



PLA UPDATE

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

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Welcome to the fourth issue of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA’s monthly newsletter focused on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Each edition of this newsletter draws on the expertise of CNA’s China and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division to gather information and provide an update on important developments in the PLA as reported in the Chinese- and English-language media of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

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SPECIAL: RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

In March and April, PRC military and civilian authoritative media continued to adhere closely to the Russian narrative in their portrayals of the Russia-Ukraine war. However, nonauthoritative Chinese media outlets—which are less stringently controlled by the party-state and therefore less directly reflect official policies and opinions—have offered scant and scattered, but slightly more balanced, coverage of the war. Below we summarize one such nonauthoritative media commentary focused on an operational dimension of the war.

NDU PROFESSOR ON COGNITIVE WARFARE IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Patrick deGateño

PLA National Defense University (NDU) professor argues that information operations in the war represent the future of contemporary warfare. On March 17, the *Global Times* [published](#) an op-ed by Senior Colonel Li Minghai, a professor at the PLA NDU National Security College War and Crisis Response Training Center, claiming that cognitive warfare is the “essence” of the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine.¹

Cognitive domain operations, according to Li, use neuroscience, new information technologies (such as big data and artificial intelligence), and mass communication channels and platforms to execute cyber, psychological, public opinion, legal, and other forms of information warfare across the conflict continuum and at all levels of war. Li argues that these operations influence opponents’ thought processes and ideology through disseminating propaganda, indoctrinating populations, and infiltrating their culture and value systems. Li asserts that this “mind war” weaponizes language and ideas to “affect targets’ cognition,” influence their pursuit of their military and political objectives, and “change their decision-making and behavior.”

Li alleges that Russia, Ukraine, and Western countries have effectively exploited the global society’s growing reliance on communications technologies and platforms to sway domestic and international support for their respective aims. According to Li, these states have accomplished this exploitation by selectively releasing key leadership statements and information—along with disinformation and misinformation—about the war, particularly in audio-visual formats, on global social media platforms. To illustrate his point, Li summarizes key statements that Vladimir Putin, Volodymyr Zelensky, and global leaders have issued to muster their citizens’ support and the support of other countries for their respective sides of the conflict. According to Li,

- Putin’s statements about the conflict have affected the course of the war, the concerns of the international community, and Russia’s domestic and global public “positive and tough” image;
- Zelensky’s public statements about the war have had a global influence few would have predicted before the onset of hostilities, “obviously triggering a change in international public opinion”; and
- The speeches of US, French, British, and other Western heads of state have all made clear their stance on the conflict, which “will affect the ups and downs of global public opinion.”

If we follow Li’s reasoning, then it would seem reasonable to speculate that the PRC’s own official statements and media coverage of the war constitute a form of cognitive domain operations in support of Russia’s war effort. Li’s opinions in this editorial align with views expressed in other publications by PRC military and civilian analysts, who believe that efforts to influence domestic and international opinion will become more important in future conflicts, and that these efforts will be aided by artificial intelligence.

Nevertheless, the heavy kinetic action between Russia and Ukraine suggests that cognitive warfare, while important, is not likely the “essence” of this conflict, as Li claims. Instead, Li may be overestimating cognitive warfare’s importance to advocate for the salience of his field of study rather than present an accurate

assessment of the conflict. (For more on PRC views concerning cognitive warfare and the future of modern war, see CNA's October 2021 study [The PLA and Intelligent Warfare: A Preliminary Analysis](#) by Kevin Pollpeter and Amanda Kerrigan.)

ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

In this section, we first discuss the beginning of the 2022 conscription cycle. For the second consecutive year, the PLA is following a semiannual conscription and demobilization policy.² This new conscription cycle, which was first [announced](#) in 2020 but was [delayed](#) until 2021 because of COVID-19,³ is part of broader military reform efforts and has replaced the once-a-year conscript induction model.⁴ PLA watchers outside China have [noted](#) that this new conscription model could enhance conscript training and discipline, thereby improving military readiness because smaller numbers of personnel would now enter and leave the system.

