

PERSONNEL OF THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY



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Abstract

This report conducts an in-depth assessment of various personnel-related topics in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), as requested by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC). Information is drawn primarily from open-source research and analysis of Chinese documents, regulations, newspaper articles, and books, as well as from authoritative secondary sources. Topics include PLA personnel quality and shortfalls, challenges the PLA faces in improving personnel quality, recruiting and retention of quality personnel, desired education and expertise, conscription vs. voluntary recruitment, morale, combat readiness, personnel socioeconomic makeup, and the role of politics in the PLA.

Among the key findings, this report suggests that Xi Jinping has continued doubts about personnel competence and loyalty since becoming the Chairman of the Central Military Commission in 2012, and thus has focused on both force modernization and Party loyalty. Despite this emphasis, many commanders are still judged as incapable of properly assessing situations, making operational decisions, deploying forces, or leading forces in a modern, joint, informationized war. Regarding loyalty, political officers and Party Committees within the PLA are emphasized as the key conduit for ensuring Party control. As the Secretary of the unit's Party Committee, these political officers play a key role in unit affairs, including in personnel issues and day to day training and operations, but oftentimes struggle to play a productive role in the latter. Improving political officer operational knowledge, making political officers an asset rather than a liability in the command tent, appears to be an ongoing concern of the PLA.

Since 2009, the PLA has emphasized recruitment of college-educated and more technically proficient personnel at all levels. It has had success in recruiting more educated personnel, though it continues to face serious challenges with retention and proper utilization of talent. The PLA has also worked to improve the professionalism of its non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps through a range of new initiatives, with the goal of increasing NCO responsibilities and allowing NCOs to take over billets previously held by junior officers. Further, significant changes have been made to improve training and standardize bases and academic institutions, while basic training times have nearly doubled. Most significantly, in 2021 the PLA shifted from a single conscription cycle per year to two cycles per year, with the aim of eliminating uneven levels of unit combat-readiness at certain times of the year. While progress has been uneven, the sum of these initiatives is likely to produce a PLA that is more educated, professionalized, and technically proficient in the coming years.

Key Findings

This report conducts an in-depth assessment of various personnel-related topics in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), as requested by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC). The report reached the following conclusions:

- As part of their overarching goal of creating a PLA able to “fight and win,” Chinese leaders have in recent years expressed ongoing concerns about a lack of personnel who are both competent and technically skilled, as well as being loyal, obedient, and uncorrupted. Personnel modernization has received attention in many of China's major strategic and policy documents, and Xi Jinping has placed PLA personnel modernization in the context of his goal of achieving the basic modernization of the military by 2035 and transforming the PLA into a world-class force by mid-century. Many commanders are still judged as incapable of properly assessing situations, making operational decisions, deploying forces, or leading forces in a modern, joint, informationized war. Xi has called for improved “scientific literacy and technological know-how” to improve technical skills in the force.
- While the Party has in recent years declared victory over military corruption and have slowed their anti-corruption campaign, it is unclear if this has actually changed the culture of pervasive corruption in the PLA. By the time Xi Jinping had come to power in 2012, corruption in the PLA was pervasive and systemic at all levels, including amongst the senior-most leadership. China's top leaders also worried about Party control over the military. These concerns over an “out of control” PLA rose to the point of questioning whether it would be able to perform and execute its missions when called upon. Following a major crackdown, Xi declared victory over corruption in 2018. It remains to be seen whether this has fundamentally changed the underlying factors that lead to corruption, which has included bribery in exchange for promotions or graft in procurement processes, or if it has pushed it into remission. The Party seems to share this worry, as it has extended the anti-corruption campaign indefinitely.
- The PLA has made significant reforms to its training system in recent years. Most significantly, in 2021 it switched to a two-cycle annual conscription system. Prior to 2021, all conscripts who completed their service departed on the same day that new conscripts arrived for their basic training. As a result, all units were short staffed for a period of several months, until the new personnel had completed their basic training. This caused significant problems with combat readiness, especially for branches which were more reliant on conscripts. By shifting from one to two conscription cycles per year, the PLA hopes to alleviate this issue, but it is too soon to tell whether it has been successful, and initial evidence suggests that it is still struggling to adjust to the new system. It has also made other notable reforms, including creating dedicated training units with full-time drill instructors, likely providing a more standardized basic training regime.
- The PLA's efforts to recruit a more educated enlisted force overall appear to be succeeding, even if they have not always met the PLA's high recruitment targets. By 2020, almost 57% of personnel had at least some post-secondary education, versus approximately 51% in 2010 and 47% in 2000. The PLA has attracted these personnel by offering increasingly generous pay and benefits. The PLA has made particular efforts to attract more college students and graduates from civilian science, technology, and engineering backgrounds. It has also emphasized cutting-edge skills for which there is an urgent need, recruiting more students to study areas such as aerospace, radar, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), missile

technology, and maritime science to fill specific billets that require these specialties, while de-emphasizing more traditional fields such as infantry and artillery. However, there also are reports that these troops are oftentimes not efficiently utilized once recruited, with many personnel neither being used properly or receiving sufficient support once in their billets.¹ This perceived lack of support has resulted in personnel retention problems, as recruits oftentimes come to feel that their expertise is improperly utilized. The PLA is also increasingly emphasizing direct recruitment of civilian college graduates, with a focus on science and technology, and assigning them directly to operational units. However, a major initiative to educate future officers at civilian academic institutions has apparently failed and been scrapped, due to an inability to properly integrate and utilize these officers.

- While the PLA has been successful at recruiting a more educated volunteer force, it is unlikely to switch to a purely volunteer force in the near future. It will continue to conscript high school and ninth grade-educated* personnel where it fails to fill voluntary quotas.
- The PLA has made significant changes to its non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps, gradually empowering it to take on greater responsibilities. NCOs now frequently man billets previously held by junior officers. The PLA has begun new partnerships with civilian academic institutions to provide education to NCOs, as well as directly recruiting civilians with in-demand technical skills as NCOs. While anecdotal evidence suggests these NCOs often struggle to adjust to military life, both programs have been expanded in recent years, indicating good results. It has also begun a Master Chief program to further empower NCOs, but evidence suggests this program has failed to live up to expectations.
- While the PLA has had success recruiting college-educated enlisted personnel, limited evidence suggests it has been less successful retaining them beyond their two-year enlistment. Some college-educated recruits have trouble adjusting to the harsh realities of military life, resent being treated the same as their less-educated counterparts, and feel the PLA isn't giving them a platform to use their skills. Limited evidence suggests that the majority do not choose to stay on as NCOs.
- Personal problems frequently faced by PLA personnel include difficulty finding a partner, limited leave, and distance from family. Other practical problems for personnel include limitations on who is allowed to live on base, having to get permission to marry, and family members of personnel with rural hukou (household registration) being unable to find housing near bases in urban areas.
- Political work is a key component of the PLA and is the primary avenue for Party control over the military. Political officers are responsible for both political education and maintaining unit morale and discipline, while also holding a leadership role as the secretary of their unit's Party Committee. Political officers not only make decisions on promotions, career advancement, and who to trust with power, but can also remove officers seen as violating Party rule and punish dereliction of duty. Political officers are also involved in personal issues, such as helping with soldiers' home-lives or adjusting to military life, to ensure these issues do not affect combat readiness. Their role in the unit can be categorized as equal parts Party whip, chaplain, and social worker, simultaneously responsible for ideological discipline, political and moral education, and personnel wellbeing.
- Despite typically beginning their careers as command officers, political officers oftentimes struggle with operations and command, and the PLA has in recent years heavily

* Ninth grade continues to be the highest level of compulsory education offered in most rural areas of the PRC.

emphasized improving political officer operational capabilities, hoping to make them an asset rather than a liability in the command tent. Political officers' role as secretary of the unit Party Committee, which is responsible for collectively approving operational decisions unless in an emergency, as well as their responsibility to take command should the commander be incapacitated, necessitates a high degree of operational skill and expertise.* Further, during peacetime, the political officer can override the commander on operational and training decisions. Despite this, political officers are oftentimes found to be deficient in even basic operational skills. This appears to be an ongoing problem, and the PLA likely remains unsatisfied with political officer operational capabilities. Despite giving commanders greater latitude to act unilaterally in wartime, the political officers' central role in unit decision-making has the potential to introduce a layer of bureaucratic inefficiency and lead to slowdowns and hesitancy in operational matters.

Section 1: Recommendations

1) Congress should consider helping fund the establishment of a single organization that can access and pay for all current PLA publications, and each publication should then be made available in digital form to the full analytic community. One of the keys to understanding the PLA and its personnel is having access to PLA primary sources, including newspapers, journals, books, and websites. Prior to late 2018, most organizations looking at the PLA, including government organizations, think tanks, and for-profit and non-profit companies, had relatively easy access to these sources. However, in late 2018, the PLA cut off access to most of those publications, even though they are not classified. Although some organizations have limited access to at least some, but not all, of those publications, the cost has increased appreciably and each organization must pay for them individually. In addition, when the United States Government's (USG) Open Source Center became the Open Source Enterprise in 2015, it cut off access to most outside organizations. However, the USG relies heavily on non-government organizations to provide information and analysis of the PLA based on open-source material. Thus, such access is crucial.

2) While the current state of U.S.-China bilateral relations is not conducive to exchanges in this area, Congress should work with the Department of Defense to reestablish Track 1.5 and 2.0 military dialogues with China if conditions support. China and the United States previously had multiple forums for exchanging military-related information, including Track 1 (government-to-government), Track 1.5 (non-government dialogue with some quasi-government or government participation), and Track 2.0 (non-government) dialogues. However, almost all of these have disappeared in recent years, likely in part due to worsening bilateral relations and the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the United States has lost access to valuable information concerning the PLA, including educational and promotion pathways, how unit leaders are chosen, and the success of reform initiatives. Given the increasingly closed nature of China's information sphere, properly planned and managed interactions could be enormously helpful in better understanding the inner workings of the PLA. Congress could help solve this problem by funding Track 1.5 and 2.0 engagements across the full spectrum, including think tanks and academics to discuss not only policy issues at the highest level but also personnel issues down to the lowest level.

* Importantly, the commander is tasked with implementing the Party Committee's operational decisions, and, as the second-ranked member on the Party Committee, has a strong voice when providing decisions. While there is an obligation to abide by the Party Committee's decisions except in an emergency, what constitutes an "emergency" is not specified and can have a high degree of interpretation, presumably giving the commander a high degree of autonomy during wartime.

3) As a follow-up to this report, Congress should fund a detailed report that examines the annual training cycle for each service, force, and branch, to better understand the time between the arrival of new PLA personnel and the achievement of basic combat effectiveness, as well as the key weakness in the PLA that this creates. In 2021, the PLA switched to a two-cycle annual conscription system. Notably, some branches, such as the Army's Infantry, the Navy's Marine Corps, and the Air Force's Airborne Corps, are heavily dependent on two-year conscripts, and lose one-quarter of all their conscripts at the same time twice a year. It takes three to five months to replace them with new conscripts following basic training. Furthermore, all new officers who attend a military academic institution graduate around July 1 and are assigned to their operational units with virtually no operational experience. As such, the PLA is not necessarily prepared to conduct full combat operations all year round, a vulnerability that deserves further examination.

4) Following the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, Congress should provide funding for a new conference on the PLA, as well as an accompanying publication within the following year that examines the PLA's current structure following the 2016 reorganization. In 2002, RAND published a book entitled *PLA as Organization*, which was based on a conference held in 2000. In 2012, Defense Group Inc. held a conference on *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, which was published in 2014 and posted online in 2015. However, no such publication has emerged since the PLA's 2016 reorganization, leaving a gap in in-depth research and discussion on the PLA's structure.

Section 2: Key Sources and Terminology

This section covers key primary and secondary sources used in this report, as well as a number of key terms used throughout.

Most of this report is based on analysis of original primary source material, including information from the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Ministry of National Defense (MND) and official PLA websites, as well as the PRC State Council Information Office's *Defense White Papers* (1995 to 2019) and official PLA newspapers and journals such as the *PLA Daily*, *China Armed Forces*, and service specific journals including *People's Navy*, *Navy Today*, *Air Force News*, *China Air Force*, *Rocket Force News*, etc. The websites *Zhengbing Xinxi Wang* (征兵信息网) (www.zhengbing.cc), and its now-defunct apparent predecessor *Daxuesheng Zhengbing Xinxi Wang* (大学生征兵信息网) (<http://www.0730hao.cn/index.html>), unofficial or semi-official sites with information on PLA recruitment, were also useful primary sources for information on recruitment at the local and provincial levels. Further, since the PRC was established in 1949, the PLA has implemented several military laws and regulations, some of which are publicly available and were consulted for this report. Most recently, in January 2021, CMC Chairman Xi Jinping issued 12 new documents, including the *Interim Regulations on the Management of Active-duty Military Officers* (现役军官管理暂行条例), which included a lengthy online article about the content.² Unfortunately, no information is currently available on the other 11 documents.³

Another key source was Ken Allen's correspondence with several experts in the field of PLA studies, including Dennis Blasko, Marcus Clay, Brendan Mulvaney, Daniel Salisbury, Derek Solen, Eli Yin-shan Huang, Joel Wuthnow, John Corbett, David Finkelstein, Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise, and analysts from TextOre, as well as discussions at the National Ground Intelligence Center (NGIC) and National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC).⁴

Other key secondary sources included *70 Years of the PLA Air Force* by Kenneth W. Allen and Cristina L. Garafola; "People Win Wars: The PLA Enlisted Force, and Other Related Matters"

by Marcus Clay and Dennis J. Blasko; “People Win Wars: A 2022 Reality Check on PLA Enlisted Force and Related Matters,” by Marcus Clay, Dennis J. Blasko, and Roderick Lee; *The People’s Liberation Army’s 37 Academic Institutions* by Kenneth W. Allen and Mingzhi Chen; *Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications* by Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders; *Gray Dragons: Assessing China’s Senior Military Leadership* by Joel Wuthnow; *Thoughts on the Reorganization and Reform of the PLA* and *Get Ready for the Second Phase of Chinese Military Reform* by David Finkelstein; and *The People of the PLA 2.0* edited by Roy D. Kamphausen. Another outstanding foreign source is Japan’s National Institute for Defense Studies’ (NIDS) annual reports on the PLA.⁵ Of note, the equivalent annual U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) *Report to Congress on the PLA* rarely mentions personnel issues.

Key Terms

It is important to identify and explain some key terms and concepts, as certain PLA terms do not necessarily mean the same thing as they do for the U.S. military. According to the 2021 Military Service Law (and its predecessors in 1984 and 1998), “the People’s Republic of China practices a military service system which combines conscripts with volunteers.”⁶ However, it can be difficult to parse between enlisted personnel who are mandatorily conscripted and those who enlisted by choice, as all enlisted personnel are referred to as “conscripts” (义务兵), “new soldiers” (新兵), or simply “soldiers” (士兵 or 战士) during their two-year service period, regardless of how they joined.⁷ Further, the terms *zhengbing* (征兵) and *zhengji* (征集) are used interchangeably to refer to the processes of “conscription,” “enlistment,” and “recruitment.”

Those who remain on active duty after their two-year enlistment period are traditionally referred to as “volunteers” (志愿兵) as well as NCOs (士官 or 军士) regardless of whether they hold leadership responsibilities or not.⁸ In 2022, the PLA began using *junshi* (军士), a more traditional Chinese term for NCO, rather than *shiguan* (士官), or “officer of soldiers,” a Chinese translation used for Western NCO systems. All officers (军官) are also called cadre (干部).

Section 3: Report Scope and Limitations

The report is organized around seven topics: PLA force size and composition, Chinese leadership’s concerns about PLA personnel, the effects of political elements within the PLA, and the PLA’s conscript force, NCO corps, and officer corps, as well as a discussion of benefits and salary. The report also provides recommendations for the USCC, as well as several key findings. Interwoven among these topics are six questions that drove the research. These key questions are 1) what Chinese leaders assess to be the most significant shortfalls in PLA personnel quality; 2) what initiatives the PLA has undertaken to address its personnel challenges, particularly since the 2015 military reorganization; 3) what types of education or expertise the PLA most prizes in its recruits, and how successfully is it recruiting Chinese citizens with that background; 4) the hybrid conscription-volunteer system the PLA services use to recruit enlisted personnel; 5) how personnel issues affect the PLA services’ recruitment, retention, morale, and combat readiness; and 6) the structure and impact of the PLA’s political commissar system on personnel issues.

* For example, the PRC’s 2004 *Defense White Paper* translated the terms as conscription, the 2006 *Defense White Paper* translated them as enlistment, and 2010 *Defense White Paper* translated them as recruitment. The 2002, 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2019 *Defense White Papers* did not have an entry for either term. The 1998 *Military Service Law* translates the term as enlistment. Note that neither term was found in the *PLA Military Terminology* dictionary, Second Edition, 2011. *Zhengbing* is translated as “conscription” and *zhengji* is translated as “recruit” in *The Chinese-English English-Chinese Military Dictionary* [英汉汉英军事大辞典], (Beijing: Xueyuan Press, November 2011), 636.

Although the authors tried to address every question, some answers were not readily available, particularly answers regarding the efficacy or assessment of individual reforms. While the PLA does sometimes offer frank high-level assessments of specific problems, including mental health and refusal to serve, it is far more common for it to either stay quiet about, or attempt to put a positive spin on, many of the issues it faces in public-facing media. Thus, it is necessary to *infer* significance based upon certain metrics, such as the frequency with which a problem is discussed in PLA media, potentially signaling that the problem remains salient and unresolved.

Further, the PLA is not transparent about even the most basic demographics, including the number of personnel by service or branch, numbers of officers, conscripts, or NCOs, rank/grade, or voluntary enlistment versus mandatory conscription, leaving only sparse and anecdotal evidence with which to work. China's decennial census does provide some basic military demographic information, including age, gender, education, and ethnicity. One key area which was of interest to the Commission was force retention, or how well the PLA is finding and keeping quality personnel. Unfortunately, the PLA has not made available any comprehensive data on this subject, forcing the authors to infer answers based on occasional oblique anecdotes.

Finally, most of this report is based on open-source PLA writings, but access to hard-copy sources, including books, journals, and newspapers, has been limited since the PLA cut off access for foreigners starting in late 2018. As a result, most of the available open-source PLA material today comes from information available on the internet. Another source of information that has disappeared over the past few years is the opportunity for direct discussions with PLA personnel, including visits by faculty and students from U.S. military academic institutions to China, and vice versa, as well as Track 2 exchanges.

Section 4: PLA Force Size and Composition

This section provides information about the current structure and number of personnel in the PLA. Of particular note, while rough approximations are available, the PLA does not publish more granular info relating to the number of personnel by service/branch/force, Theater Command, or officer and enlisted personnel ranks/grades.^{9*} However, analysts have gathered sufficient data to estimate the number of personnel by service and role (conscripts, NCOs, and officers).

