



## The PLA's New Joint Doctrine

### *The Capstone of the New Era Operations Regulations System*

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## Abstract

More than five years into an unprecedented series of reorganizations and systemic reforms which began in 2016, the Chinese People's Liberation Army was issued new joint doctrine, the first update in 20 years. On November 13, 2020, the Xinhua News Agency announced that the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission had issued the *Guidelines on Joint Operations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (Trial)*. This paper presents what the PLA is saying about this new doctrinal guidance; places the joint operations *Guidelines* within the larger context of ongoing PLA reform and years of doctrinal evolution by drawing on previous work at the Center for Naval Analyses; engages in some informed speculation on various dimensions of the new joint doctrine; and identifies questions for further consideration.

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**Cover image and credit:** Xi Jinping and members of the Central Military Commission at the CMC's Joint Operations Command Center. Xinhua, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-11/03/c\\_1121903852.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-11/03/c_1121903852.htm).

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## Introduction

More than five years into an unprecedented series of reorganizations and systemic reforms, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is now armed with new joint doctrine. On November 13, 2020, the Xinhua News Agency announced that the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) Central Military Commission (CMC) had issued the *Guidelines on Joint Operations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (Trial)* — hereafter, *Guidelines*.<sup>1</sup>

The promulgation of this document speaks to the core of what the PLA aspires to achieve as an operational outcome of the military reform enterprise that was launched on December 31, 2015. Specifically, the PLA seeks to become a force capable of prosecuting “integrated joint operations” in multiple battlespace domains in an era of information-centric warfare and future intelligent warfare. This latest conception of how the PLA should fight as a joint force has served as one of the drivers for some of the most notable organizational changes in the PRC armed forces to date. These include the following:

- Establishing a Joint Staff Department under the Central Military Commission
- Replacing the seven legacy military regions with five joint theater commands
- Realigning command and control authorities at the national and theater levels

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<sup>1</sup> “With the Approval of the Chairman of the Central Military Commission Xi Jinping, the Central Military Commission issued the ‘Chinese People's Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Trial)’” (*Jing Zhongyang Junwei Zhuxi Xi Jinping Pizhun Zhongyang Junwei Yinfa ‘Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Lianhe Zuozhan Gangyao (Shixing)’*); 经中央军委主席习近平批准 中央军委印发《中国人民解放军联合作战纲要（试行）》，Xinhua, Nov. 13, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-11/13/c\\_1126735392.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-11/13/c_1126735392.htm); “Chinese Military Releases Outline to Improve Joint Combat Capabilities,” Xinhua, Nov. 13, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/13/c\\_139513202.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/13/c_139513202.htm).

- Redesigning the PLA structure away from a ground force-centric organization
- Relegating the services' roles to force providers for the joint theater commands
- Creating a Strategic Support Force and Joint Logistics Support Force as joint enablers
- Continuing ongoing efforts to create a more joint (“purple”) officer corps and enhance joint professional military education.<sup>2</sup>

With the issuing of this publication, the PLA now has a warfighting doctrine to be employed by the joint warfighting organization that it is creating.

The publication of the new doctrinal *Guidelines*, officially adopted on November 7, 2020, was announced with great fanfare. However, the actual document has not been placed in the public domain, nor should one expect it to be. Consequently this paper aims to do the following: present what the PLA is saying about this new doctrinal publication; place the joint operations *Guidelines* within the larger context of ongoing PLA reform and years of doctrinal evolution by drawing on previous work at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) on these issues; engage in some informed speculation on various dimensions of the new joint doctrine; and identify questions for further consideration.

## **Brief comments about translation and the format of the *Guidelines***

Translating PLA operational terminology into English is always challenging. Not all terms transfer, and many are unique to the PRC armed forces. For example, the PLA does not have a single term for “doctrine.” Instead, it speaks of “operations regulations” (*zuozhan tiaoling*; 作战条令), “operational methods” (*zuozhan fangfa*;

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<sup>2</sup> For background on the post-2015 reforms, see David M. Finkelstein, “Breaking the Paradigm: Drivers Behind the PLA’s Current Period of Reform,” in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), pp. 45-85. This excellent volume from NDU covers most of the reform developments up to 2019, before the new doctrine was issued.

作战方法—often contracted as *zhanfa*; 战法), and “operations laws” (*zuozhan fagui*; 作战法规). Even translating the name of this new document is subject to variation. This paper adopts the following translation: *Guidelines on Joint Operations of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (Trial)*. This is the translation the PLA used in the official English-language transcript of the Ministry of National Defense (MND) press conference on November 26, 2020, when the publication was discussed for the benefit of foreign audiences.<sup>3</sup> An alternate translation could justifiably be *Chinese People’s Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Trial)*. In Chinese, the title is 《中国人民解放军联合作战纲要(试行)》 (*Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Lianhe Zuozhan Gangyao (Shixing)*). Students of PLA affairs will quickly focus on the Chinese term *gangyao* (纲要) in the vernacular title of the publication. This is because it provides a sense for what type of document is being used to transmit the new doctrine. Therefore, a few words about the term *gangyao*, and what it conveys, are in order.

The term *gangyao* can be translated in various ways: “essentials,” “guidelines,” “outline,” or “compendium.” This paper adopts “guidelines” because, once again, this was the PLA’s choice in the English transcript of the aforementioned MND press conference. Documents identified as *gangyao* generally provide authoritative guidance and essential information conveyed at a high level of discourse. The content is meant to be studied, learned, and implemented. The word “overview” could also describe one purpose of these documents. *Gangyao* documents convey big ideas or concepts—i.e., foundational knowledge. In some cases they provide a blueprint for action. *Gangyao* are not just for the military. For example, there can be *gangyao* for studying Xi Jinping’s



Source:  
<http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/68294/428935/>

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<sup>3</sup> “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on November 26,” *China Military Online*, Nov. 29, 2020, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-11/29/content\\_4874839.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-11/29/content_4874839.htm).

speeches on a variety of issues, and *gangyao* for outlining the major lines of effort in five-year economic plans. The document cover on the previous page is from a “study *gangyao*” on *Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era*. China’s first formal national security strategy, adopted in 2015, was issued as a *gangyao*.<sup>4</sup> By way of providing a reference point for military affairs, when, for example, the PLA discusses the 1993 US Army Field Manual FM 100-5 (*Operations*) they refer to it as a *gangyao*. The same holds for the US Joint Staff’s Joint Publication 3-0 *Joint Operations*.<sup>5</sup>

## Announcement of the *Guidelines* was a media event

Between November 2020 and January 2021, the PLA media complex, the CCP-affiliated media, and select non-authoritative PRC media outlets announced the promulgation of the *Guidelines* in about three dozen articles, mostly in the vernacular. They were aimed at a domestic Chinese-speaking audience, to include the PLA itself.<sup>6</sup> For the benefit of foreign audiences, the monthly PRC MND press conference in November 2020 included comments on the *Guidelines*, and an English-language version of that press conference was posted online.<sup>7</sup> English-language articles were relatively scarce during this timeframe (and have been so since then); an occasional short article, or reference to the *Guidelines*, has been posted on the English-language versions of *China Military Online* (<http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>), which is the PLA’s portal, *China Daily*, and Xinhua.

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<sup>4</sup> “Xi Jinping Presides Over the Politburo Meeting to Deliberate and Approve the National Security Strategy Outline” (*Xi Jinping Zhuchi Zhengzhi ju Huiyi Zhenyi Tongguo Guojia Anquan Zhanlüe Gangyao*; 习近平主持政治局会议 审议通过 国家安全战略纲要), *China News*, Jan. 23, 2015, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2015/01-23/7000730.shtml>. The name of the national security strategy document in Chinese is 《国家安全战略纲要》.

<sup>5</sup> 《美国陆军 FM 100-5 纲要》 (US Army FM 100-5 *Gangyao*) and FM 100-5 号 《作战纲要》 (FM Number 100-5 “Operations *Gangyao*”) are two common iterations.

<sup>6</sup> This paper is based on 37 articles on the new *Guidelines* published between November 2020 and March 2021 and a body of work on PLA doctrinal issues conducted over many years. After January 2021, media coverage dropped off noticeably.

<sup>7</sup> “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on November 26.”

Most articles announcing the publication of the *Guidelines* used near-identical language, drawing on and recycling official verbiage, presumably crafted by the PLA. Consequently, there is a great deal of repetition in how the document is described throughout the PRC media. Also, because the actual content is not meant for public consumption (the *Guidelines* is undoubtedly a controlled if not classified document), descriptions of the actual content of the new doctrinal publication in the PRC media are extremely superficial by design. Some of the very few insights in the public domain are the result of a small handful of media interviews with PRC civilian subject matter experts, retired PLA officers, or active duty officers—usually identified only by their office—who provide commentary in what are clearly officially sanctioned media appearances. Even then, more is inferred than is specified, and a background in PLA doctrinal affairs is helpful in reading between the lines. We should not expect the PLA to place the *Guidelines* in the public domain as the US armed forces do with many key doctrinal publications.



November 26, 2020: MND spokesperson Senior Colonel Ren Guoqiang comments on the new joint *Guidelines*. [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/focus/2020-11/29/content\\_4874841.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/focus/2020-11/29/content_4874841.htm)

## **The *Guidelines* is part of the PLA’s “Third Big Campaign” of reform**

The need for major adjustments to operational doctrine was identified as an important component of the military reform program directed by the CCP as a result of the Third Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee (October 2013). The need to “innovate and develop military theory” (doctrinal matters) was near the top of the list of the 46 major areas of military reform listed in the important post-Third Plenum document known as the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues of Comprehensively Deepening Reform*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Several Major Issues of Comprehensively Deepening Reform” (*Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Quanmian Shenhua Gaige*)

Two and one half years later, on January 1, 2016, the *Opinion of the Central Military Commission on Deepening Reform of National Defense [and the] Armed Forces* was issued to serve as a roadmap for how the PLA would implement the military dimensions of the Third Plenum “Decision.” When identifying the areas in which “innovation” would be necessary, the CMC *Opinion* mentioned military theory (doctrinal matters) first, followed by military technology, military organization, and military management. Significantly, the CMC *Opinion* also underscored the need to focus on increasing warfighting capabilities by striving to create a military that can conduct “integrated joint operations” (*yitihua lianhe zuozhan*; 一体化联合作战).<sup>9</sup> (This paper will discuss “integrated joint operations” further on.)

To help conceptualize this complex and wide-ranging defense modernization effort, the PLA speaks in terms of “Three Big Campaigns” of reform (*san da zhanyi*; 三大战役), each with a specific focus area comprising multiple subsidiary objectives. The “First Big Campaign,” launched in January 2016, focused on reconfiguring the national and theater-level command systems and organizations. Some, but not all, of its key features were the expansion of the Central Military Commission, the creation of the five joint theater commands, and changes to the service headquarters. The PLA refers to this first campaign as “strengthening the brains and strengthening the center [meaning the CMC]” of the force. This first set of reforms was vital to the PLA’s ability to provide rational command and control for future joint operations. The “Second Big Campaign” is described as “strengthening the bones

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*Ruogan Zhongda Wenti de Jueding*; 中共中央关于全面深化改革若干重大问题的决定), Xinhua, Nov. 15, 2013, [http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-11/15/content\\_2528179.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2013-11/15/content_2528179.htm). The Third Plenum was held in October 2013. The “Decision” was published on November 15, 2013. The Third Plenum and its “Decision” covered many more areas for reform than for military affairs. In fact, military reform issues were covered in the last section, Section 15. The actual implementation of the reforms would commence two years later, announced on December 31, 2015. In retrospect, the areas for future military reform listed in this 2013 document would serve as a high-fidelity roadmap to what would actually transpire in the PLA over the ensuing years and up until today.

<sup>9</sup> “Opinions of the Central Military Commission on Deepening the Reform of National Defense and the Army” (*Zhongyang Junwei Guanyu Shenhua Guofang he Jundui Gaige de Yijian*; 中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见), Xinhua, Jan. 1, 2016, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-01/01/c\\_1117646695.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-01/01/c_1117646695.htm).



and strengthening the muscles” of the PLA. This effort consisted of rebalancing the services, demobilizing forces, and significantly restructuring the size and composition of operational units across all the services. Training reform, professional military education reform, and adjustments to the military science research establishment were also part of this effort.<sup>10</sup> The PLA considers both of these first two reform “campaigns” to be complete or nearly complete.

The “Third Big Campaign” is ongoing as of this writing. It is focused on reforms to what the PLA refers to as “the military policy system” (*junshi zhengce zhidu*; 军事政策制度). This endeavor began in November 2018 after Xi Jinping presided over the two-day Central Military Commission Policy System Reform Work Conference.<sup>11</sup>

PLA commentators universally consider this third campaign to be the toughest one they face, the one that will take the most time to enact, and the endeavor that is vital to unleashing the combat potential of the first two reform campaigns. It is likened to the “life’s blood” of the PLA. It is about policy, operational doctrine, personnel, institutional culture, management, and governance. It comprises all of the tough organizational issues that have bedeviled the PLA for decades. These issues cannot be solved simply by changing organization charts, because they are about governance, behaviors, and norms.

Initiatives under this “Third Big Campaign” have been divided into four major baskets. Unsurprisingly, the first focuses on improving party organization and practices within the PLA. The second seeks innovations that will enhance the

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<sup>10</sup> “Open up a New Situation in National Defense and Army Building with the Spirit of Reform and Innovation” (*Yi Gaige Chuangxin Jingshen Kaita Guofang he Jundui Jianshe Xin Jumian*; 以改革创新精神开拓国防和军队建设新局面), *China Military Online (Jiefang Junwang*; 中国军网), Feb. 25, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/2019qglhzt/2019-02/25/content\\_9433949.htm](http://www.81.cn/2019qglhzt/2019-02/25/content_9433949.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Da Jun (大钧), “This ‘Third Major Campaign’ in Military Reforms is Tied to the Vital Interests of Each Officer and Enlisted!” (*Zhe Chang Jun Gai ‘Di San Da Zhanyi,’ Guanxi Mei ge Guanbing de Qieshen Liyi*; 这场军改“第三大战役”，关系每个官兵的切身利益！), *PLA Daily (Jiefangjun Bao*; 解放军报), Nov. 15, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/xue-xi/2018-11/15/content\\_9345923.htm](http://www.81.cn/xue-xi/2018-11/15/content_9345923.htm). The conference (中央军委政策制度改革工作会议) took place November 13-14, 2018.

employment of combat power. The third is focused on personnel reforms. The fourth deals with administrative and management practices.<sup>12</sup>

It is precisely in the second basket of reforms under the “Third Big Campaign,” that the new joint operations *Guidelines* resides. As reported on the PLA’s website, this second basket will seek to

innovate the military strategic guidance system, *build a system of joint operations laws and regulations*, adjust and perfect the combat readiness system, and form a policy system for the use of military forces based on joint, peacetime, and warfare integration, and fully fulfill our military mission in the New Era. (Emphasis added.)<sup>13</sup>

Needless to say, the issuance of the joint operations *Guidelines* must have been considered a major accomplishment for those PLA organizations and officers charged with demonstrating tangible progress to the Central Military Commission in doctrinal reform, and may partially explain the media fanfare over a document not available in the public domain.<sup>14</sup>

## **A capstone document for the “new era operations regulations system”**

The joint *Guidelines* is a foundational document meant to sit atop a larger body of doctrinal guidance, which is described by the PLA as the “new era operations regulations system” (*xin shidai zuozhan tiaoling tixi*; 新时代作战条令体系). The Ministry of National Defense described the document (in English) as “the capstone of the combat doctrine system in the New Era.”<sup>15</sup> A member of the CMC’s Training

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that since the inception of the “Third Big Campaign” in 2018, the PLA has issued innumerable new regulations, “decisions,” and other edicts in the other three baskets (party building, personnel, and management). The 2019 defense white paper lists a few but certainly not all, since many new regulations have been issued since the publication of the white paper.

