



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

*Brian Waidelich and Patrick deGategno, editors*

Welcome to the June 2023 edition of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA’s newsletter on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). This issue begins with a look at PLA views on professionalizing and modernizing the force’s personnel, doctrine, and capabilities. We review a senior officer’s discussion of challenges and objectives related to transforming the PLA into a “world-class military” by 2049, the official PLA newspaper’s call for a cultural shift that embraces devolution of authority in fast-paced future conflict, and a forum on various applications of big data for future operations defined by artificial intelligence and autonomy. The issue concludes with two recent real-world exercises and training: the groundbreaking China–Laos Friendship Shield exercise and a round of simulated mine countermeasures training for PLA Navy (PLAN) divers.

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## SENIOR LEADERSHIP GUIDANCE

### AMS LEADER DISCUSSES PLA'S "WORLD-CLASS MILITARY" GOAL

**A department head of the PLA's top research institution penned an article outlining progress, challenges, and outstanding tasks related to achieving force modernization objectives by mid-century.** On May 1, an [article](#) titled "Fully Grasp the Strategic Arrangements for Accelerating the Building of the People's Army into a World-Class Military" was published in *Qiushi*, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) leading theoretical journal.<sup>1</sup> The article was authored by Air Force Major General Shen Zhihua, director of the Political Work Department at the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), the PLA's premier institution for the study and development of strategy, operations, and tactics. This article was the latest in a body of high-profile work by Shen on PLA modernization and transformation.<sup>2</sup> It also follows a series of articles by PLA leaders and experts that have been incrementally fleshing out the meaning of the "world-class military" goal since it was set by Xi Jinping at the CCP's 19th National Congress in October 2017.<sup>3</sup>



Air Force Major General  
Shen Zhihua.

Shen began his article by contending that the PLA has made important progress toward becoming a world-class military since November 2012, when Xi Jinping became general secretary of the CCP and chairman of the Central Military Commission. Shen argued that Party leadership over the PLA has been strengthened, the PLA's focus on readiness and warfighting has been renewed, and important military reforms and modernization initiatives have been advanced.

Shen also identified a raft of challenges that the PLA faces as it seeks to achieve its modernization objectives over the next two and a half decades. Addressing the security environment, Shen warned that instability and uncertainty in the international situation were rising and that the "real danger of war" was increasing pressure on the PLA to be capable of performing its missions. He pointed out institutional obstacles that were slowing PLA modernization, including insufficient innovation in the domestic defense industrial base, unsatisfactory technological literacy among officers and enlisted, and persistent corruption in lower level units.

The conclusion of Shen's article put forward a lengthy list of tasks that the PLA must carry out to achieve the world-class military goal by mid-century. These tasks include the following:

- Innovating military strategic guidance, including formulating core concepts to guide the implementation of planning, acquisitions, and resource allocation<sup>4</sup>
- Developing strategy and tactics for "people's war," a body of strategic thought originating under Mao Zedong that emphasizes widespread popular support and participation in PLA operations<sup>5</sup>
- Accelerating the development of forces for "[unmanned intelligent operations](#)"<sup>6</sup>
- Building a strong "[system of strategic deterrence forces](#)"<sup>7</sup>

Like other PLA leaders before him, Shen did not elaborate on how the future capabilities of the PLA as a world-class military would compare to the US or other advanced militaries. Shen said that the goal implies that the PLA will have power "commensurate" with China's status as a powerful country, be capable of effectively safeguarding national security, and have strong influence internationally. People's Republic of China (PRC) leaders view the PLA's achievement of the goal as imperative to realizing the overarching strategy of rejuvenating the country into a "great modern socialist country."<sup>8</sup>

## DOCTRINAL ISSUES

### PLA DAILY CALLS FOR DEVELOPING CULTURE OF MISSION COMMAND

**The official newspaper of the PLA has argued that the devolution of command authority for decentralized operations will be key to victory in future warfare.** On May 25, the *PLA Daily* published an [article](#) titled “Attach Importance to the ‘Soft Power’ Behind Mission Command.”<sup>9</sup> The article began by proposing a definition of mission command and contrasting it with traditional notions of command and control. A traditional style of command, the article stated, consists of a superior officer assigning a subordinate both a task and detailed instructions for completing the task. Mission command, in contrast, entails only that a superior give a “clear task” to a subordinate, who is entrusted to independently organize and command forces to accomplish the task. This definition is similar to descriptions of mission command in US military doctrinal publications.<sup>10</sup>