Size, Structure, and Force Reductions

By law, the Chinese Armed Forces are composed of the following three components: 1) the People's Liberation Army, which currently consists of approximately two million personnel and is composed of active-duty officers, civilian cadres, non-commissioned officers (NCOs),[†] and conscripts, 2) the People's Armed Police Force (PAP), and 3) the People's Militia.¹⁰ The PLA is comprised of both active-duty and reserve personnel and units (most of whom are civilians and serve only part-time in uniform). In addition, the PLA created a new civilian personnel system in

* For comparison purposes, the US Air Force Association publishes an annual *Air Force and Space Force Almanac* that provides detailed information for the US Air Force and Space Force, including number of personnel by education level, ethnicity, marital status, race, sex, rank, specialty code, and pay, and number of personnel assigned to each base. It also has a table for all other branches.

† Although the US military uses the term noncommissioned, the PLA uses non-commissioned. In the U.S. military, NCOs are appointed by and receive their authority from a commissioned officer as the administrative apparatus and to supervise enlisted soldiers and aid the commissioned officer corps. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and every branch of the military has a senior enlisted member, and every military HQ has a senior enlisted advisor to the commander. PLA NCO responsibilities are somewhat similar to the U.S. military, including implementing the commander's decisions, training new enlisted personnel, and conducting technical duties. However, they also differ in certain areas. For example, the PLA does not have any senior enlisted advisors above the brigade level. This is further discussed in Section 8, on the NCO Corps.

2005. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) *2022 Military Balance*, the PLA currently has a total of 2,035,000 personnel, and is likely broken down as follows: Army (PLAA) (965,000), Navy (PLAN) (260,000), Air Force (PLAAF) (395,000), Rocket Force (PLARF) (120,000), Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) (145,000), and others (150,000).¹¹

Today, the PLA consists of three active-duty components: officers/cadres, enlisted personnel (NCOs and conscripts), and civilian cadres.* Although the PLA has not provided a breakdown, Clay and Blasko estimate that officers and civilian cadres now number approximately 450,000 personnel (23%), NCOs 850,000 (42%), and two-year conscripts approximately 700,000 (35%).^{12†} This means that one-half of the conscript force, which has been reduced from 400,000 to 350,000 under the new system,¹³ arrive and depart at the same time each year, clearly impacting the PLA's training cycle (discussed in Section 7). Although this report does not discuss the PAP, the PAP also brings in about 110,000 new enlisted conscripts each year.¹⁴

Since the PRC's founding, the PLA has undergone 11 force reductions, in 1950, 1952, 1953, 1957, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1997, 2003, and 2016, going from a force of 4.6 million in May 1950 to 2 million in 2016.¹⁵ It will most likely see another force reduction in the late 2020s or early 2030s. Recent force reductions have been aimed at reducing unit headquarters size to increase efficiency and better optimizing the ratio of officers to enlisted.¹⁶ These reductions have also been aimed at transitioning the PLA from an emphasis on *quantity* – that is, relatively poorly trained massed manpower – to *quality* – that is, well-trained personnel capable of utilizing high-tech equipment and carrying out complex, “informationized” joint operations.

The more recent reductions (including the most recent in 2016) have primarily targeted the officer corps, which has historically been a severely bloated structure, constituting roughly 50% of the total force well into the late 1990s.[‡] This is because officers cannot retire until they reach their maximum age, leading to a significant number of excess officers “running out the clock” to retirement. Thus, the 2016 reduction was likely conceived to further reduce the excess of unneeded officers and streamline the PLA's force structure as it transitioned to the new joint Theater Command system. In addition, the latest reduction reduced the size and domination of the Army, allowing the PLA to better balance the Army with the other services in both size and influence.

Although the PLA has about 700,000 conscripts, they are not evenly divided among the services, forces, and branches. For example, the Army's Infantry Branch, Navy's Marine Corps Branch, and the Air Force's Airborne and Air Defense Branches have a much higher proportion of conscripts to NCOs than the Navy's Surface and Submarine Branches or the service Aviation branches, which consists mostly of NCOs.¹⁷ Although it has never been explicitly stated, the primary reason for this discrepancy is most likely that the PLAAF and PLAN have a higher percentage of billets requiring enlisted personnel with technical skills than do the ground forces.¹⁸ In accordance with the 2021 Military Service Law, all PLA officers join voluntarily.¹⁹

Section 5: Chinese Leaders' Concerns about PLA Personnel

This section provides an overview of the PRC leadership's main concerns with its armed forces and its responses to such issues. As Chinese President and CMC Chairman Xi Jinping has

* The Civilian Personnel program is slowly replacing the Civilian Cadre program, with some cadres being shifted into this new system. However, unlike Civilian Cadre, Civilian Personnel are not considered part of the 2 million active-duty force.

† By comparison, the U.S. military consists of approximately 18% officers, 38% NCOs, and 43% junior enlisted personnel. See: *Congressional Research Service* “Defense Primer: Military Enlisted Personnel,” December 1, 2021. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF10684.pdf>.

‡ Notably, the creation of a professional NCO corps in the late 1990s also began to reduce the size of both the officer and the conscript force.

repeatedly stated since coming to power in 2012,²⁰ Chinese leaders’* overriding concern is the ability of PLA personnel to “fight and win” wars. To this end, Chinese leadership has in recent years expressed ongoing concerns about both a lack of competent and technically skilled, and to a lesser extent, loyal, obedient, and uncorrupted personnel. This has particularly applied to officers and their ability to conduct joint operations. Following various measures to address these problems over the past decade, the CCP appears to no longer view the state of corruption and loyalty in the military as an urgent threat based on public statements of success in the anti-corruption campaign by Xi and other top leaders, though the campaign continues as of late 2022 and shows no signs of stopping. However, continued official criticisms and efforts indicate a lack of effectiveness in addressing other personnel issues, in particular with effective leadership and joint command.

Leadership Statements on Personnel Quality

The push to improve PLA personnel quality long predates the rise of Xi Jinping. For example, at a 1996 CMC meeting, then-leader Jiang Zemin stated that “high-tech equipment cannot be improved at once, but training talented personnel must come first. It is better to let talented personnel wait for equipment than equipment wait for talented personnel.”²¹ However, Xi has successfully amassed and consolidated his power in a way that his predecessors never did, allowing him to more vigorously pursue reforms and attack widespread corruption in the PLA.²²

From day one, Xi has been clear about the necessity of improving personnel quality, repeatedly stressing the role of personnel “talent”[†] in strengthening the PLA. At a November 2021 CMC personnel work conference, Xi stated that “talent holds the key to advancing the high-quality development of the Chinese armed forces, achieving victory in military competition, and gaining the upper hand in future wars.”²³ Elsewhere, he has laid out the importance of personnel for the PLA, saying that “success in building a powerful military lies in capable military personnel,” and emphasizing that “we need to attach greater importance to the training of officers and professionals.”²⁴ A 2016 book of Xi’s thinking on national defense emphasized the crucial role of personnel from the bottom up, stating that “without grassroots officers and soldiers, no strategy, no matter how magnificent, can be realized, and no weapons or equipment, no matter how advanced, can work.”²⁵ In addition, on the eve of the 95th anniversary of the founding of the PLA, Xi said that improving personnel quality is “of great significance to realizing the Party’s goal of strengthening the military in the new era and building it into a world-class military.”²⁶

In his reports to the 19th and 20th Party Congresses (2017 and 2022), the CCP’s highest-level political gathering, Xi placed PLA personnel modernization in the context of his goal of achieving the basic modernization of the military by 2035 and transforming the PLA into a world-class force by mid-century.²⁷ When listing priorities for force modernization, Xi listed personnel modernization after military theory and organization, but before weapons and equipment modernization.²⁸ His speeches also included lists of on-going tasks for the military, including enhancing the political loyalty of the military and strengthening the military through reform, science, and technology. In 2019, Xi began mentioning improved personnel training as a key way of strengthening the military.²⁹ This was also included in his 2022 Party Congress report, indicating the growing importance of personnel quality in Xi’s eyes.

More specifically, since 2019 Xi has spoken of “the need to cultivate a new type of high-quality and professional military personnel” who are “competent, professional, and possess both integrity and ability.”³⁰ Such phrasing has been used repeatedly by Xi as well as CMC Vice

* Chiefly Xi Jinping, as well as the CMC and other top CCP and PLA personnel.

† The term used is 人才, which state media translate as “personnel” or “talent” (or more rarely, “professional”) in the context of the military.

Chairmen Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia.³¹ Official media has defined these qualities as follows: *High-quality* means having a global vision, adapting to the requirements of the times, and being able to participate in the strengthening of the military. *Professional* means having the professional qualities required for the position. Finally, “*possessing both integrity and ability*” means being both politically reliable and technically skilled.³² In addition, the *PLA Daily* and other state media have defined “high quality” personnel, especially commanders, as those who “understand combat, are proficient in jointness, and excel at command.”³³ The PLA thus seeks personnel who are both politically reliable as well as educated and able to quickly grasp new concepts in a demanding and rapidly changing environment, including for command and joint operations.

As part of his strategy for “strengthening the military through personnel cultivation in the new era,”³⁴ Xi has called for “great efforts to improve the scientific literacy and technological know-how of military personnel to improve their ability to fight and win modern wars.”^{35*} He has also declared that “the cultivation and development of military talent for joint operations command, new combat forces, high-level scientific and technological innovation, and high-quality strategic management” must be ensured.³⁶

Beyond improving personnel quality, Xi has also repeatedly emphasized the importance of cultivating loyalty and obedience to the Party, as well as sound “morals.” For example, he has spoken of the need to train “competent officers who are loyal to our Party and our people, have moral integrity, and demonstrate a keen sense of responsibility,” in addition to being “outstanding professionals who are resolved to strengthen the military and win wars.”³⁷

Problems with Personnel Quality

Command Issues

Commander capabilities have received special attention from PRC leadership. At a speech at the PLA National Defense University (NDU) in 2016, Xi admitted to a scarcity of personnel who know how to fight and command, especially with regard to joint operations, and stated that this significantly restricts the PLA’s ability to fight and win wars.³⁸ He added that it was urgently necessary to improve the command capabilities of commanders and staff officers. However, Xi also stated that the PLA hasn’t fought a war in a long time, and in particular hasn’t conducted joint combat operations under informatized conditions, and thus admitted that “what qualities joint operations command personnel should possess and how to train them remains poorly understood.”³⁹ Xi’s opinions have been echoed by experts in the military, with one PLA academic stating in 2016 that the PLA had a shortage of officers with a deep knowledge of joint combat operations and advanced equipment. In addition, the researcher added, “We have developed and deployed many cutting-edge weapons, including some that are the best in the world, but there are

* The 2020 edition of the Science of Military Strategy (SMS) states the following about how the PLA views modern war: “Modern warfare is an open system composed of a huge flow of people, logistics, information, and energy. The two sides are confrontations between combat systems, not between single or several combat force units;” “Modern wars are conducted in multi-dimensional fields such as land, sea, air, space, network, and electromagnetic, and are integrated joint operations carried out by various forces;” and “Informatization has become an increasingly distinctive feature of modern warfare...and has become the fundamental form of modern warfare.” It also adds that “In the current and future period, informatized local war is the main form of war that our country will face in the future.” Winning informatized local wars is the PLA’s main strategic focus, as first stated in China’s 2015 *Defense White Paper* and noted in the SMS. The *People’s Daily* has defined informationized war as “warfare that mainly uses information technology-dominated weapons and equipment systems, with information as the main resource, an information-based military as the main body, information-centric warfare as the main mode of operation, competition for information resources as the direct goal, and the corresponding military theories as the guide.” A Nanjing Municipal People’s Air Defense Office article defined it as “a form of warfare that makes full use of information resources and relies on information. It refers to a multi-service and branch integrated warfare in which the warring parties use information-based militaries as the main combat forces and conduct warfare in all dimensions such as land, sea, air, space and cyberspace under the conditions of highly developed information technology and nuclear deterrence in the information age.”

not enough soldiers to use many of those advanced weapons...In some cases, soldiers lack knowledge and expertise to make the best use of their equipment.”⁴⁰

The deficiencies of PLA commanders have been summed up in several critical slogans. One of the most prominent is the “Two Insufficiencies” (两个能力不够), which states that the military’s ability to fight modern wars, and the ability of officers at all levels to command in a modern war, are both insufficient.⁴¹ Though Xi first used the term in 2013,⁴² it continues to be referenced repeatedly, appearing in 169 articles between 2014 and 2018 in the *PLA Daily*,⁴³ and continuing to appear in official Chinese media through 2022, indicating its continued salience.⁴⁴

Another major criticism is the “Five Incapables” (五个不会), which posits that some commanders are incapable of judging situations, understanding higher authorities’ intentions, making operational decisions, deploying forces, and handling unexpected situations.⁴⁵ This slogan showed up in 163 *PLA Daily* articles between 2015, when Xi first used the phrase,⁴⁶ and 2018,⁴⁷ and also continues to appear across Chinese state media in 2022.⁴⁸

The “Three Whethers” (三个能不能), which has been referred to as Xi’s “question of victory” in state media,⁴⁹ asks, in a time of need for the Party and people, whether the military could uphold the Party’s absolute leadership, whether it can fight victoriously, and whether commanders at all levels can lead forces and command in war.⁵⁰ This criticism, first used by Xi when he began his term as CMC chair almost ten years ago,⁵¹ has been used less frequently than other slogans, featuring in just 27 articles in the PLA’s official paper between the earliest mentions in 2014 to 2018,⁵² but has also continued to appear in Chinese state media through 2022.⁵³

While not specific to commanders, another PLA self-criticism is the “Five Weaknesses” (五弱[现象]), namely weaknesses in the abilities to adapt to the environment, manage and coordinate, operate equipment, command operations, and organize training.⁵⁴ This criticism has been less common than the others, appearing at least 36 times from 2013 to 2021, but became more frequent between 2017 and 2019.⁵⁵ Though it does not appear to have been used by Xi, PLAA, PLAN, and PLAAF leadership have used it.⁵⁶ The earliest mention, from a PLA Military Region newspaper article about cultivating a new type of personnel, contained a slightly different definition of the criticism: weaknesses in strategic thinking, command and strategy, information technology, innovation and practice, and actual-combat drills & training.⁵⁷

Fighting and Winning

The issue of whether the PLA can “fight and win” is a major concern for China’s leaders, especially since most members of the PLA have never engaged in combat. While the PLA has also identified other traits such as loyalty as high priorities, the focus on being able to fight and win is a key theme across a multitude of Xi’s remarks and top PRC documents, such as his speech to the 19th and 20th Party Congresses and the 2015 and 2019 *Defense White Papers*.⁵⁸ As part of this, Xi has in recent years stressed the importance of improving combat capabilities⁵⁹ and readiness,⁶⁰ as well as making training less formulaic and more like real combat.⁶¹ In addition, the CCP’s *Third Resolution on History*, a seminal declaration made in 2021 of the Party’s views on its history and achievements, states that the PLA has focused on “combat effectiveness as the sole criterion that matters most...to their fundamental purpose of being able to fight and win,” that it has “worked hard to address ‘peacetime ills,’” and that it has “strengthened training under combat conditions.”⁶²

These “peacetime ills”^{*} (i.e., bad practices that proliferate in times of peace) are another frequent target of official criticism toward and within the PLA. At the 2018 annual meeting of the National People’s Congress (NPC), Xi stressed the need for their elimination,⁶³ and variations of the phrase have appeared around 565 times in the *PLA Daily* between 2012 to mid-2018,⁶⁴ continuing to see official use through 2022.⁶⁵

PLA Responses to Personnel Quality Problems

The above critiques are published almost exclusively in Chinese, suggesting they are meant for domestic consumption and thus probably reflect sincere concern over personnel deficiencies. Further, the fact that nearly all of the above critiques have continued to appear over the course of several years and into the present day implies a lack of effectiveness in dealing with them. In addition to the continuing self-criticism, the depth of the response to this perceived lack of adequate personnel suggests a high ongoing degree of concern over these issues.

To begin addressing these issues, the PLA has taken several steps in recent years to improve personnel quality, including new regulations and initiatives focused on improving joint operations command. In 2013, Xi announced a new training system to cultivate officers capable of conducting joint operations.⁶⁶ This “triad training system” consists of military academic institution education, ongoing professional education, and unit training, and ensures all three are building on and informing one another. Despite this, it remains unclear how effective these initiatives have been given the limited sources available. PLA academic institutions reportedly continue to suffer from issues of outdated faculty and courses, poor coordination between institutions and operational units, and corruption.⁶⁷ Further, most PLA officers still do not receive any joint education with their counterparts from other services until they reach the corps level (roughly equivalent to a one-/two-star general), at which point they can take joint courses at the NDU. A study of more than 300 of China’s most senior officers (equivalent to three- and four-star flag officers) during Xi’s first ten years shows that these officers continue to have little joint experience.⁶⁸

Despite being a major focus since early in Xi’s tenure, the high number of proclamations stretching the length of Xi’s nearly decade-long rule suggests that Xi and PLA leadership remain fundamentally dissatisfied with personnel quality. An apparent lack of progress may in part be due to an inherent difficulty of changing a hidebound organization with hard-set cultural norms, especially in its structure and long-standing precedence given to the Army.⁶⁹ More recently, there has been a noticeable uptick in rhetorical urgency from Xi and other leaders, indicating a growing realization that talent is proving to be a limiting factor for combat effectiveness. At the November 2021 CMC personnel work meeting, Xi both stated that the military should strengthen its sense of urgency in improving personnel work,⁷⁰ and directly tied personnel work to the PLA’s 2027 modernization benchmark. Days later, CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia wrote that “the cause of strengthening the military is at a critical juncture, demanding talent more than at any other time in history.”⁷¹ In July 2022, a *PLA Daily* editorial written by the Political Commissar (PC) of the PLA Army Engineering University agreed with his assessment, stating, “To create a newly strengthened army and rejuvenate the army, the most basic and critical thing needed is talent...to build a world-class army, what is most urgent and most needed is also talent.”⁷² These recent proclamations suggest a feeling of, to use Xi’s own phrasing, *urgency*, and a commensurate

^{*} Also known variously as “peace disease” (和平病), “peacetime habits” (和平积习), “peacetime malpractices” (和平积弊), and, less commonly, variations of “peace(time) thinking” (和平思想/和平思维/和平麻痹(思想/症)).

perception of the seriousness of the issue on the part of Beijing towards improving the quality of its personnel.

Loyalty, Obedience, and Corruption

In the wake of previous subpar Party leadership over the PLA, as well as high-profile corruption cases within the PLA and Xi's desire to centralize power under his personal control, loyalty and obedience have emerged as key themes for the CCP's messaging on the military. The issue appears to have stemmed from elements of the PLA acting outside of the Party's control and serving their own interests over the Party's, especially in the form of corruption.