We then discuss a report on a recent PLA effort to improve its military awards system by creating the August 1 Medal, the PLA's new highest honor.

PLA'S EARLY 2022 CONSCRIPTION PRIORITIZES COLLEGE STUDENTS

Brian Waidelich

The PRC Defense Ministry announced in January that the first round of annual PLA conscription would take place from February 15 to March 31. [According](#) to a ministry spokesperson, PLA conscription

work in the first half of 2022 would prioritize recruiting college students—specifically students majoring in science and engineering and those with “skills required for combat readiness and warfighting.”⁶ Citing the same desired skills, the Central Military Commission (CMC) Political Work Department [announced](#) in mid-March their desire to recruit about 3,600 civilian college graduates as military officers.⁷

Transportation of conscripts throughout China kicked off on March 16. *PLA Daily* [reported](#) that the PLA used the “New Soldier Transportation Planning Management System” (an information system developed by the CMC) the first time this year. The new system reportedly optimizes conscript transport by reducing the number of transfers and the time underway and by increasing the use of high-speed rail.⁸ Other [methods](#) for conscript transport included chartered aircraft, roll-on/roll-off ships, and intercity buses.⁹

By early April, PLA media published various articles on the start of training for new conscripts throughout the services and forces of the Chinese military.¹⁰ As in previous years, China did not release information on the total numbers of personnel conscripted.

The second round of conscription in 2022 will [start](#) to start on August 15 and conclude on September 30.¹¹



New conscripts boarding a high-speed train to travel to their units. They wear sashes that read, “When one person joins the military, it brings honor to the whole family” (一人参军，全家光荣). Source: [China Military Online](#).⁵

CMC ANNOUNCES NEW MEDAL FOR OUTSTANDING PERSONNEL

Kelly Buckley and Brian Waidelich

The CMC has announced the August 1 Medal for outstanding military service.¹² A Xinhua report on the new medal [states](#) that it is now the PLA's highest honor.¹³ According to Xinhua, the CMC has issued nomination guidelines for the medal, urging units to select model figures who have made outstanding contributions to safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests, while advancing national defense and military modernization.¹⁴ The CMC will award the August 1 Medal for the first time this year on the 95th anniversary of the founding of the PLA.¹⁵

This new medal is part of the PLA's implementation of recently announced revisions to its military awards system. According to a February 2022 China Military Online [article](#), improvements to this system have greatly "[enhanced] the attractiveness of military careers and the sense of mission and honor of the military personnel in China."¹⁶ (This article is related to the article "[Implementation Measures for the Commendation of Military Merits and Honors](#)," which we included in our first [PLA UPDATE](#).)

LAWS AND REGULATIONS

In this section, we feature summaries of reports on a batch of new CMC regulations designed to improve the human capital of the PLA's non-commissioned officers (NCO) corps. Like the new regulations we summarized in our past three issues, these NCO regulations are clearly part of the "Third Big Campaign" in the PLA's reform agenda, which focuses on improving the military policy system.¹⁷ (For more on the Third Big Campaign and the state of PLA reform, see David Finkelstein's September 2021 report [The PLA's New Joint Doctrine: The Capstone of the New Era Operations Regulations System](#).)¹⁸

CMC IMPLEMENTS NEW NCO AND CONSCRIPT REGULATIONS AND POLICIES

Kelly Buckley and Brian Waidelich

New CMC regulations and policies seek to enhance the professionalism of NCOs and the roles of conscripts. According to [Xinhua](#) and [China Military Online](#) reports, the new regulations took effect on March 31 and address NCO professionalism and career stability, while "allowing conscripts to play a more fundamental role in the development of the Chinese military."¹⁹ More specifically, the regulations address NCO and conscript recruitment, training, management, development, rank promotion, benefits, demobilization, retirement, and other core military reform issues. We discuss one of those new policies in more detail in the next summary.

