



PLA UPDATE

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

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Welcome to the September 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 an overview of the PLA’s recent bilateral and multilateral exercises and activities with countries in the Indo-Pacific. We then look at recently published PLA analyses of defense budgets in France and Japan. Next, we turn to People’s Republic of China (PRC) media reporting on an Eastern Theater Command Air Force exercise focused on repairing runways damaged by enemy fires. We conclude by examining two emerging capabilities: the PLA Navy’s recently launched Type 054B frigate and a new automated system aimed at improving the PLA Army’s vehicle dispatch efficiency.

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MILITARY DIPLOMACY & OVERSEAS ACTIVITIES

PLA ACTIVE IN BILATERAL, MULTILATERAL MILITARY DIPLOMACY

The PLA engaged numerous countries' militaries during recent exercises, conferences, and aid missions. The following is a summary of related activities involving China's defense ministry, army, navy, and air force.

PRC Ministry of National Defense

From August 28 to September 2, China's Ministry of National Defense hosted the [third China-Africa Peace and Security Forum](#). Over 100 defense ministers or senior representatives of the African Union and nearly 50 African countries attended the forum. PRC Defense Minister General Li Shangfu gave a keynote speech at the event in which he urged China and African countries to enhance their joint contributions to regional and global security.¹

PLA Army

The PLA Army carried out bilateral exercises with Singapore and Thailand and partnered with Cambodia in a multilateral exercise conducted under the auspices of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

- From September 1 to 14 in Singapore, members of the Singapore Armed Forces' 3rd Singapore Division and 1st Commando Battalion and the PLA Army's 74th Group Army conducted [Cooperation 2023](#), the fifth iteration of the bilateral exercise since 2009. This year's exercise focused on urban counterterrorism and featured battalion-level command post training.²



Multinational participants at Pure Homeland 2023 are briefed on PRC mine clearance and disposal equipment.

Source: [China Military Online](#).

- From mid-August to early September in Thailand, "special warfare" personnel from the Royal Thai Army and the PLA Army's 74th Group Army carried out [Commando 2023](#), an exercise focused on counterterrorism operations.³ Thai media [separately reported](#) this as a "special warfare" combined ground forces exercise called Joint Strike 2023.⁴

- Starting on September 13 in Cambodia, servicemembers from an unspecified brigade of the PLA Army's 75th Group Army participated in the multinational demining operation [Pure Homeland 2023](#). The event was led by China and Cambodia as cochairs of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus Experts' Working Group on Humanitarian Mine Action.⁵

PLA Navy (PLAN)

The PLAN conducted a bilateral exercise with Thailand, wrapped up a medical mission in the South Pacific, and sent a training ship to three Indo-Pacific countries.

- From August 31 to September 9 in Thailand, a PLAN taskforce with embarked marines joined members of the Royal Thai Navy in executing [Blue Strike 2023](#). This iteration of the exercise series, which began in 2010, focused on topics including antisubmarine warfare (ASW), urban combat, and maritime search and rescue.⁶ Blue Strike 2023 is the third of [three exercises](#) this summer between the PLA and the Royal Thai Armed Forces. The other two were Falcon Strike 2023—a PLA Air Force-Royal Thai Air Force combined exercise from July to August—and Joint Strike 2023—a PLA Army-

Royal Thai Army combined exercise from mid-August to early September.⁷ (For more on Falcon Strike and this trio of exercises, see *PLA UPDATE* Issue 13.)⁸

- On September 10, the Type 920 hospital ship CNS *Daishan Dao* (866)—commonly known as *Peace Ark*—completed its stop in Dili, Timor-Leste, the final leg of the five-country humanitarian medical mission Harmonious Mission 2023. While in Timor-Leste, the *Peace Ark*'s crew saw 10,947 patients and performed 50 surgeries.⁹ (For more on Harmonious Mission 2023, see *PLA UPDATE* Issue 13.)¹⁰
- On September 4, the PLAN training ship CNS *Qi Jiguang* (83) commenced a [training mission](#) that would take over 300 PLAN midshipmen and 10 midshipmen from five other countries to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji before returning to China in late October.¹¹ The ship arrived at its first stop in the Port of Surabaya, Indonesia, on September 17.¹² (See *PLA UPDATE* Issue 12 for a summary of CNS *Qi Jiguang*'s training mission in Southeast Asia from May to June 2023.)¹³

PLA Air Force (PLAAF)

The PLAAF wrapped up bilateral exercises with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Pakistan, respectively, both of which took place in PRC territory. PLAAF personnel also participated in a bilateral medical exercise held in Cambodia.