This corruption has historically been pervasive at all levels of the PLA. At the bottom, this takes the form of what the PLA terms "micro-corruption," which includes small gifts (for example, cash, cigarettes, special delicacies from one's hometown, etc.) given to superiors in return for small favors and preferential treatment in everything from housing to time off.⁷³ It also includes frequent bribery to get into or stay out of the PLA, especially at the enlisted levels. At the top, major corruption has included promotion buying, as well as bribery, embezzlement, and other types of corruption in the finance, construction, fuel, procurement, health care, and real estate sectors.⁷⁴

Promotion-buying in the NCO and officer corps has been one of the most serious issues, with one former general in 2015 stating that "everyone in society knows that...promotions to be platoon, company, regiment, and division cadres all have a (market) price."⁷⁵ The practice was reportedly widespread up to Xi's early years in office, suggesting that many officers, including at senior levels, might not be competent.⁷⁶ The corruption went as high as former CMC Vice Chairmen Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou, China's top two military officials for the eight years immediately preceding Xi Jinping's ascendance to CMC Chairman. Guo and Xu were two of the biggest targets of Xi's anti-corruption campaign, which began in 2012 and has since slowed but not fully stopped. It also featured top generals such as Chief of the Joint Staff Fang Fenghui and Political Work Department Director Zhang Yang.⁷⁷ In the aforementioned *Third Resolution on History*, the CCP admitted that "for a period of time the Party's leadership over the military was obviously lacking."⁷⁸ If left unresolved, this would have "diminished the military's combat capacity," in addition to degrading the Party's principle of "controlling the gun."⁷⁹ Prior to and during the first stages of Xi's anti-corruption campaign, military voices within China warned of the dangers that corruption posed to the PLA, with current and retired generals going on TV and saying that corruption was seriously damaging both performance and morale, to the point that "we would lose before fighting" if it was not properly addressed.⁸⁰

In response to these concerns over an "out of control" PLA – possibly to the point of being unable to perform and execute its missions when called upon, as Xi put it in his "Three Whethers" – China's leadership has prioritized reestablishing loyalty to the Party. Xi,⁸¹ as well as CMC Vice Chairmen Xu Qiliang⁸² and Zhang Youxia,⁸³ has repeatedly called for upholding the "Party's absolute leadership over the military," including "in the whole process and all aspects of personnel-related work."⁸⁴ Xi in particular has made the importance of the issue clear, proclaiming "the political standard the first standard for military personnel, and the political requirement the most fundamental for military personnel" at the 2021 CMC personnel work meeting.⁸⁵

In 2014, Xi held a conference at Gutian, the site of a 1929 meeting famed for placing the Red Army under Party control. Here, he effectively "read the riot act" to the top 420⁸⁶ officers of China's military, telling them to get in line or go down in the next anti-corruption campaign.⁸⁷ Issues raised at the Conference included improving cadres' professional and political development,

stemming any potential belief in military independence from politics, poor leadership in embedded Party Committees, and corruption and abuses of power.⁸⁸ Xi also introduced a set of “promotion standards”⁸⁹ for military officers,⁹⁰ which were, in possible order of importance: loyalty to the Party, military expertise, leadership capability, performance records, and moral integrity.

The top CMC leadership have also implicitly linked fighting corruption with loyalty: repeating a phrase Xi first used in 2013, Zhang Youxia called for “military officers responsible for political and legal affairs...to be absolutely loyal, pure and reliable” and to “eradicate graft and corruption,”⁹¹ and Xu Qiliang has said “the military must be steadfast in their allegiance to the CCP and follow the Party to win the final victory in the ongoing fight against corruption.”⁹²

The anti-corruption campaign has been variously attributed to a genuine desire to root out corruption, a power grab by Xi, a way to remove obstacles to reform, or most plausibly, some combination of these.⁹³ Regardless of intention, it has allowed Xi to remove officers resistant to his reforms and replace them with personnel more loyal to the CCP and himself.* Xi has personally interviewed candidates for senior military positions,⁹⁴ with the dual criteria of upholding political standards and preparing for and winning wars.⁹⁵ The appointment of Zhang Shengmin, head of the CMC Commission for Discipline Inspection, to the CMC in 2017, as well as adding Discipline Inspection Commissions/Committees† at every unit down to the regiment level and adding their directors to unit Party Standing Committees, also suggests the importance of this issue to Xi and PRC leadership. In a sign of how serious the problem was seen by top leadership, a profile of Xi published by state news agency Xinhua in 2017 stated that over 100 corps leader-grade (roughly equivalent to a one-/two-star general) military officers had been investigated and punished for “serious violations of discipline”‡ since the anti-corruption campaign began in 2012.⁹⁶

In 2018, Xi declared an “overwhelming victory” in the anti-corruption campaign, a phrase that was repeated in the 2019 *Defense White Paper*’s section on anti-corruption.⁹⁷ Other state media have since repeated and added to the phrase on various occasions through 2022, while at the same time emphasizing a need to continue the “protracted war” against corruption.⁹⁸ He reaffirmed this victory his report to the 20th Party Congress, saying that this helped “remove serious hidden dangers in the Party, the country, and the military.”⁹⁹ In his speech to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Xi declared that since the Gutian meeting in 2014, the Party and the military’s “excellent work style”§ had been restored and the political ecosystem of the PLA was now effectively governed.¹⁰⁰ In addition, the CCP’s recent historical resolution stated that since the previous period of PLA unruliness, the Party and CMC have “enforced political discipline,” “enhanced political loyalty,” and “strengthened the Party’s leadership and Party building, improved Party conduct, built integrity, and fought corruption in the military.”¹⁰¹ This included working to remove the “pernicious influence” of Guo and Xu since their fall.¹⁰² This section of the resolution ended with the declaration that, after these steps were taken to address the lack of control and corruption in the PLA, “the political environment in the People’s Armed Forces has made a fundamental turn for the better.”¹⁰³ These declarations, combined with the significant slowdown in publicly stated corruption investigations since the peak of the campaign, indicate that the Party believes that its goals for the campaign have largely been achieved and that corruption and loyalty in the PLA, while deserving continued attention and efforts, no longer pose urgent threats.

* This reportedly includes CMC Vice Chairmen Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia.

† Discipline Inspection Commissions/Committees, like the CMC Commission for Discipline Inspection, are tasked with investigating and enforcing discipline violations, which includes corruption.

‡ Typically, this designation refers to graft, though it does not exclude other political issues.

§ In the Party’s terms, a “good” work style is free from problems like corruption, disobedience, excessive bureaucratism, and perfunctoriness.

The purported decrease in corruption has likely improved professionalism and helped non-corrupt and junior personnel advance in their careers, likely improving morale.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the removal of oftentimes less competent corrupt personnel could lead to an overall higher level of competence within the PLA, thus improving overall performance.

From the outside, it is difficult to assess the success of the campaign in comprehensively eradicating corruption in the PLA, as opposed to reducing it to a manageable level. It is also difficult to say whether it has fundamentally changed the culture of and factors that contribute to corruption, or just forced it into remission without addressing root causes, potentially leading it to spring up again once attention fades. Without access to internal PLA assessments, this is probably unknowable until the PLA is tested in battle. PLA and Party leadership are seeking to avoid a resurgence via a broader Party-wide campaign of constant “self-revolution,” including making it so that personnel “don’t dare to, can’t, and don’t want to” engage in corruption.¹⁰⁵ Xi’s speech to the 20th Party Congress said they will “make unremitting efforts to improve conduct, enforce discipline, and combat corruption in the military,” and elsewhere, the PLA has made it clear Xi’s fight will remain an enduring feature inside the military as well. In January 2022, CMC Vice Chair Zhang Youxia stated it was necessary to continue to fight the protracted battle of building a clean government and fighting corruption, and articles published in the *PLA Daily* and on the Ministry of Defense’s website during the 20th Party Congress affirmed that “the charge of the struggle against corruption must always be sounded” and that “anti-corruption is ever on the road.”¹⁰⁶

Personnel Differences Between Services

While there is no information regarding perceptions of China’s top leaders towards personnel quality of the various services and forces in public sources, there are differences in the nature of the services that affect the quality of personnel. The more technical of the PLA’s services – the PLAAF (excluding the Airborne and Air Defense Branches) and PLAN (excluding the Marine Corps) – have a lower proportion of conscripts and a higher proportion of NCOs relative to the Army. Data for the PLASSF and PLARF remains sparse, but it would seem plausible that, given their relatively high-tech nature, they would follow the pattern of the PLAAF and PLAN in having a relatively low proportion of conscripted personnel when compared to the PLAA. The quality of personnel in the PLAA and the conscript-heavy branches of the other services is likely lower, as higher proportions of conscripts are associated with a less educated and technically skilled force. Further, the problem of having to repeatedly train so many new personnel, as opposed to retaining personnel with more experience and knowledge, has a negative impact on readiness.

A 2016 survey of nearly 54,000 members of the various services and forces showed that members of the PLASSF had the best mental health, followed in descending order by the PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF and PLARF, indicating a rough hierarchy of potential desirability for personnel.¹⁰⁷ The article suggested that this was due to higher levels of education, a better work environment, a lack of major marital conflicts, and relatively low-intensity physical training in the PLASSF. On the other hand, the other services were to varying degrees associated with more difficult conditions, monotony, more remote service locations, and more intensive military training.¹⁰⁸

Section 6: Politics and Personnel in the People’s Liberation Army

This section will cover political elements within the PLA, including Party Committees and their responsibilities and effects on decision-making, political officers (including their roles and recruitment), and other political organizations, as well as recent reforms to political work. Political

elements within the PLA are intended as a check against its independence from the CCP, ensuring that it remains the Party's army rather than becoming a national army. Commanders are in close and frequent contact with political officers and are responsible to the Party Committee, which is led by the political officer. Party Committees make decisions on career advancement and political discipline, and must approve of decisions taken by the commander unless in an emergency situation. Despite a commander's authority to act during wartime, it is possible these political elements will introduce a degree of bureaucratic inefficiency and lead to slowdowns and hesitancy during operations. Partly in order to minimize this inefficiency, the PLA is actively trying to improve the operational skills of its political officers.

Background Information

As the armed wing of the CCP, the PLA has distinctive political components in its force composition and structure. These components include both high-level commissions and departments in the CMC, as well as Party Committees, political officers, and political organizations throughout the PLA's many levels. In broad terms, these structures exist to ensure that the PLA retains its role as the CCP's army and does not develop an attitude of political independence or insubordination to the Party's political goals. This is explicitly stated in the 2010 PLA Political Works Regulations, which explains that political work within the PLA ensures that the military stays under the absolute authority of the CCP.¹⁰⁹

However, it appears that by 2014 the CCP considered political work within the PLA to have been insufficient. As mentioned in Section 5, a Whole-Army Political Work Conference was held in Gutian, Fujian Province in November of that year to address improvements to the political system.¹¹⁰ Many of the problems identified at the conference would be addressed in 2016 with military reforms that concentrated power in the CMC, abolished the General Political Department (GPD) and placed responsibility for political work under the smaller CMC Political Work Department, and created the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission. While the structure of Party Committees within the PLA remained unchanged, the reforms did reportedly increase the importance of Party Committees in decision-making and overall authority.¹¹¹

Party Committees

While the CMC Political Work Department organizes propaganda and human resource functions from a macro perspective, political work within the PLA is largely the purview of Party Committees situated throughout the various organizational levels.* These Party Committees are attached to the PLA from the company level up through the regiment level and above,[†] and their Standing Committees are responsible for collective day-to-day leadership.¹¹² At every level, the PLA's Party Standing Committee, not just the commander, is responsible for approving important decisions. During Party Standing Committee meetings, everyone has an equal vote. However, once a decision is made, every member is responsible for implementing their portion of the decision.¹¹³

* For example, in December of 2021, the CMC Political Work Department issued a notice requiring the entire PLA to ensure that cadres, officers, and enlisted soldiers develop the habit of reading officially-approved news from the *PLA Daily*, *Quishi*, and *People's Daily* publications. While the notice came down from the CMC Political Work Department, it was the responsibility of the Party Committees to make arrangement and ensure that the order was carried out. See Cheng Wenjun "The Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission notified that the subscription of party newspapers and periodicals in 2022 should be done well" [中央军委政治工作部通知要求做好 2022 年度党报党刊订阅工作], *PLA Daily*, December 3, 2021. Translation. http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2021-12/03/content_4900297.htm.

[†] A company has roughly 100-200 personnel, while regiments contain 1,000-2,500. The PLA has traditionally followed the Soviet model, with unit sizes ranging from the smallest squad to the platoon, company, battalion, regiment, brigade, division, to the largest group army. See Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen, eds, *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, Defense Group Inc., 2013. 273. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1082742.pdf>.

The term “Party Committee” (党委) is used for organizations which are established at the regiment level and above.¹¹⁴ Grassroots Party Committees (基层党委) are established at the battalion level and in second-level functional and administrative departments.* At the company level, Party Committees are referred to as “Party Branches” (党支部). Party small groups (党小组) are established at the platoon level and for ad hoc organizations at any level that are created for specific purposes and have three or more Party members.¹¹⁵ These multiple levels of Party organizations will be here be referred to as Party Committees, unless otherwise specified.

Party Standing Committees meet on a regular basis, while the Party Committees they lead tend to meet only twice a year. In regiment-level Party Committees and above, membership on Standing Committees can include the commander, political commissar, the deputy commanders, deputy political commissar, chief of staff, department directors, and Secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission/Committee.† The political commissar generally serves as the secretary of the Standing Committee, while the commander is assigned the deputy secretary position.¹¹⁶ Party Standing Committee meetings are similar to the Central Committee’s leading small groups, where ideas, issues, or suggestions are raised among the leadership.

As mentioned above, unit operational decisions must be collectively approved by the Party Standing Committee, unless in an emergency.¹¹⁷ Topics raised could include issues such as methods to improve combat readiness, political directives from the CMC, or performance reviews following recent training activities.¹¹⁸ Decisions made by a Party Standing Committee are then sent to the next higher level for approval, whether during peacetime or wartime (although much greater latitude is given to the commander during wartime, as discussed below). Unless it clashes with a political objective, it is unlikely that the Party Standing Committee would disapprove a plan put forth by the commander. However, it is quite possible that the Party Standing Committee’s presence and ability to disapprove of decisions might dissuade a commander from proposing a course of action he feels might be met with scrutiny from the PLA’s political elements.

After a decision has been reached, it is the joint responsibility of the commander and the political officer to see that the decision is carried out. According to the National Institute for Defense Studies, a research organization attached to Japan’s Ministry of Defense, military decisions made by the Party Committees tend to be the responsibility of the commander to implement, while political work is up to the political officer.¹¹⁹ However as previously mentioned, in emergency situations the commander is given a great deal of latitude to formulate and carry out command decisions. Given the chaotic nature of warfare and nebulous definition of “emergency,” it is likely the Party Standing Committees will have less of a direct impact on routine, small-scale tactical decisions in battle. Considering that the PLA has not been involved in a major war for over forty years, this remains speculative.

Political Officers

Political officers have different titles based on the organizational level in which they are embedded. Political commissars (政委) are assigned to all organizations at the regimental level and above, while political directors (教导员) are assigned to all battalion-level organizations, and

* Each headquarters has two categories of subordinate departments: functional (业务部门) (or operational (事业部门)), and administrative (行政部门). Although there is no official source, analysis indicates that functional departments include operations, intelligence, training, finance, and health, while administrative departments conduct work that impacts upon daily life, including support, supplies, and housing.

† Although the Logistics, Equipment, and Support Departments have both a Director and PC, only the Director serves on the unit’s Standing Committee. However, the political commissar serves as the Secretary for the Department’s Standing Committee. Below the service and Theater Command Headquarters levels, the Logistics and Equipment Departments have now been merged into a Support Department.

political instructors (指导员) are assigned to all company-level organizations.^{120*} Many political officers are chosen from company-grade officers who have been CCP members since their time as cadets and were already progressing through the military command track, while others may come from more specialized roles such as the logistics, equipment, or special technical tracks.¹²¹ Because of this, most political officers in the PLA already have an operational foundation to build upon and are not simply propagandists or Party bureaucrats. In a potential sign of their importance, a report analyzing China's top 300 or so officers (equivalent to three- and four-star flag officers in the U.S. military) found that almost half were long-time political commissars.¹²²

Outside of Party Committees, political officers have numerous responsibilities, including implementing Party Committee decisions, enforcing Party discipline, overseeing personnel political education, looking after the morale and daily needs of personnel under their command, and generally assisting political work organizations throughout the PLA.¹²³ Their role in the unit can be categorized as equal parts Party whip, chaplain, and social worker, simultaneously responsible for ideological discipline, political and moral education, and personnel wellbeing.¹²⁴

Political officers are encouraged to take an active role in addressing personnel ideological and morale issues. Ideological issues could include combating perceived foreign influences, dealing with political or discipline violations, and generally ensuring that personnel understand the PLA's role as the Party's army through regular ideological training and education.¹²⁵ The guiding principles of military political work were explained in the CMC's *Opinions on Building the Ranks of Political Organs and Political Cadres with Absolute Loyalty to the Party, a Focus on Fighting, and a Good Workstyle Image*.¹²⁶ This 2015 document lays out the urgent need to rectify political issues and restore the prestige of political work in the PLA.[†] It calls for a focus on practical concerns, building Party spirit, eliminating malpractice, cultivating professional ethics, and improving the system of rewards and punishments.¹²⁷

Beyond bigger issues such as corruption or Party discipline, political officers are also involved in personal issues, such as helping with soldiers' home-lives or adjusting to military life.¹²⁸ For example, when a work unit of a PLARF telemetry battalion was set to be split up, the political officer actively sought to talk with the members and help smooth the transition process.¹²⁹ Political officers are expected to know their soldiers well, conducting heart-to-heart conversations and spotting and rectifying any signs of behavioral change or poor morale which could affect personnel performance. Family issues and ensuring a stable home life also feature as a prominent part of the political officer's routine duties. This includes liaising with personnel families and ensuring spouses and children are taken care of (including housing, education, and employment), and assisting with medical, legal, or financial issues personnel family members may be having back in their hometowns.¹³⁰ For example, a political director in a PLARF battalion learned that the father of one of his men was having legal problems, so he dispatched a representative to the father's hometown to expedite a legal resolution with the local authorities.¹³¹ On another occasion, the same political director learned that one of his men was frequently arguing with his wife, so he intervened by calling the wife and acting as a marriage counselor, improving their relationship.¹³² On a third occasion, the same political director helped ease the financial burden of one of his men after a family member accrued significant medical bills.¹³³

Political officers also ensure the cultivation of good morals among personnel, overseeing both ideological education and campaigns against "immoral" temptations such as gambling and

* These are the preferred translations of these terms, originally cited from the PLA's 2002 *Defense White Paper* and used onward. However, there is a degree of interchange between them and the PLA itself is not completely consistent with their use.