NEW POLICY SEEKS TO RETAIN HIGH-DEMAND PLA NCOS

Brian Waidelich

In late 2021, the PLA began implementing a military-wide policy aimed at retaining NCOs with critically needed technical expertise. The policy, referred to as "extended service" (延期服役), is [reportedly](#) pursuant to last October's revised [PRC Military Service Law](#).²⁰ Under extended service, "outstanding" NCOs who are ineligible for rank promotion and are nearing the end of time-in-rank restrictions may apply to have their period of service extended.²¹

The policy's rollout comes at a time when the PLA has purportedly struggled to fill certain high-demand NCO billets. In a February 24 interview with *PLA Daily*, Li Hailu, political commissar of a PLA Navy ship testing center, [said](#) that military organizations at various levels had recently lost "backbone" (i.e., leading NCOs),

limiting the organizations' combat readiness. Li told the *PLA Daily* that the new policy will help ensure smoother turnovers and better stability in the personnel system.²²

PRC media have reported examples of military units retaining NCOs under the new policy:

- On December 2021, China Military Video Net [reported](#) that “over 10” NCOs of an 81st Group Army aviation brigade were “among the first” PLA NCOs to extend their service under the new policy.²³
- [According](#) to a January 2022 China Military Online report, a Northern Theater Navy Aviation department extended the service of an unspecified number of NCOs, including those with expertise in aircraft maintenance, air combat service, air support, and airborne electronic countermeasures.²⁴
- A February 2022 *PLA Daily* article [stated](#) that a PLA Navy ship testing center retained 12 outstanding Master Sergeants Fourth Class under the extended service policy.²⁵
- A March 2022 *China Youth Daily* article [claimed](#) that “nearly 20” NCOs of a PLA Army Airborne Corps brigade extended their service after passing retention assessments at the end of 2021.²⁶

How successful the new policy has been to date is unclear since PRC media has not disclosed how many NCOs the PLA seeks to retain or how many have extended service. A purported increase in workloads for extended-service NCOs also raises questions about the policy's long-term feasibility. Commenting on a group of NCOs who extended their periods of service, one *PLA Daily* article [noted](#) that “even though there has been no change in their military rank, the responsibilities on their shoulders have grown heavier.”²⁷

PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION

The next summary describes a way the PLA's professional military education system provides the PLA with more combat-realistic training and education, while also supporting planning for future combat operations.

ARMY BATTLE LAB DEVELOPS OPERATIONAL PLAN ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

Brian Waidelich

A PLA Army Command College “battle lab” (作战实验室) reportedly developed a means for optimizing combined arms operational planning. According to an April 2022 *PLA Daily* [report](#), the battle



Battle lab members test their new digital platform. Source: *PLA Daily*.²⁸

lab has created a digital platform known as the “Army Combined Arms Unit Operational Plan Simulation and Assessment System,” which lab staff described as the battle lab’s “brain.” The platform generates (1) graphics visualizing data such as units’ assault speed, inflicted damage, and ammunition consumption, and (2) assessments of draft plans for evaluating their strengths and weaknesses of the plans. The system reportedly includes different assessment models and metrics corresponding to unique characteristics of “intelligentized” and unmanned operations.²⁹

PLA AIR FORCE

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is hard at work developing its strategic projection capabilities. As the next summary shows, the Xi'an Y-20 large transport aircraft is proving vital to that effort.

12 PLAAF Y-20 TRANSPORT FLIGHTS DELIVER WEAPONS TO SERBIA

Ryan Loomis

PRC media and subject matter experts (SMEs) assert Y-20 military equipment deliveries to Serbia showcase PLA "strategic air force" capabilities. On April 9 and 10, a total of 12 Y-20 flights [reportedly](#)



Three of six Y-20s at Nikola Tesla International Airport in Belgrade, Serbia, on April 9. Source: *The Observer*.³⁰

delivered PRC-made FK-3 air defense systems to the Serbian military as part of a 2019 arms sale deal.³¹ During an April 11 routine press conference, PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Zhao Lijian [confirmed](#) that Beijing sent Y-20 transport aircraft to deliver "conventional military supplies" to Serbia.³² Citing public flight tracking information from [Flightradar24](#) and other ADS-B trackers, PRC media reports [said](#)

that for at least two consecutive days, the same six Y-20 aircraft made two roughly 16,000-kilometer round trip flights from China to Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade, Serbia.³³ The aircraft each stopped for one ground refueling, some in Istanbul, Turkey, and others in Baku, Azerbaijan.³⁴