<sup>15</sup> “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on November 26.”

and Administration Department (*zhongyang junwei xunlian guanli bu*; 中央军委训练管理部) authoritatively described the *Guidelines* (more accurately in Chinese) as “the pinnacle of our military’s new era operations regulations system.”<sup>16</sup> The term “new era,” of course, is applied by the CCP to many new initiatives, military or otherwise, instituted during the tenure of Xi Jinping.

One gets the sense that the new *Guidelines* will serve the same capstone functions for the PLA that US Joint Publication 1 (*Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*) and Joint Publication 3-0 (*Joint Operations*) serve for the US Joint Force.

**US Joint Publication 1:**

“Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, is the capstone publication for all joint doctrine, presenting fundamental principles and overarching guidance for the employment of the Armed Forces of the United States. This represents the evolution in our warfighting guidance and military theory that forms the core of joint warfighting doctrine and establishes the framework for our forces’ ability to fight as a joint team.”

— Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, Mar. 24, 2013, Incorporating Change 1, Jul. 12, 2017, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1\\_ch1.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1_ch1.pdf)

**US Joint Publication 3-0:**

“This publication is the keystone document of the joint operations series. It provides the doctrinal foundation and fundamental principles that guide the Armed Forces of the United States in all joint operations.”

— Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, Jan. 17, 2017, Incorporating Change 1, Oct. 22, 2018, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_0ch1.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_0ch1.pdf)

Speculating, based on past experience following PLA doctrinal developments, it is not out of the question that more joint doctrinal publications are likely under

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<sup>16</sup> Cheng Ronggui (程荣贵), “Strong Army Forum: Establish Iron Rules for Joint Operations” (*Qiang Jun Luntan: Li Qi Lianhe Zuozhan de Tie Guiju*; 强军论坛：立起联合作战的铁规矩), *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*; 解放军报), Nov. 29, 2020, [http://www.chinamil.com.cn/11/2020-11/29/content\\_9944344.htm](http://www.chinamil.com.cn/11/2020-11/29/content_9944344.htm). Recall, the PLA does not use the term “doctrine” to refer to operational principles and guidance as we do in the United States. Instead, the PLA often uses the term “regulations”—*tiaoling* (条令).

development and will be issued over time—sitting hierarchically below the new *Guidelines* in the “new era operations regulations system.” There are already hints to this effect. For example, in an interview with CCTV, an officer from the CMC Joint Staff Department’s Strategy, Campaign and Training Bureau (*junwei lianhe canmou bu zhanlüe zhanyi xunlian ju*; 军委联合参谋部战略战役训练局) stated, “As a top level law [pertaining to] operations regulations, the *Guidelines* have a commanding and binding effect on lower-level operations regulations.” He went on to say, “The promulgation of the *Guidelines* can effectively impel the construction of the entire system of operations regulations.”<sup>17</sup> A retired PLA Navy analyst suggested that subordinate *guidelines* for issues such as training and professional military education tied to this new joint operations *gangyao* could follow.<sup>18</sup> Going forward, we should not be surprised to find that the theater commands, services (PLA Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force), Strategic Support Force, Joint Logistics Support Force, and People’s Armed Police will all eventually formulate their own supporting documents aligned with the larger *Guidelines*, but at a higher level of specificity of implementation focused on their own organizations. This doctrinal trickledown effect was certainly the case when the PLA issued a large corpus of doctrinal *gangyao* and operations regulations in 1999, known as the “New Generation Operations Regulations.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Leaders of the Strategic Campaign Training Bureau of the Joint Staff Department of the Military Commission Answered Reporters’ Questions on the Release of the ‘Chinese People’s Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Trial)’” (*Junwei Lianhe Canmou bu Zhanlüe Zhanyi Xunlian ju Lingdao jiu Fabu ‘Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Lianhe Zuozhan Gangyao (Shixing)’*; 军委联合参谋部战略战役训练局领导就发布《中国人民解放军联合作战纲要（试行）》), CCTV, Nov. 26, 2020, <http://m.news.cctv.com/2020/11/26/ARTIrGeWDBNisWMMqOW2WNRX201126.shtml>.

<sup>18</sup> “Greater China Live” (*Zhibo Gang’ao Tai*; 直播港澳台), CUTV, Nov. 14, 2020, [http://www.cutv.com/v2/shenzhen/b/a/b/2020/11/15/content\\_wap\\_sp\\_2995696.shtml](http://www.cutv.com/v2/shenzhen/b/a/b/2020/11/15/content_wap_sp_2995696.shtml). Retired PLA Navy Senior Captain Cai Weidong, interviewed by Shenzhen TV on November 15, 2020, formerly served at the PLA Navy Research Institute (NRI).

<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the PLA’s 1999 “New Generation Operations Regulations” (新一代作战条令), see David M. Finkelstein, “Thinking About the PLA’s ‘Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs,’” in *China’s Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army*, eds., David M. Finkelstein and James Mulvenon (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2005), pp. 1-27. In 1999, at least six new doctrinal *gangyao* were identified for the services and logistics community.

## The *Guidelines* is focused on how the PLA intends to prosecute joint operations

As a first order of business, the *Guidelines* is intended to “unify thinking” (*tongyi sixiang*; 统一思想) across the force on how the PLA will approach joint operations institutionally and operationally. The former speaks to roles, missions, responsibilities, and authorities; the latter, about fundamental operational principles and concepts.

The building block nature of PLA doctrinal literature, in which opening sections provide extensive background and context before addressing the topic at hand, suggests that it would not be a stretch of the imagination to envision the new joint *Guidelines* leading off with a high-level political discourse on Xi Jinping “Strong Army Thought” on national defense, background on the development of PLA joint doctrine (notionally, “the development and history of joint operations regulations in our military” — *wo jun lianhe zuozhan tiaoling fazhan yu lishi*; 我军联合作战条令发展与历史), the changing nature of modern warfare, the centrality of joint operations as the “basic form of operations” for the PLA going forward, as well as official judgments about China’s security situation akin to what one would read in the latest PRC defense white paper, or even the PLA’s military strategic guidelines. For example, the PRC Ministry of National Defense press conference commenting on the *Guidelines* provided geo-strategic context for the new doctrine by stating, “Hegemonism, power politics, and unilateralism are on the rise, and terrorist and separatist activities remain rampant. [The] National security of the country faces new challenges and threats,” thus necessitating new operational doctrine.<sup>20</sup> One would expect that the discussion in the actual *Guidelines* (assuming there is such a discussion) is much more pointed about threats from the United States (often referred to as the “strong enemy”— *qiangdi*; 强敌), the rising problem of Taiwan separatism, and perhaps challenges from other regional antagonists across various “strategic directions” (*zhanlüe fangxiang*; 战略方向).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on November 26.”

<sup>21</sup> “Strategic Directions” is PLA doctrinal term that identifies where military threats exist and for which the PLA must develop operations plans and be prepared to engage in combat. Each of the five new

One might also speculate about the inclusion of discussion about challenges to China's overseas interests. Overseas challenges were also mentioned at the MND press conference as a justification for the new joint doctrine by tying the *Guidelines* to the PLA's "new missions and tasks" in the 2019 edition of the PRC defense white paper.<sup>22</sup> The imperative of defending PRC interests overseas was repeated as the Chinese media recycled the MND's comments. Along these lines, in an interview discussing the *Guidelines*, Major General Chen Rongdi, of the War Studies Institute of the PLA's Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), pointedly stated, "As our country's national security and development interests continue to expand, the country is facing new security threats. The battlefield is not limited to the periphery of the country, but may also involve distant seas and overseas areas."<sup>23</sup>

But at its heart, the *Guidelines* is undoubtedly focused on providing guidance to the PLA on how it will prosecute joint operations within the framework of its new organization. A fundamental judgment that is being relayed is that joint operations will be the dominant form of warfare that the PLA will have to prosecute *regardless of the scale of future operations*. This judgment is a change in the PLA's

"The future combat style of our military will be integrated joint operations under the unified command of the joint operations command organization."

— Tang Renjiang - *PLA Daily*  
[http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-11/23/content\\_276478.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-11/23/content_276478.htm)

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joint theater commands has one or more strategic directions for which it is responsible. For example, the Eastern Theater Command is responsible for operations against Taiwan, which also has the special designation of "main strategic direction" (*zhuyao zhanlüe fangxiang*; 主要战略方向). Another way to think about the term is to equate it with "planning contingencies."

<sup>22</sup> "Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on November 26." "Secondly, the guidelines focus on new missions and tasks." Recall that in July 2019, China released a white paper entitled *China's National Defense in the New Era*, in which the missions and tasks of the Chinese military in the New Era are expounded for the first time as the four strategic supports: to consolidate the leadership of the CPC and the socialist system; to safeguard national sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity; to protect China's overseas interests; and to promote world peace and development.

<sup>23</sup> Chen Rongdi (陈荣弟), "Exploring the Way to Victory in the Evolution of War" (*Tanxun Zhanzheng Yanjin Zhong de Sheng Zhan Zhi Dao*; 探寻战争演进中的胜战之道), *China Social Science News (Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Bao*; 中国社会科学报), Jan. 7, 2021, [http://sscp.cssn.cn/xkpd/jsx\\_20175/202101/t20210107\\_5242995.html](http://sscp.cssn.cn/xkpd/jsx_20175/202101/t20210107_5242995.html).

thinking relative to the past, which will be addressed later on. “Joint operations have become the basic combat form,” according to the MND.<sup>24</sup> “The future combat style of our military will be integrated joint operations under the unified command of a joint operations command organization,” stated Major General Chen Rongdi (AMS) in his interview with *China Social Science News*. Chen further opined that no individual service (army, navy, air force, etc.) will be able to prosecute operations on its own. He added, “It can be said that future wars will be joint operations regardless of scale. ‘No war is not joint, [and] without jointness it is not a war’ is the common practice among the world’s strong military [powers].”<sup>25</sup> Consequently, although we will not see the actual content, from what one can gather, the most important purpose of the *Guidelines* is to transmit to the force the PLA’s basic approach to joint operations in this “new era,” the way that joint operations are conceptualized in the PLA’s new organization, and the newly reconfigured command and control arrangements between the Central Military Commission, the theater commands, and the services.

At a minimum, the data suggest that the document will include guidance on the following issues:

1. The roles and authorities for the conduct of joint operations in the newly reorganized force
2. Fundamental principles for prosecuting joint operations—possibly including an updated set of “joint campaign basic principles” (*lianhe zuozhan jiben yuanze*; 联合作战基本原则) more attuned to prosecuting “informatized local wars”
3. A construct for how different elements of the force should think about joint operations (e.g., the CMC, theater commands, services, support forces)
4. The important linkages between joint operations principles and peacetime training
5. The implications and needs for the future development of weapons systems, technologies, platforms, and personnel
6. The role of the national defense mobilization system in joint operations

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<sup>24</sup> “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on November 26.”

<sup>25</sup> Chen Rongdi (陈荣弟), “Exploring the Way to Victory in the Evolution of War” (*Tanxun Zhanzheng Yanjin Zhong de Sheng Zhan Zhi Dao*; 探寻战争演进中的胜战之道).

7. How military political work is intended to support the joint force.

In addition to adjusting previous “joint campaign basic principles” from doctrine issued in 1999, it is also possible that the new *gangyao* identifies new types of joint campaigns as a result of emerging technologies and new battlespace domains. Notionally, this might include “Joint Cyber Campaigns” and joint campaigns in the electro-magnetic spectrum. It might even include updated guidance for previously identified joint campaigns such as a “Joint Blockade Campaign” or “Joint Island Landing Campaign.” This, however, is speculation at this point.

Officers from the CMC’s Strategy, Campaign and Training Bureau discussed the objectives of the *Guidelines* at length. That discussion can be condensed into four key areas: (1) to transmit to the force the consensus reached across the PLA on the fundamental concepts of joint operations (guided by Xi Jinping Strategic Thought); (2) to standardize the most important types of operations and how to implement them; (3) to “consolidate and deepen the leadership and command system” and new force structure as result of the 2016 reorganization; and (4) to link “strategy, campaigns, and tactics” so as to “construct a new era operations regulations system.”<sup>26</sup>

Below are some typical comments on the *Guidelines* from the PRC media.

*Xinhua* (Chinese edition):

The *Guidelines* is a top-level regulation for our military’s operations regulations system for the new era, prominently stressing guidance, concepts, and principles, with an emphasis on concentrating on the main points of executing overall standards in macro-guidance, clarifying the basic issues of joint operations organization and implementation, and in unifying operational thinking, clarifying the order of rights and responsibilities, and guiding combat operations...clarifying joint operations command, combat operations,

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<sup>26</sup> “Leaders of the Strategic Campaign Training Bureau of the Joint Staff Department of the Military Commission Answered Reporters’ Questions on the Release of the ‘Chinese People’s Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Trial).’”



combat support, defense mobilization, political work, and other major principles, requirements, and basic procedures.<sup>27</sup>

*China Daily* (English edition):

The *Guidelines* stem from *Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military* and the nation's defense strategies for the New Era. They establish basic concepts and rules for the PLA's joint combat operations, clarify responsibilities of units at different levels, expound on questions such as how to fight future wars and also stress the importance of combat preparedness....The publication of the *guidelines* is significant in efforts to boost the PLA's structural reforms and enhance its joint operations capabilities, the military commission said.<sup>28</sup>

Ministry of National Defense (in English):

The *Guidelines* highlights the new organizational structure. In order to actively adapt to the defense and military reform [of the PLA], and continue to enhance combat effectiveness, the *Guidelines* has achieved historic breakthroughs in terms of strengthening CMC strategic command, underlining the theatre commands' responsibility for operations and the use of new-type combat forces, improving the joint operations command system, and innovating combat methods,

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<sup>27</sup> "With the Approval of the Chairman of the Central Military Commission Xi Jinping, the Central Military Commission issued the 'Chinese People's Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Trial)'" (*Jing Zhongyang Junwei Zhuxi Xi Jinping Pizhun Zhongyang Junwei Yinfa 'Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Lianhe Zuozhan Gangyao (Shixing)'*; 经中央军委主席习近平批准 中央军委印发《中国人民解放军联合作战纲要（试行）》).

