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Modernizing the People's Liberation Army: The Human Factor



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Studies

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Abstract

The tremendous demographic challenges facing China will not significantly affect the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the immediate future, but will become more problematic in the medium and long term. The rapid aging of the population and the resulting socio-economic imbalances will put pressure on defense budgets, military wages and the general attractiveness of the army. For the time being, the PLA's primary goal in terms of human resources is to build a less oversized, more professional army, prepared for high-intensity combat.

This objective is in line with the institutional reform of 2016, which shortened the chain of command and strengthened the political and ideological control of the Communist Party of China (CPC) over the PLA through an overhaul of the Central Military Commission (CMC).

This reform also involved a major restructuring of China's armed forces. The PLA is pursuing a streamlining target that emphasizes quality over quantity. This qualitative improvement concerns equipment, forces and chains of command, and is driven by the need to elevate modernity, operational effectiveness and interoperability. An analysis of the evolution of the PLA Navy Marine Corps and the People's Armed Police (PAP) demonstrates this qualitative upgrading trend and the prioritization of combat readiness.

To integrate increasingly modern and complex equipment, the PLA is also focusing on recruiting and retaining young conscripts and volunteers with a high level of education, in order to increase the number of commissioned and non-commissioned officers. The major reforms being carried out thus aim to enhance the status of the military so as to strengthen its economic and social attractiveness. On the other hand, the PLA, like other armies around the world, is confronted with societal phenomena such as internet addiction, near-sightedness and obesity, which hinder its ambitions and force it to make trade-offs in its selection standards.

Résumé

Bras armé du Parti communiste chinois, l'Armée populaire de libération (APL) est relativement épargnée – à court terme – par le colossal défi démographique auquel la Chine est confrontée. Néanmoins, le vieillissement rapide de la population et les déséquilibres socio-économiques qui en découlent feront pression, à moyen et long terme, sur les budgets de défense, la solde des militaires et l'attractivité générale de l'armée. Pour l'heure, l'objectif prioritaire de l'APL en termes de ressources humaines est le suivant : bâtir une armée moins pléthorique mais plus professionnelle, et préparée au combat de haute intensité.

Cet objectif s'inscrit dans la continuité de la réforme institutionnelle de 2016 qui a permis de resserrer la chaîne de commandement et de renforcer le contrôle politique et idéologique du Parti sur l'APL, grâce à la refonte de la Commission militaire centrale (CMC).

À travers cette réforme, qui comprend une importante restructuration des forces, l'APL poursuit également une trajectoire claire de rationalisation des effectifs consistant à privilégier la qualité sur la quantité. Cette montée en puissance qualitative vise aussi bien les équipements que les forces et les chaînes de commandement, et obéit à des exigences de modernité, d'opérationnalité et d'interopérabilité. L'analyse des évolutions du Corps des Marines de la Marine de l'APL et de la Police armée du peuple (PAP) témoigne de la montée en gamme et de la priorisation des fonctions combattantes.

Pour mettre en œuvre des équipements de plus en plus modernes et complexes, l'armée chinoise mise enfin sur le recrutement et la fidélisation de jeunes conscrits et volontaires de haut niveau d'éducation, afin de grossir les rangs des corps des sous-officiers et des officiers. Elle procède ainsi à d'importantes réformes visant à valoriser le statut de militaire pour renforcer son attractivité économique et sociale. L'APL est en revanche confrontée, comme d'autres armées dans le monde, à des phénomènes sociétaux, tels que l'addiction à internet, la myopie et l'obésité, qui freinent ses ambitions et la poussent à des compromis dans ses standards de sélection.

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Introduction

As the People's Republic of China (PRC) grows more powerful, against the backdrop of heightened Sino-American rivalry and tensions in the Taiwan Strait, China's military capabilities now attract unprecedented attention. The dramatic expansion of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy has been the subject of numerous studies and press reports, with a particular focus on China's aircraft carriers, the third of which, *Fujian*, was launched in June 2022. The Air Force is also closely monitored, particularly the J-20 5th generation fighter, the Y-20 heavy transport aircraft and its refueling version YU-20, and the future H-20 strategic bomber. China's new ballistic missiles (conventional and nuclear) are a further source of concern, especially the DF-17 hypersonic missile.

A less covered dimension, and yet the fundamental basis of any army, is the human factor. It is more difficult to assess since, unlike weapons, its value is not measured by its precision, its autonomy, its range of action, or its capacity for destruction, but by less quantifiable criteria such as the level of training and professionalization, discipline, ideological commitment, and the motivation of troops.

This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of the PLA's operational level through this human factor. It aims to provide a dynamic overview of the Chinese army's force structure. From a human perspective, what does the PLA represent today, and what army format do the authorities want to move towards? It appears that combat readiness is the key operational priority for the military. Considering these aims, this paper seeks to examine certain measures taken to reinforce the attractiveness of the PLA, as well as the obstacles and challenges encountered.

The People's Liberation Army: What Format for What Ambition?

China faces a daunting demographic challenge, which has become the main obstacle to its constant economic development. Its rapidly aging population and gender imbalance are putting pressure on its labor market, healthcare and education system, as well as on the pension management system.¹ Despite successive easing of the one-child policy since 2015, China's fertility rate in 2021 fell to 1.15 children per woman, compared to 1.6 in many developed economies (United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Germany) and 1.8 in France. While most projections predict that China's population will peak around 2030, the latest estimates – including from Chinese demographers – point to a peak as early as 2022.²

This demographic challenge affects the PLA more or less directly. The general increase in wages and living standards in China may put pressure on military pay and the attractiveness of the military. The economic slowdown may also have an impact on defense budgets in the medium term. Finally, the gender imbalance prevents and renders irrelevant the feminization of the forces, despite being an important recruitment drive in many armies around the world.

However, the aging of the population does not appear to be a major issue for the PLA in the short term. Indeed, the Chinese army is primarily concerned with rationalizing its excessively numerous personnel, and, even with a gradual decline of the active population, the recruitment pool will still be substantial. Moreover, the PLA remains the cornerstone of the Communist Party of China (CPC). On the one hand, it has a strong social role, but it is also, along with the People's Armed Police, an instrument of control and the Party's "life insurance" in case its legitimacy is challenged. The central government will therefore do its utmost to protect the PLA from the harmful effects of an aging population.

As of now, the PLA's goal is to become a smaller but more modern, professional and combat-ready army.

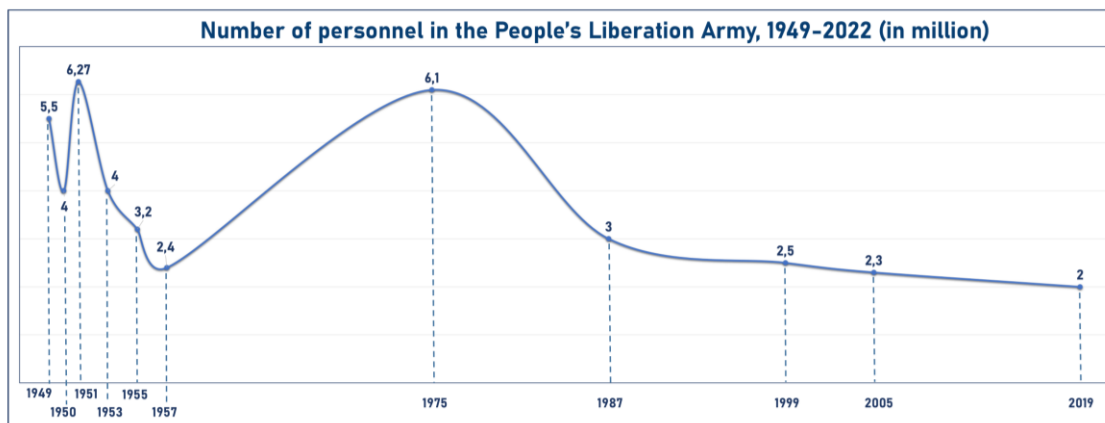
1. I. Attané, "Vieille avant d'être riche. La Chine face au défi de sa démographie", *Briefings de l'Ifri*, April 5, 2022, available in French at : www.ifri.org.

2. X. Peng, "China's Population Is about to Shrink for the First Time since the Great Famine Struck 60 Years Ago. Here's What It Means for the World", *The Conversation*, May 29, 2022, available at: <https://theconversation.com>.

