



# PLA UPDATE

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

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Welcome to the March 2023 edition of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA's newsletter on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). This issue focuses on human capital issues in the PLA.

We begin by analyzing a newly enacted law and an expanded PLA recruitment campaign designed to increase the attractiveness of careers as reservists and carrier fighter pilots, respectively. Next, we consider recent accounts of PLA Army and China Coast Guard (CCG) organizations using simulation technologies to improve officer decision-making. We conclude with some initial impressions of the latest session of China's National People's Congress (NPC), including implications of the announced defense budget and a look at how the demographics of the PLA's NPC delegation reflect (or don't) the PLA's total active duty force.

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## LAWS AND REGULATIONS

### NEW LAW TO SUPPORT TRANSFORMATION OF PLA'S RESERVE FORCE

**The PLA reportedly seeks to improve the attractiveness of reserve duty by guaranteeing more benefits for reservists.** On March 1, the new [Reservists Law of the PRC](#) went into effect.<sup>1</sup> According to a spokesperson from China's defense ministry, the law is an ["important" piece of legislation](#) that will help promote the "transformation and development of the PLA's reserve force." The spokesperson said that the law seeks to improve reservists' ability to execute missions, enhance existing institutions and support systems, and facilitate the recruitment of reserve talent from a "larger scope" and "broader fields."<sup>2</sup>

The Reservists Law addresses areas such as reservists' military ranks, training, promotion, management, mobilization, benefits, and retirement. We summarize several key areas from the law below.

**Definition of reservists.** The new law specifies that the term *reservist* applies to PRC citizens 18 years or older who are "preassigned" to PLA active duty units or are assigned to reserve units. Reservists include both enlisted personnel and officers. The law specifies that PLA reservists are an "important source" of supplementary officers and enlisted personnel during wartime.

**Oversight of reservists.** The law identifies China's Central Military Commission (CMC) as the sole entity responsible for "leadership" over matters concerning the reserves. The CMC has been exercising this role since July 1, 2020, [before which](#) reserve personnel work was overseen by the "dual leadership" of the military and local governments.<sup>3</sup>

The law divides specific responsibilities for work related to reserve personnel among various CMC departments. Of note, the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department is responsible for assigning reservists to units and calling up reservists for duty when needed.

**Sources of reservists.** According to the law, the PLA shall recruit reservists mainly from the ranks of former PLA active duty personnel and technicians.<sup>4</sup> New reservists must serve a minimum of four years.

**Increased benefits for reservists.** The law outlines benefits aimed at improving reserve duty's attractiveness, as Zhang Yaokui—a PLA National Defense University Joint Operations Academy professor who helped draft the law—explained in a February [interview](#) with *PLA Daily*. According to Zhang, the law addresses several "long-term dilemmas" in reservists' treatment and support by establishing financial aid and subsidies for items such as food and transportation. Zhang also noted that the law clarifies that reservists participating in military training and operations are entitled to medical insurance and compensation on par with active duty servicemembers. Such support, said Zhang, will alleviate reservists' concerns about the potential effects of their death or injury on their family.<sup>5</sup>

**Reservist ranks and retirement.** The law specifies the ranks and mandatory retirement ages for reserve officers and enlisted personnel (see tables below.) Of note, although reserve non-commissioned officer (NCO) and junior enlisted ranks overlap with those of active duty personnel, there are no general officer ranks in the PLA's reserve forces.

The release of the PRC's Reservists Law represents one of several recent pieces of PRC legislation with provisions to improve the recruitment and retention of specific types of military personnel. For an overview of a similar effort reflected in the release of [new regulations for the PLA's civilian employees](#), see the February 2023 edition of *PLA Update*.<sup>6</sup>

**Ranks and Retirement Ages of Reserve Officers**

Reserve Grades	Reserve Ranks	Mandatory Retirement Age
Reserve Field Grade Officers	Reserve Senior Colonel	60
	Reserve Colonel	
	Reserve Lieutenant Colonel	
	Reserve Major	
Reserve Company Grade Officers	Reserve Captain	Command track officers: 45 Technical track officers: 50
	Reserve Lieutenant	
	Reserve Second Lieutenant	

