



PLA UPDATE

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

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Welcome to the March 2024 edition of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA’s newsletter on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). We begin this issue by summarizing notable military and defense-related developments at the recent convening of the national legislature of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Next, we turn to a new PLA effort to partner with civilian universities specialized in finance and economics. We then discuss several topics concerning the PLA’s overseas activities, including PLA Navy (PLAN) operations in the Gulf of Aden; a trilateral exercise between the navies of the PRC, Russia, and Iran; and the PLA Army’s (PLAA’s) participation in the US-Thailand multilateral exercise Cobra Gold. We conclude by looking at a new PLA app aimed at better disseminating propaganda about China’s armed forces.

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NATIONAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS

XI JINPING CALLS ON PLA TO STRENGTHEN STRATEGIC CAPABILITIES

The exhortation to sustain investments in high-end capabilities comes as China's government announces a more than 7 percent defense budget increase. From [March 4 to 10](#), China held its annual "Two Sessions," which comprised the second session of the [14th National People's Congress](#) (NPC) and the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.¹ During the NPC, delegates voted on issues concerning the national agenda and priorities set forth in the annual government [Work Report](#), which was presented this year by PRC Premier Li Qiang. In a break from tradition, NPC delegates did not vote on personnel appointments this year.²

This year's NPC delegation from the PLA and the People's Armed Police (PAP) was led by Central Military Commission (CMC) vice chairs and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Political Bureau members General Zhang Youxia and General He Weidong. According to [China Military Online](#) reporting, Zhang stressed to the PLA delegation that this NPC was a "vital meeting" marking the 75th anniversary of the PRC's founding and that 2024 was a "pivotal year" for achieving goals set out in China's 14th Five-Year Plan. Zhang urged PLA delegates to present motions during the session on critical military issues such as "enhancing combat-oriented training, promoting high-quality development, and consolidating and enhancing integrated national strategies and strategic capabilities."³

CCP General Secretary [Xi Jinping met with the PLA and PAP delegation](#) on March 7. In a speech, Xi exhorted the delegates to "strengthen military responsibilities, deepen reform and innovation, and comprehensively enhance strategic capabilities in emerging fields."⁴

Commenting on Xi's remarks to the delegation, a spokesperson for the group reiterated that Xi expects the PLA to "consolidate and enhance integrated national strategic systems and capabilities." The PLA would do so, said the spokesperson, by "integrating important military and civilian resources, accelerating the effective supply of advanced combat capabilities, and relying more on the country's comprehensive strength to promote national defense and military modernization."⁵

During the NPC, the PRC government also announced economic growth figures and targets for 2024, including the national defense budget. The 2024 defense budget was announced as being RMB 1.665 trillion (USD 233 billion), a [7.2 percent increase from its 2023 budget](#) of RMB 1.55 trillion (USD 225 billion).⁶ This marks the eighth consecutive year of single digit growth in China's defense budget.⁷

This official figure may understate China's actual defense spending, as some Western analysts pointed out. The United Kingdom's International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) published analyses of the announced budget with higher estimated figures. According to a post from [IISS](#), China's total military spending in 2024 (when adjusted for purchasing power parity and including military research and development (R&D), local militia funding, and funding for the PAP) is likely approximately USD 574 billion—more than double the figure announced at the NPC.⁸ A slightly more conservative estimate was given by an analyst from SIPRI, who told the [Financial Times](#) that China's military budget—when including military R&D, "some procurement," and paramilitary forces—may be as much as 30 to 35 percent higher than announced.⁹

However large China's 2024 military budget may be, a considerable part of it will likely be used to continue to fund the procurement of new and sophisticated naval platforms. One such platform is China's latest aircraft carrier under development: the Type 004 CV, the construction of which was officially [announced](#) to the press during the NPC by PLA Navy Political Commissar Admiral Yuan Huazhi.¹⁰

MILITARY-CIVIL FUSION

CMC LOGISTICS AGENCY PARTNERS WITH LOCAL UNIVERSITIES

The PLA's logistics management administration is looking to civilian universities to help train the military's financial experts. On March 1, the CMC Logistic Support Department signed a talent development agreement with the Beijing-based Central University of Finance and Economics (CUFE).¹¹ Under the agreement, CUFE will provide training classes and tutoring services to officers, noncommissioned officers, and civilian personnel of the Logistic Support Department. The two sides will also collaborate in areas such as military economic research (while respecting the PLA's operational security regulations).



Signing ceremony between the CMC Logistic Support Department and CUFE.

Source: [CUFE](#).