The *PLA Daily* article argued that the PLA’s ability to employ mission command is especially relevant in an era of increasingly complex and fast-paced warfare. It pointed out that elements of modern warfare including “dispersed deployments,” “high operational tempos,” and “numerous uncertainties” could make it difficult or impossible for senior commanders to maintain constant direct control over their subordinates. Under such conditions, the article stated, subordinate commanders must be able to carry out tasks according to their superiors’ intent and actual battlefield conditions.

The article contended that to develop the capability for executing mission command, one must develop several “soft factors” during peacetime, including the following:

- **Mutual trust.** The article stated that for mission command to work, superiors and subordinates must have mutual trust in each other’s capability and judgment. Such trust is not earned overnight, but rather through “repeated exchanges and butting heads” over the course of completing “major tasks” and joint exercises and training.
- **Common understanding.** The article noted the importance of sharing a common language and set of experiences that facilitate smooth communication, shared understanding of operational issues, and the fulfillment of a superior’s intent. Getting to a common understanding requires standardized systems for education and training that “homogenize” troops’ ways of thinking.
- **Changes in command culture.** The article claimed that certain countries’ militaries place more emphasis on command and control, while others put more weight on mission command. To achieve a shift to a mission command culture, officers at all levels must be “guided” toward a common understanding of mission command principles, superiors must “dare to delegate authority,” and subordinates must “bravely take on responsibility.”

Implicit throughout the *PLA Daily* article is the notion that the PLA’s command culture is overly committed to command and control and that it must embrace mission command to be successful in future conflicts. This contention is clearer in an August 2022 [article](#) by the same newspaper titled “Amid Tradition, Innovate Mission Command.” According to this article, even though elements of mission command are discernable throughout the PLA’s 20th-century warfighting experience, the command culture tends to emphasize central control over “sensitive issues that concerned the overall situation,” such as the “key axes, times, and stages of campaigns.” The article argued that the PLA must abandon “inflexible limitations on authorities” such that when a superior has limited ability to exercise timely control under battlefield conditions, the superior is able to quickly grant subordinates partial or complete control over operational actions.<sup>11</sup>

Mission command may be especially relevant to the PLA Army following reforms in 2017 that made combined arms battalions the “basic combat unit” for independent operations. Under the PLA’s previous

Soviet-influenced organizational structure, operational planning and staff work for PLA Army battalions were conducted at the headquarters of their parent regiments. Combined arms battalions are now responsible for planning and executing their own operations. The fact that these battalions have comparatively small staffs, however, raises questions about unit leaders' ability to exercise sustained command and control over long-term, high-intensity operations.<sup>12</sup>

## MAJOR CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

### AMS HOSTS FORUM ON MILITARY APPLICATIONS OF BIG DATA

**The PLA convened military and civilian experts to discuss ways of leveraging big data for "intelligentized" future warfare.** On May 18 and 19, the [4th Military Big Data Forum](#) was held in Beijing. The event was hosted by AMS' Military Science Information Research Center in partnership with the PLA National University of Defense Technology and two civilian universities with close ties to the domestic defense industry.<sup>13</sup> This iteration of the forum (the fourth since its inception in 2018) drew the participation of more than 400 domestic military and civilian researchers, including "well-known experts and scholars in the field of big data."<sup>14</sup>

The theme of the forum was "Data Wins: Comprehensive Management and Integrated Application of Military Big Data." The event's five breakout sessions focused on topics including "cross-domain data governance" and "big data applications in training management." Participants [discussed](#) associated technologies, existing difficulties, and trends in the development of big data applications for the PLA's use in future warfare.<sup>15</sup>

Speaking to PRC state television on the sidelines of the forum, Bai Xiaoying, deputy director of AMS' Military Science Information Research Center, [claimed](#) that the PLA's development of big data capabilities has "entered the fast lane" in recent years. Bai said that multi-source data fusion would give rise to "large numbers of new-type intelligent applications" that would energize and increase the efficiency of future warfare capabilities centered on artificial intelligence and autonomy.<sup>16</sup>



Professor Du Xiaoyong of Renmin University of China delivers a presentation titled "Cross-Domain Data Management" at the 4th Military Big Data Forum in Beijing.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).



