



# PLA UPDATE

A monthly newsletter focused on the internal and external affairs of the PLA

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Welcome to the April 2023 edition of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA's newsletter on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). We begin this issue by examining PLA views on an emerging People's Republic of China (PRC) concept for better integrating national economic and defense resources. We then look at two developments in PLA efforts to recruit civilian personnel and officers from civilian universities. The next two summaries cover PLA Army and Joint Logistic Support Force (JLSF) assessments of personnel's capabilities for operating unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and commanding brigades, respectively. We conclude with highlights from China and Cambodia's latest Golden Dragon exercise.

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## SENIOR LEADERSHIP GUIDANCE

### PLA DISCUSSES INTEGRATION OF STRATEGIC SYSTEMS, CAPABILITIES

**Since the March 2023 National People’s Congress, PLA subject matter experts have begun discussing an emerging concept related to maximizing efficiencies in economics and defense.** On March 8, in a [speech](#) at the First Session of the 14th National People’s Congress, PRC leader Xi Jinping called for the “consolidation and enhancement of integrated national strategic systems and capabilities” (巩固提高一体化国家战略体系和能力). According to Xi, better coordination between economic development and defense requirements is essential to realizing the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and the PLA’s transformation into a “world-class military.”<sup>1</sup>

Xi Jinping had briefly referred to the “consolidation and enhancement of integrated national strategic systems and capabilities” in his report to the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2022.<sup>2</sup> PLA subject matter experts also had been advocating for the idea before the Party Congress.<sup>3</sup> Xi’s speech in March shone a spotlight on the concept, demanding the PLA’s attention and implementation.

Since Xi’s speech, PLA institutions and experts have begun penning articles affirming and discussing the task of improving China’s integration of national strategic systems and capabilities. For example, an [article](#) by a PLA National Defense University (NDU) research center dedicated to studying Xi Jinping Thought asserted that China’s national security is in a “high-risk period” as countries around the world are uniting various instruments of national power in pursuit of their own strategic aims. To “win the initiative in military competition,” the NDU research center argued that China must muster and integrate all its national resources, including a “system of military forces” supported by and in support of the national economy.<sup>4</sup>

An [article](#) by an author affiliated with the Armed Forces Political Work Research Institute of the PLA Academy of Military Sciences described the concept of “consolidation and enhancement of integrated national strategic systems and capabilities” as essential to future competition in priority areas for strategic capability development. According to the author, “emerging fields,” including “maritime, space, cyber, biology, and new energy,” have “enormous power and potential” and must be strengthened to improve national strategic systems and capabilities. The author claimed that “getting a grasp” on these fields is key to success in future competition.<sup>5</sup>

Based on multiple articles discussing Xi’s March 8 speech,<sup>6</sup> the concept of “consolidation and enhancement of integrated national strategic systems and capabilities” is clearly related to the PLA’s concept of “military-civil fusion” (军民融合). The degree of continuity between these two concepts remains to be seen.

## ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

### EARLY 2023 OFFICER RECRUITMENT OF CIVILIAN UNIVERSITY GRADS

**In late March, the PLA completed the first stage of a two-stage annual effort to directly commission civilian university students for select command and technical officer billets.** In mid-March, the PLA [announced](#) that it was directly commissioning about 3,500 soon-to-graduate students of civilian universities for officer billets.<sup>7</sup> The PLA began this recruitment program in 2020 after canceling its earlier program that recruited officer candidates at the start of their civilian university studies. The announced recruitment target for 2023 is similar to that for 2022, when the PLA sought to directly commission about [3,600](#) civilian university graduates.<sup>8</sup> In a break from past practice, however, 2023's recruitment effort is divided into an "early 2023" phase—with an application period of March 22 to 31—and a later phase at a yet-unspecified date.



Footage of the PLA Rocket Force's effort to recruit soon-to-graduate civilian university students in March 2023.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

Unlike the PLA's highly centralized conscription and recruitment program that fills the ranks of the PLA's enlisted corps, PLA officer recruitment at civilian universities is conducted separately by each service. Directly commissioning civilian university graduates helps the PLA fill gaps in high-demand officer billets that have not been met by the pool of candidates who receive undergraduate degrees and commissions from military academies. PLA services seek to commission civilian university graduates for both command and technical billets. For example, the PLA Army [stated](#) that it mainly sought to recruit civilian university graduates in early 2023 for platoon commander, staff officer, assistant translator, and assistant engineer billets.<sup>9</sup>