Streamlining the Number of Troops

The PLA's roots date back to 1927, a time when the Chinese Communist Party's armed wings were waging war against the nationalist army of the Kuomintang. In 1947, the different groups merged under the title of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). It was then a revolutionary army of roughly one million men, primarily peasant infantrymen. After the proclamation of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, the PLA sought to professionalize and modernize its organization. The PLA Air Force and Navy, as well as different corps within the three armies, were formed, respectively, in late 1949 and early 1950; the national territory was divided into military regions in 1955.

Since 1949, the PLA has been structurally oriented toward a reduction in personnel and a more professional, modern, combat-oriented and expeditionary force.



Source: graphic realized by authors.

Officially, since 2019, the PLA has had approximately 2 million active military personnel.³ It has undergone many reforms since 1949. In the wake of the communist victory over nationalist forces, which fled to Taiwan, the PLA's troops dropped from 5.5 million to 4 million soldiers. However, when war broke out in the Korean peninsula, the trend reversed; the number of personnel rose to 6.27 million in late 1951, the all-time peak of the PLA. The end of the Korean War led to another round of streamlining, to 3.2 million soldiers, in 1955. The reduction was repeated in 1957-1958 in order to cut the state's military spendings: the PLA dropped to 2.4 million troops. During this last round of reform, however, the ground forces were

3. "Graphics: China's Military Reform in Past 5 Years", *CGTN*, August 1, 2020, available at: <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn>.

significantly reduced while the Navy, the Air Force and the special forces, amounting to 32% of the total of the PLA, were strengthened.⁴

In the 1960s and 1970s, the sharp increase in tensions with the USSR and the domestic turmoil provoked by the Cultural Revolution led to a new surge in PLA personnel, totaling 6.1 million soldiers in 1975. After Mao died in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978, the reform and opening-up policy shifted efforts toward industrializing and modernizing the country. In addition, the tensions with the USSR stabilized and China quickly opened up to the Western world. With no immediate threat to the country, the army came to represent a financial burden for the state. Three successive waves of reform occurred in 1980, 1982 and 1985 in order to streamline non-combatant units from the PLA and abolish or merge many redundant organs. The PLA then reached a total of 3 million soldiers in 1987. Between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the downsizing trend continued, leading to a total of 2.3 million soldiers.⁵ In 2015, Xi Jinping announced that the number of troops would be cut by 300,000, to give a total of 2 million.⁶

However, the Chinese authorities do not provide the precise figure of PLA personnel. Any estimate must hence be taken with caution, especially given the deep reform of the army structure in 2016, as well as the People's Armed Police (PAP) reform in 2018. The most consensual figures are those of the *Military Balance*,⁷ which are consistent with numerous non-official or unsourced Chinese sources. The PLA would thus have between 2 and 2.4 million active military personnel, including the PAP which is placed under the sole command of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and accounts for approximately 500,000 troops. The PLA would additionally rely on a reserve force of 500,000 personnel.

The Ground Force remains predominant in the PLA, with around 965,000 troops, although potentially overestimated since the 2019 White Paper stated that “the PLA had significantly reduced the Army's active forces”.⁸ The Navy accounts for 260,000 personnel, an increase since the mid-2000s, and the Air Force for 400,000. The Rocket Force includes fewer personnel (120,000) for missions that are no less strategic – that is, nuclear deterrence and conventional ballistic forces.

4. “Details of Troops Reductions in the Chinese Army” (中国军队历次裁军数据一览), *People's Daily*, September 3, 2015, available at: <http://politics.people.com.cn>.

5. *Ibid.*

6. However, the PAP, which was then still under dual civilian and military leadership, was probably not included in this estimate.

7. *The Military Balance 2022*, IISS, February 2022 (and previous editions).

8. *China's National Defense in the New Era*, State Council Information Office, July 2019.

Indicative estimate of PLA personnel totals, 2022	
Ground Forces	965,000
Navy	260,000
Air Force	395,000
Rocket Force	120,000
Strategic Support Force	145,000
Logistics Support Force	?
People's Armed Police	500,000
PLA total military personnel	2,035,000 (raw estimate, Military Balance 2022)
	2,385,000 (consolidated estimate)

The PLA is overwhelmingly composed of soldiers from the Han ethnic majority, which is even over-represented: 2010 official statistics show that the Han, who represented 91.6% of the total Chinese population, accounted for 95.7% of the PLA. Manchus are also well represented (1% of the PLA and 0.8% of the population) as are Mongols (0.4% of the PLA and 0.45% of the population). In contrast, Uyghurs (0.09% of the PLA, or 2,048 soldiers, and 0.75% of the population) and Tibetans (less than 0.2% of the PLA and 0.47% of the population) were under-represented.⁹

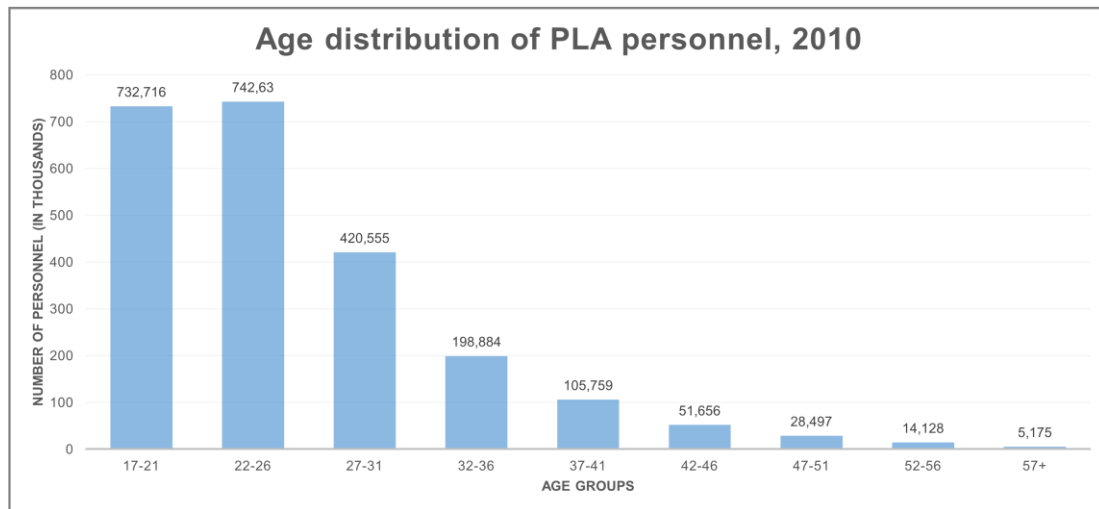
While mutual distrust between Han and Uyghurs and Tibetans probably explains these discrepancies, affirmative action in favor of the ethnic minorities has been implemented in the PLA enrollment process. The presence of “ethnic companies” (民族连队), composed of soldiers from ethnic minorities, is also worth noting. They are rarely mixed, and often comprise ethnic minority soldiers from the same region (for instance Uyghurs, Hui, Kazakhs and Mongols for a well-known brigade in Xinjiang).¹⁰ Although the PLA presents them as a means of integration for ethnic minorities (through the learning of Mandarin for example), these units remain under the command of Han officers and do not mingle with entirely-Han units.

Lastly, the PLA is a relatively young army, mostly thanks to the conscription system. According to the 2010 statistics, 17 to 26 year-olds represented two-thirds of the total number of PLA personnel.¹¹

9. “Ethnic Composition of Active Military Personnel in the PLA” (中国人民解放军现役军人的民族构成), National Bureau of Statistics, 2010, available at: www.stats.gov.cn.

10. “It’s Time to Introduce You to This Company – The Sixth Company of National Unity” (是时候带你认识这个连队了——民族团结好六连), *Sina*, August 14, 2018, available at: <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn>.

11. National Bureau of Statistics : www.stats.gov.cn.



Organic Modernization: The 2016 Reform¹²

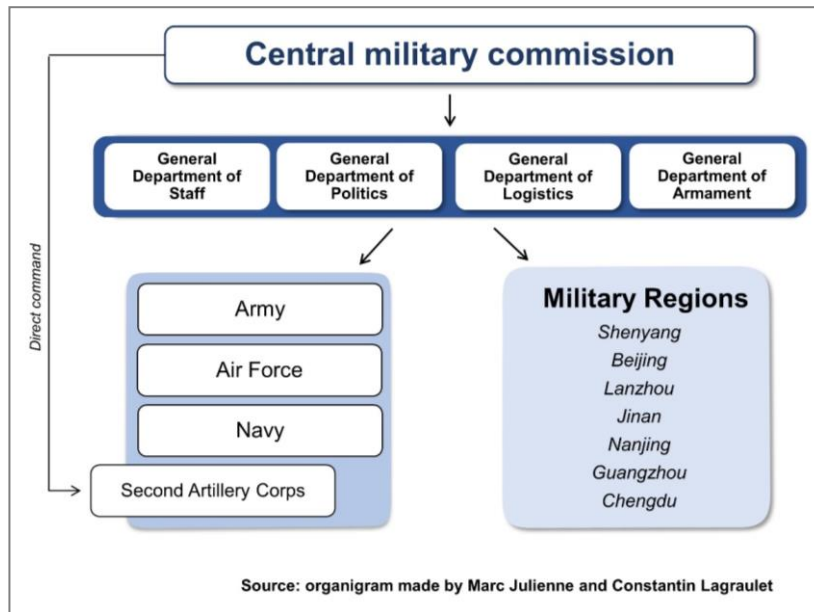
It is important to understand the vast reform of 2016 in order to grasp the current structure of the PLA. This reform was launched in November 2013 (3rd Plenum of the 18th Congress) and led by Xi Jinping himself. It ended up with the publication on January 1, 2016 of the “Opinions of the Central Military Commission on Deepening the Reform of National Defense and the Army”,¹³ preceding other announcements in the following weeks.

