



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

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Welcome to the November–December 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 by examining PLA units’ adoption of new policies to fast-track promotions of junior enlisted personnel to junior noncommissioned officer (NCO) ranks. We then review a PLA professor’s discussion of differences between war mobilization and national defense mobilization as they apply to China’s mobilization activities. Next, we look at several categories of PLA engagements with various countries and their militaries, including recent bilateral and multilateral exercises, exchanges with international cadets, and deliveries of relief supplies to earthquake-stricken countries. The issue concludes with recent PLA applications of technologies to improve the precision and fairness of physical training assessments.

CONTENTS

LAWS AND REGULATIONS	2
PLA Units Fast-Track Junior Enlisted Promotions to NCO Ranks	2
NATIONAL DEFENSE MOBILIZATION	3
NDU Professor Discusses Differences in Mobilization Concepts	3
MILITARY DIPLOMACY AND OVERSEAS ACTIVITIES	3
PLA Conducts Combined Exercises at Land and Sea	3
PLA Academies Host Weeklong Events for International Cadets	4
PLAAF Transport Aircraft Deliver Aid to Afghanistan, Nepal	5
ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES	5
PLA Advances Digitization of Physical Fitness Assessments	5
NOTES	6

LAWS AND REGULATIONS

PLA UNITS FAST-TRACK JUNIOR ENLISTED PROMOTIONS TO NCO RANKS

In an effort to increase the proportion of the PLA's college-educated NCOs, some units have permitted high-performing junior enlisted to "rank-skip." Since June, *PLA Daily*, the official newspaper of the PLA, has described at least two instances of PLA units using new policies to shorten timelines for junior enlisted personnel to attain promotions to junior-grade NCO billets. For example, according to a June 17 *PLA Daily* report, an unspecified base of the Northern Theater Command Navy has promoted seven entry-level privates directly to the rank of sergeant since last year. These promotions skipped over the ranks of private first class and corporal (see table below).¹ An article published in the same newspaper on November 11 noted that an unspecified brigade (likely a service support brigade) of the PLA Army's 71st Group Army had authorized three such promotions in 2023.²

PLA enlisted ranks³

Category	Rank
Senior NCOs	Master Sergeant First Class
	Master Sergeant Second Class
	Master Sergeant Third Class
Intermediate NCOs	Sergeant First Class
	Sergeant Second Class
Junior NCOs	Sergeant
	Corporal
Junior enlisted	Private First Class
	Private

PLA Daily reporting on such "rank-skipping" (跳级) among PLA units' enlisted personnel stated that the practice was grounded in the Interim Regulations for NCOs (军士暂行条例) and Interim Regulations for NCO Occupational Development Management (军士职业发展管理暂行规定)—policies that went into effect on March 31, 2022.⁴ Related reporting explained that rank-skipping offers enlisted personnel a more flexible approach to career development compared with the traditional model, in which junior enlisted serve a mandatory two years before becoming eligible for promotion to corporal. At the same time, the *PLA Daily* noted that units fast-tracking junior enlisted promotions were also in the process of developing remedial programs for NCOs who had passed over years of formative education and training.⁵

Benefits of rank-skipping could include PLA units having more sources for filling junior NCO billets and improved material and non-material incentives for high-performing junior enlisted personnel. Commenting on the practice in late 2022, a political instructor of the PLA Army's 71st Group Army said fast-tracking junior enlisted promotions could help remedy a "lack of backbone cadres during retirement season," reward young servicemembers financially, and improve their self-esteem.⁶

NATIONAL DEFENSE MOBILIZATION

NDU PROFESSOR DISCUSSES DIFFERENCES IN MOBILIZATION CONCEPTS

According to the professor, China is inclined to describe its own mobilization activities as “national defense mobilization” rather than “war mobilization” to emphasize that its aims are not expansionist or hegemonic. On November 10, *China Defense News* published an article by Senior Colonel Xu Kui—a professor at the PLA National Defense University’s (NDU) National Security College—that discussed differences between the concepts of **war mobilization** and **national defense mobilization**.⁷ According to the author, because the topic of mobilization has been receiving renewed attention following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, many people have been using the terms *war mobilization* and *national defense mobilization* interchangeably, when there are in fact important similarities and differences.

- **Similarities:** Xu noted that war mobilization and national defense mobilization both pertain to a series of actions taken during the transition from peacetime to wartime. This transition entails the reallocation and concentration of resources including manpower, materials, financial resources, and “spiritual strength.”
- **Differences:** The author portrayed national defense mobilization as a particular form of war mobilization in which the state is the central actor and its mobilization activities are focused on preparing for and executing defensive warfare. According to Xu, national defense mobilization does not apply to actions taken by a non-state entity or those taken by a state to conduct wars of invasion and expansion.

Xu stated that although China’s current concepts of war mobilization and national defense mobilization are essentially the same, in practice, China is more likely to describe its own mobilization activities as national defense mobilization. The reasons for this practice include a desire to emphasize the defensive nature of China’s mobilization activities and to explain that preparations for mobilization are not limited to the runup to a conflict.