† This is likely as a response to the issues exposed by the Xu Caihou corruption case.

pernicious Western influences. For example, one PLARF battalion political director was incensed upon hearing one of his men singing a pop song glorifying money, and thus set up a battalion song and dance troupe which only sings patriotic songs with proper morals.¹³⁴

Broader morale, psychological, ideological, and PR-related issues in wartime, grouped together under the banner of “wartime political work” (战时政治工作), are the responsibility of unit political officers and are considered an essential part of combat readiness for the PLA. These duties include gauging personnel morale and opinion, combatting enemy psychological warfare attempts and pernicious rumors within the ranks, and handling the media and PR.¹³⁵ Having command awareness and maintaining a good grasp of the military situation, as well as being able to function as a seamless part of the unit’s command element, is also now considered a key part of wartime political work (discussed further below).¹³⁶ For example, during the PLA’s large-scale “Red Sword – 2018” (红剑 - 2018) military exercise, wartime political work was featured as a key part of the training.¹³⁷ Political officers were expected to engage in 17 forms of wartime political work, including “battlefield psychological protection” and “public opinion attack and defense,” and were assessed for their “contribution rate” toward combat effectiveness.¹³⁸ The political officers were evaluated according to their leadership abilities, organizational abilities, performance style and 46 other unspecified elements.¹³⁹ Emphasizing morale and psychological warfare as key factors on the battlefield, and incorporating them organically into operations, is an important addition to training which promises to improve overall combat readiness if conducted effectively. However, it is difficult to assess the efficacy of these exercise components based on what is provided in open sources.

Further, as the heads of the various Party Committees, political officers’ responsibilities also involve management of professional development activities such as training and education.¹⁴⁰ For example, during an emergency response drill, a Northern Theater Command radar station practiced combatting sabotage from “criminal elements.”¹⁴¹ The brigade’s political officer found that the drills were becoming too rote and unchallenging, and decided to change both the drill scenario and deploy multiple adversary groups to participate.¹⁴² * Likewise, as part of his responsibilities, the political commissar of the PLA’s Military Medicine University spent months visiting aviation, surface-to-air missile (SAM), radar, airborne, and other units in order to better understand their support requirements.¹⁴³

In addition to understanding the personal, professional, and political needs of the soldiers in their organizations, political officers also bear responsibility for practical operational knowledge. According to Roy Kamphausen, President of the National Bureau of Asian Research, the PLA is engaged in a broader effort to involve political work organs in operational training so that their political efforts can be realistically performed and they can gain experience making command and operational decisions under duress.¹⁴⁴ Because political officers are involved in the daily activities of a unit, sit as secretary of the Party Committee, and sign off on operational decisions, it is important for them to understand operations so that they do not make decisions that will impede the unit’s training and combat capabilities.¹⁴⁵ Further, political officers may, depending on their background, be called on to command should the commander be incapacitated.¹⁴⁶ Thus, political officers are often recruited from a selection of Party cadres with high levels of education, a background with intelligence work, and experience with either command or technical fields.¹⁴⁷

Balancing political concerns with operational realities is likely a major contributing factor to the preference for political officers with background experience in operations. Among the

* This tends to be a common issue in the Chinese education system that likely affects military training as well. While exercises with surprise elements do occur, often “lessons learned” from the articles discuss how useful the PLA found these exercises to be, implying they are not common.

changes from previous versions, the 2010 *Regulations on Political Work* emphasized integrating military training with political work training and the need for Party Committees to complete diversified military tasks.¹⁴⁸ It further called for training political officers in military subjects, joint operations, and strategic and campaign command.¹⁴⁹ Recruiting political officers with such knowledge may be a way to streamline the integration of such military knowledge with political work. The Regulations also stated that these revisions to integrate political work with operations training were intended to better secure the leadership of the Party over the military, improving PLA leadership's ability to win wars while pursuing political objectives.¹⁵⁰ As mentioned above, the PLAAF's large-scale "Red Sword – 2018" exercise thus not only saw increased participation of political officers in operational training, but also emphasized political objectives and messaging about the PLA's subordination to the Party.¹⁵¹ This exercise and others like it suggest the PLA is attempting to better modernize and integrate its political components with its warfighting duty.

Thus, political officers should be able to "organize training, give commands, and operate weapons and equipment."¹⁵² However, despite frequently having some operational knowledge from earlier in their careers, a lack of operational skills amongst political officers appears to be an ongoing issue for at least some PLA units. Anecdotes frequently appear in PLA media about political officers who were found to be operationally deficient, signaling that this is an ongoing area where the PLA seeks improvement. Political officers often have to be taught how to issue even basic commands, and in some cases have even been found to lack the basic physical fitness necessary to operate at the front line.¹⁵³ In one telling example from Red Sword-2018, an airborne battalion political officer took over after the simulated "death" of the commander but failed to take decisive action and re-establish the chain of command, leading to his unit taking crippling casualties and failing the mission.¹⁵⁴ Examples like these have led to a variety of unit-specific training initiatives to improve political officers' operational skills and integrate them into the command network. For instance, one PLAN air brigade decided to incorporate their political officers into pilot flight training via participation in post-flight debriefings due to their previous poor performance and lack of interest in operations.¹⁵⁵ The article implied that this was part of a new, large-scale push to get political officers more involved in operations training.

It remains to be seen what effect this push will have on combat readiness, or how effective it will eventually be. While the authors are limited by a lack of sources, it is not difficult to imagine potential issues with incorporating political officers more closely into operations. These include political officers comfortable in their ways and reluctant to take on additional duties, and operations officers equally comfortable in their ways and reluctant to bring political officers more closely into decision making. Further, despite having at least some experience in operations, this experience is oftentimes at a lower level of command.* However, political officers approve command decisions as the Party Standing Committee secretary, making it imperative that they thoroughly understand operational matters. In this way, giving them additional operational experience and bringing them more closely into decision-making is essential to ensuring that they are useful, or at the very least not an impediment, to command.

Dual Leadership Issues: Peacetime and Wartime

According to interview sources, the PLA's *Revised Service Regulations* state that the PLA has a dual leadership system whereby the commander and political officer at every level are jointly

* For example, after graduating from a PLA academy, most political officers first served as military/command officers in a platoon- or company-level unit. Therefore, they already have the requisite skills to assume full command at the company level. However, as the political officer moves up the chain of command, their command skills have not progressed accordingly and may thus need to be delegated.

responsible.¹⁵⁶ When the commander is away or unable to carry out his duties, the political officer assumes daily command during peacetime. Subsequently, the political officer is responsible for delegating tasks to each deputy commander for their particular areas. However, the political officer may also assume control of these tasks directly if he has the requisite operational training.

During peacetime, the unit's Party Standing Committee is responsible for voting on all major decisions, including issues concerning training, and the commander is responsible for carrying out those decisions. However, as the Party Committee secretary, the political officer also has significant influence over decisions such as training and operational issues. During peacetime, the political officer can override the commander on operational and training decisions.¹⁵⁷ This might include considerations such as safety, weather conditions, or continuing mechanical problems. For example, in 2015 a PLAAF air regiment was preparing to undergo training exercises before the Party Committee (headed by the political officer) decided to cancel them due to safety concerns.¹⁵⁸ According to the author's interviews with PLA officers, this authority can lead to friction between the commander and political officer.¹⁵⁹

During wartime, Party Standing Committees are de-emphasized, as the PLA recognizes the need for efficient decision-making in the field. Theoretically, during a conflict, the commander will implement planning that Party Standing Committees at equal or higher levels have already approved during peacetime. On the tactical level, the commander would make decisions in the heat of combat, and will have a large degree of latitude on how to carry these decisions out. Even if the commander follows the pre-planned decisions, given that the commander is an important member on the Party Standing Committee, it's most likely that he will be implementing his own plan in battle (with authority to change tactics if an emergency arises). If at some point the commander (or political officer) takes initiative, they will eventually have to justify their actions to the next higher-level Party Standing Committee.

Effects of Political Structures on the PLA

Ultimately, the PLA is a Party army which both takes its orders from, and is a part of, the CCP, both during peacetime and in a conflict. In practice, these political goals may take the form of conflict escalation or de-escalation depending on the political context. Recent hostile maneuvers in the South China Sea, where the CCP is taking an aggressive political stance, is an example of political escalation which would presumably be guided and overseen by the political officer as the representative of the Party.¹⁶⁰ Conversely, the situation at the Sino-Indian border, where a 1996 treaty between India and the PRC stipulates that "Neither side shall open fire, [...] conduct blast operations or hunt with guns or explosives within two kilometers from the line of actual control" is an example of escalation control, wherein political officers ensure that PLA personnel understand and adhere to the limitations that the greater political context of the conflict requires.¹⁶¹

A *PLA Daily* article from 2015 reflects China's thinking on the matter: every war has strong political components, and sometimes these components dictate the military choices, scale of forces, and strategic decisions on the ground.¹⁶² The article explicitly calls on PLA leadership to not blindly pursue military goals, exercise control and political awareness, and ensure that the political objectives set forth by the CCP Central Committee and the CMC during a conflict are pursued.¹⁶³ This type of escalation control is the purview of the political officers, in both understanding the overall political context of a conflict and communicating those requirements to the commander.

It is the political officers' duty to represent those political concerns and ensure they are known to the personnel under their command. At the highest level of each service, this can be accomplished at the Party Committees' plenary sessions held every six months and reinforced

daily by the services' Party Standing Committees.¹⁶⁴ As stated above, these Party Committees, situated both at higher and lower levels of the PLA, place political officers in close contact with commanders. Through this contact the CCP enforces Party control over the PLA, whereby the political officers act as agents for the CMC and the CCP Central Committee.

On a higher level, the need for commanders who can take guidance from political officers may explain why personnel, career, and discipline considerations fell under the political organs of the PLA both before and after the 2016 reorganization. Originally, these responsibilities were carried out by the GPD, which was headed by now-disgraced general Xu Caihou, and dealt with discipline inspection, officer personnel management, ideological education, and military diplomacy, among others. While on paper placing political cultivation and career tracking under the same umbrella organization may have reduced the likelihood of independent-minded officers, ultimately the GPD was most likely broken up due to high levels of corruption and bribery.¹⁶⁵ Reportedly, the marriage of bribery and career advancement within the GPD was an effective avenue for outside intelligence agencies to recruit Chinese assets within the PLA.¹⁶⁶

Upon being broken up, the massive GPD's responsibilities were distributed to multiple independent organizations under the CMC, including the CMC Political Work Department, the CMC Politics and Law Commission, and the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission.¹⁶⁷ The CMC Political Work Department manages cadres, enlisted personnel, and civilian personnel.^{*} The CMC Politics and Law Commission is focused on corruption and violations of regulations governing the military.¹⁶⁸ Importantly, various Politics and Law Commissions are also attached to the Party Committees at multiple levels throughout the PLA.¹⁶⁹ These commissions are headed by one of the deputy political officers of the organization the commission is attached to and have significant overlap with Party Committee membership. Finally, the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, in addition to its main functions of supervision of Party discipline and anti-corruption, provides an independent evaluation of PLA leadership to the CMC and Xi Jinping directly.¹⁷⁰ As an important indication, Zhang Shengmin, a political commissar and the secretary of the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission, was given a position both directly on the CMC itself, and as a deputy secretary of the CCP Central Discipline Inspection Commission.^{†171} This series of rapid promotions may highlight the seriousness with which Xi still regards the ongoing anti-corruption campaign within the PLA, despite declaring victory in 2018.

Ultimately, while it is difficult to assess the impact of the numerous political elements within the PLA, their omnipresence ensures the Party is a constant factor in military life. Party Committees exist throughout almost all levels of organization in the PLA, bear responsibility for nearly all important decisions, and are led by political officers. The commanders are also important voices within the Party Committees and are generally responsible for carrying out operational decisions.^{‡172} As mentioned above, it seems most likely that the political components within the

^{*} Prior to the 2016 reforms, the General Staff Department managed enlisted personnel issues, while the GPD only managed officer/cadre issues. However, political officers were involved in interviewing enlisted personnel seeking promotion to NCO as well as everyone who worked with them. Until the late 2000s, political officers were oftentimes involved in corruption by taking bribes from families in order to keep their children in the military. This disappeared by the end of the 2000s, when the promotion information was made more public at every level. See Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen, eds, *The PLA as Organization v2.0*, Defense Group Inc., 2013. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1082742.pdf>.

[†] While in this case a political commissar was appointed as the head of a political department, it is rare that the leadership in political departments become political officers. For more information, see Kenneth W. Allen, *Political Commissars of the People's Liberation Army Air Force*, China Aerospace Studies Institute, February 2021, 17. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/PLAAF/2021-03-22%20PCs%20of%20the%20PLAAF%2026%20Apr%2021.pdf?ver=dj7FQjr3rmLP5fB0S3tOtg%3D%3D>.

[‡] Likewise, if the commander has ever served as a political officer during their career, then they are instead given the position of Party Committee Secretary. In several cases, PLAAF Commanders who had previously served as PCs retained their secretary positions once they had become the PLAAF Commander, with the PC serving as deputy secretary. See Kenneth W. Allen, *Political Commissars of the People's Liberation Army Air Force*, China Aerospace Studies Institute, February 2021, 17.

PLA function as an extra layer of guarantee for the CCP's control over the army. Much like the Party cells embedded within large corporations, Party Committees, political officers, and the other political organs act as eyes on the ground for the CCP. Because of political officers' responsibility to help with personal life issues, they are the first in the loop when a problem arises. Further, they not only make decisions on promotions, career advancement, and who to trust with power, but can also remove officers seen as violating Party rule and punish personnel for dereliction of duty.

It seems likely that these checks on military command would introduce significant inefficiency, as the extra layer of bureaucracy would slow down decision-making. Despite being granted greater latitude in wartime, eventually commanders are expected to report to Party Committees and account for their decisions. Further, the high degree of overlap between the command elements in Party Committees and the political elements meant to be inspecting them (such as the Politics and Law Commissions) opens the door to serious conflicts of interest regarding corruption and discipline. However, these fundamental structural issues may be a worthwhile price if it guarantees an army loyal to the Party, and a Party which commands the gun.

Section 7: Conscript Force

This section provides an overview of the PLA's two-year conscript enlisted force. It includes discussion of conscription management and quotas, the conscription process, salary and compensation, assignment restrictions, the role of ethnic minorities and women, training and education, the annual training cycle, and post-service status, as well as ongoing questions.

History, Reforms, and Conscription Cycle

The story of PLA conscription since 1998 is marked by a series of wide-ranging reforms, all with the singular goal of moving the PLA from a force organized around poorly-educated mass manpower to one organized around a more educated, more technically-proficient talent pool. These reforms included increased emphasis on urban conscripts (who are more likely to have completed a full high school education), measures to encourage the enlistment of college-educated personnel, and creation of a professional NCO corps. In order to understand the importance of these reforms, it is important to understand the context of the PLA prior to this period.

From the founding of the Red Army in 1927 until the PRC was founded in 1949, the Chinese Communists used a voluntary service system (志愿兵役制) to recruit and retain military personnel.¹⁷³ The PLA continued to use this volunteer system until 1955, when it was replaced by the PRC's first compulsory service system (义务兵役制), which mandated three years of service for Army conscripts and four years for Navy and Air Force conscripts.¹⁷⁴ Following the negative impact of the Cultural Revolution, the PLA embarked on an ambitious program in the late 1970s to modernize many aspects of the military, including education, training, and recruitment. Conscripts and volunteer soldiers were combined into a single system that allowed conscripts who wished to remain in the military to stay as volunteer soldiers for up to 16 years.¹⁷⁵

Each locality in China is assigned an annual recruitment/conscription quota based on population distribution. By the late 1990s, two decades of economic reform had dramatically altered Chinese society. A tremendous increase in employment opportunities, coupled with an overall loosening of state control, made it increasingly difficult for the PLA to meet its quotas of qualified conscripts, who were selected from a shrinking pool of ninth-grade and high school graduates who had not gone on to college. The prospect of joining the military no longer had much attraction to a growing number of young people, particularly in China's wealthier coastal areas.

For example, in the booming southern province of Guangdong, nearly 7%, of the 150,000 youths eligible for conscription tried to fake nearsightedness on the physical examination to avoid conscription duties.¹⁷⁶ In another, more extreme example, one male in eastern China's Zhejiang Province invented a criminal history to avoid his conscription obligations stating that it "would better to do four years in jail than three years as a soldier."¹⁷⁷

This problem was compounded by mandatory quotas of specifically rural conscripts. Beginning in the 1950s, the PLA's quota for conscripting new enlisted personnel was based on rural and urban demographic distribution that Mao Zedong implemented as part of the Great Leap Forward's and the Cultural Revolution's collectivization in rural areas. This system remained as the foundation until the late 2000s.¹⁷⁸ Specifically, the rigid quota system adopted in 1990 prescribed that 73.5% of conscripts nationally must be drawn from the rural population (where, education levels often do not extend beyond the ninth grade), and the remaining 26.5% from the urban population. In 1999, the PLA noted that conscripts selected from urban areas were the most likely to possess the educational and technical skills it needed.¹⁷⁹ In 2002, the quota was changed to 66.8% and 33.3%, respectively, to recognize the increasing rate of urbanization.¹⁸⁰

Despite the emphasis at that time on technology and education, the core of the enlisted force continued to be made up of poor, young men from rural areas. Although the conscription orders for 2001 to 2005 noted that it was preferable that conscripts recruited from rural areas be high school graduates, in truth, most rural conscripts were ninth grade graduates with low levels of technical proficiency.¹⁸¹ As late as 2006, the proportion of new conscripts who were high school graduates remained in the minority.¹⁸²

As the PLA began to acquire high-tech weapons systems in the late 1990s (e.g., Russian Sovremenny-class destroyers and Su-27 fighters), it determined that such a force composition was insufficient for its needs, and that it had to recruit and train a more educated enlisted force, who were not only literate but could better understand at least basic technical issues at the high school level.¹⁸³ However, it faced multiple roadblocks which it would need to tackle in order to recruit such a force. These included societal bias against the military as a career option for anyone other than the poor and desperate, a bias which the PLA is still fighting today. Military members, and especially enlisted personnel, traditionally did not have high social status, and expressions such as "a good man shouldn't join the military, as good iron shouldn't be made into nails" were prevalent in Chinese society.¹⁸⁴ The work was seen as arduous and dull. Pay and benefits were low, and prospects for post-service employment lackluster. In addition, the private sector with its higher pay offered increasingly attractive prospects, especially for educated young people.¹⁸⁵

Recognizing the need for more educated personnel to operate this high-tech equipment, CMC Chairman Jiang Zemin began advocating in the 1990s for a more educated officer and enlisted force.¹⁸⁶ The PLA first attempted to tackle these issues by amending two earlier key regulations that were approved in 1998 and went into effect in 1999: The *Military Service Law* and the *PRC Conscription Regulations*.¹⁸⁷ The amended *Military Service Law* addressed conscription difficulties by shortening the mandatory conscription period to two years for everyone, and created a 30-year enlisted force system.^{188*} This also included, for the first time, a major step toward the professionalization of the PLA with the creation of a true NCO corps (discussed in Section 8).[†] Prior to reaching the end of their second year of service, conscripts could now apply

* Of note, it will be 2029 before someone who became a conscript in 1999 has served a full 30 years.

† Notably, the term "NCO" had been used since 1988 to refer to volunteers serving after their initial conscription period. However, the 1999 law created the basis of the modern NCO corps the PLA uses today, with NCOs taking on greater responsibilities and eligible for regular promotion.

to become an NCO or take exams to become an officer.¹⁸⁹ Conscripts not accepted as either an NCO or an officer would be demobilized at the conclusion of their two-year conscription period.