# MILITARY DIPLOMACY & OVERSEAS ACTIVITIES

## CHINA, LAOS CONCLUDE BILATERAL GROUND FORCE EXERCISE

**The PLA wrapped up a groundbreaking exercise with Laos that likely sought to communicate the benefits of the two countries' overall relationship to Lao leaders.** From May 9 to 28, ground force troops of the PLA Army and the Lao People's Armed Forces (LPAF) conducted exercise Friendship Shield at the Kommadam Academy in Vientiane Province, Laos. According to a PRC Defense Ministry [spokesperson](#), this was the two countries' first bilateral exercise to focus on "real combat subjects." Related subjects included "fire assault, assault penetration, joint occupation of strongholds, and division and encirclement."<sup>17</sup>

Friendship Shield 2023 was carried out under the [scenario](#) of PRC and Lao forces launching combined attacks against "transnational armed criminal groups based in jungle mountains."<sup>18</sup> The PLA [sent](#) over 200 personnel to the exercise from a combined arms brigade of the 75th Group Army, which is headquartered in Kunming, Yunnan Province, near the China–Laos border. The PLA Army personnel took with them hardware that included assault vehicles, ordnance, and equipment for mine clearing, explosive ordnance disposal, and epidemic prevention.<sup>19</sup>

Similar to its coverage of the China–Cambodia exercise [Golden Dragon](#) held a month earlier,<sup>20</sup> PRC media reporting on Friendship Shield highlighted drills with "mixed groupings" of personnel, professional exchanges, and donations of humanitarian aid as signs of unity among PLA and LPAF forces. As another similarity, PRC state television media highlighted the importance of on-the-ground translation staff. A PLA Army translator [interviewed](#) on the program *Military Report* said the training "dealt with a lot of professional military terminology," and that it was important to "make every word precise and easy to understand" to enable "in-depth communication and training."<sup>21</sup>

Friendship Shield 2023 took place at a time when the benefits of Vientiane's broader cooperation with Beijing have been increasingly called into question. China is Laos's largest [creditor](#), accounting for nearly half the country's foreign debt, and the exact terms of loans under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are obscure and possibly predatory.<sup>22</sup> A PRC Foreign Ministry [spokesperson](#) asserted on May 25 that the China–Laos Railway, the flagship BRI project in the Southeast Asian country, has provided employment to thousands of Laotians and boosted Lao exports to China. The PRC's portrayal of its bilateral exercise with Laos seems tailored to help convince Vientiane that its partnership with Beijing is a win-win endeavor.<sup>23</sup>



Top: PLA Army troops instruct Lao counterparts on the use of PRC automatic rifles during Friendship Shield 2023. Bottom: Students at a Lao primary school that received school supply donations from PLA troops participating in the exercise learn words in Chinese ("hello," "China," "thank you," "Laos").

Sources: [China Military Online](#); [CCTV-7](#).

## PLA NAVY

### NAVAL DIVERS SIMULATE MINE DISPOSAL AND RECOVERY



Top: PLAN divers at the surface of the indoor pool. Middle: Underwater divers appear to be handling simulated bomblet. Bottom: Naval diver secures rope around apparent practice mine shape.

Source: China Military Video Net.

**PLAN divers conducted simulated mine countermeasures (MCM) training aimed at neutralizing mines at depths of at least 20 meters.**

On May 10, China Military Video Net, an official online repository of PLA video content, uploaded a [video](#) with highlights from a recent training exercise by PLAN “mine countermeasure frogmen,” or naval divers. The divers, part of a unit under an unspecified PLAN minesweeper squadron, were shown conducting drills in an indoor cylindrical pool. The drills appeared to include naval divers recovering simulated bomblets that had been placed on the seabed to neutralize naval mines and using buoyancy devices to bring practice mine shapes up to the surface.