**Ranks and Retirement Ages of Reserve NCOs and Junior Enlisted**

Reserve Grades	Reserve Ranks	Mandatory Retirement Age
Reserve Senior Grade NCOs	Reserve Master Sergeant Class One	55
	Reserve Master Sergeant Class Two	
	Reserve Master Sergeant Class Three	
Reserve Intermediate Grade NCOs	Reserve Sergeant First Class	45
	Reserve Sergeant Second Class	
Reserve Junior Grade NCOs	Reserve Sergeant	30
	Reserve Corporal	
Reserve Junior Enlisted	Reserve Private First Class	30
	Reserve Private	

## PLA NAVY

### NAVY CASTS WIDER NET AMID SHORTFALLS OF CARRIER-BASED PILOTS

**The PLA Navy announced that its carrier aviation program will recruit flight cadets from three groups of previously untapped talent.** In late February, PRC media [reported](#) that the PLA Navy had recently begun recruiting and selecting flight cadets for 2023.<sup>7</sup> Reportedly, this year's recruitment of the future pilots of carrier-borne J-15 fighters will expand beyond the traditional focus on high school students and graduates of military academic institutions.

According to related media reports, this year's carrier aviation flight cadets will include individuals from the following three groups.

- **Civilian college graduates.** Students of "first-tier" civilian universities who are majoring in science or engineering disciplines and who are set to graduate in the current year are welcome to apply.
- **College-educated enlisted personnel.** Navy enlisted who have received at least some level of college education are eligible. Enlisted recruitment for carrier air wings may expand beyond naval units in the future, as PRC media described the limited scope for 2023 as an "experimental" effort.
- **Women.** The PLA Navy's carrier aviation program will now recruit women. Previously only men have flown J-15s. A Xinhua report was "[hopeful](#)" that China's first female shipborne aircraft pilot would

be selected this year, suggesting that the PLA Navy has no quota or firm requirement for recruiting women in 2023.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the selection process, PRC media noted that candidates can apply via the [PLA Navy's pilot recruitment website](#), after which they will undergo a process of reviews and assessments, including physical, psychological, and political examinations.<sup>9</sup> The selection process will focus on candidates' "aviation capability."<sup>10</sup> Those selected will be admitted to the PLA Naval Aviation University in Yantai, Shandong, for three to four years of flight training before deployment.

PRC media reporting suggested that the PLA Navy decided to expand recruitment after struggling to meet J-15 pilot quotas following the launch of China's third aircraft carrier in 2022. As an unnamed officer quoted on the PLA's official website said, the PLA Navy's "accelerated transformation" in recent years has made the [demand for carrier-based aircraft pilots](#) "increasingly urgent."<sup>11</sup> *PLA Daily* echoed this sentiment, stating that China's aircraft carrier program "quickly developed" amid the navy's "transformative development" and that "the need for shipborne aircraft pilot talent" has become "[more pressing.](#)"<sup>12</sup>



Senior Captain Zhan Kejia, head of the PLA Navy's officer management bureau, discusses the new recruitment drive on the nightly news program *Military Report*. The bottom caption reads "shipborne aircraft aviators are the core of carrier combat power."

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

## PLA ARMY

### BRIGADE SEEKS TO REMEDY PROBLEMS IN OFFICERS' "DATA THINKING"

**A PLA Army brigade has taken steps to encourage commanders to better use data for operational planning and execution.** On February 28, *PLA Daily* published an [article](#) documenting changes underway to improve the "data thinking" of officers in an unidentified 71st Group Army brigade.<sup>13</sup> The article provided a parable-like retelling of a previous opposing forces (OPFOR) exercise held at an unspecified date in which one of the brigade's battalions suffered a grievous defeat at the hands of its opponent because of the latter's more adept use of data. At the start of the exercise, the opposing force had reportedly seized the initiative by acquiring large quantities of battlefield data through unmanned aerial vehicles and "portable reconnaissance equipment" and by using "military modeling technology" to generate a "near-real-time 3D map" of the battalion's key assets.

During the OPFOR exercise's hotwash, the brigade's commander reportedly attributed the battalion's poor performance to its commander's "reliance on experience and direct observation" to make decisions. The brigade leader said that only by improving "data thinking" during peacetime could forces be employed "precisely" during wartime and increase their chances of operational success.

In response to the brigade commander's remarks, the unit reportedly undertook efforts to improve the ability of commanders at all levels to acquire, analyze, and use data. For example, brigade members expanded the unit's use of military simulation technologies, conducted wargames to analyze "patterns and trends of confrontation," and required that commanders become familiar with "basic operational data" to enable their use of big data and cloud platforms.