This in-depth reform aimed to rationalize and shorten the command chain, and buttress the political and disciplinary control of the Party over the PLA. The CMC was hence considerably reinforced with the suppression of the four powerful General Departments (of Staff, Politics, Logistics and Armament) which constituted a sort of “kill switch” between the CMC and the forces, and generated endemic corruption networks. The prerogatives of these four General Departments were absorbed by the CMC and divided between various departments, commissions and bureaus. Since then, the CMC has held direct command over the armed forces and the five “theater commands”, which form the new military division of Chinese territory, replacing the previous seven military regions. The operations command falls to the theater commands, while each army’s staff is responsible for managing its troops.

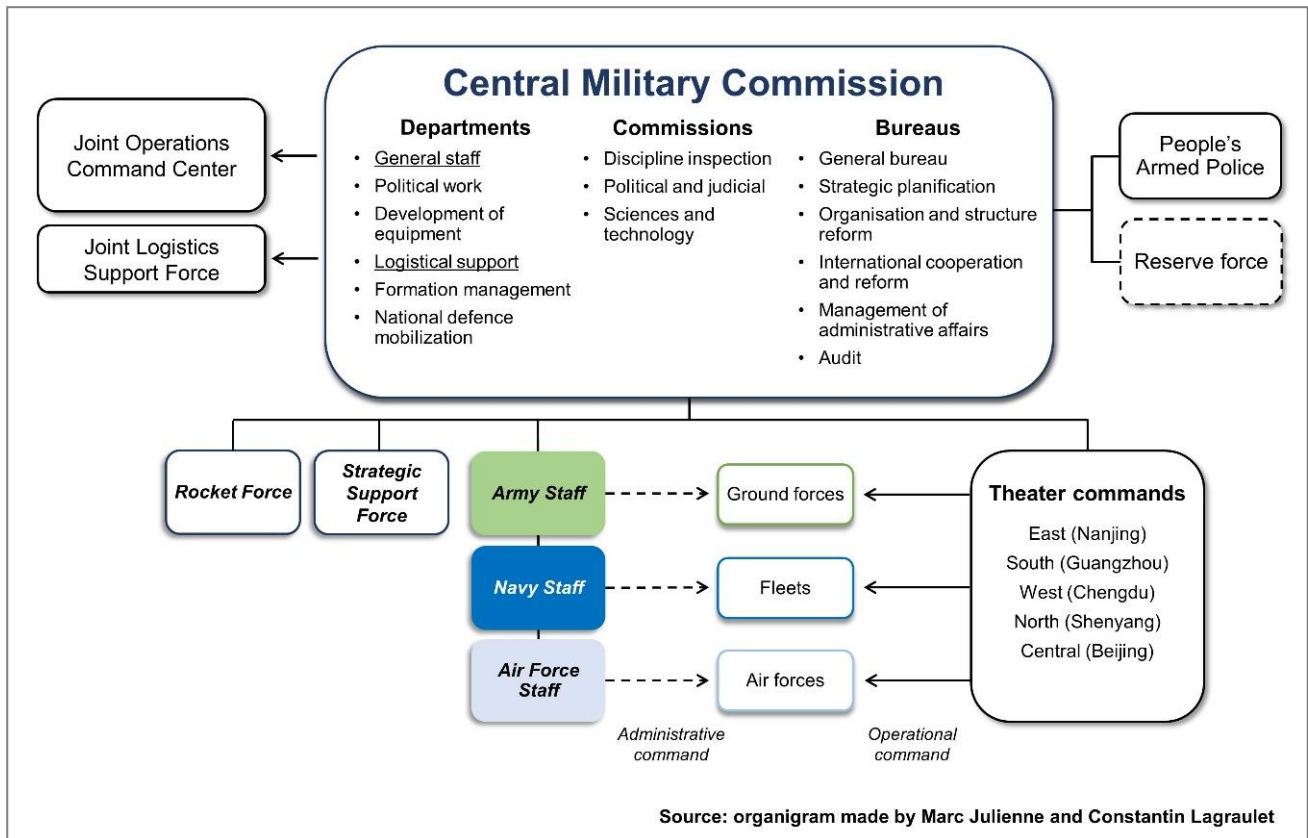
12. We have further analyzed this reform in this publication: A. Bondaz and M. Julienne, “Modernize and Discipline: The Reform of the Chinese Army under Xi Jinping”, *Note de la FRS*, No. 05/2017, February 24, 2017, available in French at: www.frstrategie.org.

13. “Opinions of the Central Military Commission on Deepening the Reform of National Defense and the Army” (中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见), *Xinhua*, January 1, 2016.

Central Military Commission before the 2016 Reform



Central Military Commission after the 2016 Reform



The reform also entailed a profound transformation of the structure of the armed forces. The Army was provided with its own general staff, in an attempt to give it (qualitative) parity with other armies. Just as the 2015 troops reduction campaign, which was targeted at the ground forces, recruitment in the latter has slowed down, to the profit of the other armies. The military academies of the ground forces cut their recruitment by 24% between 2015 and 2016. On the contrary, the military academies related to the Navy, the Air Force and the Rocket Force have seen their recruitment rise by 14%; recruitment in specific fields such as space intelligence, radars and drones has grown by 16%.¹⁴

One transformation of force stands out as the most significant: the Force (部队) of the Second Artillery, in charge of the nuclear and conventional ballistic arsenal since 1966, was promoted to the rank of army (军), on a par with the Army, the Navy and the Air Force.

Furthermore, two additional forces (部队) were established. The Strategic Support Force (SSF) is a crucial contribution to the PLA since it merges cyber and space military capabilities. It plays a key role in offensive and defensive cyber warfare, and has become a central actor in the Chinese space program.¹⁵ In parallel, the Joint Logistics Support Force seeks to rationalize logistics and interoperability between the armed forces. Unlike the SSF, it is integrated into the CMC and, while acting independently, is under its command.

The last major change to take into account is the establishment of the Joint Operations Command Center. It is chaired by Xi himself, who has taken an operational role in addition to being the head of the CMC. He thus governs a greatly reinforced CMC, which controls the forces much more directly and vertically than before. Besides that, the establishment of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the Political and Legal Affairs Commission, and an Audit Bureau within the CMC, is aimed at tightening political and disciplinary control in order to fight against corruption and spread ideology at every hierarchical level of the PLA.

14. L. Zhao, "PLA Restructuring Changes Focus on Military Schools", *China Daily*, April 28, 2016, available at: www.chinadaily.com.cn.

15. For further analysis, consult: M. Julienne, "China's Ambitions in Space: The Sky's the Limit", *Études de l'Ifri*, January 2021, available at: www.ifri.org.

Armed forces distribution by theater command



Source : Map made by Marc Julienne and Constantin Lagraulet © Ifri, 2022.

Combat First: The Case of the Marines and the PAP

The 2016 reform aims to lay the foundations for transforming the PLA into a modern, world-class army. The guiding principle is now to favor quality over quantity. An excerpt of the 2019 White Paper sums up this ambition clearly:

“In accordance with the instruction to optimize structures, develop new types of forces, adjust proportions, and reduce formats, the PLA is striving to move from a model based on quantity and scale to one based on quality and efficiency, and to move from a personnel-intensive model to a science and technology-intensive model.”¹⁶

Despite substantial progress in the “revolution in military affairs with Chinese characteristics”, the PLA still lags behind technologically, especially in the field of mechanization and informatization. Furthermore, it perceives the international environment as highly competitive, and the vector of a “potential technological surprise and growing technology gap”.¹⁷

In addition to mechanization and informatization, the modernization of the PLA involves stepping up its combat capabilities:

“Measures have been taken to increase the combat capabilities of forces, reduce the command hierarchy, and consolidate troops at lower levels. New types of combat forces have been developed to conduct special operations, multi-dimensional attack and defense operations, amphibious operations, distant sea protection, and strategic projection, aiming to make the force composition comprehensive, combined, multi-functional, and flexible.”¹⁸

Theater commands play a key role in this combat modernization dynamics, helping to develop interoperability between forces during live combat drills and raising combat readiness.