According to a reporter appearing in the video, the PLAN’s naval divers must be capable of conducting MCM tasks at depths of at least 20 meters (the apparent depth of the cylindrical pool in which they were training). Speaking to China Military Video Net, Lieutenant Commander Xu Xiaoxing, deputy commander of the naval diver unit, said that the training had strengthened junior divers’ techniques and emergency-handling abilities and that it had laid a strong foundation for follow-on training at sea.<sup>24</sup>

Writings by PRC military and civilian subject matter experts argue that the PLAN requires strong MCM capability for operations both inside and outside the

First Island Chain. At the same time, related writings identify existing PLAN MCM capabilities as inadequate for responding to potential naval mine blockades, which, if not dealt with, could limit PLAN maneuvers and pressure the PRC economy. PLAN investments in its naval diver program offer one indication of its efforts to improve MCM capability.<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Shen Zhihua (沈志华), “Fully Grasp the Strategic Arrangements for Accelerating the Building of the People’s Army into a World-Class Military” (全面把握加快把人民军队建成世界一流军队的战略部署), *Qiushi* (求是), May 1, 2023, [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2023-05/01/c\\_1129582135.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2023-05/01/c_1129582135.htm).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in July 2022, Major General Shen delivered a lecture at a study session of the CCP Politburo, the Party’s top decision-making body, on the topic of “strengthening the military by training competent personnel.” In November 2022, he published an article in the CCP Central Party School’s theoretical newspaper *Study Times* on accelerating the PLA’s development into a world-class military. See “Xi Stresses Further Strengthening Armed Forces by Training Competent Personnel,” Xinhua, July 30, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220730/4e00d99906274d55b71b161caa1b3209/c.html>; Shen Zhihua (沈志华),

“Accelerate the Building of the People’s Army into a World-Class Military” (加快把人民军队建成世界一流军队), *Study Times* (学习时报), Nov. 11, 2022, <https://www.theorychina.org/c/2022-11-11/1453720.shtml>.

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of PLA writings on the “world-class military” goal from 2017 to 2020, see Taylor Fravel, “China’s ‘World-Class Military’ Ambitions: Origins and Implications,” *Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2020): 85-99.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the hierarchy of strategic guidance within the PLA, 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*, Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, eds., (Carlisle: Army War College, 2007): 69-140.

<sup>5</sup> China’s 2019 defense white paper states that “based on the idea that China’s national defense is the responsibility of all Chinese people, China’s armed forces give full play to the overall power of the people’s war by innovating its strategies, tactics, and measures.” The need to “develop strategies and tactics for a people’s war” was also stated in the report delivered by Xi Jinping to the 20th National Congress of the CCP. See State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s National Defense in the New Era*, July 2019, [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content\\_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html); “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” Xinhua, Oct. 25, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20221025/8eb6f5239f984f01a2bc45b5b5db0c51/c.html>.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the concept of “unmanned intelligent operations,” see “AMS Authors Decode Concepts of Unmanned & Intelligent Ops,” in *PLA Update*, Issue 10, May 17, 2023, <https://www.cna.org/Newsletters/PLA%20Update/Issue-10/PLA-Update-Issue-10-May-17-2023.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> PRC writings on strategic deterrence call for the development and refinement of a PRC “strategic deterrence system.” PRC authors envision such a system as being centered on nuclear forces and complemented by other “non-nuclear strategic weapons,” including high-end conventional capabilities such as hypersonics as well as hard- and soft-strike options in the cyber and space domains. For more on the PRC concept of a strategic deterrence system, see Alison A. Kaufman and Brian Waidelich, *PRC Writings on Strategic Deterrence: Technological Disruption and the Search for Strategic Stability*, CNA, Feb. 2023, DOP-2022-U-032923-2Rev, 20-27, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/04/PRC-Writings-on-Strategic-Deterrence.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> United States Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 2022, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Zhao Xiangang (赵先刚), Wang Quan (王权), and Lu Cong (吕聪), “Attach Importance to the ‘Soft Power’ Behind Mission Command” (重视任务式指挥背后的“软实力”), *PLA Daily*, May 25, 2023, [http://www.81.cn/szb\\_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=ifjb&paperDate=2023-05-25&paperNumber=07&articleid=906602](http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=ifjb&paperDate=2023-05-25&paperNumber=07&articleid=906602).

