, their discontent could be a sign that the regime is corroding from within.<sup>3</sup>

Activist veterans are indeed a cause of concern to the Communist Party of China (CPC), as they possess unique features that make them more threatening than other protest groups. First, official propaganda hails veterans as heroes and defenders of the nation-state. Their public defiance of state authorities could signal declining solidarity among the groups considered to be in closest accord with the regime. Their contentious actions could also shake other people's faith in the system and embolden other protest groups. Second, veterans have exceptional disruptive capabilities, as they have acquired organisational, communication, and combat skills in the armed forces. The fact that they would have served with people from around

the country makes them more capable than other social groups of organising cross-regional collective actions. When these well-trained personnel redirect their energies from external enemies to state authorities, their actions can have severe implications for grassroots stability.

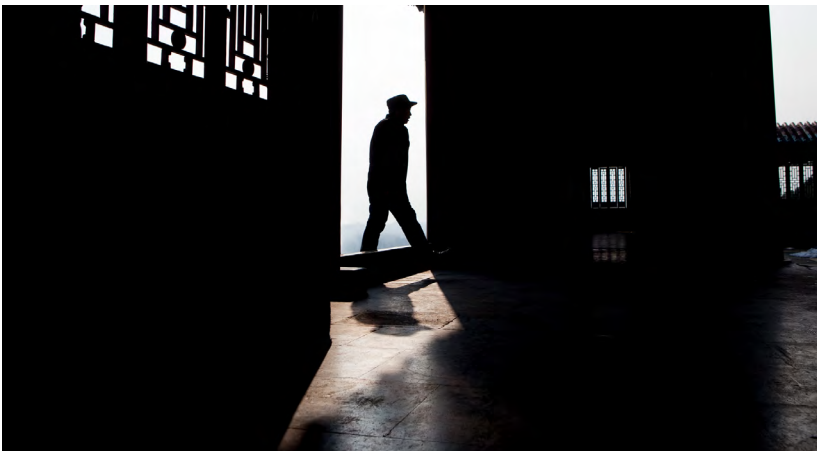
Although veteran activism can be disturbing, they do not constitute a genuine threat to the rule of the CPC. As part of a group that is broadly sympathetic to the regime, activist veterans primarily focus on addressing defective policies and policy implementation, rather than toppling the regime or seeking structural political reforms. The Ministry of Veterans Affairs, established in 2018, may not be able to address veterans' concerns in full or straight away, but it does provide alternative institutional channels through which veterans can voice their grievances, such as petitions rather than street protests.

## **Disturbing but not politically threatening**

Veteran activism is not a new phenomenon. There are accounts of veterans engaging in conflicts with low-level bureaucrats in the Mao Zedong era. For example, from January 1955 to February 1956, the Ministry of Interior (later the Ministry of Civil Affairs) received 43,363 petition letters, 90.9 percent of which were from veterans. Veterans also made 15,318 visits to the ministry. Half the topics raised in visits and letters related to job assignments, 20 percent to job changes or position adjustment, 15 percent to livelihood hardship, and 15 percent were about miscellaneous issues such as marriage.<sup>4</sup> Veterans also expressed their anger outside institutional channels, including by 'refusal to accept assigned jobs, surliness and uncooperative behaviour during and after assignment, or leaving their village to seek urban jobs through personal connections and other informal means'.<sup>5</sup> In the post-Mao era, veterans reliant on pensions that did not keep up with inflation and quickly lagged behind average wages in the expanding private sector struggled to adjust to the socioeconomic changes. Many found themselves left behind while other groups, such as private entrepreneurs, progressed. They complained about poverty, unresolved medical problems, and a lack of recognition

for their service to the nation. Of course, veterans' grievances and claims varied by the location, duration, and types of service. For example, veterans who had been involved in wars and nuclear tests—collectively called 'two-participating veterans' 两参老兵—focused on demanding state compensation for their sacrifices. Former officers mainly demanded recognition of their status as 'state cadres'.