Speaking on PRC state television, an officer of the CMC Logistic Support Department's Human Resources Division described the partnership with CUFE as an important means of promoting military-civil fusion in the field of human talent.¹² Military-civil fusion is a PRC strategy that seeks to maximize efficiencies between the civilian economy and the armed forces by reducing systemic barriers to civilian support for PLA modernization, operations, and activities.¹³ Although PLA academies and universities provide the lion's share of servicemembers' education and training, the PLA has long been experimenting with ways of better integrating educational resources from select civilian academic institutions.¹⁴

Reportedly, the Logistic Support Department plans to sign similar agreements with the following four universities:

- Shanghai University of Finance and Economics
- Southwestern University of Finance and Economics
- Zhongnan University of Economics and Law
- Dongbei University of Finance and Economics¹⁵

MILITARY DIPLOMACY AND OVERSEAS ACTIVITIES

BEIJING DENIES CLAIMS OF PLAN ESCORTING PRC SHIPS IN RED SEA

A statement from a PRC official and data from a PRC shipping company support the claim that PLAN ships have stayed outside the Red Sea and kept within their traditional area of operations. Since November 19, 2023, Iran-backed Houthi militants in Yemen have carried out dozens of attacks against vessels in the Red Sea area.¹⁶ These have included attacks by uncrewed aerial vehicles, uncrewed surface vessels, and missiles against what the Houthis have called "Israel-linked" ships as a reaction to Israel's military operations in Gaza.¹⁷ In response to the threat to commercial shipping, the US and European Union created the multilateral naval coalitions Prosperity Guardian and Aspides, respectively, to escort commercial vessels through the Red Sea.¹⁸

China, despite having important economic interests in the region and several PLAN ships that regularly operate in the neighboring Gulf of Aden, has elected to not join multilateral naval coalitions in the Red Sea. Beijing has also publicly denied that the PLAN's Naval Escort Taskforce (NETF) in the Gulf of Aden has been operating outside of the framework of its traditional antipiracy operations, a mission that dates back to 2008. A spokesperson of China's Ministry of National Defense [said](#) in February that the NETF conducts "routine escort operations" in the Gulf of Aden and in waters off Somalia and that its deployment has "nothing to do with the current situation in the region."¹⁹

Previously, Western media reported that the PLAN had in early 2024 begun providing escort support to PRC ships transiting the Red Sea. One such report from the Voice of America cited data published on the website of the PRC shipping company Sea Legend.²⁰ A plotting of the coordinates on the company's website indicates, however, that the start and end points of PLAN escort operations are fully within the Gulf of Aden—the NETF's traditional area of operations²¹—and do not enter the Red Sea (see figure below).

Commence Date (When Escort Starts)	Sailing Direction	UTC	Confluence (Where Protection Starts)	Conclude Date (When Escort Ends)	Dismiss Point (Where Protection Ends)
1th Jan	East Bound	0600Z	11-52N,044-12E (B Point)	3th Jan	14-50N,053-50E (A Point)
5th Jan	West Bound	0600Z	14-50N,053-50E (A Point)	7th Jan	11-52N,044-12E (B Point)
10th Jan	East Bound	0600Z	11-52N,044-12E (B Point)	12th Jan	14-50N,053-50E (A Point)
15th Jan	West Bound	0600Z	14-50N,053-50E (A Point)	17th Jan	11-52N,044-12E (B Point)
19th Jan	East Bound	0600Z	11-52N,044-12E (B Point)	21th Jan	14-50N,053-50E (A Point)
23th Jan	West Bound	0600Z	14-50N,053-50E (A Point)	25th Jan	11-52N,044-12E (B Point)
27th Jan	East Bound	0600Z	11-52N,044-12E (B Point)	29th Jan	14-50N,053-50E (A Point)
31th Jan	West Bound	0600Z	14-50N,053-50E (A Point)	2th Feb	11-52N,044-12E (B Point)



Top: Table published on PRC shipping company Sea Legend's website indicating the start and end points of PLAN NETF escort operations (Points A and B, respectively). Bottom: Points A and B plotted on a map.

Sources: [Sea Legend](#), [Google Maps](#).

NAVIES OF PRC, RUSSIA, & IRAN CONDUCT FOURTH COMBINED EXERCISE

The exercise reportedly did not feature counterterrorism drills as in past years, potentially to avoid drawing unwanted attention to PLAN inactivity in the nearby Red Sea area. From March 11 to 15, the navies of China, Iran, and Russia carried out combined drills near the Gulf of Oman as part of exercise Security Belt 2024 (安全纽带-2024).²² The exercise incorporated more than 10 ships and focused on topics including counterpiracy and search and rescue. The three participating PLAN ships were the Type 052D guided-missile destroyer CNS *Urumqi* (118), the Type 054A guided-missile frigate CNS *Linyi* (547), and the Type 903A comprehensive supply ship CNS *Dongpinghu* (960). Prior to the start of the exercise, in early