<sup>10</sup> One US Joint Staff publication, for example, describes mission command as “the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission-type orders” in which subordinate leaders at all echelons “focus on the purpose of the operation rather than on the details of how to perform assigned tasks.” See “Mission Command (Second Edition),” Deployable Training Division, Joint Staff J7, Jan. 2020, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/fp/missioncommand\\_fp\\_2nd\\_ed.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/fp/missioncommand_fp_2nd_ed.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Huang Changjian (黄昌建), Shi Fuxiang (师福祥), and Liu Xiaoliang (刘孝良), “Amid Tradition, Innovate Mission Command” (在传承中创新任务式指挥), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Aug. 18, 2022, [http://www.81.cn/ifjbmap/content/2022-08/18/content\\_322218.htm](http://www.81.cn/ifjbmap/content/2022-08/18/content_322218.htm).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the structure and staffing of PLA Army units following the organizational reforms of 2017, see Dennis J. Blasko, “The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms: The PLA Army,” in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, Philip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, eds., (National Defense University Press, 2019): 345-392.

<sup>13</sup> The two civilian universities, Beihang University and the Beijing Institute of Technology, are among the PRC’s “Seven Sons of National Defense,” a group of elite universities with deep roots in the PLA and PRC defense industry.

<sup>14</sup> “4th Military Big Data Forum Kicks Off in Beijing,” China Military Online, May 23, 2023, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16226094.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16226094.html).

- <sup>15</sup> Zhu Xi (朱玺), “Fourth ‘Military Big Data Forum’ Opens in Beijing” (第四届“军事大数据论坛”在京开幕), *Science & Technology Daily* (科技日报), May 18, 2023, <http://www.stdaily.com/index/kejixinwen/202305/f034f26ae0a44f6bb63491762fafa0db.shtml>.
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- <sup>17</sup> “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on May 29,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, June 2, 2023, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/NewsRelease/16228175.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/NewsRelease/16228175.html).
- <sup>18</sup> “China, Laos Hold Joint Military Drill in Laos,” China Military Online, May 11, 2023, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16223692.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16223692.html).
- <sup>19</sup> “China, Laos to Hold Friendship Shield 2023 Joint Exercise in May,” China Military Online, May 5, 2023, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16222067.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16222067.html).
- <sup>20</sup> See “PLA, Cambodian Military Conduct Combined Exercise Gold Dragon 2023” in *PLA Update*, Issue 9, Apr. 19, 2023, <https://www.cna.org/Newsletters/PLA%20Update/Issue%209/PLA-Update-Issue-9-April-19-2023.pdf>.
- <sup>21</sup> “Combined Exercise ‘Friendship Shield 2023,’ Participating Troops from China and Laos Carry Out Mixed-Formation Training” (友谊盾牌-2023”联合演习 中老两军参演官兵展开混编联训), *Military Report* (军事报道), CCTV-7, May 20, 2023, <https://tv.cctv.com/2023/05/20/VIDEsv1pBa5cRAT56X9mkCg3230520.shtml?spm=C52346.PiumOrlYLNUM.E0VXtwLj8YU7.15>.
- <sup>22</sup> Anjali Bhatt, “Laos Is Not in a Chinese ‘Debt Trap’ – But It Is in Trouble,” *Diplomat*, Apr. 27, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/laos-is-not-in-a-chinese-debt-trap-but-it-is-in-trouble/>.
- <sup>23</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning’s Regular Press Conference on May 25, 2023,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, May 25, 2023, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/202305/t20230525\\_11083609.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202305/t20230525_11083609.html).
- <sup>24</sup> “Hold Your Breath! Come Along 20 Meters Below the Surface to See How Mine Countermeasures Frogmen Train” (屏住呼吸！一起去水下 20 米看一看反水雷蛙人训练什么样), China Military Video Net (中国军视网), May 10, 2023, [http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202305\\_302086.html](http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202305_302086.html).
- <sup>25</sup> Brian Waidelich and George Pollitt, “PLAN MCM: Platforms, Training, Civil-Military Integration,” US Naval War College, forthcoming.



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For additional information, contact: [PLAUPDATE@cna.org](mailto:PLAUPDATE@cna.org)

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Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise

China Studies Program/China and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division

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