Since the 1980s, veterans have become one of the most prominent of all disaffected groups in Chinese society. They have employed a wide repertoire of tactics to make their voices heard, including writing letters to state leaders, petitioning, contacting journalists, publishing online blogs, and mounting street demonstrations. In some cases, they have established informal fraternal organisations and launched cross-regional collective actions. In the early 2000s, the party secretary of the Law School at China University of Political Science and Law noted that the central leadership viewed veterans' activism as the second-largest source of social instability. In 2012, a public security official ranked veterans' protests the third-largest source of social instability after dispossessed farmers and the unemployed.<sup>6</sup>



**There is a growing sense of dissatisfaction among veterans**

Source: Jens Schott Knudsen, Flickr

However, despite state authorities' concern, and the commentary of Western experts such as those quoted above, veterans have never constituted a substantial threat to the Party's rule. Why?

First, veterans-turned-protesters constitute only a minority of the veteran population in China. We get the impression that veterans are highly militant mainly because their actions are more disruptive than the actions of others and thus more likely to attract international media attention. Media bias has led to a distorted picture of state-veteran interactions in China. In fact, military service remains an important channel for upward social mobility, although its political and economic benefits are no longer as significant as in the Mao era. Zhang Chunni 张春泥, a sociologist from Peking University, has analysed the China Family Panel Studies 中国家庭追踪调查, a nationally representative social survey. Writing in 2015, Zhang found that military experience brought lifelong benefits, such as educational attainment, marriage, political credentials, economic advantages, and swifter career advancement.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, my fieldwork finds most elderly veterans are proud of their service. Many of those from lower-class families changed their destinies through service. For example, 'Wei', a veteran whom I interviewed for my research, was born into a poor rural family in a northern province and, due to hardships, his parents sent him to the army at an early age in the 1960s rather than to school. After service, he was transferred to a state-owned machinery factory and later appointed as a division head in his home county's Public Security Bureau, where he obtained an urban residence permit and CPC membership. He retired as a state cadre and is now entitled to a monthly retirement pension. His experience is common among the veterans I interviewed. They are largely grateful to the government, and some are willing to see their children and grandchildren join the armed forces as well. Although Wei revealed his sympathy for protesters in the Zhenjiang and Pingdu incidents, he characterised their actions as 'irrational and unacceptable' 不明智,也不可接受.

Among the outspoken veterans, it is important to note that different individuals and groups have distinct grievances and claims, and their protests thus pose different levels of threat to sociopolitical stability. There are three types of veteran activism.

## I. Individually specific activism

Some veterans' claims are particularistic, such as individual requests for recognition of status. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, many civil affairs offices were ransacked by Red Guards and veterans' dossiers were destroyed accidentally. In the post-Mao era, many veterans' and martyrs' families were hard-pressed to prove they deserved the preferential treatment due them for their service. For instance, 'Yang' served in a nuclear test unit but could not prove his identity or access regular subsidies until his former comrades-in-arms stepped in to help by petitioning the provincial government in 2019. In another case, 'Zhang', a 90-year-old veteran at the time of interview in 2019, revealed that he had repeatedly sent petition letters to different levels of state authorities about his political status, but received no response. He had defected from the Nationalist Party and joined the CPC during the Civil War and was later involved in the Korean War. He retired at the rank of platoon commander 排长 and was eligible for job placement in state institutions, but he was instead sent back to his village as an ordinary farmer in the 1960s for unknown reasons. He has since demanded the government recognise him as a 'state cadre' and provide him with a monthly pension. His case was not resolved at the time of interview.

Others have been similarly frustrated. In 2007, the Chinese government began to provide regular pensions to veterans who had taken part in officially listed wars and nuclear tests. However, not all battles or nuclear tests are recognised. In one case, a veteran from Beijing's Miyun county petitioned to be recognised as a combatant in the Battle of the Paracel Islands 南沙群岛自卫反击战 in 1974. The local Bureau of Civil Affairs at first denied this, saying there was 'no original record' in his dossier. In 2014, the veteran petitioned the municipal bureau, but was declined again as his affiliated unit was 'not included in the official list'. In other cases, such as during the Support Vietnam, Resist America 援越抗美 campaign, many soldiers were sent on to the battlefield in plain clothes and anonymously, frustrating the later verification of their identity.