Although the 1998 law and regulations focused on building a better two-year enlisted force and an NCO corps, several factors still negatively affected the PLA's ability to recruit qualified enlisted personnel, retain talent, and provide good post-service jobs, including unclear and inadequate laws for military wages and benefits.¹⁹⁰ While the PLA started enlisting college graduates in 2001, by mid-2009 it had enlisted only 2,000 in total.¹⁹¹ In 2009, in order to improve recruitment of civilian college students and graduates as two-year enlistees, the PLA and Ministry of Education (MOE) established lucrative new financial incentives.¹⁹² These included 1) writing off tuition debt; 2) allowing students who had not graduated to return to school and change their majors;^{*} 3) providing a one-time post-departure compensation, paid by the hometown local government, for enlisted personnel who want to start their own business; and 4) requiring state-owned enterprises to hire 5% of all new employees from individuals who have left the military.¹⁹³ Largely as a result of this, the PLA saw recruitment jump to 130,000 college graduates and students for that year's conscription cycle.¹⁹⁴ However, while much improved, recruitment continued to face difficulties and shortfalls. For instance, the PLA set a goal of recruiting 150,000 college graduates in 2010 but was only able to recruit 100,000. The 2010 shortfall led to further efforts from the PLA, including doubling enlisted salaries in 2010 and passing a new *Military Service Law* in 2011.¹⁹⁵ The PLA also worked to address other personnel bottlenecks at this time. For example, it faced a shrinking conscript pool due to the ever-increasing number of high school students going on to further education: during the 1990s, only about 8% of high school graduates attended college, but this rose to 26.2% in 2013 and 54.4% by 2020.¹⁹⁶ This left a rapidly shrinking pool of potential conscripts: because there was an age limit of 21 for conscripting personnel, the number of high school graduates available for conscription was thus growing smaller as a higher percentage began attending college and exceeded the age limit.

Therefore, in the early 2000s, the PLA increased the maximum age to 21 years for high school graduates, 23 for students receiving a senior technical or vocational degree, and 24 for college students and graduates with a bachelor's degree.¹⁹⁷ In addition, the age limit for graduate students was later relaxed to 26.¹⁹⁸

In 2013, the PLA further reoriented its recruitment and conscription system toward a better educated candidate pool by largely abolishing the required quota of rural and urban conscripts (though the latter had not been followed for several years).¹⁹⁹ However, provinces with high rural populations (e.g., Yunnan Province) must still recruit 5% of its enlisted personnel from rural areas.

Another major effort was made to accommodate college graduates in 2013.²⁰⁰ Until that point, potential enlisted personnel received their conscription notices in August and then went through a six-week selection, induction, and training process starting on November 1st, which included physical, political, and psychological examinations. Conscripts who were selected then departed for their units around mid-December. However, the PLA realized that there was a gap between when college students finished their academic year and when the training cycle began in November. As a result, in 2013 the PLA moved the entire conscription process forward three months, which was renamed from the winter conscription cycle to the summer/fall conscription cycle. Therefore, the first day of the two-year cycle, when all new enlisted personnel began their conscription process, was changed to August 1. Personnel now begin their basic training around September 10, and the last day of their two-year cycle is now July 31.

* College majors in the PRC are typically determined by both personal choice and admission test ("gaokao") scores and are not easily changed after the test, so the ability to change majors is a potentially significant incentive for college students.

Management and Quotas

Historically, the former General Staff Department's (GSD) Military Affairs Department was responsible for overseeing enlisted force conscription. However, in 2016, the PLA created both the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department (NDMD) and the CMC Political Work Department Soldier and Civilian Personnel Bureau, which, combined, are now responsible for enlisted force conscription. In addition, the MND has a subordinate (Enlisted Force) Recruitment Office, which is dual hatted under the NDMD.²⁰¹

Since formal conscription began in the 1950s, the PLA has provided quotas by service and force to each province, autonomous region (AR), and municipality.^{*} Although no specifics were found, these quotas are likely based on the population of each location. Until the *2011 Military Service Law*, when college recruits were allowed to register online, all registration and screening was done in person by the People's Armed Forces Departments (PAFD), which are under prefectural military commands.²⁰² Around August each year, the CMC NDMD and the CMC Political Work Department Soldier and Civilian Personnel Bureau decide how many conscripts need to be inducted that year.²⁰³ The CMC and State Council then jointly issue a "conscription order" which is sent to each of the five Theater Commands. Quotas are passed to the provincial Military Districts (MD), which then sends specific requirements for new soldiers to Military Sub-districts (MSD) and local PAFDs. Local PAFDs are responsible for enlisting the number of recruits (for both PLA and PAP) necessary from their district. The PAFD also decides which new soldiers go into the PLA or the PAP based on specific requirements from each PLA service and the PAP. In contrast to the U.S. military, in which each service recruits individually, PAFDs conduct recruitment for all services and forces collectively, and assign personnel to each based on quotas.

As a general rule, new recruits from a single district have been sent at most to three separate division or brigade-level units, and a single district typically is responsible for sending conscripted personnel to the same units year after year, with the new batch of conscripts simply replacing the previous batch sent from the same district two years ago. As discussed later, since the 1989 Tiananmen crisis, recruits are generally not assigned to units in the vicinity of their hometown and are usually assigned outside their home province/AR/municipality,²⁰⁴ so that every PLA or PAP unit consists of soldiers from many parts of the country.²⁰⁵

As stated above, while the PLA recognized the need for more college-educated recruits in the 1990s, it only began widespread recruiting of college students and graduates as two-year enlistees in 2009, when it began offering more lucrative benefits to attract these personnel. Of note, although these college students/graduates did not receive conscription notices and joined voluntarily, they are still called conscripts. In order to be able to recruit at the college level, the PLA established an official conscription website that allows for online registration and is managed by the PAFD assigned to the college (high school students were also allowed to register online beginning in the early 2010s).[†] Besides quotas by local PAFDs who are responsible for ninth grade and high school graduates, each college PAFD also has a fixed quota by service.

Although statistics are not consistent, one authoritative database noted that, in 2020, the PRC had a total of 2,738 governmental colleges and universities and 788 privately founded colleges and universities.²⁰⁶ China also had about 10,000 secondary vocational schools in 2020.²⁰⁷ It is not clear if every academic institution has a PAFD. Of note, non-Chinese citizens are not allowed to access the online registration form, so it is not clear what questions are asked or how

^{*} These are the three primary provincial-level administrative divisions of the PRC.

[†] *Quanguo Zhengbing Wang* (全国征兵网), which can be translated as *National Conscription Web* - www.gfbzb.gov.cn.

the PAFDs use the information provided to link recruits with a specialty. Whereas the US military uses the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), a multiple-aptitude battery that measures developed abilities and helps predict future academic and occupational success in the military, the PLA does not appear to have a similar procedure.

While no systematic official statistics on personnel quotas exist, articles about the conscription process will in some instances identify local quotas by education level. Based upon this anecdotal evidence, it appears that from 2009 to the late 2010s the quota target for college students/graduates (including associate's and special technical degrees) ranged from approximately 20-25% of new recruits in less developed regions to 70% in more developed regions:

- In 2013, the Tibet AR set a recruitment quota of 25% for college students and graduates.²⁰⁸
- In 2014, more than 20,000 people from Guangdong Province became two-year enlistees, 20% of whom were college students and graduates.²⁰⁹
- In 2014, Yunnan Province set a goal of recruiting at least 25% of new enlistees from college students and graduates.²¹⁰ It increased its goal to at least 40% college students and graduates for 2016.²¹¹
- In 2015, 33.4% of new enlisted personnel from Liaoning Province were college students and graduates.²¹²
- In 2015, Beijing established a minimum quota of 70% for college students and graduates as new two-year enlistees.²¹³

In more recent years these quota targets appear to have increased significantly, with anecdotal reports indicating something in the range of 50% college students/graduates at the low end, to over 90% at the high end, with most appearing to fall in the 70-75% range. The following bullets provide some good examples for 2020-2022:

- In 2020, Sichuan Province's Nanchong City recruited/conscripted 238 personnel, of whom 70% were college students and graduates. The goal for 2021 was increased to 75%.²¹⁴
- In 2021, Beijing set a recruitment goal of 95% college students.²¹⁵ As of June 2021, a total of 7,000 personnel had registered in Beijing, including 6,000 college students (83%).
- In the first half of 2021, the Shenzhen SEZ's Nanshan District recruited 86 personnel, of which 98.84% had a college or a special technical (2- to 3-year) degree.²¹⁶
- During the second half of 2021, about 6,000 men in Guangdong Province's Dongguan City registered, of which 50% were college students and graduates.²¹⁷ This was a 90% increase of college students and graduates over 2020.
- During the second half of 2021, 76% of the people who registered in Yunnan Province's Dehong Prefecture were college students and graduates.²¹⁸
- In 2022, Zhejiang Province's Jiaxing Prefecture set an 82% quota of college students and graduates.²¹⁹

Fortunately, the PRC does include some breakdown of PLA demographics in its decennial census, including for force education levels, allowing us to see how these have changed.²²⁰

PLA Personnel by Education Level							
	2020	2010	2000		2020	2010	2000
Total	2000000	2300000	2498600				
Grad School	103744	136236	37638		5.19%	5.92%	1.51%
Undergraduate	494195	431092	300170		24.71%	18.74%	12.01%
All College	597939	567328	337808		29.90%	24.67%	13.52%
Associate/Technical	538168	595936	826647		26.91%	25.91%	33.08%
All College + Assoc/Tech	1136107	1163264	1164455		56.81%	50.58%	46.60%
High School	795328	719014	644316		39.77%	31.26%	25.79%
9th Grade or less	68565	417722	689829		3.43%	18.16%	27.61%

The data shows a notable decrease in personnel with only a ninth-grade education, from a high of 27.61% in 2000 to only 3.43% by 2020. These personnel were replaced by both high school personnel (an increase from 25.79% in 2000 to 39.77% in 2020) and personnel with at least some post-secondary education. The number of personnel with either some college, or 2-3 year associate's or special technical degrees rose from 46.6% in 2000 to 50.58% in 2010, and to 56.81% by 2020. While this is largely expected, it also raises some interesting questions. First, while the number of personnel with post-secondary education has risen, it has not risen to the levels of 70% or more that the PLA seems to have aimed for in recent years with their known quotas.²²¹ This indicates that these numbers may be more aspirational, and that while the PLA has clearly had success in recruiting more educated personnel, is still struggling in many places to hit these high numbers. Further, the number of personnel with graduate education has stagnated, and even gone down slightly.²²² The reason for this is not known.

The 2019 National Conscription Work Teleconference provided some good insight into recent conscription priorities,²²³ vowing to continue to focus on recruiting college students and graduates. Further, the PLA expanded a pilot project of "precision recruitment centers," which focus on recruiting personnel with an education level above high school (including college, vocational high school, technical secondary school, and technical school) and placing them in billets that properly utilize their skillset.²²⁴ Further, the PLA has created a special admissions plan for 5,000 master's degree students as two-year conscripts.²²⁵ In 2021, that number was increased to 8,000.²²⁶ This suggests the PLA is making a renewed push for graduate student personnel, following a lack of growth between 2010 and 2020.

Recruitment data from 2020 to 2022 indicates that recruitment continued to emphasize college-level students in accordance with the above-mentioned 2019 pilot project, especially those with science and engineering backgrounds, graduates of advanced technical schools and technician colleges, and those with the increasingly high-tech skills needed for combat readiness.²²⁷ China's military recruitment for the first half of 2022 kicked off on February 15, and, as of May 2022 pre-enlistment medical examinations were ongoing around the country.²²⁸

It is clear that the PLA has found success recruiting college-level two-year enlistees, even if it has not always hit its high target quotas. Anecdotally, college PAFDs seem to be having success meeting their quotas for volunteers, although it is also possible that colleges who do not meet their quotas are less likely to announce this publicly.²²⁹ Indeed, in some cases colleges have exceeded their quotas. For example, the quota for graduates from the Jiangxi Normal University of Science and Technology for 2021 was 45, but a total of 68 were enlisted.²³⁰ The percentage of new enlisted personnel at the high school level who are volunteers rather than conscripts has also increased dramatically. That said, it is unlikely that the PLA will shift to a 100% voluntary

recruitment system, but will likely continue to have a small quota for ninth grade graduates from rural areas and high school graduates, perhaps around 5% and 20% respectively. This will be necessary to fill local quotas in cases where they are not filled via volunteers. Further, the PLA will likely keep this conscription framework in place in case there is a conflict and it struggles to find enough people willing to join voluntarily.

Enlisted Screening Process and Health Issues

Each year, the MND issues the “Physical Examination Standards for Enlisted Citizens” (应征公民体格检查标准) that identifies what the requirements for conscription/enlistment are for both qualifying and disqualifying personnel, including height, weight, eyesight and color blindness, diseases or chronic medical issues, body odor, pregnancy, dental issues, and mental health.²³¹ All candidates also undergo a detailed political review.²³²

Fitness appears to be an ongoing issue for PLA recruitment efforts. Reportedly, the injury rates among new recruits have been significantly higher in recent years due to lower amounts of physical activity among China’s youth.²³³ The sedentary lifestyle that creates these injuries has also led to a prevalence of high BMI and shortsightedness among new recruits. In 2013, one Beijing PLAA recruiting office found that 60% of its college recruits were failing the physical examination for these reasons.²³⁴ Issues with fitness appear to persist well into personnel enlistment, with physical fitness often assessed as a component of poor training performance.²³⁵

Mental health is also an important aspect of the PLA’s recruitment process, with the PLA attempting to improve its screening process since at least 2016.²³⁶ The PLA focuses on recruits’ ability to withstand four key environmental stress factors affecting mental health. These are 1) natural environment (heat, cold, altitude, humidity); 2) artificial environment (acceleration, vibration, noise, radiation); 3) social and psychological environment (loneliness, living and working in confined spaces, living a secluded, mundane life); and 4) operational environment (ability to deal with continuous operations, inadequate sleep, danger, and training at all times of the day over multiple days).²³⁷ Those who do not pass this screening are not selected for enlistment.

Mental health evaluations continue past the recruitment phase and appear to be an ongoing issue for the PLA. Reportedly, mental health and the psychological stresses of military life are a particular problem for younger recruits born after 1995, with many described as having weak endurance in the face of difficulty.²³⁸ This could translate into broader morale and combat readiness issues for the PLA, particularly in the early stages of a conflict when personnel lack first-hand combat experience. It has also led to conscripts refusing to serve, as discussed below.

A 2016 survey of nearly 54,000 members of the various services and forces by PLA psychologists showed that members of the PLASSF had the best mental health, followed in descending order by the PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF and PLARF.²³⁹ The article suggested that this was due to higher levels of education, a better work environment, a lack of major marital conflicts, and relatively low-intensity physical training in the PLASSF; and on the other to more difficult conditions, monotony, remote service locations, and intensive military training in the PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF and PLARF.²⁴⁰ Long-term (up to four weeks) training in the PLARF’s many bunkers and ICBM silos has been noted as a particularly mentally grueling assignment, despite the PLARF’s considerable efforts to maintain morale and mental health while locked underground.²⁴¹

Similar to mental health screening, the PLA has taken steps to streamline, standardize, and quantify the political screening process since the 1990s, including creating a loyalty evaluation system in at least some key billets.²⁴² While political reviews are a component of the recruitment process, the PLA’s frequent need for political work and indoctrination of its personnel after

recruitment would imply that these screening processes are of limited value and only select against overt anti-CCP indicators. For example, only after partnering with the local police force was one political evaluation office able to discover that a cadet who had already passed the initial political screening had an aunt who was in prison (presumably for political reasons).²⁴³

Salary and Compensation

Conscripts regardless of education level receive a monthly salary, allowances, and compensation, which includes clothes (3,600 RMB/USD 566 per year), food (13,000 RMB/USD 2,045 per year), living, travel, and medical expenses.²⁴⁴ Salaries begin at 750-850 RMB (USD 118-134) per month, which equates to about 20,000 RMB (USD 3,147) for two years.^{*} In addition, conscripts' hometown governments also pay an amount equal to their salary to conscripts' families. Conscripts who serve in hardship areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet also receive substantial bonuses depending on their education level, as do their families.²⁴⁵ For example, starting from 2021, the Department of Veterans Affairs of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region standardized family preferential treatment for conscripts at a fixed rate of 22,000 RMB (USD 3,176) per person per year.²⁴⁶ On this basis, each conscript serving in remote and difficult areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet will be issued an additional 10,000 RMB (USD 1,443) per year, and each conscript with a bachelor's degree will receive an additional 8,000 RMB (USD 1,554).²⁴⁷

Salaries and benefits for more educated enlisted personnel have improved in recent years, and appear to be competitive when judged against average salaries for Chinese college-educated civilians. Each province has its own policies, which are not consistent across the country.²⁴⁸ As an example, the overall economic benefits for a four-year undergraduate in Hebei Province in 2018 would be about 186,000 RMB (USD 29,265), which includes salary, retirement benefits and fees, medical insurance, endowment insurance, and various occupational subsidies.²⁴⁹ This is well above the average salary of 5,440 RMB (USD 10,271) for Chinese college graduates in 2019.²⁵⁰ Further, such employment could become attractive as a growing surplus of Chinese college graduates increasingly struggle to find well-paying jobs in a slowing economy.²⁵¹ Additional benefits for housing and after retirement are discussed in Section 10.

For college students who have not yet graduated and college graduates who join the PLA and are then demobilized after their two-year enlistment, the Ministry of Education provides a maximum of 8,000 RMB (USD 1,259) tuition assistance per year for a maximum of four years for undergraduate students and 12,000 RMB (USD 1,888) per year for graduate students.²⁵² No information was found concerning the maximum number of years for tuition reimbursement for graduate students. New conscripts receive their tuition reimbursement as soon as they are selected as a conscript and sign their contract.²⁵³

China's average tuition costs are estimated to be RMB (USD 2,500 to 10,000) per year depending on the college.²⁵⁴ The tuition cost for master's degrees in China range from 11,000 – 40,000 RMB (1,520 – 5,500 USD) per year.²⁵⁵ This is thus likely to be a significant incentive for personnel with some college education, particularly those from less affluent families. However, it appears that the PLA has struggled to retain personnel with some college education as NCOs (further discussed in Section 8), suggesting that some of these personnel may be content to do their two years, receive their tuition assistance, and return to college rather than stay on long-term.

^{*} All RMB-USD conversions are based on conversion rates from January 1, 2022 of 1 RMB = 0.15734 USD. Any analysis of the above USD amounts should take into account the substantially lower cost of living in China.

While the PLA has pushed to recruit personnel with higher levels of education, a large portion of its conscripts still come from its rural population, creating a potential problem when considering China's persistent levels of education inequality between wealthy coastal provinces and the impoverished rural populace.²⁵⁶ As the PLA recruits more educated personnel, this could cause a system of "haves" and "have-nots," creating tension between the relatively devalued recruits from rural locations and the prized recruits from wealthy areas who are showered with incentives.