<sup>28</sup> Zhao Lei, "Top Military Organ Issues Guidelines," *China Daily*, Nov. 14, 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202011/14/WS5faf3d80a31024ad0ba9408a.html>.

thus providing a basic guidance for the employment of China's armed forces.<sup>29</sup>

*China Military Online* (in Chinese, citing an officer from the PLA National Defense University):

The *Guidelines* clarified major principles, requirements and basic procedures for joint operations command, combat operations, combat support, and national defense mobilization, and answered, from an institutional level, the major issue of 'what war to fight and how to fight.' These strategic judgments set clearer goals and requirements for 'actualized' [realistic] exercises and become the baton for effective preparations for war.<sup>30</sup>

*PLA Daily Commentator Article* (in Chinese):

This is a major achievement in the innovation of our military's joint operations laws and regulations. It indicates that our military has a new understanding and grasp of the laws and guidance for informatized warfare. It will definitely strengthen and clarify guidance for preparing for war and further consolidate and deepen the leadership and command system and scale. The structure and strength are organized around reform results to promote the liberation and development of our military's joint combat capabilities....The *Guidelines* is the top-level law of our military's operations regulations system in the new era. It focuses on macro-guidance, outlines guidelines and general specifications, focuses on clarifying the basic issues of joint operations organization and implementation, and

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<sup>29</sup> "Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on November 26." The term "new-type combat forces" is a PLA euphemism for cyber space, outer space, the electro-magnetic spectrum, and other information-age, high-technologies employed in modern battlespaces.

<sup>30</sup> Wang Chuanbao (王传宝), "Build an Iron Army Ready to Fight at Any Time (*Dazao yi zhi Quan Shi Dai Zhan Suishi Neng Zhan de Tiejun*; 打造一支全时待战随时能战的铁军)," *China Military Online*, Jan. 11, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/jx/2021-01/11/content\\_9965784.htm](http://www.81.cn/jx/2021-01/11/content_9965784.htm).

focuses on unifying operational thinking, clarifying powers and responsibilities, and guiding operations.<sup>31</sup>

Major General Zhang Peigao, PLA Academy of Military Sciences (*Liaowang* in Chinese):

The *Chinese People's Liberation Army Joint Operations Guidelines (Trial)* that came into effect on November 7 is the top-level regulation of the new era operations regulations system, unified operational thinking, established basic concepts, established basic systems, and clarified basic rights and responsibilities from the system level. It answers the major questions of 'what wars to fight and how to fight' in the future, actively designs future wars, and actively innovates winning strategies. It will develop new operations forces and support forces, carry out actual combat military training, strengthen the use of military forces, accelerate the development of [intelligent warfare], and continuously improve joint combat capabilities and global operations capabilities based on network information systems, effectively shape the situation, manage crises, and deter wars and win the war.<sup>32</sup>

## The *Guidelines* is meant to address the PLA's previous and current challenges

Commentary surrounding the *Guidelines* reinforces the notion that over the years the PLA has experienced challenges in developing and implementing an approach to joint operations that works for them. Moreover, even with the new and more "purple" post-2016 joint organization in place, questions apparently persist about how all the moving parts are supposed to come together operationally.

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<sup>31</sup> "Designing Innovative and Winning Strategies for Future Wars" (*Sheji Weilai Zhanzheng Chuangxin Zhisheng zhi ce*; 设计未来战争 创新制胜之策), *China Military Online (Jiefang Junwang*; 中国军网), Nov. 14, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-11/14/content\\_275740.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-11/14/content_275740.htm).

<sup>32</sup> Zhang Peigao (张培高), "March Toward the Modernization of National Defense and the Army, Forging an Indestructible Great Wall of Steel" (*Xiang Guofang he Jundui Xiandaihua Jinjun, Duanzao Jianbukecui de Gangtie Changcheng*; 向国防和军队现代化进军, 锻造坚不可摧的钢铁长城)," *Outlook Weekly (Liaowang; 瞭望)*, no. 47 (2020), [http://lw.xinhuanet.com/2020-11/24/c\\_139536604.htm](http://lw.xinhuanet.com/2020-11/24/c_139536604.htm). Zhang is from the AMS Institute for War Studies.

Consequently, the new doctrine is being touted as having the answers to these and other outstanding questions.

A November 2020 *China Daily* article on the *Guidelines* paraphrased an unnamed PLA analyst from the Academy of Military Sciences as saying that the new *Guidelines* “are badly needed by the armed forces because they will help combat units to better plan, organize and coordinate their joint operations.” The PLA analyst was subsequently quoted directly as saying, “Our forces are giving unprecedented importance to honing their joint combat skills but have found many problems and questions that they have been unable to solve. Therefore, the highest military authority produced the *Guidelines* to provide methods and solutions and answer questions.”<sup>33</sup>

Shortly after the *Guidelines* was published, the Shanghai-based website *The Observer* ran a long article in its military affairs column on the PLA and recent reforms. Although a non-official publication, some of the challenges associated with joint operations that were ascribed to the PLA in the article resonated with other commentary. For example, it spoke to the issue of “gaps in planning and the implementation of joint operations,” and previous difficulties in getting the services to work together in order to achieve the commander’s intent (“realize the will of the commander”). In addition to the technical difficulties inherent in joint operations, such as the networking of systems, the article also spoke to institutional challenges such as service parochialism (“mountaintop-ism,” *shantou zhuyi*; 山头主义). Several topics were highlighted: the complexity of command and control in joint operations; the need to rectify service roles and missions, and the need for more personnel trained in joint operations. “What is the specific coordination procedure? What are the powers and responsibilities of each service? These are all issues to be clarified in the *Guidelines*.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Zhao Lei, “Top Military Organ Issues Guidelines.”

<sup>34</sup> Wang Shidun (王世纯), “Guangcha Weekly Military Review: People’s Army in the Great United Era” (*Guancha zhe Wang Yizhou Jun Ping: Da Lianhe Shidai de Renmin Jundui*; 观察者网一周军评：大联合时代的人民军队), *Guancha* (*Guancha*; 观察), Nov. 15, 2020, [https://m.guancha.cn/WangShiChun/2020\\_11\\_15\\_571499.shtml](https://m.guancha.cn/WangShiChun/2020_11_15_571499.shtml).

In a long discourse in *China Social Science News*, Major General Chen Rongdi of the PLA Academy of Military Sciences—a key center for doctrinal development—declared that the new joint *Guidelines* “marks that our military has a new understanding of the characteristics and laws of informatized warfare.” But he also cautioned that the ability to successfully prosecute joint operations will be a long-term endeavor. A subheading in the article prominently stated, “Improving joint mechanisms and culture has a long way to go,” and Major General Chen commented that “it is not easy to achieve the overall linkages and smooth operation of all of the parts.”<sup>35</sup>



Major General Chen Rongdi,  
[http://www.china.com.cn/military/2019-08/22/content\\_75127611.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/military/2019-08/22/content_75127611.htm)

Command and control arrangements are the most critical and difficult dimension of joint operations, according to Major General Chen. To make the point, he provided his interpretation of the evolution of US joint command and control dating from the Second World War to the Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 (Goldwater-Nichols Act). He told readers that it took the US Joint Force almost 40 years and “countless struggles between services and the balancing of different interests” to settle on a new US approach to joint command and control. He then paid homage to the PLA’s recent reforms, stating, “In national defense and military reforms, our military has established a new joint operations command system, optimized the size and structure of the force and the composition of forces, and promoted our military’s joint operations to a higher stage.”<sup>36</sup> But it is clear that Chen is cautioning that the PLA’s road to jointness will be a long one, and that continuous adjustments to command

“...the *Guidelines* has achieved historic breakthroughs in terms of strengthening the CMC strategic command, underlining the theatre commands’ responsibility on operations and the use of new-type combat forces, improving the joint command system, and innovating combat methods, thus providing basic guidance for the employment of China’s armed forces.”

Ministry of National Defense Press Conference, November 26, 2020

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<sup>35</sup> Chen Rongdi (陈荣弟), “Exploring the Way to Victory in the Evolution of War” (*Tanxun Zhanzheng Yanjin Zhong de Sheng Zhan Zhi Dao*; 探寻战争演进中的胜战之道).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

and control arrangements may be necessary. Perhaps this is why the term “trial” (shixing; 试行) is included in the title of the *Guidelines*.

Major General Chen also rightly points out that the PLA’s institutional culture is also going to have to change.

At the same time, joint operations is not only a union of artifacts, but also a union of mind and soul. Only by enhancing joint awareness and fostering a joint culture can joint operations be supported....Joint culture is the soft power of joint operations and an important indicator of the combat effectiveness of a military....All personnel from different services must adhere to the principle of unity, unite, obey unified command, take the initiative to unite and cooperate, have the courage to sacrifice themselves [parochial interests], and consciously integrate into the "big family" of joint operations.<sup>37</sup>

Changing the PLA’s culture to have a more joint outlook may turn out to be the hardest task of all. In order to do so, the officer corps will have to be incentivized through the personnel system (promotions and other rewards) and through socialization via the various stages of professional military educational (PME) and development. Along those lines, as part of the post-2016 reforms, the PLA National Defense University (NDU) established a subordinate Joint Operations College (*lianhe zuozhan xueyuan*; 联合作战学院) in the city of Shijiazhuang for mid-career officers. If the experiences of other militaries (including those of the US Joint Force) are any indication, institutionalizing a joint perspective is going to be a generational endeavor for the PLA. In the case of the PLA, the political work system will certainly be brought to bear to inculcate a joint perspective, as suggested in various articles surrounding the *Guidelines*.

One can easily imagine that across the PLA a good deal of unit and individual political work study time will be devoted to the new document, and one can also imagine that studying and trying to absorb the contents of the *Guidelines* will be particularly intense among the commanders and staffs of the five new joint theater commands (established February 1, 2016) and their component services. This is

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

because it is in these new entities that being able to fight as a joint force will matter the most. In fact, this latest and very dislocating attempt by the PLA to achieve jointness will succeed or fail at the theater commands. Under the new arrangements, it is the theater commands that have the greatest responsibility for joint training, the development of operations plans for their assigned contingencies (“strategic directions”), and the actual execution of combat at the operational level of war.

“As the sole highest joint operational command organization in each strategic direction, the theater commands shoulder the responsibility for the mission of responding to security threats in [their] strategic directions, maintaining peace, containing wars, and winning wars.”

— Zhang Hui, Zhang Huitao, PLA National Defense University School of Military Management, [http://www.81.cn/yw/202012/22/content\\_9956424.htm](http://www.81.cn/yw/202012/22/content_9956424.htm)

## The *Guidelines* will inform a “new type training system”

In addition to personnel incentives, part of inculcating a new joint operations culture in the PLA will also hinge upon deepening a joint training culture. Improving training is an issue that continues to receive a great deal of attention from PLA leaders. Especially in recent years, with the PLA being told to focus on warfighting, the Chinese armed forces are striving to make their exercises more joint, more realistic, less scripted, and more inclusive of opposition forces (OPFOR “blue” forces). These imperatives were re-emphasized in February 2021, when the Central Military Commission issued a “decision” document entitled “Decision on the Construction of a New Type Training System” (*Guanyu Goujian Xinxing Junshi Xunlian Tixi de Jueding*; 《关于构建新型军事训练体系的决定》). The need to “strengthen joint training” was one of several reasons given for the need to revamp how the PLA trains.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “With the Approval of the Chairman of the Central Military Commission Xi Jinping, the Central Military Commission issued the ‘Decision on Establishing a New Military Training System’” (*Jing Zhongyang Junwei Zhuxi Xi Jinping Pizhun Zhongyang Junwei Yinfa ‘Guanyu Goujian Xinxing Junshi Xunlian Tixi de Jueding’*; 经中央军委主席习近平批准 中央军委印发《关于构建新型军事训练体系的决定》), Xinhua, Feb. 20, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-02/20/c\\_1127119798.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-02/20/c_1127119798.htm).

Reportedly, Xi Jinping personally weighed in on the need for improved joint training less than three weeks after the joint operations *Guidelines* went into effect. At the Central Military Commission's Military Training Conference, held on November 25, 2020, at the Jingxi Hotel in Beijing, the CMC Chairman is reported to have made a speech in which he stated, "We must strengthen joint training, adhere to jointness as the key link, develop a unique joint training system for our military, and accelerate the improvement of integrated joint operations capabilities."<sup>39</sup>

It is unknown whether releasing the joint *Guidelines* shortly before the CMC's Military Training Conference was coincidental or by design. Nevertheless, PLA officials have made clear the linkage between the new doctrine and future joint training. The fundamental joint command relationships and operational concepts transmitted via the *Guidelines* are expected to inform how the PLA will conduct exercises across battlespace domains. The Ministry of National Defense asserted unambiguously that the new doctrine will serve as "the primary guidance" for training, as well as actual operations.<sup>40</sup> Drawing again from their lengthy CCTV interview, officers from the Strategy, Campaign and Training Bureau of the CMC's Joint Staff Department declared, "The issuance of the *Guidelines* is conducive to determining a series of issues such as the training content, training requirements, and training standards of the troops, and improving the level of our military's actual combat training."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For the date and place of the training conference, see "The PLA Pushes for the Transformation and Upgrading of Military Training" (*Jiefangjun li tui Junshi Xunlian Zhuanxing Shengji: Zengqiang Keji Suyang Tisheng Zuozhan Nengli*; 解放军力推军事训练转型升级：增强科技素养 提升作战能力), *Reference News Network* (*Cankao Xiaoxi Wang*; 参考消息网), Nov. 28, 2020, <http://www.ckxx.net/zhongguo/p/251940.html>. For the quote by Xi Jinping, see Zhang Huitao (张会涛) Zhang Hui (张辉), "Speed up the Development of a Joint Training System with our Military's Characteristics" (*Jiakuai Fazhan wo Jun Tese Lianhe Xunlian Tixi*; 加快发展我军特色联合训练体系), *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*; 解放军报), Dec. 22, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/yw/2020-12/22/content\\_9956424.htm](http://www.81.cn/yw/2020-12/22/content_9956424.htm).

