



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

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Welcome to the July 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 look at a recent high-level meeting on basic training and a new code of conduct for PLA officers’ interactions with people outside the military. It next analyzes two articles focused on the concepts of low-altitude dominance and people’s war in the context of future high-tech conflicts. We then turn to two recent PLA Navy (PLAN) activities abroad: a goodwill tour in Southeast Asia and participation in the Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo in Indonesia. We conclude this issue with a People’s Republic of China (PRC) defense newspaper’s take on the publicly released US National Military Strategy and a promotion ceremony in Beijing that saw two PLA officers promoted to the PLA’s highest military rank.

## CONTENTS

<b>SENIOR LEADERSHIP GUIDANCE</b> .....	2
Top PLA Leader Calls for Innovation in Basic Training .....	2
<b>LAWS AND REGULATIONS</b> .....	2
CMC Issues New Code of Conduct for Officers’ Social Activities .....	2
<b>DOCTRINAL ISSUES</b> .....	3
PLA Paper Discusses Importance of Low-Altitude Dominance .....	3
NDU Authors Mull People’s War in Future High-End Conflicts .....	3
<b>PLA NAVY</b> .....	4
PLAN Midshipmen Complete Training, Tour of Southeast Asia .....	4
PLAN Participates in Multilateral Exercise Komodo .....	5
<b>COMMENTARY ON FOREIGN MILITARY ACTIVITIES</b> .....	5
PRC Defense Newspaper Reviews Publicly Released US NMS .....	5
<b>PLA PROMOTIONS</b> .....	6
Two Political Officers Promoted to Three-Star General .....	6
<b>NOTES</b> .....	7

## SENIOR LEADERSHIP GUIDANCE

### TOP PLA LEADER CALLS FOR INNOVATION IN BASIC TRAINING

**The PLA's senior uniformed leader has called for improvements in the organization and oversight of basic training throughout China's armed forces.** From June 18 to 20, a meeting focused on basic training for all of the PLA and People's Armed Police (PAP) was held in Tianjin in northeastern China. According to a PRC defense ministry [spokesperson](#), the meeting was held to implement Chinese Communist Party (CCP), PRC, and Central Military Commission (CMC) leader Xi Jinping's "important instructions" on strengthening military training. The spokesperson stated that implementing these instructions would entail accelerating innovation in the training models of China's armed forces, advancing the "transformation and upgrading" of basic training, and generating stronger combat capability with an eye toward the PLA's midcentury goal of becoming a "world-class military."<sup>1</sup>



CMC Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia (right) speaks on the sidelines of the All-Military Basic Training On-Site Meeting in Tianjin. Behind him is a display on treating training injuries. Source: [CCTV-7](#).

General Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of the CMC, attended and spoke at the [meeting](#) on basic training, where leaders from each of the PLA's five theater commands and military services were present. Zhang said that strengthening basic training was crucial to laying a firm foundation for fighting as a joint force and winning future battles. He called for research into innovative ways to organize and execute basic training, including standardized training evaluations and the use of simulated training.<sup>2</sup>

## LAWS AND REGULATIONS

### CMC ISSUES NEW CODE OF CONDUCT FOR OFFICERS' SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

**PLA officers are subject to new rules governing their interactions with virtually all people outside of China's armed forces.** According to a June 18 [report](#) by the *PLA Daily*, the CMC Political Work Department and Discipline Inspection Commission recently issued a code of conduct for the social interactions of military officials. The full text of the regulations was not publicized, nor was an official reason given for the issuance of the regulations at this time.

The *PLA Daily* noted that the new code of conduct applies to an extensive range of social groups and various mediums of social interaction. The list of social groups includes individuals affiliated with local CCP and government agencies, public and private businesses, religious institutions, and all types of foreign organizations. The code of conduct pertains to PLA officials' in-person interactions with people outside the military as well as their virtual interactions on the internet and social media platforms.<sup>3</sup>

## DOCTRINAL ISSUES

### PLA PAPER DISCUSSES IMPORTANCE OF LOW-ALTITUDE DOMINANCE

**An article in the PLA’s official newspaper identified several areas for investment to ensure the PLA may secure dominance of low-altitude airspace in future conflicts.** On May 23, the *PLA Daily* published an [article](#) discussing the importance of being able to seize “low-altitude dominance” (低空制权), which it claimed was a necessary component of achieving “comprehensive dominance” (综合制权) in future land warfare.<sup>4</sup> The PLA’s stratification of airspace and its recognition of the importance of low-altitude airspace—which it defines as altitudes between 100 and 1,000 meters—are by no means new.<sup>5</sup> However, the PLA’s public discussion of the concept of low-altitude dominance appears to have gotten a boost over the past year, likely influenced by observations of the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war.<sup>6</sup>