Assignment Restrictions

As a general rule, since the June 1989 Tiananmen crisis in Beijing, during which nearby units made up primarily of native Beijingers refused to follow orders to crack down on the local population, the PLA does not allow enlisted personnel to serve near their hometowns.* For example, in 2014, more than 20,000 people from Guangdong Province became two-year enlistees, and were sent to 44 corps-level organizations in 19 provinces, ARs, and municipalities, including the former Lanzhou, Nanjing, and Guangzhou Military Regions (MR) (although presumably outside of their home regions), the PLAN, PLAAF, and PAP.²⁵⁷

This rule ensures that personnel will not have any personal affiliation with the local population, which the leadership hopes will head off potential loyalty issues by reducing reluctance to use force against civilians in a time of crisis. However, the PLA now has to pay more money to locate personnel to other regions for basic training, and it is more difficult for personnel to see their families. While PLA media does acknowledge homesickness as a potential morale issue (as with any military), it has taken steps to alleviate the problem by ensuring personnel, even those posted in remote locations, are able to conveniently call home,²⁵⁸ and also ensuring that basic family issues (including utilities, home repairs, and medical issues) are taken care of while personnel are deployed (see Section 6).²⁵⁹ Enlisted personnel are also given time off to visit families during the Lunar New Year holiday (see Section 10).

Enlisted Women

Female personnel make up approximately 3.8% of the total force, down from approximately 4.3% in 2010 and 5.4% in 2000.²⁶⁰ Given that female officers are relatively rare, and many female work units are led by male officers, the percent of female enlisted personnel is likely higher than these numbers.

All female personnel appear to join voluntarily. According to the *PRC Military Service Law*, women can be conscripted if a crisis arises whereby the PLA needs to increase the size of its enlisted force.²⁶¹ In practice however, only men are selected as part of the annual conscription cycle, and there is no evidence of women being conscripted.

Female personnel, with limited exceptions,[†] tend to be assigned to communications, medical, engineering, and foreign language roles, generally in female-only units commanded by male officers.²⁶² While there is no direct evidence of morale challenges in PLA media (as these sources take pains to avoid, or at least put a positive spin on, negative topics), they do feature frequent descriptions of concerns that male personnel have about the abilities of enlisted women, which provide some limited insight into this issue.²⁶³ Despite these articles' efforts to put a positive

* A detailed search did not find guidance concerning this issue in any PLA regulations or laws. However, the information is based on Ken Allen's discussions with PLA personnel, and no examples were found concerning PLA personnel serving in their hometown.

† E.g., female airborne, special operations, and aviation units do exist. However, these are rare exceptions.

spin on these stories by demonstrating that women are equally capable, their existence implies that male skepticism is common.²⁶⁴

There also exists a level of tacit sexism in PLA media, whereby female personnel are often described by their emotional responses and need for specialized emotional training, along with frequent comments from military journalists on their physical appearance.²⁶⁵ In one revealing article, a female corporal in the PLARF discusses how relatively few female personnel remain on as NCOs after their two-year enlistment period ends, due to wanting to marry and start families. When this corporal decided to stay on as an NCO, some of the men in her unit speculated that it must have only been because she had a boyfriend in the unit.²⁶⁶ It is thus reasonable to infer that such attitudes, as well as the lack of female personnel in more senior positions, are in fact an ongoing morale issue, as they would be in any other workplace. According to a 2016 survey of nearly 54,000 servicemembers, over a third of women in the PLA experienced psychological issues while serving, which was significantly higher than men (36.5% vs 28.6%).²⁶⁷

Ethnic Minorities

In addition to the Han Chinese majority, China also recognizes 55 ethnic minority groups constituting 8.5% of the total population. Depending on their age, academic status, and location, the PLA both conscripts and recruits minorities. According to census data, the number of ethnic minorities in active service in the PLA has gone up by nearly one-third, from 101,686 to 135,055 between 2010 and 2020 (from 4.4% of personnel to 6.75%).²⁶⁸ The number of personnel from politically sensitive minority groups (e.g. Tibetans, Uyghurs, and other Turkic minorities) has also increased, indicating a push to recruit personnel who can interact with these cultures. At the provincial level, the only data found was for minority-heavy Yunnan Province, where 33% of recruits were ethnic minorities in 2021.²⁶⁹

In at least some cases, ethnic minorities appear to receive preferential treatment for military enrollment.²⁷⁰ For example, enlisted personnel in Tibet who already have a civilian college degree can exceed the maximum age by one year for direct promotion as an officer.²⁷¹ Academically exceptional minority students are also sometimes identified and cultivated for service, receiving further education before joining the PLA.

Little information was found concerning where minority enlisted personnel were stationed. The former Chengdu MR, now part of the Western Theater Command, had a high proportion of hardship areas, including border areas and high-altitude terrain (e.g., Tibet and Qinghai), as well as a high proportion of minorities. As a result, it focused on recruiting/conscripting a higher proportion of minority personnel²⁷² and, given that rural minority areas have fewer high schools, the proportion of ninth grade graduates was also higher than in other MRs.²⁷³ Although, as mentioned above, the PLA generally no longer allows enlisted personnel to serve near their hometowns, at least some minorities are stationed in their home province/AR.²⁷⁴ In addition, various Indian media outlets reported in 2021 that the PLA had been stepping up its recruitment of Tibetans to serve on the border with India following a series of clashes there between the two countries in 2020-2022.²⁷⁵ This may indicate that the advantages of having a certain amount of ethnic minority personnel, likely heavily vetted through strict political and other screening, may outweigh other concerns such as loyalty for ethnic minority regions. These soldiers provide a valuable service with their knowledge of local languages and customs, and often provide support to civilian development projects in the region, liaising with local civilians and militia members who oftentimes do not speak Mandarin.²⁷⁶

The PLA has established “ethnic companies,” including (as of 2009) ten such companies in Xinjiang²⁷⁷ and 20 in Inner Mongolia.²⁷⁸ While the company commander is typically Han (or co-led by one Han and one minority officer, with a requirement of at least 20% minority officers), all other personnel are ethnic minorities, who likely are all from the same province-level region the company is located in.²⁷⁹ According to one officer, such companies alleviate potential cultural and morale issues by placing minority personnel together and providing support for them to observe their common traditions, customs, holidays, and language (e.g. serving halal food), which are all different from those of Han personnel.²⁸⁰ The same article claims that minority personnel appreciate this opportunity, as they allegedly feel more comfortable serving alongside soldiers of similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which (it is implied) improves their confidence and unit morale.²⁸¹ However, the article also claims that minority personnel sometimes struggle to be seen as equals with their Han Chinese counterparts.²⁸²

Such companies may have become less common in recent years, in the face of recent trends away from ethnic autonomy and toward cultural homogenization, as well as worries about Islamic “extremism” and Uyghur separatism. Further, it is unclear to what extent the ethnic companies which remain today provide support and resources for minority personnel to observe their own customs, cuisine, and language, given the increased sensitivity around these issues. Most minority personnel today likely serve in general, non-segregated units. However, such companies continue to exist as of 2020, including the Xinjiang 6th Company,²⁸³ as well as a Xinjiang border defense company²⁸⁴ and a PLAAF airborne company.²⁸⁵

Pre-induction and Departing For Duty

As early as 2012, the PLA and PAP began a “pre-induction education and training” (役前教育训练) program in several provinces to provide from three to 21 days of training for new personnel before they depart for basic training.²⁸⁶ The program was not officially incorporated into a regulation until 2018. However, there still appears to be a lack of consistency, such that some personnel receive different amounts of training or no training at all. The program requires personnel to receive ideological education, some basic military training, heart-to-heart talks, and physical reexamination.²⁸⁷ Because conscripts are selected to meet overall quotas, they are not selected for specific specialty billets. However, one goal of this program is for the PAFDs to learn about the specialties of the scheduled recruits through conversations and skill competitions.* Another goal is to further weed out personnel who were selected but found to not be able to meet all the requirements. For example, one college student was eliminated in 2020 because his overall fitness was lacking.²⁸⁸ His county’s PAFD checked up on him and helped him with a fitness plan. Six months later, he was in better shape and was able to join as a submariner.²⁸⁹

Once the new enlisted personnel are selected, they are given their uniforms and a suitcase and depart together from the train station or airport, where their families, PAFD personnel, and other key personnel see them off. Each new conscript wears their uniform and a large red, round flower. The ceremony is usually posted in the local news and sometimes on television.²⁹⁰ They are accompanied by current personnel from an operational unit who serve as escorts.

* These competitions are divided into eight specialties. The source specifies three of these: meteorology, reconnaissance, and equipment support.

Historical New-soldier Training

Prior to 2014, all new enlisted personnel either went directly to a training base, where they received basic training followed by specialty training, or directly to their operational units, where they were assigned to a “new-soldier company.”^{291*} Conscripts who completed their basic training at an operational unit were then assigned to a company within that operational unit, where they learned how to function in squads and platoons. From this point, they were referred to as soldiers (士兵, 战士, or 新战士). Rather than using trained drill instructors, basic training was traditionally led by NCOs and junior officers who were temporarily taken away from their regular duties and returned to their permanent billets after training was completed. However more recently the PLA has begun using full-time drill instructors.²⁹²

Current New-soldier Training

The Outline of Military Training and Evaluation (OMTE), which is overseen by the CMC Training and Administration Department and the service Staff Department Training Bureaus, provides overall guidance for all new-soldier training.^{293†} While it provides general guidance, each service and force also has its own specific guidance on training. The latest OMTE should be approved and published by the end of 2023.²⁹⁴ Unfortunately, the OMTE is not available publicly. While all new conscripts are required to conduct the same basic training (including physical training, marching, learning how to wear their uniforms, etc.), each service provides specific guidance based on their branch for additional basic training (including weapons firing and basic understanding of relevant weapon systems and equipment).²⁹⁵ Depending on the service, by the time new recruits finish their basic training, they may only have 18-20 months left before the end of their two-year enlistment.

In recent years, it appears that each of the four services and the PLASSF have created new-soldier training regiments, brigades, or bases to consolidate their basic training rather than send new conscripts directly to their operational units for basic training. In addition, it appears that each of the services have adopted different methods for training new conscripts.

The Army increased its basic training from three months to six months in 2018.²⁹⁶ Whereas the first three months focused on marching, boxing, shooting, physical training, and cross-country running and sprints, the last three months now include ideological awareness, theory, and the correct use of weapons and equipment for their new billets. As such, after six months of training, when recruits enter the company, they can immediately familiarize themselves with their positions, as well as be capable of fighting both as individual soldiers and in squads and platoons.²⁹⁷

Although the Army has extended its basic training to six months, it does not appear that the Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force, or Strategic Support Force have followed suit. For example, the PLAN was still conducting only three months of basic training in 2017, and no information was found since then to indicate it has changed.²⁹⁸ Whereas most new Navy conscripts receive their training in new-soldier training bases for three months,^{299‡} Marine Corps conscripts appear

* Depending on the number of new personnel, these companies are organized into new-soldier battalions, each of which had at least three companies.

† The former GSD first published an *Outline of Military Training* (军事训练大纲) in 1955 that was applicable to all PLA forces. Since 1955, revised documents were approved and issued in 1957, 1978, 1980, 1989, 1995, 2001, 2009, and 2018. In 2001, the word “evaluation” was added, such that the new name became the *Outline of Military Training and Evaluation* (军事训练与考核大纲) or OMTE. Once the draft of a new outline is provided to each PLA component, it normally takes at least two years to rewrite the regulations and approve the final version. Although the overall OMTE is not available to the public, a review of multiple articles over the years helps provide a general understanding of its content.

‡ Navy new-soldier training bases with about 1,000 conscripts each were identified under each of the three Theater Command Navy HQs, as well as under the Navy Service Academy and Submarine Academy.

to receive their training for only two months at the newly-created Marine Corps Training Base, which replaced the former Marine Corps Academy in 2017.³⁰⁰

Concerning the PLARF, each of the six operations bases has a subordinate new-soldier training regiment that provides three months of training before they are assigned to their operational billets.³⁰¹ The PLASSF also has its own new-soldier training regiments.³⁰²

In 2014, the PLAAF began increasing its basic training from about seven weeks to three months.³⁰³ Further, new soldiers would no longer be sent directly to operational units for basic training. Rather, they could be sent to training bases, as before, or could be sent to newly created new-soldier training brigades. The PLAAF created its first new-soldier training brigade in 2014, and this system was eventually implemented across the PLAAF.³⁰⁴ Each of these training brigades has about 1,000 to 1,500 new enlistees.³⁰⁵ Based on the estimated size of 395,000 personnel in the PLAAF, of which about 121,000 are two-year conscripts, this implies that about 60,500 new conscripts enter every year, which also implies there are about 40 to 60 new-soldier training brigades.* Upon completion of basic training, personnel are sent to their operational units, where they are assigned to their permanent billets and receive on-the-job training.

As basic training comes to an end in December, units in each Theater Command begin finalizing new-soldier billet assignments.³⁰⁶ New soldiers begin arriving at their operational locations in early January or remain at their training base for specialty training. Specific training units are responsible for training personnel in various specialties, including aircraft maintenance, armaments, cooking, communications, equipment, logistics, and vehicle driving.³⁰⁷ Most PLA training is put on hold during the Chinese New Year (Spring Festival) that occurs in late January or early February, but training continues in the spring.³⁰⁸

Specialty training can significantly extend the length of overall enlisted training. For example, following basic training, soldiers in the PLAAF's Airborne Corps who enlisted in autumn 2017 only performed their first large-aircraft parachute training in January 2018,³⁰⁹ and only become fully jump-qualified combat personnel following another year of specialty training. Thus, conscripted Airborne personnel are fully qualified for less than one year before demobilizing.³¹⁰

Units do seem to take personnel skills, proclivities, and preferences into account when assigning new personnel to their billets. For example, one Western Theater Command SAM brigade used psychological assessments as a determination for billet assignments, and an Eastern Theater Command airfield station considered both the new soldiers' skills and academic majors, as well as their preferred billet assignments.³¹¹ At the latter location, 87% of the new soldiers were assigned to billets that matched their majors.³¹² However, some personnel are inevitably disappointed in their assignments. One Northern Theater Command company held a ceremony welcoming new soldiers, where NCOs discussed that "all billets provide opportunities for growth," especially for those soldiers not assigned to their preferred billets.³¹³

After completing their basic and specialty training, new conscripts are assigned to their operational billets, where they receive on-the-job training, individual training, and unit training, which includes conducting tactical training and campaign training, in a step-by-step process.³¹⁴ As such, it takes the new conscripts several months to learn their specialty and to be fully integrated into their units. The PLA expects that, after the first six months of their 2-year conscription period (including basic training, advanced training, on-the-job training, etc.), most conscripts will be sufficiently proficient in their jobs to take part in larger unit training.³¹⁵

* Based on the estimated size of the PLAAF as 395,000 personnel, this implies that the breakdown is as follows: officers and civilian cadres (23% = 90,850); enlisted force (77% = 304,150); NCOs (60% of enlisted force = 182,000); conscripts/recruits (40% of enlisted force = 121,650).

Annual Training Cycle

Due to the previous once-per-year conscription cycle, units that were heavily conscript-oriented were not at 100% combat effectiveness all year long. This issue would have presented a problem for the PLA's combat effectiveness if hostilities broke out during the "off-season" just after beginning a new cycle, because untrained new conscripts would slow operations.³¹⁶ Further, under the once-per-year conscription cycle, not only did units receive all of their new conscripts, who must be gradually incorporated into the unit step-by-step, at the same time, but they also lost the same number of conscripts who had served their two years and were either demobilized or promoted to NCO.³¹⁷ The PLA also lost all of its NCOs who were not promoted to the next rank, and almost all conscripts who became an NCO had to receive some type of technical training. Thus, under the once-per-year system, the PLA was short about 350,000 trained enlisted personnel for a period of time,^{*} as that number had finished their conscription period and demobilized, while waiting for their replacements to finish basic training.³¹⁸ As such, the peak exercise season occurred during the spring and summer, when new enlisted personnel were integrated into their units in a step-by-step process including on-the-job training, squad training, platoon training, company training, battalion training, and then regiment or brigade training events.³¹⁹ However, even at that time units were not typically at 100%, as this period coincided with the arrival of newly graduated officers with no operational experience and who were on probation their first year.

While this problem disproportionately affected conscript-heavy units such as Army Infantry, the PLAN Marine Corps, and the PLAAF Airborne Corps, even less conscript-heavy units were affected, with at least one PLARF missile brigade stating in 2018 that some of its elements were unable to participate in drills immediately following the demobilization period.³²⁰ Further, until the PLAN began retaining a higher number of NCOs in the late 2000s, naval vessels rarely conducted large at-sea training from November to February because of the November turnover of demobilizing conscripts.³²¹ However, after the PLAN increased the percentage of NCOs to around 85% and reduced the percentage of conscripts onboard key combat vessels in the late 2000s, vessels are now able to conduct major training events throughout the year.³²²

To address this issue, in January 2020, the PLA announced that it would begin enlisting new personnel during two separate periods per year instead of just once per year.³²³ This new cycle was delayed for a year due to COVID but reinstituted in December 2020 for 2021.³²⁴

This shift to twice-per-year recruitment is designed to improve personnel readiness levels and ensure higher average unit-manning levels regardless of the time of year.³²⁵ As Blasko and Clay write, "when implemented, two recruitment and demobilization cycles per year could even out personnel strength at higher levels in 'conscript-heavy' units, allowing for increased unit coherence and readiness," as the recruitment and training cycle has traditionally been a key driver in these units' uneven readiness throughout the year.³²⁶

Under the new system, registration and screening took place for men between December 10, 2020 and February 20, 2021, and the final selection process took place between February 20 and March 31 for the first cycle.³²⁷ For the second cycle, registration and screening took place between April 1 and August 15, 2021 and the final selection process took place between August 15 and September 30.^{328†} Although overall conscription numbers have not changed, according to a staff officer in one mobilization bureau, the spring recruitment accounts for 45% of the annual quota, while fall recruitment takes in the remaining 55% of the total annual force.³²⁹

^{*} Ranging from three months prior to the three-month shift forward in 2013 to about five months when the PLA increased the length of time for basic training.

[†] The registration and screening cycles for women were December 10, 2020 to February 15, 2021, and June 26 to August 15.

While the goal of the two-cycle system is to offer a more regular flow of new personnel, an article from July 2022 laid out some serious problems with the new system in Army units.³³⁰ Specifically, the two-cycle system still does not fit into the overall annual training cycle as it is currently conceived. Since the annual cycle of training, drills, and exercises is still set up to progressively develop personnel arriving in the autumn, spring conscripts arrive in the middle of this cycle and thus are unable to develop in the same progressive fashion.³³¹ As a result, they struggle to master the advanced skills needed for their respective roles and are more likely to commit significant errors during training events and exercises.³³² One Army brigade noted that spring conscripts struggle to gain combat effectiveness.³³³ The presence of such articles in PLA media suggests that the PLA is aware of the problem and will likely overhaul its annual training cycle in the coming years to better accommodate spring arrivals.