## LAWS AND REGULATIONS

### NEW PHYSICAL EXAM STANDARDS FOR SELECT OFFICERS, CIVILIANS

**The PLA has adopted a more nuanced approach to assessing the physical and psychological fitness of civilian personnel and certain officer candidates.** On March 29, a *PLA Daily* [report](#) announced that the PLA as a whole is implementing new physical examination standards for the selection of (1) civilian personnel and (2) "supplementary officers," which includes civilian college graduates directly commissioned as officers as well as enlisted personnel approved to study and receive commissions at military academies.<sup>10</sup> The report explained that the new standards are being rolled out to meet manpower requirements for the PLA's growing ranks of technology-intensive "new-type operational forces."<sup>11</sup>

The new physical exam guidelines increase physical fitness requirements for some personnel while lowering them for others. For example, standards may be raised for officers in occupations that have greater physical strength and eyesight requirements, such as special operations and aviation. Standards may be lowered for others, such as civilian personnel and officers with high-demand skill sets. For example, in a *PLA Daily*

[interview](#), an unnamed Central Military Commission Logistic Support Department Health Bureau official stated that the new standards relax the height, weight, and vision requirements for “urgently needed” officers and “special” civilian technical talent.<sup>12</sup>

## PLA ARMY

### ARMY UAV PILOTS EARN LICENSES IN NEW SKILLS ASSESSMENT

**The PLA Army has initiated a new program for certifying personnel to operate multiple types of UAVs.** In late March, PRC media [reported](#) that the PLA Army had recently conducted its first occupational qualification assessment for UAV operators.<sup>13</sup> The assessment was organized by an unidentified center of the PLA Army Staff Department and the PLA Army Engineering University’s Ordnance Non-Commissioned Officer School. The occupational training and certification framework reportedly began two years ago as a trial before being expanded to the entire PLA Army in March 2023.

During the March assessment, army personnel demonstrated their UAV mission planning and execution acumen, including the takeoff, flight, and landing of multiple types of UAVs. The 46 personnel who passed the assessment earned both military and civilian UAV pilot licenses. A *PLA Daily* [report](#) quoted an unnamed PLA Army Staff Department official as saying that this new test is part of the PLA Army’s efforts to accelerate development of “new-domain, new-quality operational capabilities.”<sup>14</sup>



Three types of UAVs shown in PRC state media footage of the PLA Army’s first occupational qualification assessment for UAV operators.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

## PLA JOINT LOGISTIC SUPPORT FORCE

### JLSF HOLDS ANNUAL JINGWU JOINT LOGISTIC COMPETITION

**The 2023 iteration of the competition tested JLSF brigade commanders' leadership skills for the first time.** China Military Online [reported](#) that the JLSF held its annual command skills competition Jingwu Joint Logistic 2023 in central Guangdong Province on April 4. The competition reportedly involved 200 commanders and staff personnel from multiple JLSF units. It tested their abilities to lead unit activities in "13 subject areas from two categories" of joint logistic support operations.

JLSF Training and Management Department Director Zhang Cao was quoted as saying that the competition baselined the command skills of JLSF "third-level headquarters" and brigade commanders in subjects such as "military theory, map measurement, image interpretation, communication equipment operation, and light weapon shooting."<sup>15</sup>



JLSF personnel take a military theory test during Jingwu Joint Logistic 2023.

Source: [China Military Online](#).

## MILITARY DIPLOMACY AND OVERSEAS ACTIVITIES

### PLA, CAMBODIAN MILITARY CONDUCT COMBINED EXERCISE GOLDEN DRAGON 2023

**PRC media coverage of the combined exercise highlighted unity among the PLA and the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF).** From March 23 to April 5, personnel from the PLA and the RCAF carried out exercise Golden Dragon 2023 at the Royal Gendarmerie Training Center roughly 60 miles north of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In this fifth iteration of the bilateral exercise series (the last one was held in 2020), the two militaries conducted training activities focused on "security operations for major events and humanitarian rescue." The [stated purpose](#) of the exercise is to "consolidate and develop the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership between China and Cambodia, increase political mutual trust, and expand military exchanges."<sup>16</sup>

Although media reporting suggested that Golden Dragon 2023's activities were relatively low level and highly scripted, the exercise series is important to the PRC and Cambodia. Cambodia has reportedly agreed to host [the PLA's second overseas support base](#), and Golden Dragon is an important military engagement opportunity for China to strengthen ties with the PLA's future host country. At the same time, the exercise provides the RCAF an opportunity to receive new military equipment and training from the PLA as well as to develop certain operational capacities.

