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Security Nexus Perspectives

## MAKING THE MOST OF IT: CHINA'S MILITARY WINS THE COVID-19 FIGHT IN WUHAN

By David Dorman\*

The heroic role of Chinese soldiers working inside Wuhan city during the height of the COVID-19 epidemic deserves the admiration of the Chinese people and the respect of persons outside China. Their risks and sacrifices have been well documented in Chinese media. Over past months, one could not turn the pages of a major Chinese publication without stories, photographs, videos and even cartoons detailing their important role in saving lives.<sup>1</sup> This is the story the Chinese Communist Party wants all people, inside and outside China, to understand. If this was all there was to say, we could also be talking about the similarly important roles other militaries around the world are playing. In China's case though, there's more.

An important part of China's domestic propaganda work since January has been to obfuscate the Communist Party's early role in allowing a virus that has killed tens of thousands worldwide to spread unchecked across and out of China.<sup>2</sup> One method has been to commandeer the image of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) medical staff saving lives in Wuhan to mask the Party's role in creating the crisis. A prominent aspect of this theme has been to portray General Secretary Xi Jinping directing China's "people's war, total war, and battle" against the virus,<sup>3</sup> including in his role as chairman of the Central Military Commission leading the Party's army into the fight.<sup>4</sup> In Xi Jinping's own words, he lists the PLA first among Party heroes who have conquered the virus in Wuhan.<sup>5</sup> The Party leadership is anxious for ordinary Chinese citizens to forget or forgive the Party's missteps and is using the PLA as one antidote. Based on the perceived success of this approach, subject matter experts in China's military have also recommended wider uses.

The Communist Party has absolute leadership over China's military diplomacy,<sup>6</sup> and the Party's current international focus is to protect and improve China's image and influence as a world leader, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> One researcher within the Chinese military raised the prospect of using the same powerful image of the PLA fighting the virus in Wuhan that worked so well domestically to expand China's military diplomacy globally.<sup>8</sup> The writer highlights that pandemic-driven interest in

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cooperating on military medicine is growing among nations and the sharing of experience and best practices in fighting the COVID-19 epidemic could be leveraged into wider forms of defense cooperation. In effect, she recommends applying a form of the Party's wider campaign to military diplomacy.

There are reflections that this expansion may already be in play in China's military diplomacy. Late last month, the PLA National Defense University's International College of Defense Studies, the PLA's highest-level foreign training organization, announced the opening of a cutting-edge online learning platform for senior foreign military and defense officials with initial course offerings such as "Lessons Learned From China's Epidemic Response" and the "Community of Common Destiny Concept,"<sup>9</sup> the latter term forming the core of General Secretary Xi Jinping's message to the G20 Virtual Summit on a China-centered global response to the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the PLA's leading online news site recently posted papers from foreign military officers attending the college praising China's response to the pandemic and highlighting the PLA's role.<sup>11</sup>

At another level, one PLA researcher recently drew combat lessons from the PLA's role in Wuhan fighting the virus. In an article published in the People's Liberation Army Daily, the Chinese military's principal media mouthpiece, the researcher highlighted the PLA's experience in Wuhan as a tool to measure and improve the PLA's combat effectiveness in battlefield medicine, with special application to future forms of informatized warfare.<sup>12</sup> While it is certainly true that military medicine plays a critical role in combat operations for any military, the timing of this recommendation is striking in its crassness. It is too early, if ever, to publish combat lessons from Wuhan. The PLA's growing interest in military medical diplomacy may be wrapped in a cloak of cooperative pandemic prevention and control, but any outreach needs to be judged against reflections of the PLA's underlying interest in improving its combat effectiveness.

The Communist Party's campaign of propaganda and disinformation has been designed to protect its image domestically and internationally in the aftermath of Wuhan. As we move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, and if the Party's campaign is successful, China will seek to leverage its remolded global health image into new forms of influence, as we have already seen in forums such as the recently-concluded G20 Virtual Summit.<sup>13</sup> China will offer proposals for change and cooperation, including in areas of military diplomacy, and we should not judge their merit in advance. But we do need to carefully evaluate the motivations behind each before choosing. China's post-Wuhan ambitions are wider than we think.

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