<sup>40</sup> "Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on November 26."

<sup>41</sup> "Leaders of the Strategic Campaign Training Bureau of the Joint Staff Department of the Military Commission Answered Reporters' Questions on the Release of the 'Chinese People's Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Trial).'"



But implementing large-order changes in training culture is challenging in military organizations; it takes time and requires the development and enforcement of standards. To help raise and enforce training standards across the PLA, a new Training Supervision Bureau (*junshi xunlian jiancha ju*; 军事训练监察局) and military training supervision system (*junshi xunlian jiancha tixi*; 军事训练监察体系) were established under the CMC's Training and Administration Department, presumably as part of the 2016 reorganization.<sup>42</sup> By 2019, the "Regulations on Military Training Supervision of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (Trial)" were promulgated, probably to codify training oversight and the roles of the officers engaged in this work.<sup>43</sup>

Through this new supervision system, teams of training monitors (*junshi xunlian jiancha zu*; 训练检查组) are reportedly being dispatched throughout the PLA on announced and unannounced site visits in the field, with a special focus on large exercises. In addition to observing training and ensuring that standards are being enforced, these teams are identifying and collecting data on training shortfalls. By 2019, according to the PLA media, these groups had collected three years' worth of data and compiled it in an "All Army Military Training Supervision Big Data Statistical Analysis Report" (*quanjun junshi xunlian jiancha da shuju tongji fenxi baogao*; 全军军事训练监察大数据统计分析报告) to assess the types of training challenges that exist and that need to be attended to.<sup>44</sup> Overall, as stated in the PRC's July 2019 defense white paper (*China's National Defense in the New Era*), the PLA is intent

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<sup>42</sup> I am indebted to CNA analyst Brian Waidelich for bringing this development to my attention in the course of his reading drafts of this paper.

<sup>43</sup> 《中国人民解放军军事训练监察条例（试行）》 See Zhang Kejin (张科进), Zhou Ben (周奔), Liu Jianwei (刘建伟), "An Important Measure to Unite the Military's Spirit and Release Vitality" (*Yi Xiang Ningju Junxin Shifang Huoli de Zhongyao Jucuo*; 一项凝聚军心释放活力的重要举措), *PLA Daily (Jiefangjun Bao*; 解放军报), Jun. 28, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2019-06/28/content\\_9541665.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2019-06/28/content_9541665.htm).

<sup>44</sup> Liu Dapeng (刘大鹏), Liu Jianwei (刘建伟), Zhang Ning (张宁), "Military Training Monitoring Enters A New Stage – From the Perspective of Nine Sets of Data Changes, Our Army's Actual Combat Training is Further Advanced" (*Junshi Xunlian Jiancha bur u Quanxin Jieduan – Cong Jiu zu Shuju Bianhua Toushi wo Jun Shizhan Hua Xunlian Shenru Tuijin*; 军事训练监察步入全新阶段—从九组数据变化透视我军实战化训练深入推进), *PLA Daily (Jiefangjun Bao*; 解放军报), Sept. 23, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-09/23/content\\_243924.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-09/23/content_243924.htm).

on “strengthening oversight and supervision in military training and combat readiness to uproot peacetime ills.”<sup>45</sup>

Even the training supervisors themselves are receiving their training. According to the Ministry of National Defense, in March 2021, the CMC’s Training and Administration Department held a nine-day workshop for over 200 training supervisors from across the PLA in order “to solve problems in training supervision, and strive to improve the quality and efficiency of training supervision.” The ultimate objective is working toward “the transformation and development of military training through innovative supervision.”<sup>46</sup>

Despite advances on many fronts in the training space, a *PLA Daily* article in January 2021 suggests that there is still much work to be done. For example, the article asserts that officers performing training supervision duties are encountering “formalism” (*xingshi zhuyi*; 形式主义) in training, and that some commanders continue to adhere to scripted exercises, failing to adjust their operations even after circumstances have changed. The article goes on to declare that those engaged in discipline and supervision work are going to rededicate themselves to preventing “formalism and bureaucracy in training” and “strictly investigate and quickly deal with” other training challenges such as falsification of results that impact training standards.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly, members of the training supervision community in the PLA are going to be charged with ensuring that the new joint operations *Guidelines* is put into practice. One suspects that they, along with operations staffs and trainers in the theater commands, will be among the most conversant with the *Guidelines*’ precepts. Beyond that, the data collected by these officers will likely inform future adjustments to the new PLA joint doctrine, which is still in its trial phase.

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<sup>45</sup> *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, July 2019).

<sup>46</sup> “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on April 29,” Ministry of National Defense, Apr. 29, 2021, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2021-04/29/content\\_4884413.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2021-04/29/content_4884413.htm).

<sup>47</sup> Zhou Wenyuan (周文元), Lu Hongliang (卢红亮), Ouyang Hao (欧阳浩), “Focus on Preparing for War, Main Responsibility and Main Business Provide Strong Disciplinary Support for Winning” (*Jujiao Beizhan Dazhang zhu ze zhu ye wei da Ying Tigong Jianqiang Jilu Zhichi*; 聚焦备战打仗主责主业为打赢提供坚强纪律支持), *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*; 解放军报), Jan. 11, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/yw/2021-01/11/content\\_9965755.htm](http://www.81.cn/yw/2021-01/11/content_9965755.htm).

## The *Guidelines* will demand both compliance and judgment

Beyond the issue of challenges in joint training regimens is the question of how PLA commanders and their staffs should implement the new *Guidelines*. What does this new doctrine represent? How should it be applied? How much of it is immutable? How much is left to the discretion of the commander? These are issues that military officers around the world discuss as part of their professional discourse once their operational responsibilities progress beyond a focus on tactical-level concerns.

One of the universal professional discussions about military doctrine revolves around its dual nature. On the one hand, officially promulgated operational doctrine is usually described as authoritative, and officers are expected to adopt and utilize it. On the other hand, commanders are enjoined to be judicious in its application. For example, the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) states that doctrine “is authoritative but requires judgement in application.”<sup>48</sup> Identical language is employed in the US Army’s ADP 1-01 *Doctrine Primer* (“It is authoritative but requires judgment in application”).<sup>49</sup> US Joint Publication 3-0 (*Joint Operations*) informs the Joint Force, “The guidance in this publication is authoritative; as such, this doctrine will be followed except when, in the judgment of the commander, exceptional circumstances dictate otherwise.”<sup>50</sup>

Not having access to the actual *Guidelines*, we do not know what the document conveys to PLA commanders and their staffs about how they should think about incorporating this new joint doctrine into their training and operational plans. Nevertheless, articles in the PLA media suggest that they are receiving the same universal dual message of judicious compliance.

There is certainly a strong message of compliance emanating from the PLA’s political work establishment. A pervasive theme across articles discussing the

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<sup>48</sup> Ministry of Defence (UK), *Developing Joint Doctrine Handbook (4th Edition)* (Shrivenham: Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, November 2013), pp. 1-3.

<sup>49</sup> Headquarters Department of the Army, *ADP 1-01 Doctrine Primer* (July 2019), pp. 1-2, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN18138\\_ADP%201-01%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN18138_ADP%201-01%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-0 Joint Operations* (Jan. 17, 2017, incorporating change 1 Oct. 22, 2018), p. i, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_0ch1.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_0ch1.pdf).

*Guidelines* is that this new doctrine is a high-level regulation (literally) that must be followed. It has directive power, and is considered part of a larger and long-standing effort on the part of the PLA to standardize (“regularize”—*zhengguihua*; 正规化) how it conducts business both administratively and operationally. Moreover, the new *Guidelines* is considered to have the force of law. Should it not be followed, the PLA is warned, the result will be chaos on the battlefield. The comments below, from *PLA Daily*, are typical of the compliance message.

Orders must be taken to heart and laws carried out. With a good system of regulations in place, if one wants good results, the key is implementation. The *Guidelines* is a law, and its articles are all orders, which must be followed to the letter. Especially in modern joint operations, there are many participating forces, including multiple branches and services and local support forces. To deviate from the requirements of the *Guidelines* is to commit the error of liberalism, resulting in hindered linkages and a failure to achieve jointness, let alone fighting and winning wars. This requires party organizations at all levels to strictly study and implement the *Guidelines*, adhere to them as the only fundamental standard of combat effectiveness, and use the *Guidelines* as the fundamental basis for organizing and implementing joint operations and joint training to comprehensively improve combat in the New Era.<sup>51</sup>

The PLA’s training community would agree that compliance with the *Guidelines* is necessary. Officers from the Joint Staff Department’s Strategy, Campaign, and Training Bureau offered the following:

It is necessary to realize very clearly that the *Guidelines* is the law. We often say that regulations are orders (*tiaoling*, *tiaoling*, *tiao tiao shi ling*, 条令, 条令, 条条是令). Since it is a law, everyone is required to follow it. The rights, responsibilities, and relationships governed by operations regulations cannot tolerate their own actions. Especially in

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<sup>51</sup> Tang Renjiang (汤仁江), “The More Important the Joint, The More Important the Rule of Law” (*Yue Zhong Lianhe Yue Yao Fazhi Xianxing*; 越重联合越要法治先行), *China Military Online* (*Jiefang Junwang*; 中国军网), Nov. 23, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-11/23/content\\_276478.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-11/23/content_276478.htm).

modern joint operations, there are many forces participating, including multiple services and branches and local support forces, involving various battlespace domains and fields such as land, sea, air, space, the electromagnetic spectrum, and cyber space. If everyone deviates from the requirements of the regulations and acts without rules, they will commit liberalism and will surely disrupt or even undermine the war.<sup>52</sup>

But these same PLA training officers also offer the universal message of military professionals that doctrine must be employed judiciously. In implementing the *Guidelines*, they enjoin, “The soul is the word ‘flexible use’”

Compared with ordinary laws and regulations, operations regulations allow and need to give full play to the subjective initiative of people when they are implemented, and they can be used flexibly in accordance with actual conditions. Operations regulations cannot cover all the various and complex changes related to combat training. They should be used flexibly based on the specific conditions at the time and based on objective reality.<sup>53</sup>

The implementation of the operations regulations cannot be implemented by rote. The focus is on the thinking and methods regulated by the [intent] of the regulation, which requires that all levels must accurately understand and grasp the spirit of the regulation to guide combat operations instead of just copying the rules and regulations of the provisions to fight. Otherwise, you will make dogmatic mistakes. There is a big difference between the enforcement of operations regulations and the enforcement of other laws and regulations, and all levels must use these flexibly in combination with actual combat conditions. Because operations regulations regulate

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<sup>52</sup> “Leaders of the Strategy Campaign Training Bureau of the Joint Staff Department of the Military Commission Answered Reporters’ Questions on the Release of the ‘Chinese People’s Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Trial).”

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

general principles and methods of warfare, and battlefield conditions are ever-changing, it is impossible for a set of operations regulations to exhaust all situations... These operations regulations must be used flexibly according to actual conditions. It means that everyone should be flexible rather than executing rigidly.<sup>54</sup>

So, on one hand the PLA is being told that as a “top-level regulation” the *Guidelines* has the force of law and one has no choice but to follow its precepts. To not follow and implement the *Guidelines* would not only constitute a breach of discipline but also threaten operational defeat. On the other hand, to follow the doctrine blindly would be equally self-defeating, and commanders are urged to use judgment in its use. In the parlance of the CCP and the PLA, to engage in non-compliance would make one guilty of an act of “liberalism” (*ziyou zhuyi*; 自由主义), and to engage in uncritical application would make one guilty of “formalism” (*xingshi zhuyi*; 形式主义) or “dogmatism” (*jiaotiao zhuyi*; 教条主义).

Overall, this is an interesting peek into a professional conversation on doctrine within the PLA that was catalyzed by the issuance of the *Guidelines*. An open-ended question is whether the PLA is developing commanding officers and staffs who will be able to give “full play to the subjective initiative” that this new doctrine is said to require of PLA warfighters.

## **The *Guidelines*, PLA doctrinal evolution, and “integrated joint operations”<sup>55</sup>**

The publication of the *Guidelines* in 2020 represents the latest stop in the PLA’s doctrinal journey toward joint operations—a journey that began in the early 1990s.

### **Combined operations first, joint operations later**

Multiservice joint operations were not an issue that the PLA focused on in the 1980s, even if its foreign military affairs analysts were keeping up with developments in

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> This much-abbreviated overview of key doctrinal developments in the PLA obviously cannot do justice to such a complex subject. The purpose of providing this brief background is to place the 2020 joint *Guidelines* into a larger context.

militaries abroad, especially in the United States. Doctrinally, the most pressing matter for the PLA throughout the 1980s was developing operational concepts and reorganizing the ground forces to be able to conduct combined arms operations (*hetong zuozhan*; 合同作战) among the various branches (*bingzhong*; 兵种) of the army. In this way, infantry, armor, artillery, army aviation, and associated combat support elements would fight as an integrated team, not as “pure” infantry, artillery, or armor units. This imperative was urgent and threat based. The PLA’s 1979 incursion into Vietnam and the subsequent border war with Hanoi provided hard-learned lessons for the army. Even more worrisome, a significant Soviet military presence was deployed on the PRC’s northern border, and the threat of a Soviet ground invasion was the foremost driver of PLA planning. Consequently, a focus on ground-force combined arms doctrine and operations was necessary in order to more effectively defend against a possible invasion of the homeland from the north while securing the south, where occasional cross-border engagements were still taking place with Vietnam. This led to the creation of group armies (*jituanjun*; 集团军) in the PLA—corps-level combined arms ground force organizations—as well as a new body of doctrinal guidance.”<sup>56</sup>

### The “Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Period” and the roots of joint operations

It was not until the 1990s that the PLA’s quest to conduct joint operations began to take off. The operational lessons of the US Gulf War (1991) in particular, the introduction of new battlefield technologies, rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow, and rising concerns about military challenges or sovereignty issues in the maritime domain all urgently demanded that a new azimuth in military modernization be set. That new direction came in the form of a completely revised national military

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<sup>56</sup> David M. Finkelstein with Kenneth W. Allen, Maryanne Kivlehan, and Dean B. Cheng, *Evolving Operational Concepts of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army and Navy: A Preliminary Exploration* (Alexandria, VA: CNA, Oct. 2002). The doctrinal guidance developed in the 1980s would not be replaced until 1999, when the PLA issued a large body of doctrine known as the “New Generation Operations Regulations.” See Ren Xiangdong (任向东), “PLA Ground, Naval, Air Units Implement New Generation Operations Regulations” (*Zhongguo Luhaikong Sanjun Shishi Xin Yidai Zuozhan Liaoling*; 中国陆海空三军实施新一代作战条令), *Outlook Weekly (Liaowang*; 瞭望), no. 23 (Jun. 7, 1999).

strategy in January 1993, when, as CMC Chairman, Jiang Zemin issued the “Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Period” (*xin shiqi junshi zhanlüe fangzhen*; 新时期军事战略方针).<sup>57</sup>

The new military strategic guidelines conveyed fundamental decisions that would set the basic direction of future PLA modernization, plans, and policies even to this day in some regards. The most important was that the PLA must prepare to fight “Local Wars Under High Technology Conditions,” which was the result of three judgments. First, the most likely scale of war the PLA would face in the future would continue to be a limited conflict fought around China’s periphery for specific geopolitical objectives (a judgment Deng Xiaoping had made earlier). However, and second, such a conflict would now be characterized by the advances in warfare displayed in the Gulf War, such as high-technology platforms, precision munitions, and enhanced levels of battlespace awareness. Third, the operations and capabilities of the various military forces would need to be coordinated and integrated. It is in this last judgment that the roots of the PLA’s quest for jointness are found. As Taylor Fravel has written, “The 1993 guideline stressed joint operations (*lianhe zuozhan*) among the services as the basic form of operations that the PLA should now be able to conduct.”<sup>58</sup> Of course, in 1993, the ability to fight as a joint force was viewed as an aspirational objective to be worked toward, not as a capability that could be developed quickly.