- On August 31, a PRC defense ministry spokesperson confirmed that members of the UAE Air Force and PLAAF recently completed [Falcon Shield 2023](#), the two air forces' first combined training exercise.¹⁴ The exercise, held in Xinjiang in northwest China, followed an export deal made in February 2023 for the sale of PRC L-15 advanced trainer jets to the UAE for an undisclosed sum.¹⁵
- From August 27 to September 13 in northwest China, the PLAAF and Pakistan Air Force carried out [Shaheen \(Eagle\) X](#), the 10th iteration of the exercise since 2011. This year's exercise included drills focused on combined air defense and countermeasures. PLAN aviation personnel also participated in Shaheen (Eagle) X.¹⁶



PLAAF and Pakistan Air Force participants at Shaheen (Eagle) X.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

- On September 16 in Cambodia, over 700 participants from the PLA and Royal Cambodian Armed Forces kicked off the 13-day exercise and humanitarian mission [Peace Angel 2023](#).¹⁷ Participants from the PLA were drawn mainly from the PLAAF Medical University and the PLA Western Theater's Air Force Hospital.¹⁸

COMMENTARY ON FOREIGN MILITARY ACTIVITIES

PLA MEDIA CRITIQUES JAPANESE, FRENCH DEFENSE BUDGET INCREASES

PLA newspaper reporting claims that Japanese armed forces' budget growth reflects an increasingly offensive mindset. On August 31, Japan's defense ministry requested a record \$52.67 billion for the 2024 fiscal year (FY). The request is an increase of about 13 percent over the previous year and comes as Tokyo seeks to raise defense spending to 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2027. The FY 2024 budget would include over \$6 billion for new ship-based air defense missiles and about \$4 billion to strengthen

logistics capabilities for the deployment of weapons and resources in Japan's southwestern islands.¹⁹

A September 4 *China Defense News* [article](#) argued that Japan's latest defense budget request reflected an increasingly offensive and "outward-focused" Japanese military strategy as well as a whole-of-government approach to rapidly increasing military spending. The article concluded that such moves would worsen arms races and undermine peace and stability in the region.²⁰ Echoing related themes, a separate *China Defense News* [article](#) published on September 6 singled out Japan's intent to purchase Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile Extended Range (JASSM-ER) capability from the US as evidence that Tokyo seeks to develop increasingly offensive capabilities.²¹

An analyst from the PLA's top institution for foreign military research criticizes French defense spending earmarked for the Indo-Pacific. On July 13, the French Parliament adopted the 2024–2030 military programming law (LPM), which would commit 413.3 billion euros to the French armed forces. This level of funding is a 118-billion euro or 40 percent increase over the previous LPM (2019–2025).²² Prior to the new law's adoption, French officials identified factors including tensions in the Indo-Pacific as incentives for the priorities set in the budget.²³

In a *PLA Daily* [opinion piece](#) on the 2024–2030 LPM published on August 31, Chen Yadong, an associate researcher at the PLA Academy of Military Sciences' War Research Institute, claimed the "explosive growth" in French defense spending had attracted widespread attention from outside observers. While acknowledging that the ongoing war in Ukraine was one driver of the budget increase, Chen criticized Paris for also designating the Indo-Pacific as a "major area of concern." Chen said that French efforts to increase defense spending and force deployments in the Indo-Pacific along with the US and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries was the "wrong path" because France faced immediate economic and social problems at home.²⁴

PLA AIR FORCE

AIR FORCE, MILITIA PERSONNEL CONDUCT RUNWAY REPAIR DRILLS

The Eastern Theater Command Air Force conducted training aimed at improving airfields' speed of recovery following enemy strikes. On August 31, Xinhua [reported](#) that an air station of the Eastern Theater Command Air Force had recently worked with one or more local People's Armed Forces Departments²⁵ to carry out drills focused on disposing ordnance and quickly repairing damaged runways. In the drill scenario, a runway had been damaged by strikes from multiple types of enemy ordnance. A video accompanying the Xinhua report showed PLAAF and militia personnel operating crewed and uncrewed equipment to clear rubble, detonate unexploded ordnance, fill holes with concrete, and smooth the runway surface. According to Air Force Colonel Wang Yidong, an officer at the air station, the drills explored ways to optimize force-organization models, standardize processes for rush repairs, and improve the survivability and recoverability of airfields during wartime.²⁶