To refocus the forces on combat missions, the non-combatant military command and support bodies were downsized. Some officer duties were transferred to non-commissioned officers or civilian personnel. Agencies and personnel in arts, sports, press, publications, logistical support,

16. *China's National Defense in the New Era*, State Council Information Office, July 2019.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

education and research are being rationalized. According to the 2019 White Paper, “the number of personnel in command bodies at the regimental level and above has been cut by 25%, and those in non-combatant units by 50%”.¹⁹ On the training and research side, military schools and universities have been reduced from 77 to 44, while the top-level military universities – the National Defense University (NDU), the National University of Defense Technology (NUDT) and the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) – were restructured, placing the AMS at the top of the pyramid, under the direct supervision of the CMC’s Board of Directors on Military Scientific Research (军委军事科学研究指导委员会).

Parallel to the qualitative increase in equipment, fighting forces and command chains, ideological and disciplinary control has been reinforced at all levels of the PLA. The explicit objective is to “build troops with iron faith, conviction, discipline and commitment”.²⁰ Unsurprisingly, Xi Jinping is the alpha and omega of this ideological line:

“Firmly establish the guiding position of Xi Jinping’s thought on strengthening the military, resolutely safeguard the central position of General Secretary Xi Jinping as the core of the Party Central Committee and the entire Party, resolutely safeguard the centralized and unified authority and leadership of the Party Central Committee, implement the accountability system of the CMC Chairman.”²¹

This objective of modernizing and upgrading the troops is borne out in the various armies, and especially in the Marine Corps and the People’s Armed Police.

The Expansion of the Marine Corps

The PLA Navy’s Marine Corps has grown dramatically in recent years. After an erratic existence since its first unit was founded in 1954, it really took shape in 1980 with the creation of the 1st Marine Brigade, initially based in Hainan and then in Zhanjiang, Guangdong, under the Southern Fleet’s command. In 1997, in the context of the personnel streamlining process, the 164th Army Division was converted into a Marine Corps brigade. The Corps then consisted of two brigades of about 5,000 soldiers each.²² Besides, the

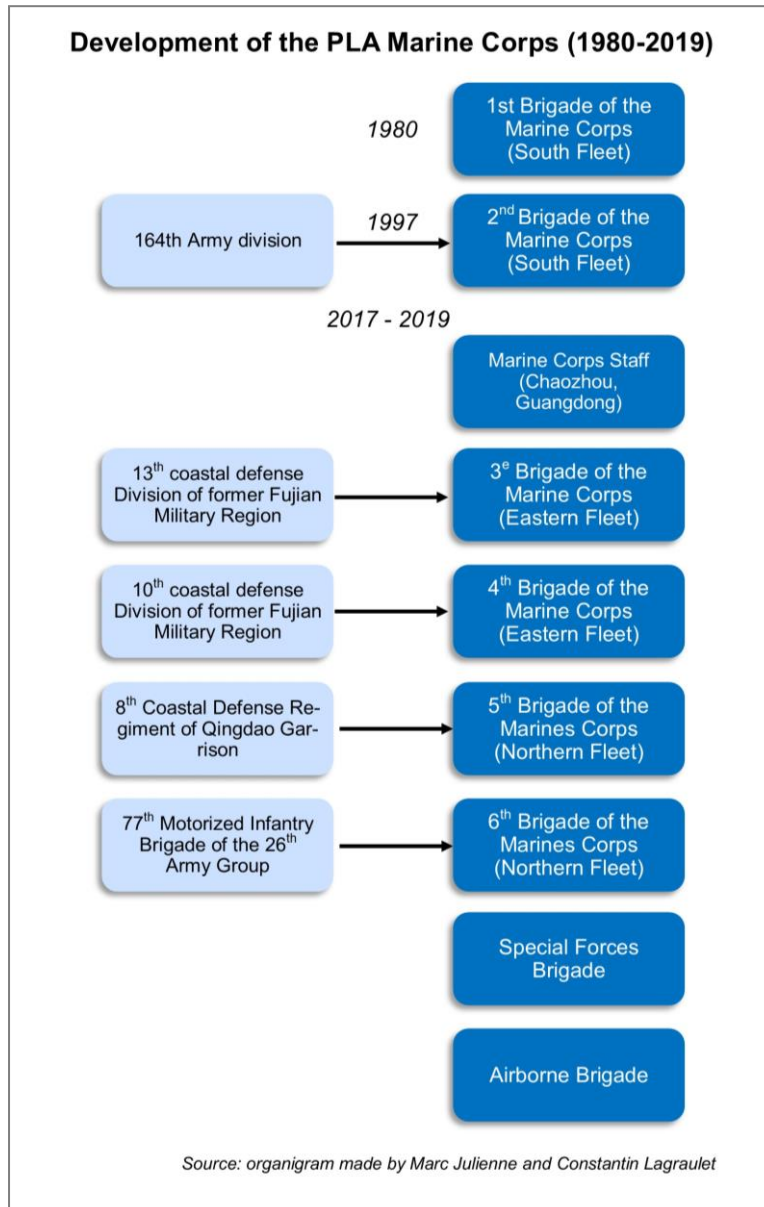
19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. D. J. Blasko, “China’s Marines: Less is More”, *China Brief*, Vol. 10, No. 24, December 3, 2010, available at: <https://jamestown.org>.

first female Marine brigade was created in 1995, and called the “Amphibious Overlord Flowers” (两栖霸王花).²³



In March 2017, the Chinese Ministry of Defense announced the expansion of the Marine Corps. Between 2017 and 2019, the Corps was equipped with four new infantry brigades from the Army (a transfer of about 20,000 soldiers), in addition to a special forces brigade (*Jiaolong* or Diluvian Dragon), and an airborne helicopter brigade (the latter two being

23. “Improper for Vases! Women Marines: What Do You Want Us to Do If We Don’t Fight?” (不当花瓶！海军女子陆战队：不打仗要我们干什么), *PLA Daily*, April 4, 2020, available at: <http://appapi.81.cn>.

drawn from the Navy's resources). This amounts to a total of eight brigades. The Corps also has its own headquarters located in Chaozhou, Guangdong Province. The Corps is no longer under the hierarchy of the Southern Fleet, but under the more direct hierarchy of the Navy staff, and the brigades are now present in Shandong (Northern Fleet), Fujian (Eastern Fleet), Guangdong and Hainan (Southern Fleet) provinces.

In 2018 and 2019, the US Department of Defense estimated that the PLA Marine Corps would total “more than 30,000 troops by 2020”. It did not provide an estimate in 2020 and 2021. A Taiwanese Navy report in October 2019 estimated the Marine Corps strength at “nearly 40,000 soldiers”.²⁴ This figure is consistent with the increased number of brigades since 2017 and has probably remained unchanged since 2019, as the Corps is now expected to ramp up equipment to carry out its missions.

In May 2017, Major General Kong Jun (孔军, born in 1964) of the Army was appointed as the first commander of the Marine Corps. It was thus he who carried out the reform and empowerment of the Corps. In February 2018, he additionally assumed political duties by becoming a representative at the National People's Congress. Since December 2021, Kong has been promoted to the rank of lieutenant general and commander of the Eastern Command Theater Ground Forces,²⁵ in the front line for a possible Taiwan unification offensive. Given his age, one can anticipate that he will reach even higher positions in the future, within the CMC for instance. It is not yet known who is his successor as commander of the Marine Corps.

The PLA Marine Corps enjoys great popularity in China thanks to the 2012 TV show “Fire Blue Blade”, which was produced, among others, by the Propaganda Bureau of the Navy's Political Department.²⁶ Such efforts to promote the Marine Corps in the media are due to a pressing need for recruitment in an extremely selective field.²⁷ Many Chinese sources describe a very high-level selection process and training.

24. Y. Huang, “Building and Developing the Marine Corps after the CMC reform” (中共軍改後海軍陸戰隊的建構與發展), Navy of the Republic of China, October 1, 2019, available at: <https://navy.mnd.gov.tw>.