The May 23 *PLA Daily* article began by contrasting low-altitude dominance with what it called “traditional air dominance.” It stated that traditional air dominance concerns equipment such as “large combat aircraft” and air defense systems, while low-altitude dominance is the purview of lower flying and/or slower armaments, such as helicopters, medium and small drones, and cruise missiles. The article further noted that low-altitude dominance is typically achieved in dispersed tactical-level engagement areas throughout the course of a conflict rather than in a broad swath of airspace that is seized and maintained in a single action or phase. The emphasis on achieving dominance over discrete pockets of low-altitude airspace during specific times aligns with the PLA’s longstanding concept of “command of the air” (制空权).<sup>7</sup>

The *PLA Daily* claimed that contests for low-altitude dominance would become more intense in future “intelligentized” warfare, a form of war characterized by high levels of artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomy. The article called for making investments in the following areas to improve capabilities for achieving low-altitude dominance in future conflicts:

- Improve the ability of army air defense systems in field environments to operate effectively in low-altitude airspace.
- Step up research and development of surveillance and monitoring platforms capable of detecting and dynamically monitoring “low, slow, and small” air vehicles operating at low and “very low” altitudes.<sup>8</sup>
- Accelerate the development of low-altitude drones, cruise missiles, and swarm capabilities capable of strikes against air and land targets.

### NDU AUTHORS MULL PEOPLE’S WAR IN FUTURE HIGH-TECH CONFLICTS

**Authors from the PLA’s top educational institution argue that the concept of “people’s war” will remain relevant in future “intelligentized” conflicts.** On June 27, *PLA Daily* published an [article](#) titled “People’s War from the Perspective of Intelligentization.” The authors of the article, who are affiliated with the PLA National Defense University’s (NDU) Politics Academy, began by contending that people’s war—a body of strategic thought originating under Mao Zedong that emphasizes widespread popular support and participation in PLA operations—remains important as the PLA develops capabilities for future wars replete with AI and autonomy. They cited a passage from the 20th Party Congress calling on China’s defense establishment to study the characteristics of intelligent warfare and develop “strategies and tactics for people’s war.”<sup>9</sup>

PLA writings describe people’s war as a form of struggle in which the masses are organized and armed to support strategic objectives that include resisting foreign invasion and protecting national unity. The NDU authors claimed that even as future battlefields become less reliant on the direct physical participation of

humans, people's war still has relevance in terms of supporting the operations conducted by AI and autonomous systems. The authors noted that because of outstanding issues in the stability and dependability of AI technologies, it will continue to be imperative in the near term to have "people in the loop" or "people on the loop" of operations executed by intelligent machines.

The NDU authors also pointed out areas in which intelligent technologies could be used to improve civilians' ability to support a future conflict. For example, they claimed that AI could be used to provide targeted, professional training to reduce the amount of time needed to equip civilians with necessary skills. They also suggested that digital twin technology could replicate the actual battlefield environment and provide situational awareness to civilians on the needs of warfighters.<sup>10</sup>

## PLA NAVY

### PLAN MIDSHIPMEN COMPLETE TRAINING, TOUR OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

**Future commanding officers of PLAN surface combatants recently completed a four-nation tour of countries neighboring the South China Sea.** From May 15 to June 24, the PLAN training ship *CNS Qi Jiguang* (83) carried out a 41-day period of at-sea [training](#) for PLAN midshipmen that included goodwill visits to Vietnam, Thailand, Brunei, and the Philippines. The midshipmen aboard the training ship were from Dalian Naval Academy and were majoring in topics including navigation command and communications command. During at-sea training, midshipmen participated in drills that included firing the ship's main and auxiliary guns and shooting light weapons in simulated counterterrorism and counterpiracy scenarios. The port visits in Southeast Asian countries included visits to host nation academies and training facilities as well as open days aboard *Qi Jiguang*.<sup>11</sup>



CNS *Qi Jiguang* paid a port call in Brunei in early June. An open day activity was held, during which locals (including PRC nationals) toured the ship's deck.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

## PLAN PARTICIPATES IN MULTILATERAL EXERCISE KOMODO

**Two PLAN surface combatants participated in multinational drills focused on collective responses to maritime disasters.** From June 5 to 8, two PLAN surface combatants—the Luyang III-class destroyer CNS *Zhanjiang* (165) and Jiangkai-class frigate CNS *Xuchang* (536)—[participated](#) in the 2023 iteration of Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo in Indonesia. The exercise drew the participation of over 40 ships from an eclectic group of more than 30 countries, including the US, Russia, India, and Pakistan. PLAN personnel took part in a range of on-shore and at-sea activities, including the exercise’s international fleet review, civil engineering and civil medical service activities, and navy band show. They participated in multinational military drills designed to improve capabilities for responding to natural disasters and maritime threats and for providing humanitarian aid.<sup>12</sup>



CNS *Xuchang* (front) during the International Fleet Review at the start of Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo on June 5.