This type of grievance is less likely to develop into collective action, as it is relatively difficult for any individual to find large numbers of people with similar grievances. In addition, such issues can be more effectively addressed through institutional channels than by disruptive means such as petitions. The government seldom perceives as threatening such isolated and individual activism for personal redress.

## **II. Locality-specific activism**

Local officials' distorted policy implementations constitute another source of grievance. For example, volunteer soldiers 志願兵 or non-commissioned officers 士官 used to spend at least one decade in service and the demand for job assignments was huge. From 1978 to 2011, most demobilised soldiers were entitled to posts in state enterprises or public institutions. However, as enterprise and administrative reforms progressed, many local authorities were unable to assign jobs to all eligible veterans. As a result, veterans with connections to civilian bureaucrats obtained decent posts, while others missed out. Moreover, there were cases where veterans' job quotas were misused or sold to third parties by corrupt officials. One of the most notorious cases was the 'fake veteran' incident in Daqing city, Heilongjiang, in 2001, in which 3,000 non-veterans were found to have bought veteran identity papers for fifty thousand yuan apiece. More than 2,000 had already assumed posts assigned by local bureaus of civil affairs.

Conscripts face similar problems. In 2013, the director of the Preferential Treatment and Resettlement Office 优抚安置办公室 in Taihe county, Jiangxi, was discovered to have embezzled more than two million yuan in pension funds earmarked for deceased and disabled veterans, conscripts' families, and demobilised soldiers.<sup>8</sup> In 2016 in Leizhou city, Guangdong, 300 of 529 recipients of war-related subsidies were found to hold fabricated credentials. A further investigation revealed a criminal ring within the bureaucracy, and the deputy chiefs of the Civil Affairs Bureau and its Preferential Treatment and Resettlement Office were later prosecuted. In 2018, in Rong'an county, Guangxi, twenty-nine pension recipients were found to be fake nuclear test veterans.

This type of grievance tends to trigger parochial protests or ‘skip-level’ petitions 越级上访 in which discontented veterans bypass local authorities and directly approach those at a higher level—usually the municipal or above. For example, in September 2017, 180 veterans in Hunan province protested fake veterans appropriating their employment quotas. Although such protests can disrupt local stability, they seldom develop into broader-based movements, such as cross-regional protests.

### III. Category-specific activism

Policy changes have also frequently aggrieved some categories of veterans. The most typical case involved former officers who lost their cadre status in the 1990s. From 1993 to 1999, the government experimented with a policy that deprived military-transfer cadres 军转干部 of their cadre/administrator status in state enterprises, and downgraded them to ordinary workers. Meanwhile, for officers demobilised during this period, the state offered only a ‘one-off compensation allowance’ 一次性安置金, ranging from 30,000 to 100,000 yuan, but no further benefits such as job assignment and retirement pensions. These two groups were collectively labelled ‘demobilised and transferred officers’ (DTOs) 复转军官.

In 2011, the state annulled the trial policy and reinstated preferential benefits for newly discharged officers but refused to restore cadre status and benefits for DTOs. This aborted policy experiment created one of the most active veteran protest groups in China. A study based in a county in the Yangtze River Delta revealed that military-transfer cadres’ petitions constituted nearly 60 percent of total petition cases from 2000 to 2002, and 85 percent from 2003 to 2006.<sup>9</sup> The state still consistently refuses to restore their cadre status, and these former officers remain one of the most vocal protest groups.

Category-specific activism is more disturbing to the party-state than that driven by individual or localised claims. This is because the grievances involved are widely shared across the country, and the protests primarily target central authorities. It is more likely to lead to the establishment of nationwide networks such as fraternal associations, and even coalitions



formed with other groups of people within or connected with the regime, such as Maoist intellectuals, retired cadres, or senior People's Liberation Army officers. This is the most unsettling form of dissent for the ruling elites.