Since 1993, various adjustments have been made to some of the original judgments in the strategic guidelines. Among the more important adjustments have been those associated with “preparations for military struggle” (*junshi douzheng zhunbei*; 军事斗争准备), which addresses what kind of conflict the PLA should be prepared to fight (a capabilities-based judgment). For example, the 1993 judgment that PLA “preparations for military struggle” should focus on fighting “Local Wars Under High

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<sup>57</sup> See David M. Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy: An Overview of the ‘Military Strategic Guidelines,’” in *Right-Sizing the People’s Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, September 2007), pp. 69-141; and M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019). See Chapter 6, especially.

<sup>58</sup> Fravel, *Active Defense*, p. 185.



Technology Conditions” was adjusted circa 2004 to preparing for “Local Wars Under Informatized Conditions,” and was adjusted yet again circa 2014 to “Informatized Local Wars.” In these adjustments the PLA accounted for the ever-changing nature of battlefield technologies, lessons learned from the conflicts of other countries (especially those of the United States and Russia), and lessons the PLA absorbed from its own exercises and experiments.<sup>59</sup> Especially critical were advances in information technologies and their application to warfare.

These adjustments notwithstanding, the quest to be able to fight as a joint force has remained a constant for the PLA since the 1993 strategy.

In 1999, after years of research and experimentation, the PLA issued its first-ever doctrine for joint operations. It was produced as part of a new and large body of operations regulations that year, likely in support of the 1993 military strategy. That body of doctrine is referred to by the PLA as the “New Generation Operations Regulations” (*xin yidai zuozhan tiaoling*; 新一代作战条令). At the time, the Xinhua News Agency declared that “For the first time in the history of our military, an operations regulations system has been formed. It has both a campaign *gangyao* and operations regulations, covering combat operations at different levels, scales, and services.”<sup>60</sup>

Among the many new operations regulations generated, the two most important were the *Guidelines for Joint Campaigns of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army* (a *gangyao*) and the *Joint Operations Regulations*.<sup>61</sup> (These are, respectively,

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<sup>59</sup> Fravel documents the evolution of adjustments to the 1993 Military Strategic Guidelines through 2014 in chapters 6 and 7 of his volume, *Active Defense*.

<sup>60</sup> “Central Military Commission Chairman Jiang Zemin Signs the Order, The New Generation Operations Regulations is Issued by our Army,” (*Zhongyang Junwei Zhuxi Jiang Zemin Qianshu Mingling wo Jun Xin Yidai Zuozhan Tiaoling Banfa*; 中央军委主席江泽民签署命令我军新一代作战条令颁发), *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*; 人民日报), Jan. 25, 1999.

<sup>61</sup> Finkelstein, *Evolving Operational Concepts*. According to the PRC media at the time, the doctrine from the 1980s that was retired in 1999 represented the first time that the PLA had codified operational guidance across the entire PLA, probably a result of the decision in 1985 to focus on combined arms warfare. Ren Xiangdong (任向东), “PLA Ground, Naval, Air Units Implement New Generation Operations Regulations” (*Zhongguo Luhaikong Sanjun Shishi Xin Yidai Zuozhan Liaoling*; 中国陆海空三军实施新一代作战条令).

*Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Lianhe Zhanyi Gangyao*; 《中国人民解放军联合战役纲要》, and *Lianhe Zuozhan Tiaoling*; 《联合作战条令》).

Then, as now, this first-ever *gangyao* for joint campaigns and its accompanying operations regulations were held closely and not placed in the public domain, so we can only speculate as to specific content. Most likely, the 1999 joint *gangyao* provided overarching guidance for how the PLA envisioned the conduct of future joint campaigns, probably identifying and elucidating for the first time a set of “basic joint campaign principles” (*jiben lianhe zhanyi yuanze*; 基本联合战役原则). The *Joint Operations Regulations* likely provided more granular guidance akin to joint tactics, techniques, and procedures (JTTP). It is clear from PLA writings at the time (1999) that the various new service operations regulations that were also issued as part of the “New Generation Operations Regulations” were to be considered subordinate to the joint campaign *gangyao* and the joint operations regulations.<sup>62</sup> In an interview with *PLA Daily* in February 1999, General Fu Quanyou, who was then chief of the General Staff, explicitly stated that the “New Generation Operations Regulations” would guide the PLA to becoming a joint force.<sup>63</sup>

### A focus on “coordinated” joint operations in the late 1990s and early 2000s

The first joint *guidelines* (1999) were merely the beginning of discussion, exploration, and more experimentation by the PLA as to how it should conduct joint operations. Just as Beijing’s military strategic guidelines have evolved and adjusted over time, so too has the PLA’s conception of joint operations.

For example, in the 1990s, and perhaps in the early 2000s, the PLA’s initial vision of joint operations focused heavily on the concept of coordination among the services—“coordination” (*xietong*; 协同) being a ubiquitous term in the professional literature on joint operations at the time. “Coordinated joint operations” (*xietong*

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<sup>62</sup> Dean Cheng with Kenneth W. Allen, Malia DuMont, and David M. Finkelstein, *Joint Operations with Chinese Characteristics: Preliminary Study* (Alexandria, VA: CNA, Aug. 2003).

<sup>63</sup> “Conscientiously Implement the Operations Regulations and Continuously Improve the Ability to Win: Chief of the General Staff Fu Quanyou Answers a Reporter’s Questions About Studying and Implementing the New Operations Regulations,” *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*; 解放军报), Feb. 25, 1999. Cited in Finkelstein, *Evolving Operational Concepts*.

*lianhe zuozhan*; 协同联合作战) envisioned the establishment of temporary, task-organized headquarters to perform the coordination function among the various participating services once operations commenced—not permanent, standing joint forces with dedicated command and control organizations.

Moreover, as apparently conceived of at that time, joint operations seemed to be confined to campaign-level operations (*zhanyi ji*; 战役及). By the PLA's definition, that meant operations large enough to require the participation of corps-level forces (*juntuan*; 军团) from two or more services.<sup>64</sup> This level of campaign was viewed as the *minimum* scale of operation for which joint operations were considered appropriate. This is likely why the *gangyao* issued in 1999 had “joint campaigns” in its title (not “joint operations” as in the 2020 update). This also suggests that in addition to new “joint campaign basic principles,” the 1999 *gangyao* likely identified specific types of campaigns that the PLA would prosecute as a joint force in the future, such as a joint amphibious landing campaign, a joint blockade campaign, and a joint air defense campaign. So in this initial conception of joint operations, “battles” (*zhandou*; 战斗), which the PLA considers tactical-level engagements, did not rise to the level of requiring joint operations.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, in these first years, one also senses that a joint campaign was an option, not the default, and that single-service campaigns were still considered important. During the early 2000s, many PLA books on operations still focused on single-service campaigns, with joint campaigns often presented as a special case, sometimes relegated to the last chapters of books on campaign-level operations.

At bottom, the PLA's initial conception of joint operations was of coordinated service campaigns conducted in parallel with a temporary, task-organized campaign headquarters established to perform the coordination function. As former CNA analyst Dean Cheng has observed, PLA joint operations throughout the 1990s and

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<sup>64</sup> Prior to the 2016 reorganization, corps-level forces meant group armies for the ground forces (*jituanjun*, 集团军), fleets for the navy (*jiandui*, 舰队), and military region air forces (*junqu kongjun*, 军区空军) for the air force. See Dean Cheng, *Joint Operations with Chinese Characteristics*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*; David M. Finkelstein, *Evolving Operational Concepts*.

early 2000s could be described as “different services coordinating at the *juntuan* level” with the forces involved still at “extremely high levels of aggregation.”<sup>66</sup>

### **Integrated joint operations from 2004 on**

The PLA media surrounding the release of new 2020 joint *Guidelines* make very clear that “integrated joint operations” (*yitihua lianhe zuozhan*; 一体化联合作战) is the form of joint operations the PLA now intends to prosecute. It is the form of joint operations that the new 2020 *gangyao* focuses on, and integrated joint operations is now considered by the PLA to be the “basic form of operations.”

Of note, the term “integrated joint operations” predates the 2020 *gangyao* by many years. In 2004, the term appeared in the PRC’s biennial defense white paper, *China’s National Defense in 2004*.<sup>67</sup> The white paper stated that the PLA is striving to “meet the requirements of integrated joint operations.”<sup>68</sup> Some analysts suggest that this new and developing concept of joint operations accompanied the 2004 adjustment to the military strategic guidelines that shifted PLA planning to the conduct of “local wars under informatized conditions.”<sup>69</sup> From 2004 forward, the term became more commonplace, and various PLA books and articles about integrated joint operations began to appear.

The 2006 edition of the PRC defense white paper included the statement, “The PLA focuses on enhancing joint training to improve the integrated joint operational capabilities of various services and arms.”<sup>70</sup> Four years later, the 2010 white paper stated quite explicitly that the PLA takes integrated joint operations as “the basic form of operations” (*jiben zuozhan xingshi*; 基本作战形式), and an entire section was devoted to the PLA’s ongoing efforts to enhance its ability to conduct joint

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<sup>66</sup> Dean Cheng, *Cyber Dragon: Inside China’s Information Warfare and Cyber Operations* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017), p. 34.

<sup>67</sup> Fravel also points this out. See Fravel, *Active Defense*, p. 220.

<sup>68</sup> *China’s National Defense in 2004* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, Dec. 27, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> Fravel, *Active Defense*, pp. 219-226.

<sup>70</sup> *China’s National Defense in 2006* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, Dec. 29, 2006).

operations.<sup>71</sup> It was further conveyed that “the PLA takes the building of a joint operation systems as the focal point of its modernization and preparations for military struggle, and strives to enhance its fighting capabilities based on information systems.”<sup>72</sup>

**Sample PLA Book Titles on Integrated Joint Operations, 2004-2008**

Zhang Yu, Yu Haichou, Ping Zhiwei, *Integrated Joint Combat Studies* (Beijing: PLA Publishing House, Dec. 2004). 《一体化联合战斗研究》，中国人民解放军出版社，2004.12

Cui Yafeng, ed., *Integrated Joint Operations Theory Research* (Beijing: PLA Publishing House, Nov. 2005). 《一体化联合作战理论研究》，中国人民解放军出版社，2005.11.

Guan Yonghao and Zhang Huajun, *US Military Integrated Joint Operations Theory Studies* (Beijing: PLA Publishing House, June 2006). 《美军一体化联合作战理论研究》，中国人民解放军出版社) 2006.06

Ren Haiquan, *Who Holds the Lead—Studies on the Command of Integrated Joint Operations* (Beijing: NDU Press, Sept. 2006). 《孰执龙头一体化联合作战指挥研究》，国防大学出版社，2006.09

Jin Zunchun, *Research on Space Information Support of Integrated Joint Operations* (Beijing: NDU Press, Mar. 2008). 《一体化联合作战空间信息支援保障研究》，国防大学出版社，2008.03

The statement in the 2010 defense white paper that integrated joint operations is, in the judgment of the PLA, the “basic form of operations” is significant. As PLA military science specialists would likely explain it, there can be only one “basic form of operations” in any given era of military affairs, and the most important job of military

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<sup>71</sup> The identification of integrated joint operations as the basic form of operations also appears in PLA articles. For example, from 2018, see Yang Weili (杨纬立), “Accelerate the Pace of Building an Innovative People’s Army” (*Jiakuai Chuangxin Xing Renmin Jundui Jianshe Bufa*; 加快创新型人民军队建设步伐), *China Military Online* (*Jiefang Junwang*; 中国军网), Jan. 18, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-01/18/content\\_197272.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-01/18/content_197272.htm). “...integrated joint operations have become the basic form of operations...” (“...一体化联合作战成为基本作战形式...”)

<sup>72</sup> *China’s National Defense in 2008* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, Jan. 2009), in the section entitled “Building a Joint Operations Systems.”

planners is to identify that form of operations so that adjustments can be made.<sup>73</sup> What this suggests is that at least by 2010, if not earlier, the PLA had come to the judgment that integrated joint operations are the most important form of operations they needed to train to and prosecute.<sup>74</sup>

### The PLA conception of “integrated joint operations”

How, then, does the PLA describe the general features of this type of joint operations, and how is it different from their previous conception? The data for this issue are thin gruel, but there are a couple of points to be made.

First, PLA materials consistently drive home the point that integrated joint operations are tied to the prosecution of “informatized warfare” (*xinxihua zhanzheng*; 信息化战争). Recall that circa 2004 the PLA assessed that the information revolution was also revolutionizing the nature of modern warfare—in command and control, in munitions, and in new battlespace domains such as cyberspace and the electromagnetic spectrum. For the PLA, “informatized warfare” is a conflict in which systems are pitted against systems, not merely units against units, and in which decision cycles are greatly compressed relative to the past. Integrated joint operations, the PLA asserts, will take advantage of new and powerful information technologies to enable command and control systems to more tightly integrate, *not*

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<sup>73</sup> See Xiao Tianliang (肖天亮), ed., *Science of Strategy (Zhanlüe Xue; 战略学)* (NDU Publishers, 2015).