Source: [China Military Online](#).

## COMMENTARY ON FOREIGN MILITARY ACTIVITIES

### PRC DEFENSE NEWSPAPER REVIEWS PUBLICLY RELEASED US NMS

**PRC analysis of the United States’ recently publicly released military strategy criticized US “hyping” of the strategic environment and highlighted the document’s discussion of integrated deterrence.**

On June 19, *China Defense News* published a short [analysis](#)<sup>13</sup> of the unclassified version of the 2022 US [National Military Strategy](#) (NMS), which was published online in May.<sup>14</sup> The NMS is produced by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff based on consultation with the Combatant Commanders and members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It serves as a strategic framework for how the US armed forces will execute the overall policy goals laid out in the most recent National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS).<sup>15</sup>

**Strategic environment.** The *China Defense News* article described the US’ 2022 NMS as featuring “Cold War–style thinking” in its depiction of the international security environment. The article stated that the NMS describes the strategic environment as transitioning from great power competition to intense great power confrontation, in which the US could face nuclear coercion from one or more powers. The article claimed that the NMS’s portrayal of armed conflict aligns with the NSS and NDS and that this line of thinking would guide US military force building and preparations for great power confrontation.

**Integrated deterrence.** The *China Defense News* article also highlighted the discussion of integrated deterrence within the NMS, stating that the US military believed the effectiveness of deterrence in an era of great power confrontation depended on a reliable and effective nuclear deterrent. The article said it was noteworthy that near the time of the NMS’s release, the US also released information on the stockpiles of the nine nuclear powers, an apparent reference to a March 2023 [report](#) from the Federation of American Scientists.<sup>16</sup> *China Defense News* stated that in future wars, the US would seek to integrate its military, diplomatic, technological, and trade measures with those of its allies in order to strengthen strategic deterrence and thereby “win without fighting.”

## PLA PROMOTIONS

### TWO POLITICAL OFFICERS PROMOTED TO THREE-STAR GENERAL

**Senior officers in organizations responsible for regional contingency operations and doctrinal development were recently promoted to the PLA's top military rank.** On June 28, PRC leader Xi Jinping presided over a [ceremony](#) in Beijing in which two PLA officers were promoted from two-star lieutenant general to three-star general, the highest military rank in the PLA. The officers promoted were as follows:

- **Zheng Xuan**, political commissar of the PLA's Northern Theater Command (NTC). The NTC is responsible for planning and executing combat and noncombat operations within an area of responsibility oriented toward threats around the Korean Peninsula and the China–Russia border.
- **Ling Huanxin**, political commissar of the PLA Academy of Military Science (AMS). AMS is the PLA's premier institution for the study and development of strategy, operations, and tactics.<sup>17</sup>