The final section of the *PLA Daily* article tied the 71st Group Army brigade's efforts to a more widespread data literacy problem throughout the PLA. The article accused "certain commanders" of suffering "sensory failure" on the battlefield, claiming that they fail to pay adequate attention to reconnaissance data and thereby lack a "comprehensive, timely, and accurate analysis and assessment of the enemy situation." The article warned that the "form of warfare" is rapidly changing to become more "informatized" and "intelligentized" and that data acumen will be essential to "seize the initiative in future warfare."

## PEOPLE'S ARMED POLICE

### COAST GUARD SIMULATOR TO IMPROVE SPEED OF TACTICAL RESPONSES

**People's Armed Police (PAP) CCG Academy faculty have reportedly developed a new computer simulation system to train officers to respond more quickly and effectively to situations at sea.**

According to a February 15 [article](#) from *China Youth Daily*, factors such as the CCG's transfer to the PAP in 2018, improvements to CCG ships and equipment, and increasingly complex "rights protection" and law enforcement tasks have increased requirements for tactical research, education, and training. To address these requirements, a faculty team oversaw upgrades to the academy's preexisting simulator, including the integration of "elements of wargaming, mixed reality, hybrid intelligence, and digital twin technology" to improve the realism of simulated environments.

The upgraded system is reportedly located in a 600-square-meter space within the academy in which a red cell, blue cell, and control cell are situated in three sectors and physically isolated from outside networks. Simulator users engage in a variety of tasks, including "maritime security, patrols of administrated waters, routine maritime law enforcement, responding to emergencies, and cooperation with foreign law enforcement."

Commenting on the simulator's benefits, CCG academy professor Zang Jianzhong said that training in complex, quickly changing conditions will help improve commanders' decision-making capabilities and enable them to respond more "calmly" to urgent situations. Academy professor Li Shixiong added that the simulator will help satisfy the need for "high-tempo modern maritime response actions" by improving levels of "automation and intelligentization in ship command."<sup>14</sup>

## NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS

### PRC FAVORS GUNS OVER BUTTER, SELF-RELIANCE IN DEFENSE TECH

**Developments during the First Session of the NPC (March 5 to 13) signaled PRC leaders' commitment to PLA modernization amid economic and strategic challenges.** One such development was the announcement of China's 2023 [defense budget](#) on March 5. The 7.2 percent official defense spending increase notably outpaces the government's economic growth target of about 5 percent, suggesting that Beijing seeks to sustain its focus on modernizing the military even as it faces growing economic challenges.<sup>15</sup>

A second development of note was Xi Jinping's speech at the close of the NPC's First Session that called for greater "[self-reliance and strength in science and technology](#)"—including defense science and technology—to better compete with Western countries.<sup>16</sup> Using similar language in a meeting with the PLA's delegation to the NPC, Xi stressed the need to advance "[independent and original innovation](#)" to support greater technological self-reliance and enhance strategic capabilities.<sup>17</sup>

## WOMEN, COLLEGE GRADUATES PROMINENT IN PLA NPC DELEGATION

**The PLA delegation to the latest session of China’s national legislature portrays a positive, yet skewed, image of the people in China’s armed forces.** On March 3, the PLA delegation to the First Session of the NPC—which included several individuals from the PAP—was [formally established](#).<sup>18</sup>