Based on PLA reporting, the new schedule is also creating challenges for existing conscription institutions, which are still adapting.³³⁴ For example, spring conscription overlaps with existing tasks such as militia and readiness training, straining the resources of recruitment offices.³³⁵ Furthermore, the expansion of “pre-enlistment training” for new recruits conducted by local PAFDs significantly increases their workload.³³⁶ According to *PLA Daily*, this expansion of conscript training has put PAFDs into “panic mode.”³³⁷

The new system has also increased inter-personal friction between the members of the different conscript cycles. Stories have accrued of bullying between “senior” members of an earlier conscript cycle and the “junior” newer conscripts.³³⁸

While this early evidence suggests that the transition to the new system has been rocky, it remains to be seen how successful it will be in the long term in smoothing out the spikes of incoming recruits and better enabling consistent year-round operations. Changes are likely over the next few years. Although no information was found, the following provides some informed speculation about the new system:³³⁹

- Given that the new system does not completely overlap with the previous one-cycle system, the conscripts who began their training in August 2019 and August 2020 most likely remained or will remain on active duty until the end of their two years, at which time they are demobilized, or become an NCO or officer. However, once the first group of conscripts who began their training in February and August 2021 complete their two-year period, they will leave in February and August of 2023.³⁴⁰
- No recent information was found concerning new soldiers being assigned to any technical training bases, where they receive their basic training and technical training. However, until a viable alternative comes to light, such bases are presumed to still exist.³⁴¹
- Once the new conscripts complete their basic training and are assigned to their operational units, their next steps most likely remain the same, including on-the-job training and specialty training.³⁴²

There are also several outstanding questions about the new system:³⁴³

- It appears that basic training has been consolidated at the corps/army/theater level for the PLA AF, though this cannot be confirmed force-wide. Further, it remains unclear precisely *why* training has been consolidated at these levels. Which training bases specifically are employed for this purpose? How many training bases are there in total? Are all new-soldier training bases used during both conscription/basic training periods?

- Assuming that only one-half of the previous number of conscripts (350,000) begin their training at the same time now, has the number of training brigades and subordinate training battalions remained the same or been cut in half?
- Are the trainers/instructors at the bases assigned to training bases full-time? If so, how are they selected and how long do they serve there?
- After basic training, do all units receive new soldiers twice a year, or do they go to half the units once a year, or to one-quarter of the units once every two years (which would allow units to have a single set of conscripts for the longest period of time)?

Refusal to Serve

According to a report based on research from 2009-2018, the PLA has become increasingly professionalized, but incidents of new conscripts who refuse to serve after receiving their conscription notice or even after they have entered service are common.³⁴⁴ The report identified 236 publicly reported cases, portraying the behavior as occurring among soldiers who are young, unable to endure hardship, and subject to severe and varied punishments.³⁴⁵ For example, a 20-year old college student in Anhui Province joined the PLA in September 2020 but requested to quit on the first day of training on the grounds of maladjustment.³⁴⁶ Despite encouragement from his training unit and family to remain on duty, he refused and he was discharged. Analysis of this data shows that refusals to serve are more common in China's military than public reports indicate, and that China's leaders are concerned about the phenomenon, though they offer no indication the PLA as a whole would disobey Party leadership.

The PLA can retaliate against anyone who refuses to serve once they are conscripted or refuse to continue serving during their conscription period. Punishments can include cancelling preferential treatment, fines of up to RMB 46,866 (USD 6,760), and banishment for varying periods of time from resuming college, going abroad, obtaining government aid or subsidies, obtaining civil service or state-owned enterprise employment, or receiving a business license.³⁴⁷

Post-service Status

Upon completing their enlistment period, personnel have four options.³⁴⁸ First, they can be demobilized and sent back to their hometown. Here, they can seek out a government or private job. Alternatively, college students who did not complete their degree before joining the PLA can return to their academic institution to finish their degree.³⁴⁹ This is most likely when personnel who joined the PLA for tuition assistance and other simple benefits would end their service. Each unit holds a ceremony to bid farewell to all conscripts who are being sent home.³⁵⁰ In addition to some personal and commemorative items, each man is allowed to take home a single uniform (which they wear with the same large round, red flower they had when they departed for their assignments) and a discharge certificate, which serves as proof of veteran status.^{351*}

Second, they may apply and be selected for promotion to NCO (改为士官/选取士官).³⁵² Under this option, they may be selected to attend a civilian polytechnic/vocational college as part of the NCO targeted recruitment program. See Section 8 for more information on becoming an NCO, including being selected as an NCO after the two-year conscription period.

Third, they may be selected to attend an officer academic institution to become an officer (生长干部).³⁵³ Outstanding conscripts with a high school degree or an incomplete college degree

* Demobilizing personnel have to return every other uniform and everything on their uniform, including rank insignia. The PLA keeps these items in case they need to distribute them during a conflict.

can apply to an officer military academic institution by participating in the all-military undergraduate admissions examination.³⁵⁴ This is the same exam civilians wishing to attend an officer academic institution take, as well as current enlisted personnel who wish to enter the targeted NCO program in civilian polytechnic/vocational colleges.* The exam consists of five subjects, including Chinese culture and history, mathematics, military and political knowledge, scientific knowledge, and English, with a total score of 750 points.³⁵⁵ The most recent exam was held in June 2022 at 158 centers in 91 cities across China.³⁵⁶ A total of 54,000 enlisted soldiers took the exam. No information was found about how many personnel were accepted. Enlisted personnel with at least two years of college education who are selected to attend an officer academy only attend the academy for two years (学制两年).³⁵⁷

Fourth, if they already have a bachelor's degree from a civilian college and have met the relevant requirements of service time, performance, political requirements, age, and physical and psychological requirements, they can receive a direct promotion as an officer (提干).³⁵⁸

Second Enlistment

The PLA offers the opportunity for “second enlistment” (二次入伍),[†] which allows two-year conscripts who have been demobilized to return to active duty in one of four ways: 1) attending an officer academic institution; 2) being directly recruited as a special technical officer if they have certain specialty skills and the appropriate degree; 3) being directly recruited as an NCO; and 4) returning as a two-year conscript to their old unit or in a different service.³⁵⁹ For example, one article identified someone who previously served in the PLAN Marine Corps but reenlisted in the PLAAF's Airborne Corps as a paratrooper.³⁶⁰ Demobilized conscripts can also be called back to active duty during wartime if they became a member of the reserves.

Although no date was found identifying when this program began, it appears that the component allowing for the direct re-enlistment as an NCO was formalized in 2021, when it was incorporated into the amended *PRC Conscription Work Regulations* draft.³⁶¹ When it initially began, demobilized conscripts could join the PLA again and go straight to their operational units, skipping basic training, and receive the rank of private. However, based on the 2021 amended regulations, it appears that they can also now become an NCO with the rank of corporal, even though they were originally not selected as an NCO before being demobilized.

While the PLA has not published information explaining the decision to create the second enlistment program, its creation may imply that the PLA is facing issues with insufficient retention of enlisted personnel, necessitating the creation of a program to bring back old personnel to take their place. Often, the benefits of PLA service aren't realized until after demobilization. While these benefits do often scale with the amount of time spent in the PLA, many, such as tuition assistance, can be obtained in their most basic form after the 2-year conscription period is over.³⁶² Given the substantial increase in college enlistment after the creation of these benefits, it seems likely that many in the PLA joined for these benefits. As one example, in March 2015 the PLAAF Aviation University realized it faced retention issues and high dropout rates. Investigating why, they discovered that many cadets were joining the University only for its partnership programs with China's top-rated Peking and Tsinghua Universities.³⁶³ When the cadets were accepted into the program, many decided instead to leave the PLA and attend PKU or Tsinghua. This anecdote may point to a larger issue with motivation and retention in the PLA. While the benefits of joining

* However, while officer and NCO candidates sit the exam together, it appears that they take different versions of the exam.

† No official English translation was found for this term.

may entice some to join as conscripts, their realization after 2 years would also push many to leave service.

Section 8: Non-commissioned Officer Corps

This section provides an overview of the PLA's non-commissioned officer (NCO)* corps. It includes discussion of NCO force size and composition, history, ongoing challenges, NCO selection, training, and education, direct recruitment and targeted recruitment of NCOs, ranks and grades, the PLA Master Chief system, and demobilization.

Background

The PLA created the framework of a modern NCO corps in 1999, and since then has shifted from a force made up predominantly of two-year enlisted personnel to one based primarily around a core of NCOs.³⁶⁴ Over that time, the PLA has slowly begun empowering these NCOs with greater responsibilities and jobs formerly held by junior officers, in an effort to turn NCOs into professional, tactically proficient “end-point commanders” capable of taking initiative. In recent years, it has experimented with new methods for NCO education and recruitment to bring in personnel with the technical skills it needs. While the PLA has been seemingly successful in increasing the proportion of NCOs in the force and giving them greater responsibilities, the limited evidence available suggests that it has still had problems properly utilizing or appreciating their talents, leading to issues with morale and retention.

The roots of the PLA's NCO program can be traced to the 1970s, when conscripts were allowed to stay on for an additional 16 years as volunteers. In 1988, the NPC approved the *Regulations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army on the Active-Duty Service of Enlisted Personnel*, which for the first time designated these volunteers as non-commissioned officers and accorded them the rank of sergeant or specialist sergeant.³⁶⁵ Despite being referred to as NCOs, however, these personnel had none of the hallmarks or responsibilities associated with a modern, professional NCO corps, such as the ability to command or show initiative, and by the late 1990s the PLA noticed several problems with this rudimentary NCO system. For one, the PLA found it difficult to motivate these new NCOs, given their limited number of responsibilities, lower salaries and benefits compared to officers, and lack of promotion possibilities.³⁶⁶ This made it difficult for the PLA to attract talented NCOs, as well as to get rid of those with subpar performance.

By the end of the 1990s, the PLA attempted to tackle these issues, as well as the multiple other personnel problems it was facing.³⁶⁷ These included a bloated officer corps, an overreliance on conscription leading to dips in combat readiness as new conscripts cycled in and out of service, and the lack of qualified enlisted personnel to man and maintain more technologically sophisticated weapon systems. The PLA thus responded by amending two key regulations which created the PLA's modern NCO system as it exists today: *The Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China* and the *Regulations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army on the Active-Duty Service of Enlisted Personnel*.³⁶⁸ As discussed in Section 7, the amended *Military Service Law* permitted conscripts at the end of their two years of service to apply to become an NCO or take exams to enter a military academy and become an officer.

In July 1999, the PRC revised the *Active-Duty Service of Enlisted Personnel* regulations, which established the standard 30-year career path that exists for NCOs today.³⁶⁹ This career path

* The PLA is not consistent in that it uses both “non-commissioned officer” and “noncommissioned officer.” For purposes of this report, the term non-commissioned officer is used unless it is cited as noncommissioned officer in an official PLA publication.

was broken down into three grades (junior, intermediate, and senior) and six service periods ranging from three to nine years. Junior-grade NCOs serve in company and battalion-level units, intermediate-grade NCOs in regiment and brigade-level units, and senior-grade NCOs in brigade- and division-level units.³⁷⁰ Unlike the officer corps, which has a mandatory retirement age for each grade, NCOs could now only retire once they have reached age 55 or have served for 30 years.³⁷¹ All other NCOs who leave the service are demobilized.

By the late 2000s, the regulations had triggered radical changes within the enlisted force. The overall number and percentage of two-year conscripts in the military had declined as the PLA continued to increase the proportion of NCOs in the enlisted force. For example, in 2004, the proportion of conscripts in the enlisted force had dropped to 53%, down from a figure of approximately 70% in 2002.³⁷² According to authoritative PLA books from 2008 and 2012, as the PLA has downsized, the ratio of officers to enlisted personnel (conscripts and NCOs combined) has gone from 1:2 to 1:3, with an ultimate goal of 1:8.³⁷³ It is not clear what the ratio is today.

Although the 1998 law and regulations focused on laying the groundwork for a modern NCO corps, unclear and inadequate laws continued to negatively affect the PLA's ability to recruit qualified personnel, to retain talent, and to provide good post-service jobs.³⁷⁴ For instance, although the PLA started enlisting college graduates in 2001 as conscripts, by 2009 it had recruited only 2,000 as two-year enlisted personnel.³⁷⁵ In 2009, the PLA and Ministry of Education thus created lucrative financial incentives, including tuition repayment, post-military employment, and compensation for demobilized personnel to start a business, which substantially improved the PLA's ability to recruit college-educated personnel (discussed in detail in Section 7).

In December 2009, the CMC implemented a new "Plan for Reforming the NCO System" along with three revised regulations which covered NCO active-duty service periods, management, and education and training.³⁷⁶ The new plan and revised regulations kept the overall size of the enlisted force the same, but increased the size of the NCO corps while reducing the size of the conscript force.³⁷⁷ This would reduce the turnover of conscripts each year that led to reduced capabilities during certain times of the year, as well as encourage NCOs to take on more leadership and technical responsibilities as they move up their career paths.³⁷⁸ It also improved salary and benefits for intermediate and senior NCOs, increased NCO education and training requirements, and increased the number of NCOs recruited directly from civilian college students and graduates (i.e., they do not serve two-years before being commissioned as an NCO).³⁷⁹ All of this added up to encourage a more educated and professional NCO corps.

The new plan and revised regulations changed the name for each of the ranks and added a third rank at the senior NCO level. In terms of service periods, the new plan and revised regulations allows for NCOs to serve for more than a total of 14 years in the senior grade NCO grade.³⁸⁰

In spring 2022, media reporting indicated that the PLA issued new interim regulations for NCOs and enlisted personnel.³⁸¹ Though details have not been made public, the regulations broadly aim to improve the quality of new NCOs, modernize NCO development, and strengthen retention incentives.³⁸² The regulations bifurcate NCOs as "management," those presumably in leadership billets, and "skilled," those in technical positions.³⁸³ The regulations also establish a system for various billets to be filled by certain NCO ranks, creating a codified path for promotion.³⁸⁴ To help bring new and better-educated NCOs into the ranks faster, the new regulations also allow qualified conscripts to become an NCO before their two-year service commitment is up, and allow for faster promotions and extending time in rank.³⁸⁵ According to a recent article from *South China Morning Post*, the PLA may also be moving toward a system of promoting soldiers based on their abilities and qualifications instead of years in service.³⁸⁶

NCO Force Size and Composition

According to a 2009 report, NCOs accounted for 40% of the total number of PLA personnel.³⁸⁷ Per statistics from 2009, following the implementation of significant NCO reforms and regulations, junior-grade NCOs constituted 61.1% of the NCO corps, intermediate-grade NCOs constituted 37.2%, and senior-grade NCOs accounted for 1.7%.^{388*} In addition, about 61.1% of NCOs were 26 years old or younger, 98.3% were 34 years old or younger, and the average age was 30 and below. As a result of the 2009 reforms, the size of the junior-grade NCO corps was reduced in order to enlarge the number of intermediate-grade NCOs.³⁸⁹ In 2012, technical NCOs constituted 90% of the NCO corps.³⁹⁰ Unfortunately, no similar data was found for after 2012.

NCO Selection Procedures

According to the 2018 document *Provisions on the Administration of Non-commissioned Officers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army*, NCOs are divided into four categories according to their responsibilities: 1) command and management NCOs; 2) special technical NCOs; 3) command technical NCOs; 4) ordinary NCOs.³⁹¹ In 2022, the PLA merged the four categories into two: 1) management NCOs, and 2) technical NCOs.³⁹²

In order to be selected as an NCO, two-year enlistees must pass each of the following prerequisites: 1) win a National or Military Science and Technology Progress Award; 2) win an Outstanding Personnel Award for Non-commissioned Officers of the Army; 3) be commended by units at or above the corps level; 4) win an award of third-class or above; and 5) be one of three winners of the military assessment competition at the brigade and higher level.³⁹³ They must also have the relevant education level for each rank and, depending on which category they are assigned to, must undergo corresponding training for six to 12 months at an NCO school or training unit.

In order to be promoted to a higher rank, NCOs must undergo a process, usually performed at the end of the year when new conscripts are beginning their basic training, consisting of: 1) submitting an application to the Party Branch; 2) a one-on-one meeting with a company-level officer; 3) a physical examination; 4) a fitness test; and 5) professional skill tests.³⁹⁴ The Party Branch then makes public all of the information at least five days in advance of the selection, including a list of those who applied and all of the requirements, which are then reviewed by the relevant Party organization.³⁹⁵ This is likely to prevent corruption in the selection process. There is then an opportunity for comments from personnel throughout the unit, a “peer selection by secret ballot,” and a final decision by the unit party committee.³⁹⁶ Junior-grade NCOs are approved by the regiment or brigade-level Party Committee, intermediate-grade NCOs are approved by the division or brigade-level, and senior-grade NCOs are approved by the corps-level.

Of particular note, college students/graduates who remain on active duty as an NCO skip the rank of corporal and are given the rank of sergeant.³⁹⁷ Those with a three-year post-secondary degree get 1 year of service applied and only have to serve for 2 years before being eligible for promotion to the next rank. Those who already have a bachelor's degree get 2 years of service applied and only have to serve for 1 year before being eligible for promotion.

Generally, enlisted personnel throughout the PLA remain in their same regiment, brigade, and/or division within a corps-level unit throughout their entire career. For example, Navy enlisted personnel would remain on the same vessel their entire careers. However, in 2022, the Navy began moving senior NCOs from one destroyer to another in order to keep qualified personnel and fill

* Junior grade NCOs include corporal and sergeant ranks; intermediate grade NCOs include sergeants second and first class ranks; and senior grade NCOs include master sergeants class-3, class-2, and class-1 ranks.

vacant billets elsewhere with qualified personnel.³⁹⁸ As such, personnel from various destroyers (and, presumably, other types of vessels) can now compete for billets on a different vessel.

NCO Training and Education

According to a 2005 document from the GSD Military Affairs Department, all NCOs who hope to be promoted to a higher grade must undergo education at a PLA academy or school, or receive training at a training organization.³⁹⁹ Thus, with each promotion on their way up the career ladder, NCOs receive some specialty training, which varies considerably depending on grade-level and billet.⁴⁰⁰ For example, junior-grade and intermediate-grade NCOs must receive about one month of training before promotion to the next grade. New management NCOs who become squad leaders receive three months of training, while technical NCOs receive about five months.⁴⁰¹ Training for some categories, such as weapons maintenance and communications, can last up to one year. Further, multiple academic institutions and training bases have small organizations that provide a short-term specialty training for two-year conscripts who have been selected as NCOs, since most conscripts rarely receive any group specialty training.

All junior-grade NCOs must have a high school degree, all intermediate-grade NCOs and special technical and command NCOs must have at least a two-year secondary technical diploma, and senior-grade NCOs must have at least a three-year post-secondary diploma as well as at least 10 years of experience in their specialty.⁴⁰² There are no bachelor's degree requirements.