Compared to past international Y-20 flights, such as international deliveries of COVID-19 aid and [disaster relief to Tonga](#) in the wake of its January volcano eruption, the Serbia deliveries stand out for at least two reasons. First, the Serbia Y-20 deliveries represented a [large number of long-distance sorties](#) compared to the one-flight or two-flight aid deliveries of the recent past. Second, at a highly sensitive time in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, China demonstrated its strategic airlift capability by delivering weapons to a country near Ukraine.³⁵

PLAAF Spokesperson Shen Jingke [said](#) in September 2021 that with the increase in the PLAAF's fleet of Y-20 and J-20 aircraft, the service had "crossed the historical threshold to become a 'strategic air force.'" PRC SMEs and media [asserted](#) that the April 2022 Y-20 flights across Eurasia are further indications of this.³⁶ For example, military commentator Wu Jian on Shenzhen Satellite TV asserted that the PLA's "timely delivery to a complex region and through an unfamiliar meteorological environment" demonstrates improvements to its strategic projection capabilities.³⁷ Commenting on the same program, "PLA Air Force expert" Fu Qianshao claimed that conducting 12 Y-20 intercontinental sorties in two days was a record, demonstrating PRC "strategic air force" technical and flight crew capabilities for long-range delivery of heavy equipment under complex situations.³⁸

PLA NAVY

In the next summary, we see the Djibouti Support Base further developing its capabilities to support an ever-growing range of PLA overseas operations.

PLA SHIP DOCKS AT DJIBOUTI SUPPORT BASE FOR FIRST TIME

Ryan Loomis

A PLA Navy new-type fast combat support ship made its first reported PLA Navy port call to the newly constructed pier at Djibouti Support Base—the PLA’s sole overseas military base. The Type 903A “Fuchi II” class supply ship CNS *Luomahu* (AOE-964) docked at the [450-meter pier](#) of the PLA overseas support base in late March for resupply. The vessel was participating in the PLA Navy’s 40th Naval Escort Task Force (NETF) in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia, according to satellite imagery [cited in Western media reports](#) and repeated in PRC media.³⁹ In the past, NETF vessels have [resupplied at the PRC-built Doraleh Multipurpose Port nearby](#).⁴⁰ With its dock operational and able to support a supply ship purpose-built to replenish aircraft carriers, Djibouti Support Base can ostensibly accommodate aircraft carriers, eliminating Beijing’s reliance on the nearby civilian port.

PLA JOINT LOGISTICS SUPPORT FORCE

One responsibility of the PLA Joint Logistic Support Force (JLSF) is overseeing the PLA’s medical system. The quality of the PLA medical support system is unevenly spread across the force, just as the quality of China’s civilian medical system is uneven. The article summarized below offers useful details on how the PLA is working through the JLSF to improve the PLA system.

HUNDRED-DAY REVIEW OF JLSF MEDICAL SYSTEM REFORM WORK

Timothy Ditter

PLA media published a report reviewing the first 100 days of JLSF efforts to implement new regulations on military medical reform. Beginning in early 2022, the CMC issued a series of policy documents aimed at improving soldiers’ lives, the quality of medical care, and veterans’ treatment and benefits.⁴¹ One of these documents, enacted on January 1, 2022, and titled, “Interim Provisions on the Medical Treatment and Protection of Soldiers and Military-Related Personnel,” focuses on “protecting the health of military members and their families and ensuring the happiness of military families.”⁴²

An article published in China Military Online on April 15, 2022, outlines the success of the “Provisions” 100 days after it was enacted. The article details a series of measures PLA hospitals have taken to reduce wait times for soldiers, simplify the process for receiving medical care, increase overall communication, and improve the availability of medical services.⁴³ According to the authors, medical benefits have improved in the following ways:

