



PLA UPDATE

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Welcome to the first issue of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA’s monthly newsletter focused on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Each edition of this newsletter will draw on the material and 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-language media.

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Senior leadership guidance

The PLA and the Sixth Plenum of the 19th Party Congress

Summary by Patrick deGateno

The 19th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress held its [sixth plenary session](#) from 8–11 November 2021.¹ This was the final meeting of the Central Committee before it convenes the 20th Party Congress in the second half of 2022. The plenum represented a significant event in the political life of the CCP. During the plenum, the CCP:

- [exalted the Party's achievements](#) under Xi Jinping's leadership, reaffirming that the Party is taking the People's Republic of China (PRC) "from being rich to becoming strong";²
- adopted a [resolution](#) on the history of the CCP—only the third such document issued since 1945—that recast the Party's history into four eras, including the current "New Era" under Xi;³ and
- set the stage for Xi to remain in power for an unprecedented third term following the accession of new leadership at next year's 20th Party Congress.

At the end of November following the Sixth Plenum, propaganda teams [were dispatched to PLA units](#) across the country to hold special political work sessions to explain the results of the plenum and its implications for the military.⁴ The sessions aimed to reaffirm the military's loyalty to the Party and Xi, contextualize the history of the military within the plenum's newly revised history of the Party, and exhort military personnel to remain steadfast in their adherence to and implementation of continuing military reforms.

Of the many PLA-affiliated media reports on the Sixth Plenum, one of the most important was an [editorial](#) published in the CCP's primary newspaper *People's Daily* on 30 November and attributed to General Zhang Youxia, the Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman who reportedly oversees the political portfolio of the armed forces.⁵ Zhang's editorial reviews the military's history within the broader revised history of the CCP, from its founding during the revolution to the present day. Zhang also attributes the military's growing strength and capability to the personal efforts of Xi. According to Zhang's editorial, Xi "tried hard to save [the military] from a desperate crisis and help the country stabilize when it was about to fall in danger" (力挽狂澜、扶危定倾) by initiating the period of major military reforms and the anti-corruption campaign within the force. Finally, Zhang's editorial, like the political work sessions of the propaganda teams for PLA units, called upon the military to remain loyal to the CCP and Xi, continuing to implement Xi's reform policies.

Major operations, activities, and exercises

PLA initiates 2022 training activities

Summary by Brian Waidelich and Patrick deGateno

On 4 January 2022, [Xi Jinping signed](#) a mobilization order to begin military training for the year, the CMC's first order in 2022.⁶ In response, PLA units across all services and branches kicked off a variety of training activities. Xinhua [released a video](#) highlighting certain units' training events held as part of the implementation of the mobilization order.⁷ Other PRC media reporting on training events initiated by PLA units on the same day as the order's release include the following:

- The PLA Army conducted drills at multiple sites throughout China, the centerpiece of which took place at the training ground of an army aviation brigade of the 81st Group Army, where troops demonstrated capabilities for “special operations, long-distance fire strike, intelligence [and] reconnaissance, electronic countermeasures, and air assault.”⁸
- The PLA Hong Kong Garrison conducted training exercises with two guided-missile frigates in nearby waters, helicopter flight training in the airspace of Hong Kong, and drills involving the garrison’s armored units, special operations troops, signal corps, and medical units.⁹
- A launch battalion of an unidentified PLA Rocket Force brigade in northern China carried out “continuous fire assault drills” that featured “actual equipment operations” against the backdrop of simulated threats such as “enemy satellites overhead” and “precision strikes.”¹⁰
- An unidentified brigade of the PLA Air Force Airborne Corps held a training mobilization meeting that incorporated several thousand troops and featured demonstrations of more than 10 topics, including simulated airdrop, tactical vehicle airdrop, and squad coordinated fires.¹¹
- The PLA Joint Logistic Support Force’s 940th Hospital organized a “combat-realistic health service support” training activity, during which participants performed venipuncture while blindfolded to simulate operating at night without lights to prevent enemy detection.¹²

Laws and regulations

Recent laws and regulations affecting military affairs

Summary by Kelly Buckley

Beyond the training mobilization order discussed above, China has passed four other laws and regulations related to military affairs since November 2021. These include the following:

