



PLA UPDATE

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

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Welcome to the February 2023 edition of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA’s newsletter on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Each edition of this newsletter draws on the expertise of CNA’s China and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division to provide an update on important developments in the PLA as reported in the Chinese- and English-language media of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

In this issue, we examine personnel issues that include recently issued regulations seeking to grow the PLA’s civilian workforce and guidelines for junior enlisted personnel to apply to officer and noncommissioned officer schools. In naval affairs, we look at a theater command’s efforts to improve tactical antisubmarine warfare command and one PLA researcher’s views on the deep sea as an emerging warfighting domain. We also feature a short bio of the newly appointed commanding officer of the PLA’s Central Theater Command.

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LAWS AND REGULATIONS

NEW REGULATIONS AIMED AT GROWTH IN PLA'S CIVILIAN WORKFORCE

The PRC has implemented a newly revised policy for the management of PLA civilian employees, which likely seeks to rectify retention issues and improve the attractiveness of a career as a PLA civilian. The new [regulations](#) are the third iteration of guidance pertaining to the PLA's civilian workforce that was first released in 2005 and revised in 2017.¹ The updated policy was approved by the PRC State Council and the Central Military Commission last December and went into effect on January 4, 2023. According to [Xinhua](#), the newly revised regulations seek to "make civilian personnel management more professional, refined, and scientific" and to "facilitate the high-quality development of the civilian personnel workforce."²

A comparison of the 2022 and [2017](#) editions of these regulations shows that the updated policy is lengthier (76 articles versus 62) and contains new or revised language concerning personnel categories, training, transfers, and compensation.³ Related content from the 2022 regulations includes the following:

- **Categories of civilian personnel.** The PLA's civilian personnel primarily occupy non-combat billets that "do not directly participate in military operations" and require "high levels of professionalism." According to the regulations, such billets include the following three categories, each with a unique pay grade system.⁴
 - **Management personnel**, who undertake administrative tasks for military units.
 - **Professional technical personnel**, such as educators, scientists, engineers, and medical professionals.
 - **Professional skills personnel**, who perform functions including equipment operation and maintenance and combat service support.
- **Types of training.** According to the regulations, civilian personnel are entitled to training when (1) newly hired, (2) expecting promotion to a higher-grade billet, and (3) it is necessary to help them better perform their jobs.
- **Inter-unit transfers.** The regulations specify that, when necessary, civilian personnel may be transferred between military units or between military and civilian organizations, although intra-military transfers will take priority.
- **Compensation and benefits.** The regulations' text suggests that PLA units have some flexibility in offering incentives to recruit and retain civilian personnel. For example, "technology-intensive units" are authorized to offer "performance-based wages," while "high-level talent" and "special professional talent" may qualify for "market-based salary systems" such as "annual salary, negotiated salary, and project salary."

These revised PLA regulations are likely part of an effort to address issues with the recruitment and retention of its [20,000 or so](#) civilian personnel.⁵ For example, writing in 2017, a faculty member of the People's Armed Police Engineering University attributed high rates of civilian personnel terminating their employment with military academies to reasons including: (1) the disparity in their salaries compared to active duty counterparts and (2) the lack of opportunities for career advancement.⁶

Getting the policies for civilian personnel right will be important for the PLA going forward as (1) it seeks to orient more of its active duty personnel toward combat and combat support functions, and (2) the PLA's inventory of high-tech platforms demand more complex maintenance regimens.

PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION

2023 RECRUITMENT OF JUNIOR ENLISTED TO OFFICER, NCO SCHOOLS

The PLA has released new guidance for enlisted personnel to apply for admission to degree-conferring military academic institutions. On January 28, the PLA [announced](#) the kickoff of the 2023 round of recruiting junior enlisted personnel for attendance at officer and noncommissioned officer (NCO) schools within the PLA and People's Armed Police.⁷ The PLA's official website published [detailed information](#) on the target applicants, application process, and assignment of junior enlisted to officer and NCO schools, which we summarize below.⁸

Eligibility. Junior enlisted must meet several basic requirements to begin the process of applying to earn either a four-year undergraduate degree at an officer school or a three-year technical degree at an NCO school. These requirements include the following:

- **One to three years of service.** Applicants must have served a minimum of one year and a maximum of three years by June 30, 2023.
- **Age 22 or younger.** Applicants must be born after January 1, 2001.
- **Unmarried.** Those applying to officer schools must be unmarried at the time of application and (if accepted) the time of matriculation.
- **High performers.** Those who apply to officer schools must have consistently scored in the upper percentiles of annual assessments and training.