25. “Kong Jun, Former Commander of the Marine Corps, Has Been Appointed as the Army Commander of the Eastern Theater Command” (海軍陸戰隊原司令員孔軍已任東部戰區陸軍司令員), *Net Ease*, December 31, 2021, available at: www.163.com; “The First Commander of the Marine Corps Went to Serve in the Eastern Theater and Was Stationed in Fuzhou” (海軍陸戰隊首任司令赴東部戰區任職，駐地福州), *Sohu*, December 31, 2021, available at: www.sohu.com.

26. Available on YouTube: www.youtube.com.

27. “This is the Marine Corps” (這就是海軍陸戰隊), *Net Ease*, April 5, 2022, available at: www.163.com; “Popular Science: What Is Unique about the Chinese Marine Corps? What Is the Difference Between It and the Army and Navy?” (科普：中國海軍陸戰隊有何獨特之處？它與海陸兩軍有何差別？), *Baidu*, January 12, 2022, available at: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com>.

Chinese Marines have been participating in China's anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean, including the Gulf of Aden, since 2008. A number of them are prepositioned at the PLA Logistics Base in Djibouti. While the Marine Corps' expeditionary and global reach is by no means taboo,²⁸ its primary and explicit mission is the unification of Taiwan. The rapid expansion of the Corps between 2017 and 2019 was primarily driven by the desire to build assault capabilities against the island. In addition, Dennis Blasko reported that the Marines had already been deployed to some militarized islets in the South China Sea.²⁹

The Militarization of the People's Armed Police

The People's Armed Police (PAP) has recently undergone deep transformation, resulting in complete militarization and a prominent role in domestic security and beyond. Created in 1982, the PAP is a paramilitary force tasked with maintaining stability and supporting the PLA in case of foreign aggression. It was historically placed under the double military and civilian control of the CMC and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS, linked to the State Council). Its importance increased in the 1990s, in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown and amid tensions in Xinjiang. Until 2018, the PAP was split into several branches distributed between the dual supervision of the CMC and MPS. The CMC controlled the forestry, gold, hydroelectric and transportation branches, while the MPS supervised the border control, firefighting and public security forces. All of these forces displayed the same uniform and received military training from the Army. Each of the supervising institutions had operational command over their troops.

On March 21, 2018, the PAP was restructured as part of a sweeping reform targeting state and Party institutions.³⁰ The text provided that "all active forces of the PAP under the administration and command of the departments of the State Council shall be removed from the PAP". Similarly, the forestry, gold and hydroelectric units, previously under CMC command, were removed from the PAP and transferred to different ministries and civilian public agencies. The PAP is no longer involved in customs control missions.

28. For instance, an article concludes: "As my country's economy becomes more and more outward-looking, we can expect to see Chinese marines in other corners of the world in the future", in "Popular Science: What Is Unique about the Chinese Marine Corps? What Is the Difference Between It and the Army and Navy?" (科普: 中国海军陆战队有何独特之处? 它与海陆两军有何差别?), *op. cit.*

29. D. J. Blasko and R. Lee, "The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 2: Chain-of-Command Reforms and Evolving Training", *China Brief*, February 15, 2019, available at: <https://jamestown.org>.

30. "The CCP's Central Committee publishes the 'Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions'" (中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》), *Xinhua*, March 21, 2018, available at: www.xinhuanet.com.

Finally, after numerous reforms and the dispersion of Chinese coast guard forces under various state supervisions, the 2018 reform merged and transferred all maritime police forces to the PAP. This is particularly critical as the coast guards spearhead Beijing's territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. The PAP coast guards also command the maritime militia – commercial fishing vessels serving the interests and directives of the CCP.³¹ In addition, the National People's Congress of China passed the Maritime Police Law in early 2021, authorizing the Maritime Police, among other things, to arm itself and use “all necessary means” to defend China's maritime interests.³² In short, all Chinese forces at sea are now armed and under the military supervision of the CMC, and therefore the Party.

The 2018 reform is based on the principle of “the army is the army, the police is the police, the people is the people” (军是军、警是警、民是民原则). It militarizes the PAP by relieving it of all non-combat missions. The aim is to focus it back on essential military and combat missions: internal stability and the fight against terrorism, respect for maritime rights, and support of the PLA in the event of conflict.³³

A harbinger of the militarization of the PAP was already perceptible in October 2017, with the overhaul of the organization of the PAP command. It was restructured on the model of the 2016 PLA reform, further strengthening its military organization. Like the armed forces, the PAP command is now composed of the four departments of staff, political work, logistics and equipment, as well as a commission for the inspection of discipline.³⁴

The repositioning of the PAP under the exclusive supervision of the CMC reinforces control by the Party and Xi Jinping over the main domestic-stability maintenance force in China. In accordance with Xi's cherished principle of “absolute Party leadership over the armed forces” (党对军队绝对领导), the PAP is henceforth the Party's armed police (unlike the People's Police, which remains under the State Council's responsibility via the Ministry of Public Security). This is all the more decisive since, as the Chinese 2019 defense White Paper states, one of the priorities of

31. G. B. Poling, T. G. Mallory and H. Prétat, “Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia”, *CSIS*, November 2021, available at: www.csis.org.

32. PRC law on the Maritime Police (中华人民共和国海警法), National People's Congress, January 22, 2021.

33. See also: M. Julienne, “De 1989 à 2019: les évolutions de la doctrine chinoise de maintien de l'ordre depuis Tiananmen”, *Le Grand Continent*, June 27, 2019, available in French at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu>.

34. J. Wuthnow, “China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform”, *China Strategic Perspectives*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, No. 14, April 2019, pp. 9-11, available at: <https://inss.ndu.edu>; “The Era of ‘No Distinction Between the Military and the Police’ Is Over: From Now on the Army Is the Army, the Police Is the Police, and the People Are the People” (军警不分”的时代已经过去: 从此军是军、警是警、民是民), *China Newsweek Magazine*, October 31, 2017, available at: www.sohu.com.

Chinese national defense is to “protect the national political security, people’s safety and social stability”.³⁵

Lastly, it should be noted that the PAP is progressively establishing a legal framework in order to operate overseas. For instance, the 2016 Anti-terrorism Law provides for the sending of PLA or PAP troops abroad to “carry out anti-terrorist missions” (article 71).³⁶ Many PAP officers have also stressed the international dimension of the force. PAP’s former commander, Wang Ning, for example, underlined in July 2018 the evolution of the PAP’s prerogatives “from land to sea, from maintaining stability to protecting the rights, from inside the mainland borders to outside”.³⁷ Zhou Jian, professor at the Political Academy of the PAP, declared that the sending of PLA or PAP troops abroad was both “an unavoidable condition for international anti-terrorist cooperation” and “a necessary measure so the country can reply to global terrorist attacks”.³⁸ In April 2022, China and the Solomon Islands announced that they had signed a security cooperation agreement, of which Article 1 states that the Solomon Islands can ask China to send police personnel, armed police or military to help maintain social order. There are, therefore, no more obstacles hindering Beijing from deploying forces overseas. Still, in the specific case of the Solomon Islands, sending troops for law enforcement missions would be unwise in that it presents a number of risks, particularly with regard to China’s international reputation.³⁹

35. *China’s National Defense in the New Era*, Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, July 2019.

36. Anti-terrorism Act of the PRC (中华人民共和国反恐怖主义法), National People’s Congress, December 27, 2015.

37. N. Wang, “Fully Implement the Spirit of President Xi Jinping’s Orientations and Strive to Build a Strong and Modern Armed Police Force” (深入贯彻习主席训词精神 努力建设强大的现代化武装警察部队), *PAP website* (中国武警网), July 23, 2018, available at: <http://wj.81.cn>.

38. J. Zhou, “Armed Police Forces Have Legal Basis for Going Abroad to Counter Terrorism” (武警部队出境反恐有了法律依据), *Legal Daily* (法制日报), January 28, 2016, available at: <http://inews.ifeng.com>.

39. See also: M. Julienne, “Un coup d’épée dans l’océan. La tournée de Wang Yi dans le Pacifique insulaire”, *Lettre du Centre Asie*, No. 97, June 3, 2022, available in French at: www.ifri.org.

Charm Offensive: The PLA's Recruitment Policy

After revamping the CMC and force structure in 2016, the Chinese central government is currently undertaking major reform of its military recruitment and personnel management system. Retaining the modernization of PLA troops as the main objective, the strategy is to enhance the status of military personnel to make the army more attractive, and to recruit better qualified personnel. Priority is given to recruiting young university graduates to buttress, in particular, the non-commissioned officers corps. However, recruiters are faced with a delicate trade-off in their selection standards, between irreproachable physical condition in a society affected by addiction, overweight and nearsightedness, and the need for a high level of education for a high-tech army.