<sup>74</sup> Of note, the 2020 edition of the PLA NDU’s *Science of Strategy* states that “multi-domain integrated joint operations” (*duo yu yitihua lianhe zuozhan*; 多域一体化联合作战) should be taken as “the basic form of operations.” The addition of “multi domain” (*duo yu*; 多域) in this NDU volume has raised questions, unanswered, as to whether this terminology is official. Dr. Joel Wuthnow of the US National Defense University pointed out this anomaly in his May 2021 Jamestown *China Brief*, “What I Learned from the PLA’s Latest Strategy Textbook,” <https://jamestown.org/program/what-i-learned-from-the-plas-latest-strategy-textbook/>. Dr. Wuthnow and I discussed this issue, and did not reach any firm conclusions as to what to make of this. All of the official PRC-PLA announcements about the 2020 *Guidelines*, which came after the publication of the NDU volume, do not use the qualifier “multi domain.” Xiao Tianliang (肖天亮), ed., *Science of Strategy (Zhanlüe Xue; 战略学)* (Beijing: NDU Publishing House (*Guofang Daxue Chubanshe*; 国防大学出版社), 2020), pp. 264-267.

*merely coordinate*, the operations of multiple services in multiple battlespace domains.

The following is a typical description of integrated joint operations, cited from the 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy*, compiled by the Strategy Research Department of the Academy of Military Sciences.

Integrated joint operations is based on networked military information systems, using information-based weapons and equipment and corresponding operations methods, to conduct integrated operations in land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace. Under the conditions of informatization, a local war is a system-to-system confrontation, and its basic form of combat is integrated joint operations. Two conditions must be met for the implementation of integrated joint operations: namely, a seamlessly linked and networked military information system and a highly integrated joint operations force of all services and arms.<sup>75</sup>

The *Chinese Military Encyclopedia* (2014) states that there are four main differences between joint operations in the previous age of “mechanized warfare” (*jixiehua zhanzheng*; 机械化战) and integrated joint operations in the current epoch of informatized warfare. First, computer-based, networked information systems are enabling better command and control, expanding situational awareness, and increasing the dissemination of information. Second, networked systems are more closely integrating the capabilities of the individual services. While not explicitly stated, the implication is that achieving synchronized operational effects is now possible across services and platforms. Third, the informatized battlefield under integrated joint operations is operating in multiple, and in some cases new, battlespace domains. Of note, this encyclopedia and other sources also identify the

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<sup>75</sup> Academy of Military Sciences Military Strategy Research Department (*Junsehi Kexue Yuan Junshi Zhanlüe Yanjiu Bu*; 军事科学院军事战略研究部), Sun Zhaoli (孙兆利) ed., *Science of Strategy (Zhanlüe Xue*; 战略学) (Beijing: Military Science Press (*Junshi Kexue Chubanshe*; 军事科学出版社), 2013), pp. 124-127.

“cognitive domain” (*renzhi lingyu*; 认知领域) as being in play. Fourth, better situational awareness and a shorter decision cycle allow for speed and precision in operations.<sup>76</sup>

One notable change in the PLA’s approach to joint operations under this construct is that joint operations will not be confined to “campaign-level” operations only, as was previously the case. Recall that Major General Chen Rongdi (Academy of Military Sciences, AMS) was cited earlier in this paper as commenting, “It can be said that future wars will be joint operations regardless of scale.” He further argues that the traditional lines between the strategic, the operational, and the tactical have been blurred as a result of technologies. This suggests that the PLA intends to fight as a joint force at all three levels of conflict: strategic, operational, and tactical. This new approach of joint operations at all three levels of conflict is also borne out by discussions of command for integrated joint operations in some PLA reference materials. Also, by 2014, the AMS had published a book focused exclusively on joint operations at the tactical level of engagement.<sup>77</sup>

Likely one of the most important dimensions of the new (2020) joint operations *Guidelines* is codifying how command and control will work in the post-2016 PLA organization and its radically changed operational relationships. Leading up to the reorganization of 2016, the PLA recognized the criticality of unified command and control arrangements in order to achieve exquisitely orchestrated operational effects between services and branches, as well as among platforms and systems. The 2007 edition of the *Chinese Military Encyclopedia* (edited by the AMS’s Operations Theory and Regulations Research Department) offered that integrated joint operational command is “a new form of command that meets the needs of local

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<sup>76</sup> Chen Bingde (陈炳德) Liang Guanglie (梁光烈), and Fang Fenghui (房峰辉), ed., *Chinese Military Encyclopedia* (Second Edition) *Operations* (*Zhongguo Junshi Baike Quanshu (di er ban) Zuozhan*; 中国军事百科全书 (第二版) 作战); (China Encyclopedia Publishing House (*Zhongguo da Baike Quanshu Chubanshe*; 中国大百科全书出版社), 2014), pp. 436-437.

<sup>77</sup> See entry for integrated joint operations command in *ibid.*, p. 63; Mu Yongpeng (穆永朋), ed., *The Study of Joint Tactics* (*Lianhe Zhanshu Xue*; 联合战术学), (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House (*Junshi Kexue Chubanshe*; 军事科学出版社), Jan. 2014).



warfare under the conditions of informatization.”<sup>78</sup> The 2015 edition of the National Defense University’s *Science of Military Strategy* states, “Integrated joint operations are based on the unified command of a joint operations command organization.”<sup>79</sup>

In 2014, as discussions on impending PLA organizational reforms were undoubtedly underway, the president of the PLA National Defense University, Lieutenant General (LTG) Song Puxuan wrote an article in *Qiushi*, the flagship journal of the CCP, in which he expanded upon comments Xi Jinping allegedly had made at the First Plenary Meeting of the Central Military Commission’s Leading Group for Deepening the Reforms of National Defense and the Armed Forces.<sup>80</sup> Part of LTG Song’s lengthy discourse concerned the need for the PLA to rethink its system of command and control as it looked to conduct integrated joint operations:

Judging from the practical situation, further perfecting the joint operations command system is of the utmost importance and urgency to expanding and deepening the preparations for military struggles and improving our military’s capability for integrated joint operations. Although our military has made many explorations [of] and attempts [at] joint operations command, the building of our system still lags significantly behind, and we have not yet thoroughly resolved the problems of having too many levels of command and of the setup of command organs, and the allocation of functions that are not rational enough. We must earnestly explore and abide by the inherent laws and mechanism for defeating our enemies in joint operations under the conditions of informatization; in accordance with the requirements of authorities, being keen-witted and capable, agile, and highly efficient, accurately grasp and solve the basic orientation, basic functions, basic structures, basic relationships, operating mechanisms, and other major issues concerning the joint operations

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<sup>78</sup> Liang Guanglie (梁光烈), *Chinese Military Encyclopedia (Second Edition) Operations (Zhongguo Junshi Baike Quanshu (di er ban) Zuozhan*; 中国军事百科全书（第二版）作战).

<sup>79</sup> Xiao Tianliang (肖天亮), ed., *Science of Military Strategy (Zhanlüe Xue*; 战略学), pp. 240-243.

<sup>80</sup> “Resolutely Implement ‘Firmly Grasping Four Things’ and Solidly Push Forward Reforms of National Defense and Armed Forces,” *Qiushi* (Online edition), no. 15 (July 14, 2014).

command system; and make sure that we achieve substantial breakthroughs in the key links of reforms.

A unified and rational joint operations command organization is precisely what the PLA did *not* have before the reorganization of 2016—hence, LTG Song’s laments in 2014. The prior ad hoc arrangements for the command and control of joint operations at the theater level are believed to have comprised temporarily assigned elements from the former military regions headquarters, the service headquarters, and representation sent down from the Operations Department of the General Staff Department.<sup>81</sup> These arrangements clearly did not work. Consequently, there is an argument to be made that persistent problems with joint command and control authorities and relationships were a key reason, among others, why the entire organizational structure of the PLA at the national and theater (military region) levels had to be dismantled *en toto* and then rebuilt in 2016. After years of experimentation and exercises, it likely became evident to the PLA, as implied in the *Qiushi* excerpt above, that it was going to be impossible to superimpose effective joint command and control arrangements onto their legacy organization—one that was inspired by the Soviets in the 1950s.

Sometime between the inception of the concept of “integrated joint operations” (circa 2004) and the announced focus areas for military reform after the Third Plenum of the 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee (2013), the PLA’s operations, training, and military science research communities had probably already determined what fundamental, if not specific, organizational changes to the PLA were theoretically necessary to enable the concept of integrated joint operations. Xi Jinping’s critical contribution was providing the political muscle to force through the necessary organizational changes that were manifested in the post-2016 reorganization. The following table compares PLA joint operations as conceived of in 1999 and in 2020.

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<sup>81</sup> Dean Cheng discusses some of the earlier command and control arrangements under coordinated joint operations in his *Joint Operations with Chinese Characteristics* (CNA, 2004). Cheng also discusses these issues, to include the PLA’s early conceptions of a “joint campaign command structure” (*lianhe zhanyi zhihui jigou*, 联合战役指挥机构), in *Cyber Dragon* (Praeger, 2017), pp. 32-33.

PLA Joint Operations: 1999 and 2020		
	1999	2020
Doctrine Issued	Guidelines for Joint Campaigns & Joint Operations Regulations (January 1999)	Guidelines for Joint Operations (November 2020)
Part of Larger Doctrinal Shift	New Generation Operations Regulations	New Era Operations Regulations System
Concept for Joint Operations	Coordinated Joint Operations	Integrated Joint Operations
Scale of Conflict at Which Joint Operations are Employed	Campaign-Level Operations	At All Levels of Operations; Pushed Down to Tactical Level
Employment of Joint Operations	Joint Campaigns are an Option Along With Single-Service Campaigns	Joint Operations are the Standard: "The Basic Form of Operations"
Theater-Level Command & Control (C2)	Temporary, Task-Organized Campaign-Level HQ Likely Comprised of Military Region Staff, GSD Operations Department, Services	Standing "Integrated Command and Control Structure" Comprised of Joint Theater Command HQ

## Development of the *Guidelines* as an institutional endeavor

Which institutions had a role in crafting the PLA's new joint doctrine? How were the operational concepts derived? What were the timelines? The public domain provides precious little data with which to answer these questions with any levels of specificity. Nevertheless, this section offers three things: (1) a brief background about important capacity-building decisions made by the PLA beginning decades ago to enhance doctrinal development; (2) a description of what is to be found in the public domain about the development of the 2020 joint operations *gangyao*; and (3) speculation about processes that may have led to the 2020 *Guidelines* based on a previous PLA doctrinal shift.

### PLA capacity-building for doctrinal development in the 1980s

Perhaps one of the most underappreciated dimensions of PLA modernization and reform over the past four decades is the creation or enhancement of the institutions, processes, and personnel required to keep up with global doctrinal developments, assess the PLA's doctrinal requirements, and develop its own operational concepts.

After emerging from the dislocations imposed by the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (GPCR, 1966-1976), the PLA set about rebuilding its institutions in the shadow of a significant military threat from the former Soviet Union. Attention to doctrinal affairs was an urgent part of that recovery effort. During the 1980s, the PLA established the foundations of military science research and doctrinal development that would produce successive iterations (“generations”) of operational doctrine, eventually leading to 2020’s new joint *Guidelines* some 40 years later. As CNA’s Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise has written, in the 1980s, the PLA “slowly and steadily developed the institutional and systemic underpinnings for continuous research on issues of military strategic and operational concepts.”<sup>82</sup>

For example, circa 1981, the PLA held its first “All Army Military Science Research Conference,” which in turn resulted in the first “All Army Military Science Research Plan” to give focus to analyses of strategic, operational, and tactical issues in support of the force. By 1983, the PRC State Council recognized military science as a legitimate field of academic study, enabling the granting of degrees, which in turn helped build a cadre of doctrinal specialists with advanced degrees. Organizationally, in 1983, the PLA Navy Equipment Research Center was established (NRC, *Haijun Zhuangbei Lunzheng Yanjiu Zhongxin*; 海军装备论证研究中心). In 1985, the PLA National Defense University (NDU, *Guofang Daxue*; 国防大学) was founded both as the highest level institution of professional military education in the PLA and as a research university. Also established in 1985 was the PLA Navy Research Institute (NRI, *Haijun Junshi Xueshu Yanjiu Suo*; 海军军事学研究所). In that same year, the PLA Navy adopted its “Offshore Defense” service strategy (*jin hai fangyu*; 近海防御).

The Academy of Military Sciences (AMS, *Junshi Kexueyuan*; 军事科学院), established in 1958, was back in full swing in the wake of the GPCR, and today remains the PLA’s premier national-level research institute for doctrinal affairs (among many other issues). In 1985, the AMS’s Tactics Department (*zhanshu bu*; 战术部) was renamed and reorganized as the Campaign and Tactics Department

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<sup>82</sup> Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, with Kenneth W. Allen, David M. Finkelstein, Dean B. Cheng, and Kristen Gunness, *Doctrinal Change in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army: Institutions, Processes and Influences* (Alexandria, VA: CNA, 2003).

(*zhanyi zhanshu bu*; 战役战术部), strongly suggesting that doctrine for campaigns at the operational level of war was going to be an area of future focus for the PLA.

Also in the 1980s, professional military journals such as *China Military Science* (*Junshi Kexue*; 《军事科学》), and other publications on strategic and operational issues, began to appear. Among these were updated dictionaries to standardize military terminology, a new military encyclopedia, and specialized book-length studies, such as the first edition (1987) of the AMS's foundational study *The Science of [Military] Strategy* (*Zhanlüe Xue*; 《战略学》), which was revised and reissued in 2001 and again in 2013.<sup>83</sup>

All of these organizations (and others not mentioned), and the personnel assigned to them, constitute the PLA's military science research community. Over the years, this PLA-wide establishment has made significant contributions to the development of warfighting doctrine in support of the PLA's operations and training communities, which also have a central role in doctrinal development. PLA military science analysts have made contributions by analyzing the doctrine and operations of foreign militaries, assessing PLA doctrine training and exercises, developing operational concepts for testing by the field force, advancing methods for simulations and other technical support to the doctrine development process, and participating in the drafting of new doctrinal publications along with other key PLA stakeholders.

### **PLA commentary on the processes involved in developing the 2020 joint *Guidelines***

Although the PRC media give very little detail about how the 2020 joint *Guidelines* were developed, a common refrain across the available data is that the *Guidelines* were the result of three major lines of effort. The first was conducting theoretical research, which is the role of the PLA's military science research community. The second was studying lessons learned from PLA exercises, experiments, and simulations, which are the realms of the PLA's operations and training communities (and supported by the military science research community). The third was assessing and analyzing the operational experiences of foreign militaries,

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. Of note, all of the aforementioned institutions underwent reorganization or reorientation circa 2017 as part of the larger ongoing PLA reform enterprise.

presumably supported by the PLA military intelligence community and definitely supported by the PLA's foreign military studies community, which is a subset of the larger military science research establishment. These three lines of effort were also invoked in the PLA media two decades earlier, when the *New Generation Operations Regulations* were developed between 1995 and 1999.