There are several exceptions to the eligibility requirements listed above. For example, ethnic minority personnel up to age 23 are eligible, and individuals who previously participated in overseas activities like peacekeeping and naval escort missions may apply up until their fourth year of service. These two exceptions indicate that the PLA is (1) making a conscious effort to commission individuals from minority groups and (2) rewarding personnel for their participation in real-world operations.

Application process. Junior enlisted who apply to test into four-year officer or three-year NCO schools must pass through several steps, as follows:

- **Express interest to unit leaders.** Interested applicants must first inform the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) committee or branch of their respective "grassroots-level unit" (this term refers to units at the battalion level or below).
- **Get approval from higher headquarters.** Grassroots-level units submit recommendations up to their parent brigades or regiments, who have the final say on which individuals will sit for the entrance examination. Decisions are made by the end of March.
- **Take exam on common military subjects.** Applicants greenlighted by higher headquarters next take the "exam on common military subjects." This exam consists of [four main components](#), namely: formation, light arms use, basic tactical movements, and physical fitness.⁹
- **Physical examination.** Those who pass the exam on common military subjects next undergo physical examinations at military medical facilities.
- **Take exam on cultural subjects.** After passing the physical exam, applicants are eligible to take the "exam on cultural subjects." This exam is conducted at the same time as China's National College Entrance Examination in early June. The PLA's exam on cultural subjects consists of five subjects: Chinese language, math, "military-political knowledge," science, and English.

- **Get results.** Junior enlisted who took the exam on cultural subjects receive their results via a military-internal information network about one month after exam completion.
- **Apply to preferred schools.** Those who passed the exam on cultural subjects fill out a form indicating their preferred school(s). Junior enlisted applying to officer schools may indicate three preferences, while those applying to NCO schools may indicate only one preference.

How applicants get assigned to schools. Theater-level organizations are responsible for assigning eligible junior enlisted to officer and NCO schools. These organizations take several factors into account, including annual recruitment plans (i.e., school quotas), the examinees' preferred schools, physical examination results, cultural subject exam results, and "policy-based extra marks." These "extra marks" refer to preferential consideration given to individuals who have previously received merit citations, participated in "major military actions or tasks," or who have parents that served with distinction in China's armed forces. It is unclear how the scores of all these factors are weighted against each other in the theater-level decision-making process.

PLA PROMOTIONS

PLA ARMY OFFICER BECOMES FIFTH CENTRAL THEATER COMMANDER



Xi Jinping and Huang Ming.
Source: [Xinhua](#).

The PLA's theater command responsible for capital defense has a new commanding officer. On January 18, Xi Jinping promoted career ground force officer Huang Ming to the PLA's highest general officer rank—General (three stars in their system)—at a [ceremony](#) in Beijing also attended by senior military leaders. PRC media reporting on the promotion ceremony for the first time identified Huang as the new commander of the PLA's Central Theater Command, although the date at which he officially assumed the position was not disclosed.¹⁰

The Central Theater Command is primarily responsible for defending the PRC capital and CCP leadership. It is also tasked with providing surge support to the PLA's four other theater commands.¹¹ Central Theater Command units, which include three of the PLA's corps-level group armies, are concentrated in Beijing, Tianjin, and the provinces of Hebei, Henan, Hubei, Shaanxi, and Shanxi.¹²

Huang Ming's [previous assignment](#) was as deputy commander of the PLA Army. Prior to that, he was the first commander of the newly formed 81st Group Army based in Zhangjiakou, Hebei Province.¹³

Huang is the [fifth](#) officer and the fourth PLA Army officer to serve as commander of the Central Theater Command since its establishment in early 2016.¹⁴