The Prominent Role of Conscripts and NCOs

Military service plays a crucial role in China. First of all, it strengthens the army-nation link and avoids the two being disconnected from each other. More precisely, the PLA, being the army of the CCP, it is more about promoting and fostering the CCP's military ideology among the population. Military service further helps to maintain a very young army thanks to the incorporation of conscripts into the active forces. It is also a matter of budgetary interest, since conscripts receive a salary of 1,000 RMB (about €140) per month the first year and RMB 1,100 the second year, which is much lower than that of professional soldiers. Finally, it greatly contributes to the PLA's large reserve force that can be immediately mobilized in wartime. Indeed, military service does not necessarily lead to the reserve force, but it does generate a large influx. One article mentions the figure of 57 million veterans.⁴⁰

40. "Will the Two-year Compulsory Military Service Affect the Combat Effectiveness of Our Army?" (王若愚: 义务兵两年制会影响我军战斗力吗?), *The Observer* (观察), September 17, 2020, available at: www.guancha.cn.

New laws and acts concerning military personnel		
Date of publication	Name	Institution
26/12/2020	“Law on National Defense of the PRC (revision)”	National People's Congress
10/06/2021	“Law on the Protection of the Status, Rights and Interests of Military Personnel”	National People's Congress
20/08/2021	“Military Service Law of China of the PRC (revision)”	National People's Congress
01/01/2022	“Interim Provisions on Medical Benefits for Soldiers and Military-Related Personnel”	CMC
30/03/2022	“Interim Provisions on Non-Commissioned Officers”	CMC
30/03/2022	“Interim Provisions on Conscripts”	CMC
30/03/2022	“Interim Provisions on the Management of Professional Development of Non-Commissioned Officers”	CMC
30/03/2022	“Interim Provisions on Soldiers' Retirement Work”	CMC
30/03/2022	“Notice on Issues Concerning the Reform, Transformation and Transition of the Soldier System”	CMC

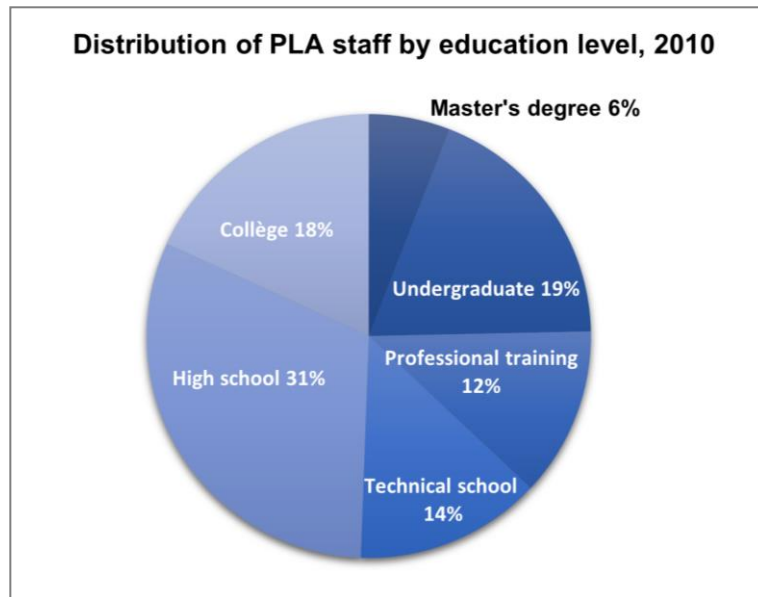
The National People's Congress revised in August 2021 the 1984 military conscription law (it came into effect in October 2021). In China, military service is mandatory from the age of 18. It should be universal according to Chapter 5: “Citizens⁴¹ of the PRC, regardless of their nationality, race, occupation, family background, religious beliefs or level of education, are required to perform military service in accordance with the provisions of this Law”.⁴² However, it seems that, in practice, women are not directly affected. In fact, Article 20 stipulates that “female citizens (女性公民) can be recruited for active service, according to the needs of the army”.

Registration for the conscription must be completed the year conscripts turn 18, and incorporation can be delayed up to age 26 for students and college graduates. Those who refuse or avoid military service cannot enter public administration, be recruited to any state-owned enterprise or agency nor be allowed to leave the territory for two years, and they are registered on the “list of citizens untrustworthy for the national defense”⁴³

41. The term “citizens” (公民) does not differentiate men and women.

42. PRC's military service Act (中华人民共和国兵役法), August 20, 2021, available at: www.gov.cn.

43. Article 57, PRC's Military Service Act (中华人民共和国兵役法), *op. cit.*



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, available at: www.stats.gov.cn.

The duration of military service is two years. The first year is devoted to training (3 months of basic training, then 9 months of specialty training). Conscripts are assigned to an operational unit during the second year. Since 2020, conscript incorporation campaigns have been increased to twice a year (spring and fall) for a smoother rotation of conscripts in the units (the arrival and departure of conscripts in the units every six months means that half of the conscripts are always already trained).⁴⁴

As a PLA recruiter in Chongqing put it, ahead of the first recruitment campaign in 2022: “Priority is given to recruiting graduates from universities, science and engineering colleges, and technical schools.”⁴⁵

The recruitment of future non-commissioned officers (NCOs) is therefore the priority in the conscript selection process. Considered the “backbone of the army”, the PLA’s NCOs corps suffers from lack of professionalization. That is why conscription is of such importance, enabling the best elements to be selected and recruited as NCOs.⁴⁶ The preference for young urban educated people for NCO positions is at the expense of less educated and rural soldiers, many of whom joined the army

44. “Will the Two-Year Compulsory Military Service Affect the Combat Effectiveness of our Army?”, *The Observer* (观察), *op. cit.*

45. “Who Can Be a Soldier, How to Sign Up, and What Incentives Are There... @Chongqing Educated Youth The 2022 Conscription Policy Is Here” (什么人可当兵、怎么报名、有啥鼓励措施..... @重庆适龄青年 2022 年征兵政策看这里), Chongqing Municipal People’s Government, December 23, 2021, available at: www.cq.gov.cn.

46. A. Wang, “The New Rules China Hopes Will Build More Professional Soldiers”, *South China Morning Post*, April 30, 2022, available at: www.scmp.com.

precisely to be trained and to move up the social ladder.⁴⁷ Today, they see their prospects for developing in the institution closed off.

Reforming the Status of Military Personnel to Improve the PLA's Attractiveness

To improve the attractiveness of the PLA, several measures have been taken recently to upgrade the status of military personnel. The PRC Law on the Protection of the Status, Rights and Interests of Military Personnel, which took effect on August 1, 2021, promotes and organizes the honoring of military personnel in society.⁴⁸ It also provides for improvement in the social and educational benefits for military personnel and their families (better access to healthcare, housing, education for children, employment for spouses), and especially for families of military personnel who died in service.

This law was followed by the “Interim provisions on medical treatment guarantees for military and military-related personnel”, implemented by the CMC on January 1, 2022.⁴⁹ They include “moderately expanding the scope of medical insurance, reasonably improving the level of medical insurance, and standardizing national medical insurance policy”. Spouses and children (up to 18 years old) of military personnel are now provided with free medical insurance, and parents and parents-in-law of officers as well as NCOs are given preferential medical treatment. Access to healthcare is also simplified by a military (social) security card (军人保障卡).

These new provisions are crucial in the Chinese socio-economic and demographic context. Indeed, because of the poor level of public welfare protection and the gender imbalance that makes it difficult for men to start a family, the social benefits granted to military personnel make them more attractive on the marriage market. It is therefore a strong argument for attracting new recruits to the military. In addition to propaganda aimed at men, leading them to believe that they will find love more easily by joining the army, the PLA deploys intense propaganda targeting women, not to

47. “The Proportion of College Students in Soldiers Continues to Rise: Where Do Soldiers with Low Education Go?” (大学生士兵比例不断攀升，低学历士兵何去何从?), Sina, June 15, 2020, available at: www.sohu.com.

48. “Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Status and Rights and Interests of Military Personnel” (中华人民共和国军人地位和权益保障法), National People's Congress, June 10, 2021, available at: www.npc.gov.cn.