MILITARY DIPLOMACY AND OVERSEAS ACTIVITIES

PLA CONDUCTS COMBINED EXERCISES AT LAND AND SEA

The exercises focused on areas including counterterrorism, law enforcement, and maritime security. Since the previous issue of *PLA UPDATE*, the PLA concluded several bilateral and multilateral exercises with countries around China’s land and maritime periphery and in the Indian Ocean region. These exercises were as follows:

- **Aman Youyi (Peace Friendship) 2023.** This exercise was conducted from November 13 to 22 by over 3,000 participants from the armed forces of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and **five Southeast Asian countries:** Cambodia,



PLA soldier demonstrates a counter-UAS system during Aman Youyi 2023.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

Laos, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. The exercise was divided into land and sea stages with a focus on counterterrorism and maritime security.⁸

- **Sea Guardians 3.** The navies of the PRC and **Pakistan** carried out this exercise from November 11 to 17 in the waters and airspace of the northern Arabian Sea. Exercise topics included formation movement; visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS); helicopter cross-deck landing; search and rescue; and anti-submarine operations. During the exercise, the two navies reportedly carried out their first combined maritime patrol.⁹
- **Blue Sword 2023.** The navies of the PRC and **Saudi Arabia** concluded this three-week bilateral training activity on October 25. At a press conference held the following day, a PRC defense ministry spokesperson said the exercise laid a solid foundation for the two sides to learn from each other and improve their interoperability at sea.¹⁰ (For more on Blue Sword, see *PLA UPDATE* issue 15.)
- **Border Defense Cooperation 2023.** PRC and **Mongolian** armed forces conducted this drill on November 10 in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The drill reportedly sought to improve the two sides' ability to combat cross-border smuggling and terrorism.¹¹

PLA ACADEMIES HOST WEEKLONG EVENTS FOR INTERNATIONAL CADETS

Three PLA services' academic institutions conducted seminars and competitions involving officer candidates from 22 countries. In late October and early November, academies of the PLA Army, Navy, and Air Force (PLAAF) conducted weeklong events in which they hosted foreign cadets and midshipmen to participate in academic, professional, and cultural exchanges. These events were as follows:

- **10th International Army Cadets Week.** This event, hosted by the PLA Army Engineering University, was held from November 5 to 13 in Nanjing. The weeklong activities involved 70 cadets from 11 PLA academies and from 10 countries: Egypt, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Laos, Morocco, Pakistan, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.¹²
- **Inaugural "Deep Sea Warrior" International Sailing Skills Competition and Naval International Cadets Week.** This event, carried out from October 16 to 21 in Qingdao, was hosted by the PLA Naval Submarine Academy. It involved over 120 midshipmen from seven PLA academies and eight countries: Bangladesh, Fiji, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Singapore, and Tanzania.¹³
- **5th Air Force International Cadets Week.** This event, hosted by the PLA Air Force Engineering University, was held in Xi'an from October 23 to 28. The 90 PLAAF cadets in attendance came from nine PLA academies and 11 countries: Azerbaijan, Belarus, Hungary, Indonesia, Laos, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.¹⁴



Clockwise from top left: robot battle during International Army Cadets Week, simulated United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission activities at International Army Cadets Week, a model UN simulation during Air Force International Cadets Week, and a skills competition at Naval International Cadets Week.

Sources: CCTV-7 (a), (b), (c); [CCTV-13](#).

PLAAF TRANSPORT AIRCRAFT DELIVER AID TO AFGHANISTAN, NEPAL

PRC media portrayed the flights as contributing to the PLAAF's development of power projection capability. In mid-October and early November, PLAAF Y-20 transport aircraft flew missions to deliver emergency supplies following earthquakes that struck Afghanistan and Nepal, respectively. Two Y-20s arrived at Herat Airport, Afghanistan, on October 15, carrying supplies such as quilts, outdoor jackets, tents, and folding beds.¹⁵ On November 8, a pair of Y-20s arrived in Pokhara International Airport in Nepal with 50 tons of humanitarian relief supplies including cotton tents and blankets.¹⁶

Speaking to PRC state media as supplies bound for Nepal were being loaded onto Y-20s at Chengdu Shuangliu International Airport, a PLAAF official called the mission “a test of the [PLAAF’s] strategic projection capability.”¹⁷ Y-20s have become increasingly visible in China’s delivery of aid to various countries since the transport aircraft began conducting related missions in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸

ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

PLA ADVANCES DIGITIZATION OF PHYSICAL FITNESS ASSESSMENTS

Related efforts are aimed at making assessments fairer and developing more customized physical training plans for individual soldiers. Several PRC media reports over the past month have noted ways in which the PLA is incorporating new technologies and information systems to improve assessments of servicemembers’ physical fitness. Related reporting included the following:

- On November 7, PRC state television [footage](#) showed “intelligent” physical examination equipment being used by the Zhengzhou Joint Logistics Support Center in eastern China’s Henan Province.

The equipment reportedly uses infrared detection to track an individual's prescribed physical movements and then automatically generates a fitness report. A member of the center said that the equipment had been helpful for developing customized training plans for new recruits.¹⁹

- On November 10, *PLA Daily* [reported](#) that the Central Military Commission's (CMC's) Agency for Offices Administration recently carried out an annual physical fitness assessment for CMC headquarters personnel. To improve precision and fairness, the agency reportedly used electronic equipment to monitor and keep records of all components of the assessment.²⁰



Left: a soldier standing in front of the Zhengzhou Joint Logistics Support Center's "intelligent" physical examination equipment. Center: the display on the equipment's monitor. Right: an individual's fitness report automatically generated by the equipment.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

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