COMMENTARY ON FOREIGN MILITARY ACTIVITIES

AMS AUTHOR DISCUSSES EMERGING WARFIGHTING DOMAIN IN DEEP SEA

The deep sea is an "operational domain of great strategic significance" that will be defined by autonomous unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) in the future, according to a recent article by a researcher at a PLA center for doctrinal development. On January 19, the PLA's official newspaper carried

an article titled "[Deep Sea Space: The New Dimensions of Future Military Competition](#)." The article's author, Kuang Lasheng, is a researcher at the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), the PLA's premier institution for the study and development of strategy, operations, and tactics.¹⁵ (See endnote for additional biographic information.) Using allegations of sabotage against Nord Stream pipelines in the Baltic Sea as a springboard, Kuang discusses international trends in the development and employment of capabilities in the deep sea, a "[new domain](#)" which the author defines as waters at depths of 200 meters and greater.¹⁶

Kuang argues that the deep sea is becoming an increasingly important battlespace for international military competition following technological advances such as artificial intelligence (AI) that are enabling exploration and operations at depths not previously possible. Kuang is not alone in making this point. Recent PRC writings on "[intelligent warfare](#)," for example, posit that AI and autonomous technologies are opening up warfighting spaces in regions where humans cannot easily operate, including outer space, polar regions, and the deep sea.¹⁷

Elaborating on the benefits of AI and autonomy in deep-sea warfare, Kuang contends that in the future, highly intelligent undersea drones and other platforms will be able to detect, identify, and attack a variety of enemy targets such as surface groups, submarines, and naval bases. The author suggests that military powers could prioritize the use of autonomous UUVs for certain missions according to their relative sizes, as follows:

- Medium and small UUVs: reconnaissance, surveillance, and deception.
- Large UUVs: antisubmarine warfare (ASW), anti-surface warfare, and electronic countermeasures.
- Extra-large UUVs: long-range strikes.

Kuang argues that deep-sea operational capability could be useful for both "strategic deterrence" and "strategic surprise attacks." To the latter point, Kuang suggests that if one can preposition deep-sea weapons systems in "key sea areas" and conceal them for long periods of time, then one could "launch attacks at a time unexpected by the enemy." As the author writes, seizing command of the deep sea may be used to improve the security of one's own surface and subsurface assets while also setting conditions for the deployment of offensive weapons.

Kuang Lasheng's article does not necessarily reflect how the PLA is developing or plans to employ future deep-sea operational capabilities. The author, while discussing how the US, Russia, France, Japan, and India have already made investments in areas such as dedicated deep-sea commands and specialized equipment, does not cite examples of PRC capabilities in this space. However, China certainly has both [civilian submersibles](#) and [military submarines](#) capable of operating 200 meters below the surface and deeper.¹⁸ It will be worth continuing to watch how the PRC publicly discusses and operationally employs such platforms in the future.

PLA NAVY

OFFICERS COMMAND MULTI-UNIT TASKFORCES DURING ASW TRAINING

The PLA's official newspaper reviews a recent ASW training event to highlight efforts to improve tactical command and control of ASW forces. On January 25, *PLA Daily* ran an [article](#) on the most recent iteration of the Eastern Theater Command (ETC) Navy's "ASW rotation training." In this type of training, assets from various units with ASW capability are combined into a single "taskforce." An officer from one of the units is placed in command of the taskforce, and it engages a fictional "enemy" in an opposing forces (OPFOR) drill.

The article included a couple of notable points, as follows:

- **Commanders made responsible for less familiar capabilities.** The assets in an ASW taskforce reportedly come from submarine, aviation, surface ship, and coastal-port support units. According to an ASW taskforce commander quoted by *PLA Daily*, ASW rotation training challenges commanders to “not only have a good command of how to employ their own forces, but also know how to employ other forces in the taskforce like the palm of their hand.”
- **Command authority devolved to the tactical level.** Earlier iterations of ASW rotation training were organized and overseen by ETC Navy headquarters. However, command authority in recent iterations of such training has been delegated downward to the taskforce level, while the theater command navy headquarters now focuses on providing “training guidance.” According to the article, the benefits of this approach include (1) closer coordination between forces in which tactical relationships are ironed out, (2) progress in addressing “difficult issues” like shared situational awareness, and (3) honing the command abilities of “frontline unit command posts.”

