

The China Quarterly



109

March 1987

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The Chinese People's Liberation Army 60 Years On: Transition Towards a New Era

On 1 August 1987 the People's Republic of China celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Nanchang Uprising, the event regarded as marking the birth of the communist armed forces, soon best known by their abbreviated title, the Red Army. Some 10 years later these forces were designated as the Eighth Route and New Fourth Armies, subsequently to become the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). In the 60 years of their existence the armed forces have played a vital role both as the instrument of revolution, and as the guardian of the state and the system created by revolution. All anniversaries in China since 1949 have been important occasions, for the armed forces themselves, for the Chinese state and for its leadership. There have been, too, variable, but never insignificant foreign affairs dimensions to such occasions which have served to elucidate the internal position of this instrument of party and state power.

In the past few years China has been engaged in an effort to modernize, the successful outcome of which would, inevitably, involve institutional transformation on an unprecedented scale. We have, therefore, commissioned the following symposium on the PLA, the publication of which, close to the convening of the 13th National Party Congress (itself to be the subject of an analysis in issue No. 114 of The China Quarterly), is timely.

It is evident that although the PLA has had a modern arm, its nuclear missiles, for some time, it still bears the hallmark of the revolutionary past. Equally clearly, while undergoing restructuring, the PLA unquestionably remains the ultimate source of revolutionary power in China. However, on balance, recent trends, including those signalled by the 13th NPC, suggest that the current transition, intended to promote modernization and enhance professionalism, once achieved, could introduce an era in which, compared to the past, the PLA and its leaders will play a much less overtly active role in Chinese politics.

BRIAN HOOK

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