49. “Interpreting the Policy on ‘Interim Provisions on Medical Benefits for Soldiers and Military-Related Personnel’” (《军人及军队相关人员医疗待遇保障暂行规定》政策解读), Ministry of Defense of the PRC, December 29, 2021, available at: www.mod.gov.cn; “A 100-Day Review of the Implementation of the Interim Provisions on the Protection of Medical Benefits for Soldiers and Military-Related Personnel” (《军人及军队相关人员医疗待遇保障暂行规定》实施百日回眸), Ministry of Defense of the PRC, April 15, 2022, available at: www.mod.gov.cn.

recruit them, but to get them to marry a soldier. An impressive number of press articles and blog posts highlight the benefits when a woman marries a military man. On an official CCP online platform dedicated to “Chinese civilization” (中国文明), an entire portal is devoted to “The Most Beautiful Stories of Military Wives”,⁵⁰ listing dozens of testimonies by soldier wives praising their marriage.

The propaganda first emphasizes the romantic dimension of marrying a soldier, a heroic figure in uniform: “Every boy dreams of joining the army and every girl dreams of being a military wife.”⁵¹ However, to attract women, the PLA mainly emphasizes the pragmatic advantages, especially since the 2021 and 2022 reforms. A recent article lists these advantages: a woman does not have to worry about a soldier’s possible criminal record or health problems, since they all pass a political and medical test upon incorporation; a member of the military has a strong ideological background that makes him reliable and loyal to the country as well as to his household; the wife does not have to worry about income, since soldiers receive decent pay and have almost no expenses. In addition, she now receives a stipend of RMB 500 (€70) per month and subsidies that can amount to RMB 5,000 (€700) per month depending on the job, location and distance from the spouse.⁵² Medical care for the wife, children and parents-in-law also add up to a strong incentive, as does children’s education.⁵³ Finally, marrying a military man is the guarantee of a stable and patriotic marriage; it is the honor of “marrying the PLA” (嫁解放军).⁵⁴

To attract priority targets to the military – young graduates – PLA recruiters thoroughly highlight the many benefits of military service. The conscript’s family receives compensation of RMB 12,000 (about €1,700) per year, undergraduates receive compensation of RMB 8,000 (about €1,130) for their tuition, and master’s students receive RMB 12,000. Conscripts admitted to university retain their student status throughout their service and can go back to university up to two years after serving.⁵⁵ In addition, there are strong incentives to remain in the military after service, especially for university graduates. Those with a bachelor’s or master’s degree can directly sit the officer’s examination. After two years of service, soldiers who wish to remain in the army can choose to become NCOs, with priority given to graduates for whom study time is counted as

50. See website (最美军嫂”故事): www.wenming.cn.

51. “Marry a Soldier, You Can Get Rid of a Lot of Real Troubles, See How High the Happiness Index of the Military Wife Is” (嫁给军人, 你可以摆脱很多的现实烦恼, 看军嫂的幸福指数有多高), NetEase, February 13, 2022, available at: www.163.com.

52. Details of the aids are available at: www.dadasou.com.

53. *Ibid.*

54. “Marry the People’s Liberation Army!’ They Came to the Barracks...” (“嫁人就嫁解放军!”她们来到军营.....), *PLA Daily*, November 6, 2019, available at: www.81.cn.

55. It should be noted that admission to university is sanctioned by an examination at the end of high school – the *gaokao* – held in June each year. In 2021, just over 90% of the candidates were admitted.

service time. Finally, graduates can enter NCO school without passing the examination, and for one year only.⁵⁶ Depending on the province, other benefits may be added, such as financial incentives.

The PLA's promotional and outreach efforts are also increasingly targeted at young children. In 2017, the Ministry of Education's "Directive for Initiating Model School Creation Activities for National Defense Education" reinforced the 2001 PRC Law on National Defense Education.⁵⁷ Again, in December 2021, a new joint directive from the Ministry of Education and the CMC accelerated the establishment of model schools for national defense education at primary and secondary levels.⁵⁸ This goes together with the general policy of strengthening ideology, with the mandatory "Xi Jinping Thought" being taught from elementary school to university. This policy of reinforcing patriotism and promoting the army is likely to bear fruit insofar as the Party controls all information and entertainment channels, allowing it to massively diffuse unquestionable propaganda. Thus, it appears that the generations born in the 1990s and 2000s, who are not aware of or were not affected by the events on Tiananmen Square, are more likely to adhere to the ultra-nationalist and anti-Western propaganda that is currently *de rigueur* in China.

Physiological Obstacles to Recruitment and Training: Addiction, Obesity, Nearsightedness

China, like many other countries, is confronted with major societal phenomena, linked to the consumerist society and new technologies, which also directly affect its army. Among these phenomena, internet addiction, obesity and nearsightedness are the subject of much reflection within the PLA.

Internet Addiction

Internet addiction generally includes addiction to online games, pornography, social networking, gambling and compulsive online shopping. In China, much has been said in the literature over the past 15 years about

56. "Who Can Be a Soldier, How to Sign Up, and What Incentives Are There... @Chongqing Educated Youth. The 2022 Conscription Policy Is Here" (什么人可当兵、怎么报名、有啥鼓励措施..... @重庆适龄青年 2022 年征兵政策看这里), *op. cit.*

57. "Circular of the Ministry of Education on Launching Activities for the Establishment of National Defense Education Demonstration Schools in Primary and Secondary Schools" (教育部关于开展中小学国防教育示范学校创建活动的通知), Ministry of Education of the PRC, March 30, 2017, available at: www.moe.gov.cn.

58. "Notice of the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission of the Ministry of Education on Further Doing a Good Job in the Establishment of National Defense Education Demonstration Schools in Primary and Secondary Schools" (教育部中央军委政治工作部关于进一步做好中小学国防教育示范学校创建活动的通知), Ministry of Education of the PRC, December 3, 2021, available at: www.moe.gov.cn.

the effects of Internet addiction on youth and the military. According to the “Statistical Report on Chinese Youth Internet Addiction”, in 2019, 14.1% of young Internet users were addicted to the Internet, which amounts to 24 million people.⁵⁹ Internet addiction leads to behavioral and social disorders as well as academic failure.

The PLA spares no effort to become a leading actor in the treatment of this type of addiction. A leading authority is Prof. Tao Ran (陶然); a former colonel, military psychiatrist and founder in 2005 of the Beijing Internet Addiction Treatment Center (the first of its kind in China), within the General Hospital of the Beijing Military Region, Tao Ran developed the “clinical diagnostic criteria for Internet addiction” in 2008.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, he remains extremely controversial, including in China. He considers Internet addiction to be a mental illness, which he tries to treat with electroshock therapy.⁶¹ He also considers that the only cause of addiction is lack of parental education.⁶²

In the face of what is presented as a social plague among young people, the PLA wants to be seen as a healthy solution. Numerous online articles paint a heroic picture of both socially and academically disengaged Internet-addicted teenagers who have found a meaning to their lives in the army and have become exemplary soldiers.⁶³ Other articles tell the story of military men who escaped from their addiction thanks to their commanding officers.⁶⁴ Internet addiction is thus more of an internal vigilance issue for the PLA, but one that does not yet seem to be considered a barrier to recruitment. Indeed, since the PLA is looking for educated young people who are comfortable with new technologies, Internet addiction is almost considered a necessary evil. Moreover, the PLA has a certain expertise in detoxifying young addicts (aside from the controversial methods of Tao Ran).

59. “Chinese Youth Internet Addiction Data Report 200 words” (中国青少年网瘾数据报告 200 字), Zuoyang Youxue Education Network (左养右学教育网), May 8, 2022, available at: www.bnfrf.com.

60. “Photo Story | Internet Addicted Teenager” (图片故事 | 网瘾少年), *Southern People Weekly* (南方人物周刊), January 3, 2018, available at: www.nfpeople.com.

61. “Can Internet Addiction be ‘Cured’? Whether Internet Addiction Is a Mental Illness Is Full of Controversy” (网瘾能“治”吗? 网瘾是否属于精神疾病充满争议), *China News*, November 2, 2016, available at: www.chinanews.com.cn.

62. “Science Life: What Are the Symptoms of Internet Addiction?” (科学生活: 有哪些症状才算患上网络成瘾病?), Central Government of the PRC (中华人民共和国中央人民政府), November 12, 2008, available at: www.gov.cn.

63. “Sun Yuzhong: ‘Transformed from an Internet Addicted Teenager’ to the New Era Military Demeanor at the Hong Kong Guard Exhibition” (孙玉钟: 从网瘾少年“变身”香江卫士 展新时代军人风采), IPTV, December 10, 2020, available at: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com>; “From ‘Internet Addicted Teenager’ to Iron Warrior: Growth and Acceleration on the Plateau” (从“网瘾少年”到钢铁战士: 成长, 在高原加速), *PLA Daily*, May 7, 2021, available at: <https://m.gmw.cn>.