The *PLA Daily* article stated that the ETC Navy had, to date, conducted ASW rotation training with taskforces composed of assets from “more than 10 units.” The article did not specify whether the ETC Navy was the only PLA Navy fleet conducting such training. Future PRC media reporting that identifies ASW rotation training in the Northern Theater Command or Southern Theater Command navies could be evidence of national-level guidance for this type of training to devolve tactical command authority to PLA Navy taskforce commanders.¹⁹

NOTES

¹ The PLA has both a corps of active duty civilian cadre (文职干部) and non-active duty civilian personnel (文职人员, a term which some Western analysts have alternatively translated as “contract civilians”). The newly released regulations apply only to civilian personnel. For the full text of these regulations (in Chinese), see “(Authorized Release) Chinese People’s Liberation Army Civilian Personnel Regulations” (〈授权发布〉中国人民解放军文职人员条例), Xinhua (新华网), Jan. 4, 2023, http://www.news.cn/2023-01/04/c_1129255553.htm.

² “China Enacts Revised Regulations for PLA Civilian Personnel Management,” Xinhua, Jan. 4, 2023, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/20230104/6310d2339ff24da19d055eda9c014457/c.html>.

³ For the 2017 editions of the PLA’s regulations for civilian personnel (in Chinese), see “(Authorized Release) Chinese People’s Liberation Army Civilian Personnel Regulations” (〈授权发布〉中国人民解放军文职人员条例), Xinhua (新华网), Nov. 10, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-11/10/c_1121937817.htm.

⁴ According to the 2022 regulations for civilian personnel, management personnel have a 12-grade pay scale (Level 1 being the highest) and professional technical personnel have a 13-grade pay scale. Professional skills personnel are divided into subcategories of “skilled workers” and “ordinary workers,” the former of which has a five-grade pay scale and the latter of which is not assigned differentiating grades.

⁵ The PLA does not appear to have released recent data on the number of civilian personnel it employs. Marcus Clay and Dennis Blasko estimated in 2020 that the PLA sought to employ over 20,000 civilian personnel. See Marcus Clay and Dennis J. Blasko, “People Win Wars: The PLA Enlisted Force, And Other Related Matters,” War on the Rocks, July 31, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/people-win-wars-the-pla-enlisted-force-and-other-related-matters/>.

⁶ Mao Saiqun (毛赛群), “The Use and Management of Non-Active-Duty Civilian Personnel in Military Educational Institutions” (军队院校非现役文职人员的作用及管理), *Journal of Naval University of Engineering* (海军工程大学学报 (综合版)) 14, no. 4 (2017), 79.

⁷ Xu Xiaogang (徐小刚) and Wu Xu (吴旭), “Work Underway for 2023 Military Academic Institution Recruitment of Enlisted Students” (2023 年军队院校招收士兵学员工作部署展开), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Jan. 28, 2023, http://www.81.cn/jx_208569/jdt_208570/10214378.html.

⁸ “2023 Enlisted Entrance Examination Work is Fully Underway, Here is What You Must Know About the Entrance Examination!” (2023 年士兵考学工作全面启动, 这些招考信息需要知道), China Military Online (中国军网), Jan. 28, 2023, http://www.81.cn/jx_208569/jdt_208570/10214381.html.

⁹ “Major Adjustments to Military Exam Policy! The Goods are Here!”, China Military Online (中国军网), Oct. 8, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jx/2021-10/08/content_10096778.htm.

¹⁰ “Xi Presents Certificate of Order to Promote Military Officer to Rank of General,” China Military Online, 18 Jan. 2023, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2023-01/18/content_10213041.htm.

¹¹ United States Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 2022.

¹² United States Department of Defense, Defense Intelligence Agency, *Directory of PRC Military Personalities*, Washington, DC, 2021.