The exercise reportedly began with the [first ever China-Cambodia maritime training event](#), a combined maneuver and communications-at-sea drill. During the maritime event, PLA Navy Type 071 LPD, CNS *Jingangshan*, met and coordinated with two Royal Cambodian Navy patrol craft in Cambodian coastal waters before docking at Sihanoukville Port to deliver PLA personnel to participate in the exercise's main activities onshore.<sup>17</sup>

Once ashore, PLA Army and PLA JLSF personnel participated in the following training events with RCAF units.

- A counterterrorism drill involving “mixed formations” of PLA and RCAF personnel.
- Live-fire small arms shooting using each other’s automatic rifles, sniper rifles, and heavy machine guns.
- A minesweeping and explosive ordnance disposal drill.
- A pandemic prevention and control drill involving emergency medical response training.
- Military diplomacy activities, including donation of school supplies to local schools and medical materials to community hospitals.<sup>18</sup>

PRC media coverage of the exercise sought to positively portray PLA and RCAF personnel cooperating and learning from each other in “mixed-group combined training.” There were reportedly some difficulties in training together in mixed groups due to differences in language and tactics, techniques, and procedures. For example, one PRC state television [report](#) on the exercise noted that the two sides spent several days learning to communicate with each other using “hand signals, body language, and specific commands.” With these, the two sides’ personnel were reportedly able to “accurately transmit tactical information with a glance or a hand gesture.”<sup>19</sup>



Clockwise from top left: PLA and RCAF troops conducting a counterterrorism drill, performing a minesweeping and explosive ordnance disposal drill, unloading humanitarian aid supplies donated by the PLA, and carrying out a pandemic prevention and control drill.

Source: CCTV-7 reports (1), (2), (3), (4).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Zhang Leilei (张汨汨) and Mei Changwei (梅常伟), “(Two Sessions Authorized Release) Xi Jinping Emphasizes While Attending Plenary Meeting of PLA and PAP Delegation: Unify Thinking and Understanding, Strengthen Mission Responsibility, Latch On to Work Implementation, Strive to Break New Ground in Integrating National Strategic Systems and Capabilities” ((两会受权发布) 习近平在出席解放军和武警部队代表团全体会议时强调统一思想认识 强化使命担当 狠抓工作落实 努力开创一体化国家战略体系和能力建设新局面), Xinhua (新华网), Mar. 8, 2023, [http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2023-03/08/c\\_1129421490.htm](http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2023-03/08/c_1129421490.htm).

<sup>2</sup> “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oct. 25, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202210/t20221025\\_10791908.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html).

<sup>3</sup> PLA National Defense University professor Jiang Luming, an influential thinker behind China’s military-civil fusion concept, has penned articles going back to at least the early 2010s that advocate for more closely integrating national strategic systems and capabilities. See, for example, Jiang Luming (姜鲁鸣), “Accelerate the Formation of Integrated National Strategic Systems and Capabilities” (加快构建一体化的国家战略体系和能力), *National Defense Education* (国防教育), no. 11 (2018): 50-51, [http://www.81.cn/rmjz\\_203219/gfjy\\_203685/2018nd11q/gflt\\_204410/9439681\\_2.html](http://www.81.cn/rmjz_203219/gfjy_203685/2018nd11q/gflt_204410/9439681_2.html).

<sup>4</sup> National Defense University Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era Research Center (国防大学习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想研究中心), “Consolidate and Enhance Integrated National Strategic Systems and Capabilities” (巩固提高一体化国家战略体系和能力), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Mar. 20, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/yw\\_208727/16210487.html](http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16210487.html).

<sup>5</sup> Chen Dongheng (陈东恒), “Strive to Break New Ground in Integrating National Strategic Systems and Capabilities” (努力开创一体化国家战略体系和能力建设新局面), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Mar. 20, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/gfbszbqxq/index.html?paperName=zggfb&paperDate=2023-03-20&paperNumber=03&articleid=901316](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbqxq/index.html?paperName=zggfb&paperDate=2023-03-20&paperNumber=03&articleid=901316).

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the articles cited above, see, for example, Fei Shiting (费士廷), “Consolidate and Enhance Integrated National Strategic Systems and Capabilities: Chairman Xi’s Important Speech at the Plenary Meeting of the PLA and PAP Delegation Prompts Enthusiastic Response” (巩固提高一体化国家战略体系和能力——习主席在解放军和武警部队代表团全体会议上发表重要讲话引起热烈反响), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Mar. 9, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2023-03/09/content\\_335141.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2023-03/09/content_335141.htm); and Zhang Leilei (张汨汨) and Mei Changwei (梅常伟), “Two Sessions Special: Bring Together the Consolidation and Enhancement of National Strategic Systems and Capabilities into a Majestic Strength: Chairman Xi’s Important Speech at the Plenary Meeting of the PLA and PAP Delegation Prompts Enthusiastic Response” (两会特稿 | 汇聚起巩固提高一体化国家战略体系和能力的磅礴力量——习近平主席在解放军和武警部队代表团发表的重要讲话引起强烈反响), Xinhua (新华网), Mar. 10, 2023, [http://www.news.cn/politics/2023lh/2023-03/10/c\\_1129423739.htm](http://www.news.cn/politics/2023lh/2023-03/10/c_1129423739.htm).