Top left: Xi Jinping presents a rank promotion certificate to AMS political commissar Ling Huanxin. Top right: the front cover of a certificate reading “[Three-Star] General Rank Order.” Bottom: scene of the June 28 promotion ceremony. Zheng Xuan and Ling Huanxin salute in the foreground as leaders of the CMC—with Xi Jinping in the center—applaud in the background. Note that everyone but Xi, Zheng, and Ling are wearing masks, a sign of continued caution in the PLA’s COVID-19 policy even after China’s loosening of related restrictions in late 2022.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on June 29,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, July 7, 2023, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/NewsRelease/16235523.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/NewsRelease/16235523.html).
- <sup>2</sup> Mei Changwei (梅常伟), “All-Military Basic Training On-Site Meeting Held in Tianjin” (全军基础训练现场会在天津召开), Xinhua (新华网), June 21, 2023, [http://www.news.cn/mrdx/2023-06/21/c\\_1310729097.htm](http://www.news.cn/mrdx/2023-06/21/c_1310729097.htm).
- <sup>3</sup> “CMC Political Work Department and Discipline Inspection Commission Release ‘Code of Conduct for Military Leading Cadres’ Social Interactions” (中央军委政治工作部、纪律检查委员会印发《军队领导干部社会交往行为规范》), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), June 19, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-06-19&paperNumber=01&articleid=908475](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-06-19&paperNumber=01&articleid=908475).
- <sup>4</sup> Zhang Peng (张鹏), “Seize Low-Altitude Dominance in Future Land Warfare” (夺取未来陆战低空制权), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), May 23, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-23&paperNumber=07&articleid=906414](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-05-23&paperNumber=07&articleid=906414).
- <sup>5</sup> The editors would like to thank Ken Allen for this observation. For PLA definitions of altitude levels, see Zhu Rongchang, ed., *Air Force Dictionary* (空军大辞典), (Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Press, Sept. 1996), p. 728.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, a *PLA Daily* article on low-altitude dominance published in December 2022 highlighted several types of Russian equipment that have featured in the current war in Ukraine, including the KUB-BLA loitering munition. See Luo Erwen (罗尔文), Wang Xiaomeng (王笑梦), and Du Jifeng (杜继峰), “High Technology Enables Competition for ‘Low-Altitude Dominance,’ Small Military Drones Gaining Momentum” (高新科技赋能角逐“低空制权”军用小型无人机风头正劲), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Dec. 2, 2022, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-12/02/content\\_329068.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-12/02/content_329068.htm).
- <sup>7</sup> As Allen and Garafola observe, the PLA Air Force’s use of the term “command of the air” refers to “control of a given air space over a given period of time.” This concept is less expansive than the US Air Force’s use of the terms “air superiority” and “air supremacy.” See Kenneth W. Allen and Cristina L. Garafola, *70 Years of the PLA Air Force*, China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2021, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/PLAAF/2021-04-12%20CASI\\_70%20Years%20of%20the%20PLAAF\\_FINAL%20ALL.pdf?ver=hTom1CXAJt0VTGTJzJBGAQ%3D%3D](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/PLAAF/2021-04-12%20CASI_70%20Years%20of%20the%20PLAAF_FINAL%20ALL.pdf?ver=hTom1CXAJt0VTGTJzJBGAQ%3D%3D).
- <sup>8</sup> The PLA defines “very low altitude” (超低空) as less than 100 meters.
- <sup>9</sup> This passage on developing strategy and tactics for people’s war was also cited in a recent article on transforming the PLA into a world-class military by Air Force Major General Shen Zhihua, director of the Political Work Department at the Academy of Military Sciences. For a summary of that article, see “AMS Leader Discusses PLA’s ‘World-Class Military’ Goal” in *PLA Update*, Issue 11, June 20, 2023, <https://www.cna.org/Newsletters/PLA%20Update/Issue-11/PLA-Update-Issue-11-June-20-2023.pdf>.
- <sup>10</sup> Zhao Hui (赵辉) and Yan Longxi (闫龙熙), “People’s War from the Perspective of Intelligentization” (智能化视阈下的人民战争), *PLA Daily* (智能化视阈下的人民战争), June 27, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-06-27&paperNumber=07&articleid=908870](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-06-27&paperNumber=07&articleid=908870).
- <sup>11</sup> “Naval Training Ship Qi Jiguang Sets Sail for Ocean-Going Cadet Training, Goodwill Visits,” China Military Online, May 17, 2023, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16224874.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16224874.html); Li Mingyu (黎明宇), “Qi Jiguang Successfully Completes Far-Sea, Far-Area Training and Visit Task” (戚继光舰圆满完成远海远域实习访问任务), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), June 25, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/yw\\_208727/16232986.html](http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16232986.html).
- <sup>12</sup> Zhang Gan and Li Hongming, “Chinese Naval Ships Return from 2023 Multilateral Naval Exercise Komodo,” China Military Online, June 15, 2023, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16231505.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16231505.html).
- <sup>13</sup> Shi Wen (石文), “New US Military Strategy Hypes Great Power Confrontation” (美新版军事战略渲染大国对抗), *China Defense News* (中国国防报), June 19, 2023,

[http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/gfbszbxg/index.html?paperName=zggfb&paperDate=2023-06-19&paperNumber=04&articleid=908429](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/gfbszbxg/index.html?paperName=zggfb&paperDate=2023-06-19&paperNumber=04&articleid=908429).

<sup>14</sup> *National Military Strategy 2022*, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, May 8, 2023, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/NMS%202022%20-%20Signed.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> “National Military Strategy,” Historical Office of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, accessed June 30, 2023, <https://history.defense.gov/Historical-Sources/National-Military-Strategy/>.

<sup>16</sup> “Status of World Nuclear Forces,” Federation of American Scientists, Mar. 31, 2023, <https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/>.

<sup>17</sup> “Xi Jinping Presents Order to Promote Military Officers to Rank of General,” China Military Online, June 28, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230628/344b113edd0a405da3a6dbec30f902e9/c.html>.

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