- Xi Jinping [signed](#) a Military Equipment Order, which took effect on 1 November 2021. The regulation is based on Xi’s “Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era.” The order provides quality control mechanisms for procuring effective military combat equipment.¹³
- On 14 December 2021, China’s Ministry of Veterans Affairs (MVA) [announced](#) a regulation providing preferential treatment and retirement benefits to veterans, as well as economic benefits to the families of deceased service members.¹⁴
- The CMC Committee of Secrecy Protection (中央军委保密委员会) [issued interim provisions](#) on the scope of military secrets in various fields on 12 January 2022. The provisional regulations reportedly focus on strengthening military information security.¹⁵
- The CMC Logistics Support Department [issued](#) the “Interim Provisions on the Management of Military Materials Engineering Service Procurement Contracts,” which took effect on 3 January 2022. For defense contracts, the provisions aim to (1) improve contract management systems; (2) standardize contents; (3) optimize procedures, such as contract conclusion, interim reviews, modifications, cancellation, and enforcement; (4) strengthen quality control; and (5) improve supervision, such as inspection, internal control, and accountability measures and discipline inspection and auditing processes.¹⁶

“Urgent” amendments to national defense mobilization laws

Summary by Timothy Ditter

On 19 October 2021, the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department Director General Sheng Bin [went before the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress \(NPC\)](#) (the PRC’s highest legislative body) to request, based on “urgent” needs, temporary changes to four primary national laws concerning the PLA’s requisition of civilian resources for military purposes in order to streamline mobilization command and control (C2). The NPC Standing Committee approved General Sheng’s request and enacted the adjustments on 24 October.¹⁷ The four amended laws are as follows:

- National Defense Education Law (2001)
- Civil Air Defense Law (2005)
- National Defense Mobilization Law (2010)
- National Defense Transportation Law (2017)

PRC civilian and military authorities deem the mobilization system crucial to fighting and winning modern informatized wars, the primary type of conflict to which the PLA is expected to respond.¹⁸ Since initiating larger military reforms in 2016, the PRC has been restructuring the mobilization system to improve civil-military C2 linkages and streamline the PLA’s requisition process during crises and conflicts. Although top CCP leaders have passed at least four decisions concerning reform of the national defense mobilization system over the past seven years, analysts have found little data concerning the practical outcome of these decisions.¹⁹

The October 2021 amendments General Sheng requested focus on accelerating improvements to the chain of command between the government and civilian and military entities and “adjust[ing] the configuration of the functions of the People’s Armed Police Force mobilization, economic mobilization, civil air defense, transportation readiness, and national defense education.”²⁰

As General Sheng explained to the NPC Standing Committee, these amendments are necessary now because “the task of reform is relatively urgent and revision cycle is long for laws.” His comments suggest that the CMC, CCPC, and State Council wanted to leapfrog the long legislative process necessary to revise each law and urged the NPC Standing Committee to act quickly to improve perceived weaknesses in mobilization C2.

Military diplomacy and overseas activities

China-Russia combined maritime exercise JOINT SEA 2021

Summary by Brian Waidelich

From 14–17 October 2021, the PLA Navy and Russian Navy carried out the combined naval exercise JOINT SEA 2021 in waters near Vladivostok. This iteration of JOINT SEA, the [10th](#) since 2012, was organized around the [theme](#) of “safeguarding maritime strategic passage security.”²¹ The exercise involved drills focused on [topics](#) including navigating through a “naval mine threat area,” destroying floating mines, and shooting targets at sea, as well as formation air defense and combined anti-submarine warfare (ASW).²²



Russian helicopter simulates a deck landing over the CNS *Nanchang*.

Source: http://www.81.cn/pk/2021-11/02/content_10104438.htm.

Five PLA Navy [ships](#) drawn from all three PLA Navy regional fleets participated, including RENHAI CG *Nanchang* (101), LUYANG III DDG *Kunming* (172), JIANGKAI II FFGs *Binzhou* (515) and *Liuzhou* (573), and FUCHI AOR *Dongpinghu* (960).²³ The ships were complemented with helicopters and operated alongside at least one PLA Y-8 anti-submarine aircraft. JOINT SEA 2021 was reportedly the [first time](#) that a *Renhai*-class cruiser and a Y-8 ASW variant participated in an exercise with a foreign military.²⁴