Although not mentioned in related PRC media reporting, the PLAAF could be developing airfield repair capabilities to support the resilience of mainland infrastructure in the event of a Taiwan contingency. The

PLA's Eastern Theater Command is responsible for developing strategies and conducting operations in an area of responsibility that includes Taiwan and the East China Sea.²⁷



Top left: a remote-controlled robot places explosives near mock unexploded ordnance. Bottom left: PRC militia member operates machinery. Right: drill participants operate heavy machinery around simulated ordnance impact areas.

Source: [Xinhua](#).

EMERGING CAPABILITIES

PRC LAUNCHES FIRST TYPE 054B FRIGATE

The Type 054B guided missile frigate (FFG) is reportedly a variant of the Type 054A Jiangkai II-class FFG with greater operational range and more capabilities that make it ideal for missions in far seas.

According to [navalnews.com](#), Shanghai's Hudong-Zhonghua Shipyard, a subsidiary of China State Shipbuilding Corp, launched the first Type 054B FFG on August 26.²⁸ The Type 054B's launch means that major construction is complete and the ship will soon proceed to sea trials.



The first Type 054B frigate from its port side at its launch in Shanghai.

Source: [Navalnews.com](#).

When asked about the new FFG during a [routine press briefing](#), a PRC Ministry of National Defense spokesperson neither confirmed nor denied its August launch. Instead, the spokesperson stated that the PLA Navy developing new platforms and equipment is a "normal arrangement consistent with China's national security needs and the overall development of the PLA Navy."²⁹

A [China Daily](#) report quoted two frequent Chinese media military commentators on the Type 054B's likely capabilities. According to retired PLA Naval Research Institute analyst Cao Weidong, the new FFG has a full-load displacement of 6,000 metric tons (2,000 more than its predecessor the Type 054A), likely enabling the 054B "to sail farther, carry more weapons and munitions, and perform more tasks." Cao speculated that the new FFG may be able to carry land-attack cruise missiles and will feature better information-processing capacity and stealth design, giving it "better agility, situational awareness, and higher survivability."³⁰



Port side stern of the new Type 054B FFG with hangar partially opened.

Source: [The Drive](#).

Song Zhongping, a former PLA Second Artillery Engineering Academy professor, also claimed to *China Daily* that the Type 054B's capabilities make it "more suitable" for far seas operations, including ASW, anti-aircraft, and missile defense operations for aircraft carrier battle groups. Song also noted that the Type 054B has a larger flight deck than the Type 054A, enabling the new FFG to "carry a Z-20 helicopter."³¹ The Z-20 is a medium-lift, multi-role helicopter with a naval variant capable of conducting reconnaissance and ASW missions, which was too large and heavy for the Type 054A to carry.

According to an issue of [Jane's Defence Weekly](#), a similar frigate appears to be under construction in a Guangzhou shipyard, and both the Shanghai-launched hull and the one in Guangzhou are "expected to be commissioned by 2024." Jane's further assessed that the Type 054B's anticipated new capabilities will enable ships in this class to operate alongside Type 075 Yushen-class landing helicopter assault ships and Type 003 Fujian-class aircraft carriers.³²

PLA ARMY

NEW "INTELLIGENT" SYSTEM TO BOOST VEHICLE DISPATCH EFFICIENCY

The PLA Army has developed a new system to automate assignments of military vehicles and drivers in dynamic mission environments. On August 26, PRC state television [reported](#) that an unspecified department of the PLA Army had developed a new "intelligent vehicle control platform" (车辆智能管控平台). The new platform was reportedly developed to improve the efficiency of planning and allocating vehicles and drivers for task execution. The platform tracks the data of underway vehicles, such as their position, speed, and route, and it can reallocate resources quickly in accordance with changes in mission. A user of the platform need only submit a request, and the platform will "scientifically" plan and allocate vehicles and drivers.³³



Screenshot of new PLA Army "intelligent vehicle control platform."

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

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