



PLA UPDATE

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

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Welcome to the May 2023 edition of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA’s newsletter on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). This issue begins with a focus on maritime affairs, including China’s recent naval exercise with Singapore, the evacuation by sea of People’s Republic of China (PRC) citizens from conflict-ridden Sudan, and China and Russia’s newly signed agreement on maritime law enforcement. Next, we look at PLA efforts to improve recruitment and retention through issuing new conscription regulations and redesigning PLA officers’ military ribbons. Finally, we break down an article by PLA authors on operational concepts tied to unmanned systems and artificial intelligence (AI).

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MILITARY DIPLOMACY & OVERSEAS ACTIVITIES

CHINA, SINGAPORE WRAP UP BILATERAL MARITIME EXERCISE

The navies of China and Singapore recently completed a bilateral exercise in the latest sign of growing security cooperation between the two countries. From April 28 to May 1, the PLA Navy (PLAN) and the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) conducted exercise Maritime Cooperation 2023 in Singapore and nearby waters. This event was the second iteration of the combined exercise since 2015.¹ Maritime Cooperation 2023 follows developments in bilateral security cooperation, including the PRC and Singaporean defense chiefs [signing](#) an “enhanced Agreement on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation” in 2019, and China and Singapore conducting [bilateral naval drills](#) in the South China Sea in 2021.²

Four ships participated in Maritime Cooperation 2023, an increase from three ships in the 2015 iteration. The ships participating in the latest exercise were as follows:

- **PLAN participants:** Jiangkai II-class frigate CNS *Yulin* (569) and Wozang-class minehunter CNS *Chibi* (747).
- **RSN participants:** Formidable-class frigate RSS *Intrepid* (69) and Bedok-class mine countermeasure vessel RSS *Punggol* (M108).



Clockwise from top left: PLAN and RSN personnel conduct medical professional exchange; PLAN and RSN personnel conduct damage control training; PLAN and RSN ships conduct maneuvers; CNS *Yulin*'s Z-9 helicopter lifts off from the deck of RSS *Intrepid*.

Source: [China National Radio](#).

Maritime Cooperation 2023 consisted of a shore phase and sea phase, which included the following activities:

- **Shore phase:** joint planning exercises, professional exchanges, and combined training at the Damage Control Training Center in Changi Naval Base.
- **Sea phase:** helicopter cross-deck landing with a PLAN helicopter landing on RSS *Intrepid*, gunnery firing, replenishment-at-sea approaches, search and rescue, simulated minefield transits,³ and communication and maneuvering exercises.

At the [closing ceremony](#), RSN Commander First Flotilla Colonel Ng Kok Yeng Daniel called Maritime Cooperation 2023 an “important milestone” for the two navies that provided valuable opportunities to learn from each other and strengthen trust and understanding.⁴ Senior Captain Mei Leyang, chief of staff of the PLAN’s 2nd Destroyer Flotilla, [told](#) PRC state television that the exercise allowed the two sides to accumulate “valuable experience” so they could further expand and refine exercise topics in future iterations.⁵

PLAN SUPPORTS EVACUATION OF PRC & FOREIGN CITIZENS FROM SUDAN

The PLAN has completed its third overseas noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO), following two prior operations of this nature in Libya (2011) and Yemen (2015). From April 26 to 29, two PLAN ships conducted a NEO of PRC and foreign citizens from Sudan as clashes among armed factions ravaged the country’s capital. The participating PLAN ships were the Type 052D guided-missile destroyer CNS *Nanning* (162) and Type 903 replenishment oiler CNS *Weishanhu* (887), which are part of China’s 43rd naval escort taskforce to the Gulf of Aden. The two ships were [reportedly](#) executing their escort mission in the Gulf of Aden when they received orders to evacuate PRC citizens from Sudan.⁶



Map showing straight distance of about 190 miles between Port Sudan and Port of Jeddah, the route of the PLAN’s Sudan NEO.

Source: [Google Maps](#).

The *Nanning* and *Weishanhu* evacuated 1,171 individuals from Port Sudan to the Port of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in two [trips](#).⁷ According to Xinhua, China’s state news agency, most of the evacuees were PRC citizens, while foreign evacuees included citizens from Pakistan and Brazil (see the table below).