JOINT SEA 2021 culminated with “round-the-clock [ASW drills](#)” from 16–17 October, which featured coordinated submarine searches between the two navies’ fixed-wing anti-submarine patrol aircraft, ship-borne helicopters, and surface warships.²⁵ The combined formation of PLA Navy and Russian Navy ships in this year’s exercise was reportedly more “[dispersed](#)” than in past iterations of JOINT SEA, which was attributed to the two sides’ efforts to make training more realistic.²⁶

Following JOINT SEA 2021, participating PLA Navy and Russian Navy forces departed on what PRC media called the two navies’ first “combined maritime patrol” (or “[joint maritime cruise](#)”).²⁷ The formation, consisting of 10 ships and six shipborne helicopters, left Peter the Great Gulf on 17 October, passed through the [Tsugaru Strait](#) on 18 October, proceeded south through the Western Pacific, and entered the East China Sea via

the Osumi Strait.²⁸ The formation fired live rounds during the patrol, including [rocket-launched depth charges](#).²⁹ The two navies’ ships held a departure ceremony on 23 October.

Speaking at the conclusion of the combined patrol, Rear Admiral [Bai Yaoping](#)—the Chinese director of the exercise and Deputy Commander of the PLA’s Northern Theater Command Navy—said that JOINT SEA 2021 demonstrated that the two navies’ ability to respond together to maritime security threats had reached an “unprecedented height.”³⁰ The rear admiral added that the two sides had explored and established an “organization and coordination mechanism” for combined patrols that would “provide strong support for subsequent improvement.”

Commentaries on external military and security issues

Former senior CICIR analyst discusses trends in US-China relations in 2021 and 2022

Summary by Patrick deGatigno and Brian Waidelich

In a [1 January 2022 interview](#) with Shanghai-based news outlet *The Paper*, Dr. Da Wei, director of Tsinghua University’s Center for Strategic and International Security Studies, reviewed key events in US-China relations during 2021 and discussed what he thinks may happen in 2022.³¹ Da, who is a former Director of the American Studies Institute at the PRC Ministry of State Security-affiliated China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), explored topics such as US-China competition, PRC efforts

to continue to take advantage of the current “period of strategic opportunity” to signal the US over the Taiwan issue, approaches to third-party countries amid US-China competition, and prospects for bilateral cooperation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Addressing perceived “salami slicing” provocations by Washington and Taipei, Da stressed that China should use both “dialogue” and “actions” to signal its displeasure to the US, while ensuring that China’s “actions” do not trigger unintended escalation:

I think there has been a major change in US policy toward Taiwan, but one must remain cautious of saying whether this change has been a “qualitative change.” Currently, “Taiwan independence” forces on the island and the US have essentially adopted the “salami-slicing” method, continually edging closer to the red line while also striving to avoid touching the red line directly. If we still want to continue striving for peaceful unification, then we must do two things well. First, we must strive to strengthen dialogue with the US as much as possible and continually convey our concerns and dissatisfaction to the US side. Second, during times of need, we should send clear and strong signals and use actions to transmit those signals. However, there is a certain degree of risk in using actions to transmit signals. We must control this process and strive to avoid losing control. At the same time, we must think through next steps in advance. In the next two years, China and the US need to focus on the Taiwan issue. The two sides need to stop this state of “salami-slicing” and avoid the possibility of unintended incidents.

Regarding Chinese policy toward third-party countries in the context of US-China competition, Da implied that China should avoid self-defeating punitive measures that could drive those countries further from Beijing and closer to Washington:

We should avoid the mentality of “killing the chicken to warn the monkey” because in the game of international relations, it is very hard for the “chicken” to be “killed.” “Killing the chicken” may not only fail to “warn the monkey,” but it may also cause the “chicken” to run more quickly to the “monkey’s” side. We cannot let contradictions between China and the US, or the emotions and pressures caused by China-US contradictions, to spill over onto third parties whose stakes were previously relatively small. In most cases, this is not a wise move.

Da expressed cautious optimism for one area in which the US and China could work together, namely their response to the global challenge posed by COVID-19:

When COVID-19 first broke out, due to the politicization of the epidemic and the Trump administration’s crazy behavior, various countries—especially China and the US—were unable to cooperate effectively. However, as the epidemic extends on and new variants continue to emerge, people are increasingly realizing that COVID-19 is a challenge for all humankind and that it is no longer an issue that can be resolved by criticizing a certain country. Perhaps more substantive cooperation will emerge in this context. I still look forward to this.

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