March, these ships completed a rotational assignment to the PLAN's antipiracy escort taskforce in the Gulf of Aden.²³

The sea phase of the exercise, held from March 12 to 13, included firing at sea targets and the simulated armed rescue of a hijacked merchant vessel. The three countries' sailors reportedly integrated into mixed task detachments that boarded two Iranian ships playing the roles of hijacked merchant vessels.²⁴

The three previous iterations of the trilateral Security Belt exercise series took place in 2019, 2022, and 2023 in the vicinity of the Gulf of Oman.²⁵ Similar to PRC media reporting on past iterations of the exercise, reports on Security Belt 2024 depicted it as conducive to forging a "Maritime Community of Common Destiny" (海洋命运共同体).



Left: Exercise participants at a shore phase planning meeting. Right: Firing at targets during sea phase.

Source: CCTV-7 (a), (b).

PLA JOINS HA/DR PORTIONS OF MULTILATERAL EXERCISE COBRA GOLD

Beijing portrayed the exercise as a platform to demonstrate PLA professionalism and enhance a positive image of China. Cobra Gold is an annual multilateral exercise organized by the US and Thailand that includes a command post exercise (CPX), a humanitarian assistance and disaster response tabletop exercise (HA/DR TTX), humanitarian and civic assistance activities, and several field training drills.²⁶ In the 2024 iteration, the PLA's Southern Theater Command sent 25 members of the PLA Army's 75th Group Army to attend HA/DR components of Cobra Gold. The exercise was held in Thailand from February 20 to 28, and it was the 11th consecutive year that China has participated since 2014.²⁷



Opening ceremony of Cobra Gold 2024.

Source: [China Military Online](#).

During the exercise, the PLA contingent engaged in discussions with other participants on international search and rescue guidelines, multinational force operational procedures, and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) disaster response mechanisms.²⁸ According to a *PLA Daily* report, the 75th Group Army personnel participated in activities including the HA/DR TTX and drills focused on areas such as search and rescue, hazardous substances leakage, water rescue, fire rescue, and first aid. These activities took place at the Disaster Relief Training Center in Chachoengsao province in Thailand. The *PLA Daily* report cited remarks from the leader of the PLA delegation, who portrayed the exercise as a window to showcase the professionalism of the PLA and a platform to display a positive image of China as a major global power.²⁹



PLA personnel participated in water rescue and first aid training activities during Cobra Gold 2024.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

PRC MILITARY MEDIA

PLA LAUNCHES “CHINA BUGLE” APP

The PLA has launched a new mobile platform aimed at improving the dissemination of propaganda related to China’s armed forces. On March 1, the PLA News Media Center held a ceremony for the launch of a new “mobile flagship communication platform” called China Bugle (中国军号). The ceremony was chaired by CMC Political Work Department Director Admiral Miao Hua and included a simultaneous metaverse event for those unable to attend in person.³⁰

According to a [readout](#) of the event posted on the website of the PRC Ministry of Defense (MND), China Bugle features functions such as streaming, text and photo articles, and artificial intelligence dialogue. It provides services including military registration and civilian recruitment, and it can be accessed on phones, tablets, and computers.³¹ Not all of these functions are new, as the verified user China Bugle has been providing at least some of these services on PRC social media platforms such as Sina Weibo for a few years or more.³²



A PLA News Media Center graphic announcing that “China Bugle Has Officially Launched.”

Source: [PRC MND](#).



The launch ceremony of the China Bugle app, with Admiral Miao Hua (center) presiding.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

Speaking at the launch ceremony, Admiral Miao described the China Bugle platform as “an important move” in implementing the spirit of Xi Jinping’s guidance on building a modern military communication system and in promoting the “in-depth integrated development of military media.”³³

Relatedly, when the verified user China Bugle joined Sina Weibo in 2022, a press release asserted that it would “spread modern national defense concepts, report on the achievements of building [China’s] national defense and military, and demonstrate the new style of the PLA,” as well as “promote further integration of military public opinion propaganda resources” and “tell the military’s story well.”³⁴

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³² Several data points provide a picture of the forerunners to the China Bugle app announced in March 2024:

- In October 2023, a spokesperson for the PRC MND named the China Bugle app as one of only two official platforms for online information releases and job applications related to the PLA’s recruitment of civilians (the other being the PLA’s Military Talent Net (军队人才网)).
- China Bugle appears to have joined Sina Weibo in April 2022 and has been very active on the platform since then. Of note, it is described on Weibo as “the official account of the PLA News Media Center.”
- Videos posted by verified user China Bugle on PRC video sharing platform Xigua Video go back at least as far as 2016.

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