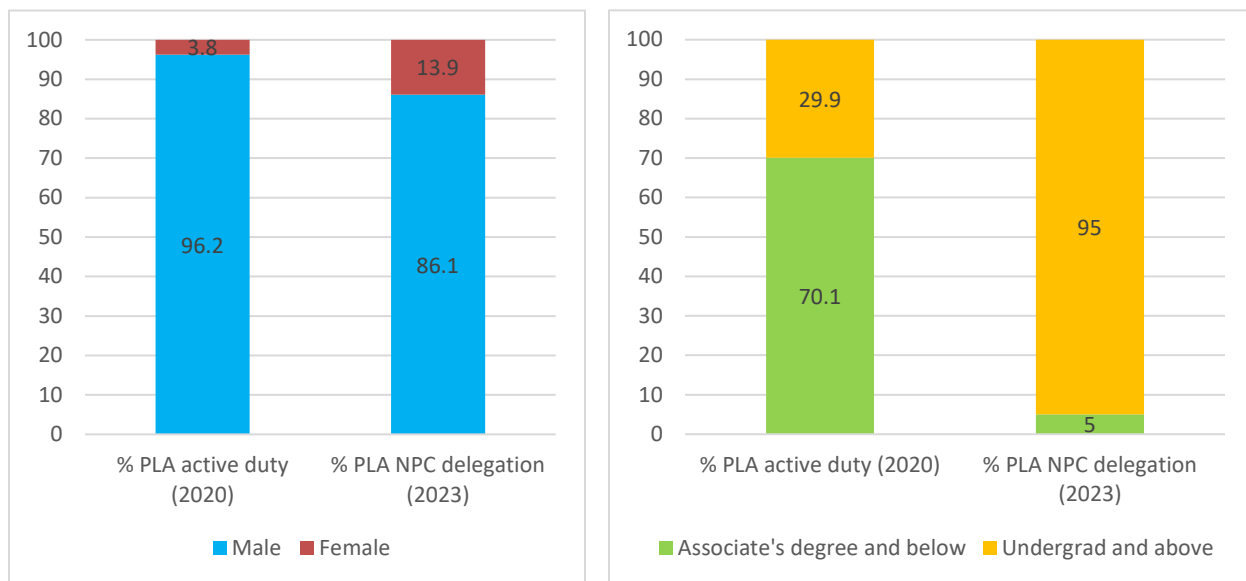
The [delegation’s demographics](#) reveal a clear effort to portray an inclusive and professional image of China’s armed forces. Speaking to the media on March 6, a PRC defense ministry spokesperson said that among the 281 delegates, 39 are women (13.9 percent). In addition, 267 delegates have undergraduate education (95.0 percent) and 140 hold master’s degrees (49.8 percent).<sup>19</sup>

A scratch beneath the surface of these figures shows that the delegation’s membership presents a warped picture of the inclusiveness of female personnel and the education levels of the PLA. PRC [census data](#) from 2020 showed that women make up only 3.8 percent of China’s active duty military (officers and enlisted), and just 29.9 percent of active duty servicemembers have an undergraduate degree or higher.<sup>20</sup>

Not all aspects of the delegation’s composition misrepresented the PLA’s demographics. For one, the percentage of delegates from ethnic minority groups basically conformed to the ethnic makeup of China’s armed forces. The delegation contains 17 ethnic minority personnel, or 6.05 percent, which is just below their percentage of the whole of PLA active duty personnel in 2020 (6.8 percent).<sup>21</sup>

The two graphs below display these data about the gender composition and education levels of the PLA NPC delegation versus the active duty force.

### Percentages of Women and College Degree Holders in PLA Active Duty Force vs. NPC Delegation



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Reservists Law of the People’s Republic of China” (中华人民共和国预备役人员法), National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China (中国人大网), Dec. 30, 2022, <http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c30834/202212/675bfd572d1440d89e29080e7310b6f.shtml>.



<sup>2</sup> “Reservists Law Important for National Defense and Military Development: Defense Spokesperson,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, Jan. 13, 2023, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/4930570.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/4930570.html).

<sup>3</sup> “Ministry of National Defense Spokesperson Wu Qian Responds to Reporters’ Questions on Adjustments to the Reserve Unit Leadership System” (国防部新闻发言人吴谦就预备役部队领导体制调整答记者问), Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China (国防部网), July 1, 2020, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/xwfy/fyrth/4867464.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The law specified two types of technicians to be recruited as reservists, namely “professional technical” and “professional skills” personnel. For more detail on the distinction between these two types of personnel, see “New Regulations Aimed at Growth in PLA’s Civilian Workforce” in Brian Waidelich and Patrick deGategno, eds., *PLA Update*, Issue 7, Feb. 16, 2023, <https://www.cna.org/Newsletters/PLA%20Update/Issue-07/PLA-Update-Issue-7-February-16-2023.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Pan Di (潘娣), “Legal Support for the Transformative Development of Reserve Duty Units in the New Era” (新时代预备役部队转型发展的法治保障), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Feb. 22, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/szbqxq/index.html](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html).

<sup>6</sup> Brian Waidelich and Patrick deGategno, eds., *PLA Update*, Issue 7, Feb. 16, 2023,

<https://www.cna.org/Newsletters/PLA%20Update/Issue-07/PLA-Update-Issue-7-February-16-2023.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Data for this section are drawn primarily from the following Chinese- and English-language PRC media reports: Qian Xiaohu (钱晓虎) and Li Fang (李方), “Navy Initiates Work for 2023 Pilot Recruitment and Selection” (海军启动 2023 年度招飞选拔工作), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Feb. 21, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2023-02/21/content\\_334169.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2023-02/21/content_334169.htm); Zhao Lei, “Navy Seeks Fresh Graduates for Aviation Posts,” *China Daily*, Feb. 21, 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202302/20/WS63f36beaa31057c47ebafcb1.html>; “Chinese Navy to Recruit Female Cadet Carrier-Based Aircraft Pilots,” China Military Online, Feb. 21, 2023, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16203163.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16203163.html).