One of the most authoritative sets of public comments on the development of the 2020 joint *Guidelines*, comes from the long CCTV interview given by unnamed PLA officers assigned to the Strategy and Campaign Training Bureau of the CMC's Joint Staff Department. The fact that this organization was featured to speak authoritatively about the *Guidelines* on a television outlet controlled by the party-state strongly suggests that it had a role in the development of the new joint doctrine. The following are four key insights from the interview.<sup>84</sup>

First, the interview states that the new joint *Guidelines* were informed by theoretical research and lessons learned from military exercises conducted since the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress—probably the Third Plenum in 2013. Recall that the Third Plenum issued 46 areas of military reform, doctrine being one of them. Although the 2020 *Guidelines* were assuredly informed by data pre-dating the Third Plenum, this paper takes as a working hypothesis that the Third Plenum in 2013 is a reasonable starting point for the compiling of the new joint doctrine. Here is what the Strategy and Campaign Training Bureau had to say in their CCTV interview:

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, in leading the great practice of strengthening the army and rejuvenating the military, Chairman Xi emphasized the need to vigorously promote the research style of operational problems and strengthen actual combat training. He personally planned and participated in a series of major military exercises, [which he] personally planned and commanded. In order to prepare for military struggles and deal with major crises in all directions, he personally led the whole army to carry out unprecedented theoretical exploration and practical creation. In accordance with Chairman Xi's

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<sup>84</sup> "Leaders of the Strategic Campaign Training Bureau of the Joint Staff Department of the Military Commission Answered Reporters' Questions on the Release of the "Chinese People's Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Trial)"."

instructions and requirements, the entire army has strengthened training and preparedness, accumulated rich practical experience, and formed a large number of high-quality theoretical research results. These practical results have been fully absorbed in the *Guidelines*.<sup>85</sup>

Second, the CCTV interview highlighted the role played by studying the experiences, operations, and doctrine of foreign militaries.

At the same time, in the process of formulating the *Guidelines*, we also carefully studied recent global local wars, deeply analyzed new developments and changes in foreign military operational concepts, weapons and equipment, and methods of action, and grasped the characteristics and laws of modern warfare. The operational experiences of foreign forces has also provided us with useful references for scientifically designing our military's future operations.<sup>86</sup>

Third, PLA interviewees from the Strategy and Campaign Training Bureau highlighted the role of new technologies as the *Guidelines* were developed.

Military technology and weaponry are the material basis for winning war. In formulating the *Guidelines*, we paid great attention to the development of modern science and technology and its application in the military field, carefully analyzed and studied its profound influence on warfare, and strived to reflect the future in terms of operational concepts, operational ideas, command methods, and operational methods, [Including] intelligent features of war informatization.<sup>87</sup>

Finally, the interview mentioned how the PLA employed technologies, simulations, and experiments to emulate operations as part of the process of developing the *Guidelines*.

Operational experimentation is an important part of formulating operations regulations and a basic guarantee for improving the quality

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

of operations regulations. In the past, we formulated [operations] regulations by using troops to carry out experiments with live ammunition. However, due to conditions, the content and methods of verification were very limited. Now, we have advanced platforms such as joint operations and service arm combat experimentation centers, which can perform a large number of combat simulations in the laboratory. Through the combination of battle laboratory demonstrations and actual military verification, the [scientific nature] and applicability of the *Guidelines* have been improved.<sup>88</sup>

The simulations and experiments mentioned above that supported the development of the 2020 *Guidelines* were the result of sustained focus and progress by the PLA throughout the 2000s in adopting the field of operations research (OR).<sup>89</sup> According to an article written by two members of the PLA military science research community, sometime toward the end of Hu Jintao's tenure as CMC Chairman, possibly in the 2010 timeframe or so, Hu Jintao is said to have visited the Academy of Military Sciences. While at the AMS he reportedly stated, "Operations laboratories are not only a new field of military practice, but also a new means of military research. Operations laboratories open up a new method for research on joint military operations under informatized conditions."<sup>90</sup>

Certainly the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) was, and continues to be, at the forefront of this effort. During the 2000s, PLA researchers assigned to key AMS departments such as the Joint Operations Research Experimentation Center (*Lianhe Zuozhan Yanjiu Shiyān Zhōngxīn*; 联合作战研究实验中心) and the Evaluation and Demonstration Research Center (*Pínggū Lúnzhēng Yānjiū*

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> This brief discussion on operations research (OR) in the PLA, and some of the titles in the tone box, benefitted from previous research on this topic by CNA China analysts Alison Kaufman and Lauren Dickey.

<sup>90</sup> Wang Huiqing (王回青) and Zhang Dequn (张德群), "Discussions on our Military's Development of 'Battle Labs' and Key Issues in Application" (*Lun wo jun Zuozhan Shiyān Fazhān yu Yunyong de Ruogan Zhōngyào Wēntí*; 论我军作战实验发展与运用的若干重要问题), *Military Operations Research and Systems Engineering* (*Junshi Yunchou yu Xitong Gongcheng*; 军事运筹与系统工程) 25, no. 4 (2011): 11-14.



*Zhongxin*; 评估论证研究中心) produced studies, books, and articles to help the operations and training communities better employ simulations, virtual experiments, and various types of “battle labs” (*zuozhan shiyan shi*; 作战实验室), or operations laboratories, in order to develop, test, and evaluate operational concepts. Among many studies published on these issues is one published in 2016 by AMS researchers Bu Xianjin and Zhang Dequn that was hailed in the PLA media. Entitled *Operations Experiments* (*zuozhan shiyan xue*; 《作战实验学》), the book, which reportedly took five years to research and write, was declared significant because it “marks the initial establishment of our military’s operations experiments as a discipline.”<sup>91</sup> This suggests that while operational experimentation enhanced with technologies had certainly been taking place for years, the PLA military science community was now bringing more rigor and codification to the process in order to assist operators and trainers in their work.

#### Sample PLA Titles on Operations Research Prior to the 2020 *Gangyao*

Zhou Chife, *Military Operations Research*, Updated Edition (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2010). 周赤非, 《新编军事运筹学》, 军事科学出版社, 2010.

Wang Huiqing and Zhang Dequn, “Discussions on our Military’s Development of ‘Battle Labs’ and Key Issues in Application,” in *Military Operations Research and Systems Engineering*, 25, no. 4 (2011): pp. 11-14. 王回青, 张德群, 《论我军作战实验发展与运用的若干重要问题》, 军事运筹与系统工程, 25, no. 4 (2011): 11-14.

Bu Xianjin, *Operational Experimentation Teaching Materials* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, July 2013). 卜先锦, 《作战实验学教程》, 军事科学出版社, 2013.

Wang Fengshan and Bu Xianjin, “Application of Big Data in Post-Event Analysis for Warfighting Experimentation” in *Military Operations Research and Systems Engineering* 31, no. 4 (2017): pp. 59-64. 王峰山, 卜先锦, 《大数据关联挖掘在作战实验分析中的应用研究》, 军事运筹与系统工程, 31, no. 4 (2017): 59-64.

Going forward, the melding of doctrine and technology in the PLA will only deepen as a result of the major reorganization of the AMS circa the summer of 2017. In this reorganization, the AMS subsumed under its authority multiple PLA technical

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<sup>91</sup> “Our Military Has Established Operations Experiments as a Discipline System” (*Wo Jun Chubu Goujian Qi Zuozhan Shiyan Xueke Tixi*; 我军初步构建起作战实验学科体系), *PLA Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*; 解放军报), Apr. 11, 2016, <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0411/c1011-28265134.html>.

institutes across China. It began the transformation of the AMS from an institution that was previously focused on military theory, military history, doctrine, strategy, and foreign military studies to one that is equally focused on operational innovation, technologies, and advancing the PLA's quest for jointness through applied research.

### **Speculating on the process, based on a previous major doctrinal shift**

Significant doctrinal change is a major institutional event for any military. In addition to the hard substantive work of developing new operational concepts, major doctrinal change also requires extensive organizational coordination to account for myriad operational factors and time for socialization to achieve consensus. That is certainly true for the US military.<sup>92</sup> The PLA is no different. Previous CNA work on the development of new doctrine in the PLA suggests that the process has the following generic characteristics:<sup>93</sup>

- *A centrally approved process:* The decision to develop a significant body of new doctrine, and the processes for developing it, receives the imprimatur of the Central Military Commission.
- *An institutionally based and managed process:* The process is led by key PLA organizations in the operations, training, and military science research communities, which are sometimes formed into an ad hoc task force to shepherd the process on behalf of the CMC.
- *A collaborative process:* Many stakeholder organizations throughout the PLA are involved and consulted at various points of the process.
- *An iterative process:* The process entails a multistep cycle of research, experimentation, assessment, debate, and drafting, which repeats as necessary.

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<sup>92</sup> For a fascinating look at some of the institutional issues in play for the US Army in the 1970s and 1980s when it transitioned to new operational concepts and doctrine, see General Donn A. Starry, "To Change an Army" in *Military Review*, March 1983, and especially John L. Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine, 1973-1982* (United States Army Training and Doctrine Command, June 1984).

<sup>93</sup> These characteristics are presented nearly verbatim, with some minor adjustments, from Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, *Doctrinal Change in the Chinese People's Liberation Army: Institutions, Processes and Influences*, pp. 14-15.

- *A deliberate process*: The process moves at a measured pace, so that multiple actors can play their required roles, the iterative cycle can produce the desired results, and institutional consensus can be achieved.

Various characteristics of this process were touched on in an article published in 1999 that discussed the *New Generation Operations Regulations* some 20 years earlier.<sup>94</sup> At the time, these operations regulations, which included first-time doctrine for joint campaigns and operations, were similarly heralded as a major advance in PLA warfighting doctrine over that which they replaced (which in the case of the 1999 regulations meant replacing those dated from the mid-1980s). To develop the 1999 doctrine, the CMC reportedly established an “Operations Regulations Committee” (*zuozhan tiaoling weiyuanhui*; 作战条令委员会) sometime in the 1990s, to guide the iterative doctrinal development process described above. As work progressed, the CMC subsequently established an “All Army Operations Regulations Editorial Committee” (*quan jun bianshen zuozhan tiaoling weiyuanhui*; 全军编审作战条令委员会) to draft the actual joint *gangyao* (issued in 1999) and the dozen or so other operations regulations. We are told that as the draft was being written, “hundreds of experts” from across the PLA “were organized to participate in the review,” that four meetings were held to discuss “special topics,” and that expert opinions were solicited along the way. Overall, according to the article, this process took four years from the start until the operations regulations were approved and signed out by the CMC.

Although there are no similar data to help us understand the process by which the 2020 joint *gangyao* was developed, it is not unreasonable to posit that the process was probably somewhat similar. Admittedly, this is conjecture.

Speculating even further, let us consider which organizations likely participated in, or at least were stakeholders in, the process of developing the 2020 *gangyao*. To reiterate, a working hypothesis of this paper is that the doctrine development process began in earnest in 2013 after the Third Plenum. Consequently, the

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<sup>94</sup> Ren Xiangdong (任向东), “PLA Ground, Naval, Air Units Implement New Generation Operations Regulations” (*Zhongguo Luhaikong Sanjun Shishi Xin Yidai Zuozhan Liaoling*; 中国陆海空三军实施新一代作战条令).

development of the *Guidelines* bridged the period between the pre-2016 PLA and the post-2016 reorganized PLA; thus, two sets of actors need to be considered.

Prior to the 2016 reorganization, the former General Staff Department (GSD, *Zong Canmou Bu*; 总参谋部) would have had a central role in the development of the new *gangyao*—ultimately being responsible to the Central Military Commission for oversight of the process. This is because the GSD was principally responsible for operations and training for the entire PLA. Within the former GSD, three departments in particular would have had roles: the Military Affairs Department (*Junshi Shiwu Bu*; 军事事务部); the Operations Department (*Zuozhan Bu*; 作战部), sometimes referred to as the First Department; and the Military Training Department (*Junshi Xunlian Bu*; 军事训练部). Based on a previous study of the GSD, prior to 2016, it is reasonable to suspect that the Military Affairs Department served as the GSD's and CMC's overall executive and coordinating agenda for the process of developing the 2020 joint *gangyao* given its role in the promulgation of regulations.<sup>95</sup>

As an inclusive, collaborative, and deliberative process, many other PLA stakeholder organizations and individual subject matter experts beyond the General Staff Department probably had roles or representation in the pre- and post-2016 phases of developing the 2020 joint *gangyao*. In the pre-2016 phase, those representatives would likely have come from the following organizations:

- The pre-2016 service headquarters (PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, and Second Artillery<sup>96</sup>)
- The General Political, General Logistics, and General Equipment departments
- Officers from the operations and training departments of the seven former military regions

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<sup>95</sup> For details on the former GSD and these three departments, see David M. Finkelstein, “The General Staff Department of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army: Organization, Roles, & Missions,” in James C. Mulvenon and Andrew N.D. Yang, eds., *The People’s Liberation Army as Organization: Reference Volume v1.0* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002), pp. 122-245.

<sup>96</sup> The Second Artillery (conventional and nuclear missiles) was technically not an independent service until the 2016 reorganization when it was reconstituted as the PLA Rocket Force, but it was previously treated as one.

- The PLA military science research community (AMS, NRI, etc.)
- Possibly, officers representing operational units
- Select institutes of professional military education, such as the National Defense University, the National Defense University for Science & Technology, and select service command academies.

Within the PLA military science research community, the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), which was directly subordinate to the CMC pre-2016 (and remains so post-2016), probably had a large role and impact on the process of creating the 2020 joint *gangyao* across all stages of its development. AMS involvement would have spanned the experimentation and simulations phases, providing insights into how foreign militaries conduct joint operations, the development of operational concepts, and ultimately participating in the drafting of the actual *gangyao*. In addition to some of the AMS departments already mentioned, in 2004, as part of a previous AMS reorganization, the former Campaign and Tactics Department was reconstituted as the Operations Theory and Regulations Research Department (*Zuozhan Lilun he Tiaoling Yanjiu Bu*; 作战理论和条令研究部), underscoring its important role in developing operations regulations.<sup>97</sup> Given the rising emphasis on joint operations in the maritime and aerospace domains, it is a safe bet that officer-analysts from the PLA Navy Research Institute<sup>98</sup> and certain departments of the PLA Air Force Command College (*Kongjun Zhihui Xueyuan*; 空军指挥学院) were also involved.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise and Frederick Vellucci, “Preparing for Informatized Warfare: China’s Evolving Concept of Military Informatization,” Pre-conference Working Draft, May 6, 2011.