However, even these groups have no real intent to topple the CPC or the party-state, because their demands for compensation and privileges are only legitimate and recognisable under the current regime. Stressing that they have devoted their best years to it, they assert that the regime has a moral responsibility towards them. State workers laid-off in the late 1990s, when the CPC deepened its market-based economic reforms, could similarly claim that they had worked hard to build the country with little material reward, so the state had a moral responsibility towards them. Therefore, despite veterans' unique capacity for mobilisation at scale and significant disruption, they are not a threat to the regime.



**The Ministry of Veterans Affairs was established in 2018 to supervise nearly all veteran-related matters**

Source: Mingjia Zhou, Flickr

## The rise of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs

In March 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping commended military personnel as the ‘Most Adorable People’ 最可爱的人. He emphasised that military service should be respected and ‘heroes should not have to shed tears after shedding blood’ 不要让英雄既流血又流泪. In the same month, the Ministry of Veterans Affairs 退役军人事务部 was established, taking over responsibilities previously shared among different ministries, such as the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security 人力资源与社会保障部 and the Ministry of Civil Affairs 民政部.

The new ministry now supervises nearly all veteran-related matters, including employment assistance, vocational training, retired cadre resettlement, preferential treatment 优待抚恤, and the commemoration of martyrs. By April 2021, 640,000 local branches of veterans’ service centres 退役军人服务中心 had been created across the country. The ministry drafted the Veterans Protection Law 退役军人保障法 in 2020, which addressed issues such as entitlement to medical care. It has also initiated substantive actions to assist veterans. For example, in 2019, a rural veteran recalled that local officials had not visited him for more than a decade, but after 2018, they started visiting him on major dates, such as Chinese New Year and Army Day. On these visits they usually gave him gifts such as wall calendars, honorary medals, bags of rice, and slices of pork. The newly founded County Bureau of Veterans Affairs has also started organising vocational training and job introduction sessions for local veterans.

It is too early to judge whether the new ministry can achieve its stated goals, but such an institutional reform signals a strong state commitment to veterans’ affairs and may temporarily appease discontented veterans. Many described the ministry as their ‘maternal family’ 娘家人 and chose to make claims via this institutional channel. For example, in 2019, the ‘Minister’s Mailbox’ 部长信箱 received 25,601 letters, covering a range of issues such as employment, pensions, and disability assessments.<sup>10</sup> The soaring number of petition cases could create an excessive workload for frontline bureaucrats, but the new ministry itself provides an alternative channel for veterans to speak out about their interests, and could deter them from continuing street protests.

## Conclusion

Veterans' activism should not be viewed as a significant political threat, given that even the most contentious veterans are not seeking political reform or regime change, and the new ministry is designed to systematically address their grievances. Where their grievances cannot be addressed institutionally, they are still likely to protest or reach out to potential allies, including active-duty military personnel and retired cadres; if they remain aggrieved, they pose a threat to the internal cohesion of the regime.

In 2023, the Chinese Government continued to pay special attention to veterans' affairs. During the Two Sessions 两会 in March 2023, the *Government Work Report* 政府工作报告 stated that different levels of government should continue providing support for veterans with social welfare, employment, and other benefits. Given the growing unemployment rate in the (post-) COVID-19 era, the report called for extra attention to the employment of college graduates, veterans, and migrant workers. The ministry and its grassroots service centres 服务中心 or stations 服务站 post their activities on their websites and social media, especially their efforts in providing employment assistance, commemorating martyrs, and glorifying veterans and their families. The government also initiated some innovative measures, such as inviting veterans to serve as village party secretaries 兵支书.

Moreover, to pre-empt veterans' protests, the ministry and its branches keep their online petition portals and service centres open to veterans. They also hire loyal veterans to work as part-time thought instructors 思想指导员, helping maintain regular contact with local veterans, detecting their grievances, and dissuading them from taking to the street. These measures seem to be working for the time being, as veterans' overt protest actions have not been so widely reported recently. However, this cannot be seen as the end of veterans' activism. Many fundamental grievances, such as military-transfer cadres' loss of status, have not seen any substantive policy changes. Therefore, the effectiveness of the new ministry in accommodating veterans remains to be seen.

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