- The First Medical Center of the PLA General Hospital established a “special services” area to better support military personnel and their families by combining services from multiple departments into one area. PLA General Hospital plans to set up special military service areas in all its medical centers.⁴⁴
- Family members of border guards and soldiers from the Tibetan Autonomous Region can now access the military’s online WeChat health service platform “Military Hospital Bridge” (*junyuan xinqiao*; 军医新桥), managed by the Army Medical University.⁴⁵

PLA STRATEGIC SUPPORT FORCE

In its [14th Five-Year Plan](#) issued January 12, Beijing declared artificial intelligence (AI) as a “strategic area” in which it aims to enhance its basic research capabilities as part of the PRC’s larger efforts to develop its digital economy.⁴⁶ The plan describes PRC objectives for integrating AI into national intelligent infrastructure and for pursuing AI applications in government services, smart cities, intelligent manufacturing, autonomous driving, and language intelligence. The plan also outlines efforts to develop intelligent infrastructure in industries such as agriculture, animal husbandry, water conservancy, environmental protection, and health services. The plan as published, however, does not describe how the PRC will incorporate AI into military technology and PLA operations.

Below we summarize a recent report describing one way in which the PLA Strategic Support Force seeks to develop and integrate AI into its space-based reconnaissance capabilities. (For more on China’s 14th Five-Year Plan, see the seventh issue of CNA’s [The China AI and Autonomy Report](#).)⁴⁷

PLA RESEARCHERS DEVELOP ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR TARGET TRACKING BY SATELLITE

Kevin Pollpeter

The PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) Space Engineering University reportedly has developed an AI system that enables satellites to track targets. According to an April 7 *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) [report](#) on an article authored by PLASSF university researchers, the AI application can track targets from the Jilin-1 satellite’s video feed with a 95 percent success rate.⁴⁸ According to SCMP, the application could enable even low-cost satellites to track targets. The research in SCMP’s report first appeared in *Fire Control and Command Control*, a PRC peer-reviewed journal published by state-owned defense conglomerate China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO).⁴⁹

According to SCMP’s report, this AI application is unlike previous systems because it can track flying aircraft and moving cars and reacquire targets after they make sharp turns or transit a bridge or tunnel. However, this AI system may lack a real-time tracking capability because it must transmit video feed to a ground station where it is processed by a computing center. The article noted that newer PRC satellites have been equipped with processors that could be uploaded with the tracking algorithm.

MILITARY DIPLOMACY & OVERSEAS ACTIVITIES

In 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) that Cambodia and China had signed a secret agreement to allow the PLA to use the Royal Cambodian Navy Ream Naval Base near Sihanoukville. The pact provides the PLA with exclusive rights to be part of the Cambodian base on the Gulf of Thailand in exchange for the PRC building new base infrastructure.⁵⁰ Such an agreement did not happen overnight; rather, it was the product of many years of steadily increasing political, economic, and military cooperation between the PRC and Cambodia—cooperation such as the kind described in the next summary.

PLA TO HELP BUILD CAMBODIAN ARMY ACADEMY FACILITY

Kelly Buckley

Royal Cambodian Army Academy construction project begins with PLA support. Xinhua [reported](#) on March 28 that the PLA will help build the Cambodia Royal Army Academy Teaching Complex Project in the Kompong Speu Province.⁵¹ This project is the latest in a series of PRC construction support projects for the academy. It will reportedly involve the construction of a new teaching complex, a lecture hall, and an

auditorium, along with the renovation of 20 academy buildings and improvements to associated roads and water supply networks. The Royal Cambodian Army Commander-in-Chief General Om Bisai and the deputy defense attaché of the Chinese Embassy in Cambodia Colonel Zhu Shuaifei attended the groundbreaking ceremony on March 28.⁵² According to Xinhua, this construction project is one more example of close cooperation between the PLA and the Cambodian military.

NOTES

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¹⁴ Ibid.

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