PRC and Foreign Citizens Evacuated by PLAN During April 2023 Sudan NEO

Dates	PRC citizens evacuated	Foreign citizens evacuated	Total evacuated
April 26–27	668	10	678
April 28–29	272	221	493
Total	940	231	1,171

After the second group of evacuees reached Jeddah, *Nanning* and *Weishanhu* departed and resumed their escort mission in the Gulf of Aden. The PRC citizens evacuated to the Port of Jeddah were returned to China via charter flights arranged by the PRC government.

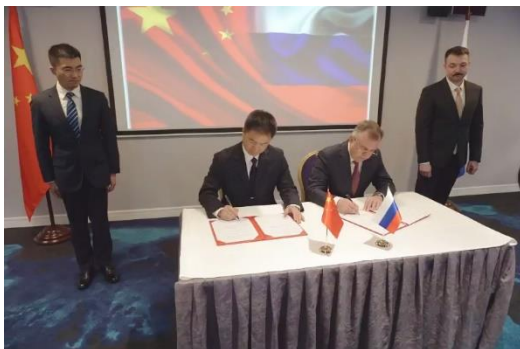


Evacuees waiting to board CNS *Nanning* and CNS *Weishanhu* at Port Sudan. The red banner on *Nanning*'s port side reads "Chairman Xi sends warships to take everyone home."

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

PEOPLE'S ARMED POLICE

CHINA AND RUSSIA SIGN MOU ON COAST GUARD COOPERATION



CCG and FSB leaders sign an MOU on maritime law enforcement cooperation in Murmansk on April 24.

Source: [China Coast Guard](#).

had attacked a ship belonging to Rosatomflot, a Russian company that operates nuclear-powered icebreakers.⁹ The exercise also involved a search and rescue operation and a response to an oil spill.¹⁰

The CCG delegation's activities in Murmansk came at a time when Russia has been [encouraging](#) non-Arctic nations to increase their commercial presence in the region through investments in projects such as shipping routes, natural gas, and power plants.¹¹ It also comes as China continues to push for enhanced

Maritime law enforcement agencies of China and Russia have signed an agreement with potential implications for Arctic security. From April 24 to 25, senior leaders of the China Coast Guard (CCG) and Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) met in Murmansk, Russia. During the meeting, CCG Director Major General Yu Zhong and First Deputy FSB Director and Chief of Border Service General Vladimir Grigorovich Kulishov [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on strengthening cooperation in bilateral maritime law enforcement. The details of the MOU were not publicly disclosed.⁸

While in Murmansk, CCG representatives observed Russia's maritime security exercise Arctic Patrol 2023. The exercise scenario [reportedly](#) featured the FSB fighting terrorists who

Arctic presence under the Polar Silk Road, a local component of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Prior to a March 20–22 summit meeting with Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin invited China to participate in a new institution to regulate the Northern Sea Route, the waterway that spans Russia's Arctic coast.¹² It remains to be seen how the CCG may expand its presence into the Arctic through cooperation with the FSB in the future.

LAWS AND REGULATIONS

NEW CONSCRIPTION REGULATIONS SEEK BETTER TALENT, PROCESSES

Newly released PLA regulations emphasize inducting college graduates and streamlining annual conscription procedures. On May 1, the PRC's newly revised [Conscription Work Regulations](#) (征兵工作条例) went into effect. This was the first update to the regulations since 2001.¹³ According to a *PLA Daily* [article](#), the latest revision was prompted by "profound changes" including PLA organizational reforms, revisions to the National Defense Law and Military Service Law, and the shift from carrying out compulsory enlistment once annually to twice annually.¹⁴

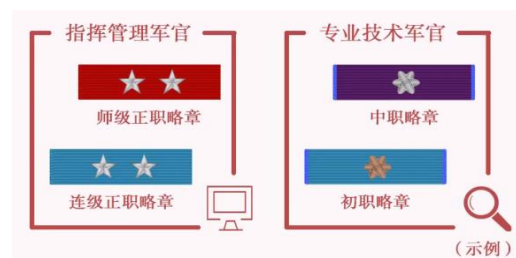
A [statement](#) by a PRC Defense Ministry spokesperson highlighted six key changes in the new Conscription Work Regulations:

- An improved organization and leadership system for conscription that covers the national, provincial, municipal, and county levels.
- An emphasis on inducting "high-caliber" personnel, with priority placed on college graduates.
- Improved procedures for conscripts' physical examinations and political assessments.
- An improved approach to delivering conscripts to their units, in which conscripts may be sent in groups by local government and military authorities or report to their respective units themselves.
- An improved mechanism for quarantining, reexamining, and returning conscripts to their homes should they fall short of physical or political requirements after reporting to their units.
- Strengthened oversight, better rewards, and more clearly defined punishments in the field of military conscription work.¹⁵