<sup>7</sup> “Early 2023 Military Direct Selection and Recruitment of Fresh Graduates from Ordinary Colleges and Universities Fully Underway” (2023年上半年军队直接选拔招录普通高等学校应届毕业生工作全面展开), Military Talent Net (军队人才网), Mar. 17, 2023, [http://81rc.81.cn/sy/gzdt\\_210283/16210167.html](http://81rc.81.cn/sy/gzdt_210283/16210167.html).

<sup>8</sup> “Chinese Military to Recruit 3,600-Odd Fresh College Graduates as Officers,” China Military Online, Mar. 14, 2022, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2022-03/14/content\\_10140693.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2022-03/14/content_10140693.htm).

<sup>9</sup> “Announcement on the Early 2023 Army Direct Selection and Recruitment of Fresh Graduates from Ordinary Colleges and Universities” (2023年上半年陆军直接选拔招录普通高等学校应届毕业生公告), Military Talent Net (军队人才网), Mar. 21, 2023, [http://81rc.81.cn/sy/tzgg\\_210284/16210915.html](http://81rc.81.cn/sy/tzgg_210284/16210915.html).

<sup>10</sup> The new standards do not appear to apply to PRC high schoolers applying to PLA academies as part of the country’s annual national college entrance examination, nor to the recruitment and conscription of enlisted personnel.

- <sup>11</sup> Sun Xingwei (孙兴维), "Full-Scale Implementation of New Standards for Physical Examinations in Military's Selection of Officers and Civilian Personnel" (军队选拔军官和文职人员体检全面实施新标准), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Mar. 29, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-03-29&paperNumber=01&articleid=902015](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-03-29&paperNumber=01&articleid=902015).
- <sup>12</sup> Zhang Peng (张鹏) and Sun Xingwei (孙兴维), "Scientifically and Accurately Provide High-Quality Talent Resources to Preparations for War: CMC Logistic Support Department Health Bureau Leader Responds to Reporter's Questions on 'Physical Examination Standards of Military Selection of Officers and Civilian Personnel'" (科学精准为备战打仗提供优质人力资源——中央军委后勤保障部卫生局有关负责人就《军队选拔军官和文职人员体检标准》相关问题答记者问), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Mar. 29, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-03-29&paperNumber=02&articleid=902020](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-03-29&paperNumber=02&articleid=902020).
- <sup>13</sup> "PLA Army Launches Occupational Training, Certification for UAV Pilots," China Military Online, Mar. 31, 2023, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16213662.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16213662.html).
- <sup>14</sup> Peng Liang (彭亮) and Li Hao (李浩), "Army for the First Time Carries Out UAV Professional Soldier Occupational Qualification Training and Assessment Certification" (陆军首次开展无人机专业士兵职业资格培训考核认证), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Mar. 30, 2023, <http://www.81.cn/jwtt/16213127.html>.
- <sup>15</sup> Zhang Tiansu and Lin Duo, "Joint Logistic Support Force Organizes Command Skill Competition," China Military Online, Apr. 4, 2023, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16214318.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16214318.html).
- <sup>16</sup> "Cambodia-China 'Golden Dragon 2023' Joint Military Exercise Kicks Off," Xinhua, Mar. 23, 2023, <http://english.news.cn/20230323/1f6ac2503f134a098222cb57fe9cfd51/c.html>.
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- <sup>18</sup> "Cambodia-China 'Golden Dragon 2023' Joint Military Exercise Kicks Off," Xinhua, Mar. 24, 2023, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2023/0324/c90000-10226925.html>.
- <sup>19</sup> "In China-Cambodia 'Golden Dragon 2023' Combined Exercise, Two Sides' Participating Forces Carry Out Single-Topic Mixed-Group Training" (中柬“金龙-2023”联演 双方参演官兵开展单课目混编同训), *Military Report* (军事报道), CCTV-7, Mar. 26, 2023, <https://tv.cctv.com/2023/03/26/VIDE12tRWf2g4Di4kJarMZtD230326.shtml?spm=C52346.PiumOrlYLNUM.E0VXtwLj8YU7.15>.



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