<sup>8</sup> Li Yun (黎云) and Sun Luming (孙鲁明), “Navy Initiates Work for 2023 Pilot Recruitment and Selection, to Select Female Shipborne Aircraft Pilots for First Time” (海军启动 2023 年度招飞选拔工作 将首次选拔女舰载机飞行员), Xinhua (新华网), Feb. 20, 2023, <https://app.xinhuanet.com/news/article.html?articleId=976becb209bca8c5cb34aea9e4866220>.

<sup>9</sup> Chinese Navy Pilot Recruitment Online (中国海军招飞网), accessed Mar. 13, 2023, <http://www.hjzf.mil.cn/>.

<sup>10</sup> As *PLA Daily* explained, recruiters will make use of “actual equipment” (presumably flight simulators) at one or more civilian general aviation organizations, where applicants’ “aviation potential” will be assessed by military and civilian flight specialists. See Qian and Li, “Navy Initiates Work for 2023 Pilot Recruitment and Selection.”

<sup>11</sup> “Chinese Navy to Recruit Female Cadet Carrier-Based Aircraft Pilots.”

<sup>12</sup> Qian and Li, “Navy Initiates Work for 2023 Pilot Recruitment and Selection.”

<sup>13</sup> Jiang Binyao (蒋彬垚) and Hua Rui (华瑞), “Unidentified Brigade of 71st Group Army Strengthens Commanders’ Data Thinking to Improve Decision-Making Levels” (第 71 集团军某旅强化指挥员数据思维提升决策水平), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Feb. 28, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/yw\\_208727/16204583.html](http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16204583.html).

<sup>14</sup> Wang Shizhuo (王世卓) and Zhang Bo (张博), “Let Maritime Rights Protection and Law Enforcement Take the Lead in the Laboratory: An Account of the Ship Tactics Command Teaching Team at the PAP China Coast Guard Academy” (让海上维权执法行动率先在实验室展开——记武警海警学院海警舰艇战术指挥教学团队), *China Youth Daily* (中国青年报), Feb. 16, 2023, [http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-02/16/nw.D110000zgqnb\\_20230216\\_2-08.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2023-02/16/nw.D110000zgqnb_20230216_2-08.htm).

<sup>15</sup> Kathrin Hille, “China’s Military Budget Outpaces Other Spending in Shift to Security,” *Financial Times*, Mar. 5, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/66790beb-bd5b-4025-b12e-5d0e7dd8bbfb>.

<sup>16</sup> Meaghan Tobin, Christian Shepherd, and Lily Kuo, “China’s Xi Promises to Build ‘Great Wall of Steel’ in Rivalry with West,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 13, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/13/xi-jinping-china-tech-self-reliance/>.

<sup>17</sup> “Xi Stresses Enhancing Integrated National Strategies, Strategic Capabilities,” Xinhua, Mar. 9, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230309/1ce3a1ec8fe74a7a9070b03e6856caff/c.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Ou Can (欧灿) and Fei Shiting (费士廷), “PLA and PAP Unit Delegation to Attend First Session of 14th NPC Established” (出席十四届全国人大一次会议解放军和武警部队代表团成立), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Mar. 4, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2023-03/04/content\\_334860.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfbmap/content/2023-03/04/content_334860.htm).

<sup>19</sup> “PLA and PAP Unit Delegation Media Spokesperson Introduces the Basic Conditions of the PLA and PAP Unit Delegation to the First Session of the 14th NPC” (解放军和武警部队代表团新闻发言人介绍出席十四届全国人大一次会议解放军和武警部队代表团基本情况), Mar. 6, 2023, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16206430.html>.

<sup>20</sup> “China Population Census Yearbook 2020” (中国人口普查年鉴), National Bureau of Statistics of China (国家统计局), accessed Mar. 10, 2023, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/7rp/zk/indexch.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Wang and Zhang, “Let Maritime Rights Protection and Law Enforcement Take the Lead in the Laboratory: An Account of the Ship Tactics Command Teaching Team at the PAP China Coast Guard Academy” (让海上维权执法行动率先在实验室展开——记武警海警学院海警舰艇战术指挥教学团队).

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