PLA IMPLEMENTS NEWLY DESIGNED MILITARY RIBBONS

PLA officers are wearing new ribbons designed to better communicate individual achievements and foster greater pride within the force. On April 27, a PRC Defense Ministry spokesperson released [information](#) on the PLA's new "Regulations on Military Ribbons," which came into force on January 1, 2023. The spokesperson called the regulations "the first important regulatory document to comprehensively and systematically manage military ribbons" and claimed their implementation would improve the attractiveness of a career in China's military.

According to the PRC Defense Ministry spokesperson, the newly implemented military ribbons better depict four categories of information, namely servicemembers' individual honors, "service experience," billet grade, and time in service.



Grade ribbon symbols for command-track officers (left) and technical-track officers (right). The command-track ribbons shown are for division grade (top left) and company grade (bottom left). The technical-track ribbons shown are for intermediate grade (top right) and junior grade (bottom right).

Source: [PRC Ministry of National Defense](#).

(See the figure below for examples of these categories.) The spokesperson noted that the new ribbons feature symbols distinguishing between command-track and technical-track officers' classifications and grades. The spokesperson also highlighted designs such as the "red flag, five-pointed star, and Great Wall" that both highlight the PLA's "revolutionary traditions" and make the ribbons more identifiable.¹⁶



Examples of PLA ribbons in the four categories listed in the new regulations. Top-left: individual and collective honors (top: peacetime individual first-class merit citation; bottom: collective first-level honor). Top-right: service experience (top: first-level border defense; bottom: first-level overseas service). Bottom-left: billet grade (top: deputy regiment-level grade; bottom: battalion-level grade). Bottom-right: years in service (top: five years of service; bottom: ten years of service).

Source: [PRC Ministry of National Defense](#).

DOCTRINAL ISSUES

AMS AUTHORS DECODE CONCEPTS OF UNMANNED & INTELLIGENT OPS

Researchers from the PLA's leading center for doctrinal development call for standardizing terminology to support PLA advances in unmanned and intelligent capabilities. On April 27, the *PLA Daily* published an [article](#) by three researchers from the PLA Academy of Military Sciences' (AMS) War Research Institute discussing the concepts of "intelligent unmanned" (智能无人) and "unmanned intelligence" (无人智能). The authors argue that the two concepts are being used imprecisely as uncrewed systems and AI are being increasingly integrated into military operations. They stress the importance of unifying and standardizing the related terminology because the concepts refer to specific stages of technological development and military modernization.

The AMS authors first distinguish between the terms "unmanned" and "intelligence" by describing "intelligence" as a high-level state of being unmanned. They note that in a broad sense, "unmanned" can refer to any type of weapon or equipment that is not directly controlled by humans at the time of task execution, including weapons and equipment ranging from traditional land mines to remote-controlled mine-clearing vehicles to swarm-capable unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). "Intelligence," according to the authors, places more emphasis on the specific functions of equipment, such as the use of machine vision for target recognition.

The authors argue that "unmanned intelligent operations" is the term to focus on as the forms of warfare evolve toward "intelligentization," or an [advanced stage of warfare](#) based on AI and autonomy.¹⁷ They claim that "unmanned intelligent operations" will be the basic form of intelligent operations in the unmanned era and will constitute a "fundamental leap" over past forms of mechanized and informatized operations. "Intelligent unmanned operations," in contrast, emphasize unmanned systems acting in an intelligent manner and are "an extension of mechanization-style thinking."¹⁸

NOTES

¹ The COVID-19 pandemic was reportedly part of the reason for the eight-year gap between the two iterations of Maritime Cooperation. See "Singapore, China Navies to Resume Flagship Bilateral Exercise," *Straits Times*, Apr. 25, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-china-navies-to-resume-flagship-bilateral-exercise>.