64. “Continue to Write the New Style of the Red Army! From an Internet Addict to an Armed Police Soldier, What Has This Teenager Experienced?” (续写红军新风采! 从网瘾少年到武警战士, 这位少年都经历了什么?), *Zhejiang News*, December 20, 2020, available at: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com>.

Obesity

There is growing debate in China on how to manage the phenomenon of overweight in the army. As a matter of fact, China faces an “obesity epidemic”, especially among children.⁶⁵ This phenomenon has long been neglected, and will arise increasingly in the PLA.

There are two types of obesity in China. The first is related to poverty, the second to the “new rich” (前现代的「富态」) phenomenon. The latter, which first affected urban areas more than ten years ago, is slowly spreading to rural areas. In a culture where fat is traditionally well perceived, stoutness is seen as an outward sign of social success.⁶⁶

The PLA seems to be developing awareness of the problem and has been adapting its fitness standards for several years. In early 2015 the CMC published the “Military Sports Training Reform and Development Plan 2015-2020”. It envisions a gradual upgrade of “military sports training” (军事体育训练), to be differentiated from the practice of sports by the military. Military sports training must now be part of a real combat perspective, serve each unit’s own operational interests, and be conducted in a “scientific” manner. Thus, it must allow for the professionalization of the soldier’s relationship with military sports and raise the physical fitness level of the troops. However, a training manager from the CMC pointed out in 2015 the lack of qualified trainers to systematize military sports training across the entire armed forces.

The Plan also calls for “the gradual implementation of weight control for soldiers throughout the army”,⁶⁷ based on the Body Mass Index (BMI) by age group. This weight control does not appear to apply to military service, for which the BMI must be below 30 for men – even though the obesity level set in China is 28, and the overweight level is 24.⁶⁸

The 2015 Plan was further strengthened by the 2018 “Military Training Plan”, which emphasizes combat readiness and the ability to fight and win

65. N. Zhang and G. Ma, “Childhood Obesity in China: Trends, Risk Factors, Policies and Actions”, *Global Health Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 2018, available at: www.sciencedirect.com.

66. “The People’s Liberation Army Declares War on Fat People, and It Is Difficult for Fat People to Be Promoted!” (解放军向胖子宣战,肥胖难以晋升!为什么中国大胖子数量不多), *Special Warfare House* (特战之家), June 14, 2017, available at: www.163.com.

67. “Military Sports Experts Interpret the ‘Outline for the Reform and Development of Military Sports Training (2015-2020)’” (军事体育专家解读《军事体育训练改革发展纲要(2015-2020年)》), *PLA Daily*, February 16, 2016, available at: <http://cpc.people.com.cn>.

68. “The People’s Liberation Army Declares War on Fat People, and It Is Difficult for Fat People to Be Promoted!” (解放军向胖子宣战,肥胖难以晋升!为什么中国大胖子数量不多), *op. cit.*

battles, including against “strong enemies”, in line with Xi Jinping’s “thinking on strengthening the military”.⁶⁹

Nearsightedness

Nearsightedness is a much more massive phenomenon than the two previous ailments and perhaps even more difficult to ease or stamp out. In China, official figures indicate that half of the population – 700 million people – are affected by nearsightedness. The numbers are rising, especially among children and adolescents who are the most affected.⁷⁰

While nearsightedness has long been a disqualifying criterion for a military career, authorities have been forced to relax recruitment criteria in the face of an endemic societal phenomenon. The PLA is now working to demystify the handicap of nearsightedness in the armed forces. The main line of argument (contrary to the problem of overweight) is that war is nowadays more often fought from afar, with the use of complex machines, than in close combat. Once again, the easing of selection criteria is directly linked to the desire to attract highly qualified personnel (those who have studied for a long period and are thus even more likely to be short-sighted). The stated logic is that, “as long as you study hard and adapt to modern combat weapons, the doors to the military will always be open”.⁷¹

Even the Air Force and the Navy’s Naval Air Force lowered, around 2018, their pilot selection standard on visual acuity: the requirement for 10/10 vision was lowered to 8/10 minimum. According to some sources, recruiting pilots had become a real struggle. Finding non-myopic candidates was a challenge, and those who had correct vision could have other eliminatory physical deficiencies. There are reportedly about 400 new fighter aircrafts entering service each year. One aircraft requires a crew of two to three pilots, which represents a need for 800 new pilots each year. Given their short careers, the PLA has a need for approximately 1,000 new pilots each year. The Air Force and Navy have therefore decided to lower the mandatory visual acuity level, in order to give priority to raising the

69. “The Leaders of the Training Management Department of the Military Commission Answer Reporters’ Questions about the Issuance of the New Military Training Program” (军委训练管理部领导就颁发新军事训练大纲有关情况答记者问), Ministry of Defense of the PRC (中华人民共和国国防部), February 1, 2018, available at: www.mod.gov.cn.

70. “Of the 1.4 Billion Chinese, Half Are Estimated to Be Short-Sighted” (14 亿中国人, 估计一半是近视眼), *Beijing News* (新京报), June 7, 2020, available at: www.bjnews.com.cn.

71. “National Myopia Will Exceed 700 Million, What to Do Then with the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Conscript” (全国近视眼将超过 7 亿, 中国解放军征兵, 到时候怎么办), *Sohu.com*, October 5, 2019, available at: www.sohu.com.

qualification and training level of pilots for increasingly high-performance and technical aircraft.⁷²

Lastly, we observe the development of refractive surgery in Chinese military hospitals, and in particular their provision of femtosecond lasers. The reason for this is the high rate of nearsightedness among soldiers, even if surgery on the scale of the entire army remains illusory and costly.⁷³

72. "Nearsighted People Can Also Pilot Fighter Jets! The People's Liberation Army Lowers the Standard of Vision of Pilots, But They Must Be a Scholar" (近视眼也能开战斗机了! 解放军降低飞行员视力标准, 但必须是学霸), *Baidu*, October 7, 2018, available at: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com>.

73. "The Refractive Correction Center of the Department of Ophthalmology of the People's Liberation Army General Hospital Was Officially Established" (解放军总医院眼科医学部屈光矫治中心正式成立), *Baidu*, June 7, 2022, available at: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com>.

Conclusion

Since Xi Jinping's access to power, PLA reform has been methodical and gradual, with clear objectives: to build a modern, combat-ready, world-class army capable of denying access to any army in its regional environment, of projecting forces and of confronting high-intensity conflicts globally.

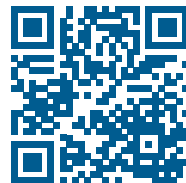
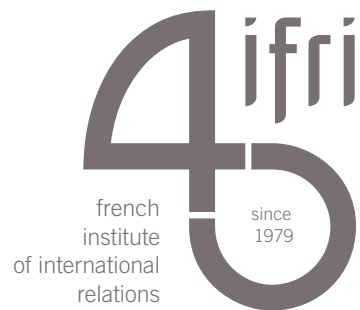
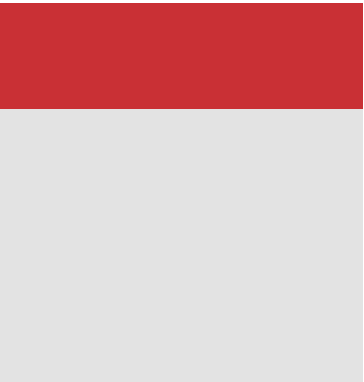
However, it faces problems of recruitment and attractiveness among educated youth, slowing down its modernization in the short term. In the medium term, the structural demographic challenge is likely to weigh on the PLA in general, and on budgets, wages and attractiveness in particular.

The overriding operational goal is unification with Taiwan. Just as he brutally brought the people of Xinjiang to heel and took back control of Hong Kong, Xi Jinping wants to be the man who completes the unification of China initiated by Mao.

Given the pace of the quantitative and qualitative development of the PLA's equipment, the optimizing of the organization of its forces and the improvement in training of its troops, China should have all the material capacities necessary to undertake military action against Taiwan by 2027.

One outstanding issue, however, concerns the operational value of Chinese troops and the strength of their ideological commitment, in the context, for instance, of a high-intensity conflict.

The domestic environment in China, however, remains relatively volatile, and will be especially so over the next five years. The economic prospects are particularly worrisome, especially in light of the demographic crisis. It is difficult to anticipate the consequences of a major economic upheaval in China on the stability of the Taiwan Strait. It is conceivable that the authorities could suspend their irredentist plans and concentrate on internal stability (with the assistance of the armed forces), but also that launching an offensive would provide a diversionary tactic to channel popular resentment and nationalism outwards.



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