

Your Opinions Are Important.

Please participate in a brief survey.

[Click here](#)

opinion-central

Economist.com

WORLD
ASIA

China

Beware of demob

Nov 8th 2007 | YANTAI

From The Economist print edition

Reuters



A reserve army of unemployed ex-servicemen worries China's leaders

[Get article background](#)

IT IS the army's recruitment season in Yantai, a port in Shandong province in northern China. A poster in one fishing village calls on citizens to report any attempt to secure one of the coveted vacancies by paying bribes or forging papers. But the Yantai authorities are far more worried about what happens when servicemen are discharged. Here and elsewhere angry ex-soldiers have been taking to the streets.

Over the past couple of years protests by demobilised soldiers have become a potent challenge to local governments trying to keep the lid on unrest during a period of wrenching social and economic change. The unrest has embarrassed the ruling Communist Party, which came to power militarily and might have fallen in 1989 but for the army's crushing of pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square.

The ex-servicemen's main grievance is the difficulty of settling back into civilian life. Most soldiers from towns are assigned jobs in the civilian sector when they leave the army. But this has become increasingly difficult because of the dismantling of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in recent years and the resentment of surviving SOEs at having ex-soldiers foisted on them. Rural soldiers—the bulk of the non-officer ranks—are being sent back to villages where there is next to nothing to do.

In Yantai around 2,000 ex-soldiers gathered in mid-July outside the local legislature to demand better benefits. They also wanted to make the point that the toothless legislature should be doing a better job of supervising the government. The Yantai authorities responded unfavourably. Activists say that police have stepped up surveillance of their homes and that plainclothes officers often follow them. Police broke up your correspondent's meeting with a group of ex-servicemen, on the pretext of a passport check.

Despite the harassment, unrest has continued. On September 19th several hundred protesters, including former servicemen from across Shandong, gathered outside the provincial government headquarters in the capital, Jinan, say activists in Yantai. In early September apparently co-ordinated unrest broke out in at least three cities in other provinces. Hundreds of ex-soldiers rampaged through centres run by the Ministry of Railways where they were undergoing training. The activist say that last week around 300 ex-servicemen protested outside the city government's offices in Tai'an, also in Shandong.

Veterans have also taken their grievances to Beijing. In April 2005 hundreds of them from around the country, some dressed in their old uniforms, staged sit-ins outside the army's General Political Department, responsible for demobilised soldiers. Such big gatherings outside a sensitive official building are highly unusual in the capital. But smaller groups of ex-army petitioners still visit, despite efforts by police to round them up and send them back to their hometowns.

China is no stranger to protests. Thousands occur every year involving disparate groups of people: peasants enraged at being turfed off their land by local governments; city-dwellers whose houses are being bulldozed to make way for development; migrant workers complaining about not being paid; and workers laid off from SOEs. But these demonstrations are usually poorly organised, ill co-ordinated and easily contained by local governments.

Given the army's vital importance to the maintenance of party rule, the official press is especially reticent about publicising unrest among ex-servicemen. Chinese academics rarely mention the topic. But in an article that appeared in the spring edition of *China Security*, a quarterly published in Washington, DC, Yu Jianrong of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said that demobilised soldiers could act as a "bond" to bring together isolated disaffected groups. Mr Yu said ex-servicemen in the countryside, who he said numbered 20m, had the "social capital, organisational, networking and mobilisation capabilities to be the bridge between workers and peasants". In the southern province of Hunan, he said, veterans had formed an "anti-corruption brigade" including laid-off workers, peasants and intellectuals of 100,000 members. This number is unverifiable, given the underground nature of any such movement.

Party leaders have called on local governments to give priority to keeping veterans happy. But this is not easy. In addition to the regular turnover, hundreds of thousands have been demobilised in recent years as a result of efforts to trim the military's enormous size. In the decade up to 2004, some 7m enlisted people left the military. Another 600,000 officers were given jobs in the civilian sector. Between 2003 and 2005 the army was trimmed by some 200,000 people, leaving it 2.3m-strong.

Local governments are supposed to find jobs for ex-officers. Since 2001, in response to dwindling opportunities in the state sector, the central government has been encouraging officers to accept cash pay-outs and find their own work. But local governments do not have enough cash to provide much of a cushion. The majority of officers apparently still prefer the supposedly safer option of being assigned positions. *Xinhua*, a state-run news agency, said in September that 256,000 officers had been given civilian jobs in the past three years. Only 49,000 had chosen to find work by themselves. Despite government promises of employment, veterans complain, some end up destitute.

Hu Xingdou, of the Beijing Institute of Technology, says peasant-soldiers are the government's biggest headache. Taught idealism in the army, he says, they go back to no work and a countryside rife with corruption. Former soldiers, he says, are often at the forefront of peasant unrest. Let the party beware.