² "Singapore and China Step Up Defence Cooperation Through Enhanced Agreement on Defence Exchanges and Security Cooperation," MINDEF Singapore, Oct. 20, 2019, https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2019/October/20oct19_nr; Ryan White, "Chinese and Singaporean Navies Conduct Joint Exercise in the South China Sea," *Naval Post*, Sept. 23, 2021, <https://navalpost.com/chinese-and-singaporean-navies-conduct-joint-exercise-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

³ Official readouts did not elaborate on the "simulated minefield transits" conducted during the sea phase. However, it is possible that the mine warfare ships were exercising the use of sonar to detect and avoid moored mines, with value ships in their wake (i.e., the PLAN and RSN frigates). This possibility is suggested by images of the exercise released by the PLAN that showed the mine warfare ships steaming in front with the frigates trailing at least several ship lengths behind. The editors would like to thank George Pollitt for this insight.

⁴ "Singapore and Chinese Navies Strengthen Maritime Cooperation in Maritime Bilateral Exercise," MINDEF Singapore, May 1, 2023, https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2023/May/01may23_nr.

⁵ "China-Singapore Cooperation 2023' Maritime Combined Exercise, Chinese Navy Ship Formation Arrives in Singapore's Changi Port" ("中新合作-2023"海上联合演习 中国海军舰艇编队抵达新加坡樟宜港), *Military Report* (军事报

道), Apr. 29, 2023, <https://tv.cctv.com/2023/04/29/VIDEX53oRSia7n8ssGzMLJVY230429.shtml?spm=C52346.PiumOrlYLNUM.E0VXtwLj8YU7.14>.

⁶ Mo Xiaoliang and Tang Siyu, "Overview of Chinese Personnel Evacuation from Sudan by PLA Navy," China Military Online, May 5, 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16222065.html.

⁷ "Chinese Navy Evacuates 493 More People from Sudan, Including 221 Foreigners," Xinhua, Apr. 30, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230429/ad59329dbe4544859ed04cc6445b34fc/c.html>.

⁸ "China Coast Guard and Russian Federal Security Service Sign Maritime Law Enforcement Cooperation Document" (中国海警局和俄罗斯联邦安全总局签署海上执法合作文件), China Coast Guard (中国海警局), Apr. 27, 2023, https://www.ccg.gov.cn/2023/gjhz_0427/2252.html.

⁹ Thomas Nilsen, "Russia's Coast Guard Cooperation with China Is a Big Step, Arctic Security Expert Says," *Barents Observer*, Apr. 28, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2023/04/russias-arctic-coast-guard-cooperation-china-big-step-expert>.

¹⁰ "The Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation and the Coast Guard of China Signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Murmansk" (Pogranichnaya sluzhba FSB RF i beregovaya okhrana KNR podpisali v Murmanske memorandum o vzaimoponimani), *Murmansk Today*, Apr. 26, 2023, https://vk.com/wall-198094615_1557.

¹¹ Liu Zhen, "China and Russia Sign Deal on Maritime Law Enforcement as Military Build-Up Intensifies in Arctic," *South China Morning Post*, Apr. 27, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3218484/china-and-russia-sign-deal-maritime-law-enforcement-military-build-intensifies-arctic>.

¹² President of Russia, "Russian-Chinese Negotiations" (Rossiysko-Kitayskie peregovory), Mar. 21, 2023, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70748>.

¹³ "Conscription Work Regulations [2023 Revision]" (征兵工作条例), Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国中央人民政府), approved Apr. 1, 2023, effective May 1, 2023, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2023-04/12/content_5750986.htm.

¹⁴ Xu Tian (徐天) and Zhou Yaoqiang (周焜强), "Newly Revised 'Conscription Work Regulations' Released, Uses Law to Support High-Quality Development of Conscription Work" (新修订的《征兵工作条例》公布, 用法治保障征兵工作高质量发展), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Apr. 24, 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16219460.html.

¹⁵ "Defense Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on Recent Media Queries Concerning the Military," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, Apr. 19, 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16218233.html.

¹⁶ "Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on April 27," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, May 5, 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/HOME_209227/Focus_209228/16222052.html.

¹⁷ For more on how the PLA conceptualizes "intelligentization" in military affairs, see Kevin Pollpeter and Amanda Kerrigan, *The PLA and Intelligent Warfare: A Preliminary Analysis*, CNA, Oct. 2021, CRM-2021-U-030806-Final, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2021/10/The-PLA-and-Intelligent-Warfare-A-Preliminary-Analysis.pdf>.

¹⁸ Zhang Shuangxi (张双喜), Chang Shujie (常书杰), and Chai Song (柴松), "'Intelligent Unmanning' and 'Unmanned Intelligence'" ("智能无人"与"无人智能"), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Apr. 27, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-04-27&paperNumber=07&articleid=904428.

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