¹³ Amber Wang, “China Names New Chief of PLA Theatre Command that Guards Beijing,” *South China Morning Post*, Jan. 19, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3207415/china-names-new-chief-pla-theatre-command-guards-beijing>.

¹⁴ Wang Fan (王凡), “Central Theater Command Commander Huang Ming Promoted to General, Previously Attended Military Parade and Ate, Resided, and Trained with Enlisted Troops” (中部战区司令员黄铭晋升上将, 曾参加阅兵与士兵同吃同住同训), *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市报), Jan. 19, 2023, <https://m.mp.oeeee.com/a/BAAFRD000020230119758646.html>.

¹⁵ Kuang Lasheng (况腊生), “Deep Sea Space: The New Dimension of Future Military Competition” (深海空间, 未来军事竞争的新维度), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Jan. 19, 2023, http://www.81.cn/yw/2023-01/19/content_10213094.htm.

Additional biographical information on Kuang Lasheng is as follows.

- As of May 2021, Kuang was serving concurrently as a postdoc at the PLA National Defense University and as a researcher at AMS’ Military Legal Studies Institute.
- Kuang previously received a law degree from Renmin University of China and taught for several years at the PLA National University of Defense Technology.
- Kuang has authored over 60 articles in technical journals such as *China Military Science* and *Military Economic Research* and published several books on military affairs including *Warning from the Ukraine Crisis* (2016) and *Meditations on the Syrian War* (2018).

See “National Defense University Postdoc Kuang Lasheng Discusses ‘US Border, Coastal, and Air Defense System’” (国防大学博士后况腊生谈“美国边海空防体制”), East China University of Technology (东华理工大学), May 17, 2021, <http://www.ecit.edu.cn/65/77/c163a91511/page.htm>.

¹⁶ In recent years, PRC military and civilian writings have referred to the deep sea as one among several new or emerging domains. PRC writings depict these domains as areas of strategic and military competition between greater powers.

For example, the 2020 edition of the PLA NDU’s *Science of Military Strategy* situates the deep sea among various “new domains” as follows:

Military conflicts in the new domains are various military activities conducted in the domains of space, network, deep sea, polar regions, biology, intelligence, etc., in order to maintain national security. The new domains are not only an important domain of military conflict, but also an integral part of international political struggle, which has an important influence on the country's politics and diplomacy. Therefore, all countries in the world, especially the big countries, are paying close attention to and planning military conflicts in new areas.

See Xiao Tianliang (ed.), *The Science of Military Strategy (2020 Revision)*, National Defense University Press, 2020, translated by China Aerospace Studies Institute, Jan. 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2022-01-26%202020%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy.pdf>.

¹⁷ Kevin Pollpeter and Amanda Kerrigan, “The PLA and Intelligent Warfare: A Preliminary Analysis,” CNA, Oct. 2021, CRM-2021-U-030806-Final, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2021/10/The-PLA-and-Intelligent-Warfare-A-Preliminary-Analysis.pdf>.

¹⁸ For example, China’s civilian manned submersible Fendouzhe (or “Striver”) descended to a depth of over 10,000 meters in the Mariana Trench in 2020. The PLA Navy’s *Kilo*-class submarine has a maximum depth of 300 meters, while the *Yuan*-class submarine has a test depth of 550 meters. See Ben Westcott, “China Breaks National Record for Mariana Trench Manned-Dive Amid Race for Deep Sea Resources,” CNN, Nov. 11, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/11/asia/china-record-dive-mariana-trench-intl-hnk/index.html>; Dorian Archus, “How Deep Can a Submarine Dive?,” Naval Post, Apr. 26, 2021, <https://navalpost.com/how-deep-can-a-submarine-dive/>.

¹⁹ Xu Wei (徐巍) and Meng Yinqi (孟印祺), “ETC Navy Strengthens Operations-Training Integration, Advances Integration Speed of ASW Operational System” (东部战区海军强化战训耦合推动反潜作战体系加速融合), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Jan. 25, 2023, http://www.81.cn/hj/2023-01/25/content_10214337.htm.

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