<sup>98</sup> The pre-2016 PLA Navy Research Institute (NRI) possessed multiple departments whose work and subject matter experts would be relevant to the process of developing the maritime dimensions of the 2020 joint *gangyao*. These include the departments focused on navy strategy (*haijun zhanlüe*; 海军战略), navy campaigns (*haijun zhanyi*; 海军战役), military operations research (*junshi yunchou*; 军事运筹), and foreign naval studies (*waiguo haijun*; 外国海军) among others. David M. Finkelstein, *Evolving Operational Concepts*, p. 108.

<sup>99</sup> Email correspondence with Kenneth W. Allen, July 10, 2021. My thanks to long-time colleague Ken Allen for insights into the organization and missions of the PLAAF Command College. Allen’s data confirm that certain research and teaching units at the college are engaged in doctrinal studies, as well as the existence of a joint operations simulation laboratory.

As mentioned earlier, organizationally, as a working assumption, the processes whereby the PLA developed its new conception of how it will fight as a joint force—from experimentation to publication—spanned both the pre-2016 and post-2016 PLA organization. With the dissolution of the General Staff Department and the military regions in 2016, we might ask, “Which new institutional actors joined the process and were involved in bringing the new joint doctrine over the finish line in November 2020?”

First, after the 2016 reorganization, the Central Military Commission (CMC) absorbed many of the responsibilities of the former four general departments. Within the CMC, several departments (*bumen*; 部门) undoubtedly took up the guidon for pushing through the doctrinal reform enterprise. These would have included the Joint Staff Department (JSD, *Lianhe Canmou Bu*; 联合参谋部), picking up the role of the former GSD Operations Department. One suspects that the critical role played by the former GSD Military Affairs Department might have also transferred to the JSD, but this remains to be verified. Some specialists of PRC military affairs believe that in the post-2016 PLA, the Joint Staff Department is now the approval authority for doctrine.<sup>100</sup>

Second, taking over from the GSD’s Training Department would have been the new CMC Training and Administration Department (*Xunlian Guanli Bu*; 训练管理部), and its subordinate Strategy and Campaign Training Bureau, which is the organization that gave the long CCTV interview on the *gangyao*. The CMC’s new National Defense Mobilization Department (*Guofang Dongyuan Bu*; 国防动员部), as well as the CMC’s Political Work Department (*Zhengzhi Gongzuo Bu*; 政治工作部), would likely have been players—recall from the official announcements heralding the new *gangyao* that political work and mobilization issues are accounted for in the new joint doctrine. Also, one suspects that the CMC’s new Reform and Organization Office (*Gaige he Bianzhi Bangongshi*; 改革和编制办公室) would have taken on some oversight responsibility. There may have been others.

Third, the newly reorganized service headquarters would certainly have had representatives engaged in the doctrinal development process post-2016. These

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<sup>100</sup> Email correspondence with Dr. Joel Wuthnow, National Defense University. July 27, 2021.

would have included the PLA Army (a newly established headquarters), the PLA Navy, the PLA Air Force, and the PLA Rocket Force, which, like the PLA Army, was made a separate service as a result of the reorganization.

Another set of new participants in this inclusive doctrinal development process most assuredly came from two new organizations that were established as joint operations enablers: the Strategic Support Force (high-tech assets such as cyber and outer space) and the Joint Logistics Support Force. Both of these organizations provide critical combat support and combat service support to warfighting commanders. Finally, post-2016, there would probably have needed to be representation from the J-staffs of the five joint theater commands. These staff officers would have had a huge stake in the new joint doctrine, for they will be the ones expected to train and fight with the new *gangyao*.

When we think of all the PLA organizations that probably had representatives throughout different phases of compiling the new joint operations *gangyao*, it is impossible to say how many officers were involved. In 1999, it was said that hundreds of officers were consulted. For the 2020 *gangyao*, it is hard even to speculate. One can imagine all the consulted stakeholders filling a cavernous auditorium. A final point to make is that not all of these organizations were involved in all phases, but all of them were stakeholders that probably had to be brought into the tent at some point along the way. The following table below presents a notional list of stakeholders in developing the 2020 *gangyao* both before and since the 2016 reorganization.

Finally, what can we say about the temporal dimensions of the process? On one level, one could argue that the new (2020) joint doctrine was 20 years in the making. This is because it replaced the PLA's first-ever joint doctrine, which was issued in 1999 as part of the *New Generation Operations Regulations*. At some unknown point during those 20 years—after training with the 1999 doctrine, assessing it, and conducting other operational experiments—it must have been decided that either the operational concepts or the organizational processes outlined in the 1999 *gangyao* were not working. Command and control arrangements were likely one of the major shortfalls.

**NOTIONAL LIST OF PLA STAKEHOLDERS IN DEVELOPING THE 2020 JOINT GANGYAO**

PRE-2016 REORGANIZATION	POST-2016 REORGANIZATION
GSD Military Affairs Department	CMC Joint Staff Department
GSD Operations Department	CMC Joint Staff Department
GSD Training Department	CMC Training and Administration Department
GSD Intelligence Department	CMC Joint Staff Department Military Intelligence Directorate
GSD Mobilization Department	CMC National Defense Mobilization Department
General Political Department	CMC Political Work Department
General Logistics Department	Joint Logistics Support Force
No Predecessor	CMC Reform Organization Office
General Equipment Department	CMC Equipment Development Department
Service HQs: Navy, Air Force 2 <sup>nd</sup> Artillery	Service HQs: Army, Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force
7 Military Regions	5 Joint Theater Commands
Military Science Research Community	No change (internal reorganizations and consolidations)
Select Academies and Schools	No change; possibly adding the new Joint Operations College
No Predecessor	Strategic Support Force
Others?	Others?

Moreover, the PLA’s evolving conception of jointness was likely changing even as it was trying to implement the 1999 doctrine. As noted, within five years of issuing the 1999 joint doctrine, the PLA’s new concept for “integrated joint operations” started to appear in the military science literature. A final point to consider is that the information technologies that enable joint operations command and control were changing quickly between 1999 and 2013. The PLA, therefore, was attempting to become a joint force in a technologically dynamic environment with unsatisfactory command and control arrangements. In short, the PLA’s approach to joint operations for “Local War Under Modern, High-Tech Conditions” (the 1999 *gangyao*), would not suffice in prosecuting “Local War Under Informatized Conditions” and then “Informatized Local Wars” as the PLA conceived of them by 2004 and 2014, respectively.

On a second level, strictly based on inference, one suspects that it took the PLA about seven years to actually produce the new 2020 joint *gangyao*. One can take



the Third Plenum in October 2013 as the point of mandate to move forward, and it was not until November 2020 that the trial version of the new joint doctrine was announced. During this seven-year period one assumes that more exercises, experimentation, and simulations were probably taking place—especially command post exercises (CPXs) and tabletop exercises (TTXs)—to test the all-important command and control relationships that are at the heart of the PLA’s conception of “integrated joint operations.” Moreover, there was also available to the PLA’s doctrinal developers over a decade’s worth of lessons learned from exercising with the 1999 joint doctrine. By way of comparison, it reportedly took the PLA four years to produce the *New Generation Operations Regulations* of 1999, which included the PLA’s first *gangyao* on joint campaigns, the first joint operations regulations, and a dozen service-level operations regulations.<sup>101</sup>

Another interesting temporal dimension to consider is that the new joint doctrine (2020) was being developed contemporaneously with the reorganization of the PLA from top to bottom. Consequently, while the need to fight as a joint force was a driving factor behind the organizational changes in the PLA, the final version of the doctrine probably could not be written until the new organization and the new command relationships were finalized and smoothed out in practice after 2016. Indeed, one commentator in the PLA’s official newspaper, *Liberation Army Daily*, urged in 2016 that the development of new doctrine be accelerated, given the new (post-2016) command and control relationships.<sup>102</sup> In the event, the new joint *gangyao* (2020) was issued four years after the reorganization of the CMC, the creation of the five new joint theater commands, and the new roles of the service headquarters. More experimentation would have been needed with these new organizations. There was also the need to take account of joint combat support and joint combat service support organizations that did not exist prior to 2016, such as the Strategic Support Force and the Joint Logistics Support Force. This underscores yet again that the larger reorganization-reform enterprise of the PLA that began after

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<sup>101</sup> Ren Xiangdong (任向东), “PLA Ground, Naval, Air Units Implement New Generation Operations Regulations” (*Zhongguo Luhaikong Sanjun Shishi Xin Yidai Zuozhan Liaoling*; 中国陆海空三军实施新一代作战条令).

<sup>102</sup> “Solidify Military Theory in the Form of Laws and Regulations to Further Promote Combat Training” (*Yi Fagui Xingshi Guhua Junshi Lilun Jinyibu Tuidong Zuozhan Xunlian*; 以法规形式固化军事理论 进一步推动作战训练), *PLA Daily (Jiefangjun Bao*; 解放军报), Apr. 12, 2016, <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0412/c1011-28269257.html>.

the Third Plenum in 2013 was, and continues to be, an incredibly complex and ambitious endeavor.

## Concluding thoughts

The publication of the 2020 joint *Guidelines* is an important milestone in the PLA's ongoing reform enterprise. The new operational doctrine it transmits is being touted as a critical contribution to a larger effort intended to take PLA warfighting to the next level, as the PLA armed forces seek to become a joint force that can “fight and win” conflicts in the information age.

The new doctrine is another demonstration that the PLA continues to be a learning organization. Its efforts to become a joint force, still in motion, have proven to be a long-term effort, beginning in earnest in the early 1990s in the wake of Operation Desert Storm. Since then, the PLA's conception of how it should fight as a joint force has evolved, based on lessons learned from its own exercises and experimentation, its analysis of the operations of foreign militaries (the US and Russia in particular), and its changing assessments of the nature of modern warfare. This includes its appreciation for the speed at which advancing information technologies are enabling new possibilities in joint command and control. Along these lines, it is highly likely that the foundational concept of “integrated joint operations” contained in the new 2020 joint operations *gangyao* has itself evolved significantly since it was first introduced circa 2004.

Although the PLA continues to demonstrate it is a learning organization there are questions on the doctrine front as to whether the PLA learns fast enough, and whether it acts quickly enough on what it has learned. One is struck by the fact that there was a 20-year time span between the PLA's first-ever set of joint doctrine, issued as part of the 1999 *New Generation Operations Regulations*, and the recently issued *Guidelines on Joint Operations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (Trial)* of November 2020. Given that track record, one wonders if by the time the PLA trains and becomes proficient with the new 2020 doctrine, that doctrine will at worst be obsolete or at best be in need of serious revisions. In other words, institutionally, there are questions as to whether the PLA can implement and then

revise its new doctrine fast enough to keep up with dynamic change in modern warfare.<sup>103</sup>

At the same time, although doctrinal change does not come quickly in the PLA, the issue is likely more one of bureaucratic inertia than one of lack of talent. The development of the new joint *gangyao* suggests that the PLA's capacity for doctrinal development has benefited from key institutional developments over the years: the deepening capabilities of its institutions of military science research; the increasing levels of its personnel's education and exposure to global military developments; the maturation of operations research (OR) as a discipline within the PLA; its use of big data, automation, and simulations; and the synergies that have developed between its operations, training, and military science research communities, each of which has a critical role to play in the development of doctrine in the PLA.

Overall, many unanswered questions are raised by the commentary surrounding the new joint *Guidelines*.

First, if the PLA intends to push joint operations down to the tactical level of operations, how far down will jointness be manifested? Moreover, since the only permanent "unified joint command organizations" (that we know of) currently reside at the theater command level, will we be seeing training and exercises with task-organized C2 structures for joint operations at, say, the brigade or PLA Navy surface action group levels?

Second, if joint operations will henceforth be the "basic form of operations," does this mean the demise of single-service campaigns as written about in the PLA literature from the late 1990s and early 2000s?

Third, how will the PLA's system for professional military education (PME) prepare officers for service in a military that aspires to fight as a joint organization? How early or late in one's career will an officer be exposed to joint operations, and will the PLA's regulations for the management of officers be amended to include the

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<sup>103</sup> In 2017, China analyst Elsa Kania wrote a piece in *The Diplomat* entitled "When Will the PLA Finally Update Its Doctrine?" In it she cites an article from the PLA's *Liberation Army Daily* in which the PLA's inability to have doctrine keep up with changes in warfare is bemoaned as a "bottleneck" in Chinese military modernization. June 6, 2017 <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/when-will-the-pla-finally-update-its-doctrine/>.

incentives necessary to inculcate the joint culture that Major General Chen Rongdi spoke of in his interview?

Fourth, also on the personnel front, will the PLA be able to develop warfighting commanders who will be able to use their professional judgment to apply the new doctrine in specific operational circumstances? As worded earlier by CMC trainers, the doctrine will “need to give full play to the subjective initiative of people.” A related question is, how much tolerance for individual initiative in operational settings will the PLA’s culture of compliance be able to tolerate, given its system of vertical authorities?

Fifth, to what degree will the PLA’s new conception of joint operations and joint battlespaces change its previous operational constructs about the scales (*guimo*, 规模) of operations? For example, at the operational level of conflict, will the PLA still be thinking in terms of War Zone Strategic Campaigns, War Zone Independent Direction Campaigns, and Group Army Campaigns?<sup>104</sup>

Sixth, commentary in passing about the new joint *Guidelines* also being applicable to PLA missions beyond the PRC proper are intriguing because the new joint theater commands are focused on strategic directions contiguous with the mainland. It raises questions about what types of contingencies away from the PRC PLA planners envision fighting as a joint force, and with what command and control arrangements.<sup>105</sup>

Finally, the PLA’s new *gangyao* reminds observers of the doctrinal component of US-PRC military competition. Eyeing each other warily—with US defense officials speaking of the PLA as the “pacing challenge” and the PLA referring to the US armed forces as the “strong enemy”—both militaries are looking to new warfighting concepts in addition to platforms, weapons, and technologies to gain operational

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<sup>104</sup> Respectively, *zhanqu zhanlüe xing zhanyi* (战区战略性战役), *zhanqu duli fangxiang zhanyi* (战区独立方向战役), and *jituanjun zhanyi*, (集团军战役).

<sup>105</sup> For a discussion about potential PLA global operations see Joel Wuthnow, Phillip C. Saunders, and Ian Burns McCaslin, “PLA Overseas Operations in 2035: Inching Toward a Global Combat Capability,” *National Defense University Strategic Forum*, May 2021 <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-309.pdf>

advantage. As the US continues to pursue its new Joint Warfighting Concept (JWC), All Domain Operations, and Joint All Domain Command & Control (JADC2), the PLA is moving forward with its latest iteration of integrated joint operations, which, like the new US concepts, also assumes operations in all battlespace domains.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Theresa Hitchens, "SecDef OKs Joint Warfighting Concept; Joint Requirement Due Soon," *Breaking Defense*, Jun. 16, 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/06/secdef-oks-joint-warfighting-construct-joint-requirements-due-soon/>.



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