Prior to 1986, a small number of officer academic institutions had established education programs for sergeants, but the majority of sergeants did not have the opportunity to attend these.⁴⁰³ Beginning in 1986, the PLA created various stand-alone sergeant schools for specific specialties, including the Bengbu Vehicle Sergeant School, Bethune Medical Sergeant School, Naval Bengbu Sergeant School, and the Dalian Communication Sergeant School of the Air Force. It also created various sergeant programs under officer academic institutions, such as the Air Force Engineering University's Aviation Maintenance Sergeant School. Since then, the number of NCO Schools has changed multiple times. Following a massive downsizing of the PLA's academic institutions in 2017, the PLA now has only three stand-alone NCO schools (Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force) and several NCO schools that are subordinate to officer academies.⁴⁰⁴ NCO schools only offer two-year secondary professional education programs/diplomas and two- to three-year post-secondary education programs/diplomas, which are roughly equivalent to a U.S. associate's degree.⁴⁰⁵ It does not appear that any NCO schools offer a bachelor's degree.

Notably, not all NCOs attend an NCO school. Whether an NCO gets to attend an NCO school⁴⁰⁶ depends on their specialty. While some schools, such as the Air Force Communications NCO Academy, focus on only one specialty, others have multiple specialties. For example, in 2019, the Naval NCO School offered six majors—Navigation, Electromechanics, Communications, Electronics, Weapons, and Management—and over 40 unspecified specialties.⁴⁰⁷

Prior to the creation of the modern NCO corps, what sophisticated weapons and equipment the PLA possessed were operated by officers. Today, when military weapons and equipment are upgraded, NCOs conduct professional training to learn the new equipment.⁴⁰⁸ Professional training for new equipment is mainly undertaken by military academies and training institutions. If necessary, they can be sent to factories, scientific research units, or local colleges for training. The training time is determined according to needs.

New Grade and Rank Structure in 2009 and 2022

The 2009 plan and revised regulations also changed the name for each of the ranks shown in the table below, as well as adding a third rank at the senior NCO grade level. The plan and revised regulations allow NCOs to serve for more than a total of 14 years in the senior NCO grade level.⁴⁰⁹ However, the exact number of years for each rank in the senior grade level is still not clear. Unlike the officer corps, which has 15 grades and 10 ranks, the enlisted force has only three NCO grade levels and a total of eight NCO ranks as shown in the table below. It is important to note that, unlike officers who wear ribbons that identify their grade and number of years served, NCOs do not wear any ribbons. In 2022, the PLA made further adjustments to the rank structure by changing the name for two ranks as shown in the table below:

New Conscript and NCO Rank Structure as of 2009 and 2022⁴¹⁰

Grade Level	Service Period	Rank (2009)	Rank (2022)	Time in Rank
Conscript (义务兵)	1st year	Private 2nd Class (列兵)	Private 2nd Class (列兵)	About 9 months
	2nd year	Private 1st Class (上等兵)	Private 1st Class (上等兵)	1 year
Junior Grade NCO (初级士官) (6 years)	3rd to 8th years	Corporal (下士)	Corporal (下士)	3 Years
		Sergeant (中士)	Sergeant (中士)	3 Years
Intermediate Grade NCO (中级士官) (8 years)	9th to 16th years	Sergeant First Class (上士)	Sergeant Second Class (二级上士)	4 Years
		Master Sergeant Class-4 (四级军士长)	Sergeant First Class (一级上士)	4 Years
Senior Grade NCO (高级士官) (14 years)	17th to 30th years	Master Sergeant Class-3 (三级军士长)	Master Sergeant Class-3 (三级军士长)	4 Years
		Master Sergeant Class-2 (二级军士长)	Master Sergeant Class-2 (二级军士长)	4 Years
		Master Sergeant Class-1 (一级军士长)	Master Sergeant Class-1 (一级军士长)	6 Years

These new 2022 regulations also now allow NCOs to either be promoted early or to remain on active duty if they are not promoted to the next rank. However, they must still retire at age 55 or after serving 30 years.⁴¹¹

Direct Recruitment and Targeted Recruitment of NCOs*

Since the late 2000s, the PLA has also implemented a program of “direct recruitment” that allows units to directly recruit civilians with needed technical degrees as NCOs, bypassing the junior enlisted ranks and starting out as a corporal, sergeant, or sergeant first class depending on their level of education and prior work experience. With this system, any PLA unit can ask a PAFD to go out and find them a civilian with required skills to fill an NCO billet.⁴¹² The PAFD then works to recruit someone with these skills, including through online advertising. For example, in May 2016, a PAFD in Chongqing stated that it was directly recruiting a total of 194 personnel as NCOs, including in the 11 specialties of computers, automation, communications, electronic information, medical technology, energy, mechanical and electrical equipment, mechanical design and manufacturing, construction equipment, road transport, and water transportation.⁴¹³ The announcement included a table showing the recruiting organization, specialty, degree required, recruitment number, and where recruits will be assigned. This included 71 PLAA personnel in

* As of late 2021, the PLA uses *zhizhao junshi* (直招军士) instead of *zhizhao shiguan* (直招士官), of which both are translated as directly-recruited NCOs or direct recruitment of NCOs.

seven specialties, 25 PLAN personnel in four specialties, 68 PLAAF personnel in four specialties, 13 PLASSF personnel in five specialties, and 11 CMC National Defense Mobilization Department personnel in three specialties. Similarly, in 2010, applicants from Zhengzhou, Henan Province were recruited to fill open billets in 28 specialties, including communications, mapping, energy, power technology, water conservancy, nursing, rail and vehicles, heating ventilation and air conditioning technology, and refrigeration/cold storage technology.

In 2022, 32 civilian polytechnic/vocational colleges were part of this program, graduating personnel who would become PLA and PAP NCOs.⁴¹⁴ Specific schools were not named in open-source reporting, but these partnerships likely fall under China's military-civil fusion concept (see "Post-service Status" in Section 7).⁴¹⁵ The procedures for applying and approval are the same as for college students who want to join as two-year enlisted personnel, as described in Section 7. However, whereas the PAFDs are responsible for managing the recruitment of all two-year enlisted personnel, individual units are responsible for directly recruiting personnel as NCOs, which they do through the PAFDs. All applicants must be male, single, no older than 24, and have graduated from an institution of higher learning, advanced technical school, or a technician's college in the summer of that year. There are strict requirements on their specialties, and they must have had their skills evaluated and received a State intermediate-level or higher vocational qualifications certificate. Recruitment mainly targets science and engineering graduates, as well as graduates who majored in medical technology and language studies.⁴¹⁶ Their general service period is from four to seven years, which begins with four months of training.⁴¹⁷

From June 10-25, public announcements are made concerning the registration and qualification process for directly-recruited NCOs. Prior to July 20, applicants must complete a physical exam and political evaluation, have received professional certification, and sign a work agreement. Prior to August 1, applicants must complete their enlistment procedures. In early August, the unit approves personnel and, from August 2-10, provides transportation for them to begin their training. Basic training lasts for about 70 days, followed by two months of pre-billet technical training and two months of on-the-job training at the NCO's operational unit. The PLA also began recruiting college and university graduates as NCOs twice a year in early 2020,⁴¹⁸ which then linked into the new two-cycle conscription process that began in 2021.⁴¹⁹

As part of the general program noted above, over the last decade, the PLA has rapidly expanded a separate program, called "targeted training" (定向培养), to increase technical capabilities across its enlisted corps by developing what it calls "made-to-order" NCOs.⁴²⁰ These targeted training NCOs are selected out of high school to receive two-and-a-half years of service-designated technical training at a civilian polytechnic/vocational college, followed by six months of military training, before entering the PLA with NCO rank and benefits.⁴²¹

While the majority of PLA NCOs still likely begin as enlisted members who apply and are selected to remain on active duty, an increasing number of those in technical expert positions are targeted training NCOs.⁴²² Targeted training NCOs are reportedly in high demand by units for their ability to quickly become technical experts.⁴²³ With over 20,000 students recruited into the program in 2020 and likely more in 2021, this program has the potential to inject significant technical knowledge into the PLA's NCO corps.

However, recruiting members directly into the military as NCOs under these two programs has potential downsides.⁴²⁴ Fresh NCOs with no experience in the junior enlisted ranks may struggle to gain the respect of their new subordinates and leaders alike, whether due to actual lack of competence or the mere perception of being an outsider who skipped a formative experience. For example, one 2015 article in the PLAAF's official magazine claimed that "The arrogant

attitude of the college students affected their relationships with the other personnel, and integrating personnel of different educational levels has become a pressing issue.”⁴²⁵ While of course not often reflected in PLA reporting, the issue has also been raised in online forum discussions about both targeted training and direct recruit NCOs. In one such forum in 2019, participants claiming to have worked with these NCOs in the PLAN and PLAAF shared that they often had trouble adapting to military life, struggled to earn respect from both junior and senior enlisted members, and often their technical knowledge did not match up well with their duties.⁴²⁶ * While anecdotal and insufficient to draw any firm conclusions about overall success or failure, such complaints indicate significant issues with the implementations of these programs.

PLA Master Chief System

In 2014, the PLA began a new “Master Chief” (士官长)[†] program for its NCOs.⁴²⁷ This program was intended to free up grassroots officers from trivial affairs, allowing them to spend more time on command, by providing them with well-trained senior NCOs able to take on many of their duties. Their tasks included assisting officers, acting as spokespeople for the enlisted force, acting as a chief trainer in basic training, and serving as an administrator for grassroots troops.⁴²⁸ Previously, officers served in all of these roles, including managing the enlisted barracks.⁴²⁹ In addition, the program was aimed at further professionalizing the NCO corps and providing greater opportunities for growth to senior NCOs, as well as further cutting down the number of officers.

Following approval, the PLA began training and assigning Master Chiefs at the company, battalion, regiment, and brigade levels in each of the services. Selection assessments covered topics such as military theory, basic skills, physical ability, and others. The PLAA has created a training unit specifically for Master Chiefs, while PLAAF Master Chiefs receive six weeks of specialized training at the Air Force Communication NCO Academy.⁴³⁰ It is unclear if six weeks is the standard training time across services. An article about the 36 PLAN Master Chiefs on board the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier states that they had an average of 20 years’ active-duty experience.⁴³¹

Master Chiefs selected at the company level must have served as a squad leader or equivalent billet.⁴³² Master Chiefs at the brigade level are selected from NCOs who have already served as squad leaders for at least four years, have at least an associate’s degree, and are Party members. Although Master Chiefs at the brigade level must be Party members, it is not clear if they are members of their unit’s Party Committee, which meets on a regular basis to discuss the unit’s issues. Most likely, only one Master Chief per brigade is allowed to be a Party Committee member, but he or she may not be an equal member with the officers. Notably, no information was found that identified a Master Chief as a member of any unit’s Party Standing Committee.

When trying to define the role of the Master Chiefs, the PLA noted in early 2014 that it still needed to address several issues.⁴³³ These included clarifying Master Chief responsibilities and relations with unit officers, determining Master Chief benefits,[‡] and how to promote Master Chiefs and create a hierarchical Master Chief system.

Despite the ambitious plans detailed above, there is evidence that the program has failed to live up to its promise. Unlike the U.S. military, in which every level up to the Joint Chiefs of Staff has a senior enlisted advisor to consult on enlisted force issues, the PLA as yet has only

* Most comments did not distinguish between targeted training and direct recruitment NCOs. The first small groups of targeted training NCOs would not have entered service until mid-2015, so it is possible these complaints were based on experiences with directly-recruited NCOs.

† The PLA has different English translations for the term 士官长, including Master Chief, master sergeant, master-sergeant-in-chief, chief non-commissioned officer, and Chief NCO. For purposes of this report, Master Chief is used.

‡ Currently, the basic salaries for NCOs consist of level salary and service salary. The highest-level NCO is paid as much as a regiment level officer. As such, the PLA may consider introducing duty salary and post allowance for Master Chiefs at different levels, to improve their living standards.

implemented this system for the company up to the brigade levels. Also, unlike the U.S. military, the system does not seem to be structured around a single trusted NCO closely advising officers at every level, but rather a small coterie of senior NCOs of elevated official status but still without clearly delineated duties. Prior to the new program, low NCO retention was an issue for the PLA,⁴³⁴ with relatively few personnel opting to remain in service as an NCO after their first two years (discussed below). A poll showed that NCOs resented having their rank capped at a certain level with no advancement opportunities no matter how long they served, and with no pay raises and only mediocre benefits.⁴³⁵ However, even after the pilot program began, some of the Master Chiefs complained that they ran into consistent obstacles such as a lack of administrative authority. Some of them complained that they were treated more like secretaries who merely passed on instructions from the battalion commander. Several of them were also given the cold shoulder by new platoon- and company-level officers who had no experience but did not listen to their advice. Further, PLA Master Chiefs do not sit on the Party Standing Committee at any level, suggesting that they are still not closely consulted in unit decision-making. A detailed search of the internet for this project found almost no articles in the past few years concerning the Master Chief program, suggesting that it is not a top priority for the PLA and does not appear to be growing in importance. This evidence suggests that the Master Chief program has not solved the issues with NCO retention.

Problems with NCO Retention

The PLA does not release any data about what proportion of personnel stay on as NCOs after the conclusion of their two-year enlistment. An extensive search revealed only one useful datapoint, from the years 2009-2012, of a single PLAN North Sea Fleet *zhidui*.^{*} The source reveals that in this time period, an average of 294 *zhidui* personnel reached the end of their two-year enlistments each year. Of these, 14% of personnel were selected to become officers, 28% were selected to become NCOs, and 55% were demobilized.⁴³⁶ The source did not reveal what percentage had undergone higher education, and no more recent data was found on retention rates.

Beyond the issues noted above, several other issues have hampered the PLA's efforts at retaining NCOs. Some college-educated recruits appear to have trouble adjusting to both the harsh realities of military life, as well as being treated the same as their less-educated counterparts. This may be causing significant roadblocks to retaining educated personnel as NCOs following their two-year enlistment, if anecdotal evidence is representative. According to one 2018 article, college-educated enlisted personnel assigned to a radar brigade in Xinjiang's Taklamakan Desert overwhelmingly chose to demobilize after their two years of service were up, due to both the harsh conditions they endured in the desert as well as general dissatisfaction.⁴³⁷ None of the 30-plus college-educated soldiers facing demobilization applied to re-enlist, and only two did so after being convinced. A brigade investigation found that, in past years, over 80% of college-educated soldiers were unwilling to re-enlist. Of these college-educated soldiers, 20% wished to become officers, but when that didn't work, they chose to demobilize; 60% felt that the PLA didn't give them a platform to use their skills; and others were unhappy that the brigade treated college-educated soldiers the same as the less-educated personnel.⁴³⁸

More recently, a 2021 survey showed that 35% of college students who completed their two years wanted to remain on active duty, while the percentage of college graduates who wanted to stay was even lower.⁴³⁹ According to another source, the Central Theater Command Army does not believe it is recruiting the proper personnel to meet its requirements, and college students are leaving after two years of service because they feel that their expertise is not used properly.⁴⁴⁰ One

^{*} A *zhidui* is a division leader-grade organization that can be translated as a *flotilla*, *naval ship brigade*, *detachment*, or *naval division*.

key issue the source identifies is that local PAFDs are not coordinating with the services to recruit people to fill the required jobs.

Another likely issue for retention is incentives offered to PLA veterans by local governments and businesses. For example, in 2020, Shanghai and several provinces provided 35 incentives for conscripts leaving the military after their two-year commitment, including extra help for government and non-government employment.⁴⁴¹

Given these problems, it is thus worth asking whether the best two-year enlistees are remaining on as NCOs, or if it is merely the best of what's left who are selected.

The PLA has begun an initiative called "precision recruitment" to fill billets with new personnel possessing the proper education and background.⁴⁴² In order to do so, PAFD recruiters in townships, commercial enterprises, and schools throughout China have begun to use big data and social media to find and recruit specific individuals with the skills that the PLA requires.⁴⁴³ However, even here there are reports that recruited personnel are not properly utilized or given sufficient support.⁴⁴⁴ At least some recruits feel that their specialized expertise is not being properly managed by the PLA, and are less likely to remain in service after their initial contracts.

As stated above, no comprehensive information was found about the percentage of high school graduates and college students/graduates who are selected as NCOs after completing their two-year conscription. Whatever the actual breakdown is, it raises several potential concerns. For example, if 90% of the new NCOs are college-educated, what signal is that sending to the high school graduates? Is it telling them that they aren't as important? If so, why should they work hard for two years only to be sent home? If 50% or more of the NCOs selected are high school graduates, then what signal is that sending to the college-educated? It would certainly appear to tell ninth-grade graduates that they don't matter. In addition, in the early 2000s, the PLA created various online education institutions, such as the Air Force Military Professional University, to provide online courses for enlisted personnel to get their specialty degrees. However, as the number of civilian college student conscripts has grown and they plan on returning to college after their two-year period, the number of students who participate in such programs is estimated to have dropped dramatically as opportunities for advancement have become increasingly scarce.

NCOs as Acting Leaders

As a result of its 10th force reduction of 200,000 personnel (85% of whom were officers) that began in 2004, the PLA replaced more than 70,000 junior officers with NCOs in 70 specialty billets from 2004 through 2006 in aviation, communications, missile, vessel, and radar units.⁴⁴⁵ According to *The Chinese Army Today*, by 2008, a "few hundred thousand" officer positions had been converted to NCO billets.⁴⁴⁶ To effectively replace officers in many of these billets, NCOs were provided additional technical and managerial training, in some cases being sent to officer colleges to attend the necessary courses, as well as receiving on-the-job skills training at equipment factories. These NCOs were identified as "acting leaders" because they were filling an officer's billet, which continued to have an officer grade. However, whereas an officer can continue up this career path, NCOs have a glass ceiling, apparently at the battalion level.⁴⁴⁷

There are numerous examples of NCOs taking on junior officer billets in a permanent capacity. For example, an article from September 2021 stated that one Army master sergeant class-3 NCO with 18 years' experience had served as squad leader, training unit squad leader, "acting platoon leader," and then as a staff NCO.⁴⁴⁸ One sergeant first class with 11 years' experience went from a culinary squad commander to battery squad commander, then to radar technician, and then to operations and training staff officer.⁴⁴⁹ In another example, a master sergeant class-four

successfully “broke the glass ceiling” and was allowed to sit in an operations command vehicle next to the unit commander. Some NCOs have reached as high as being named as “acting company deputy commanders.” For example, in 2006, one directly-recruited Navy NCO with a bachelor’s degree became the “acting company deputy commander” for a communications company.⁴⁵⁰

Besides combat leadership billets, NCOs have also been assuming various special technical officer billets. For example, in December 2012, the PLAAF held a ceremony for 29 special technical maintenance officers (ranging from major to lieutenant colonel), and six NCO aircraft maintenance personnel (ranging from master sergeant class-2 to class-4).⁴⁵¹ While some officers were identified as chief mechanics, the NCOs were identified as “acting chief mechanics,” indicating they held the same position and responsibilities as the officers.

However, as noted earlier, the PLA still classifies many billets as officer billets even though they are now filled by NCOs, creating a glass ceiling for NCOs who are barred from advancing beyond a certain level. This inability to rise beyond a certain level has been a source of resentment for senior NCOs who are unable to advance their careers beyond a certain point. While the PLA has in fact made significant strides toward empowering its NCOs, its inability to either allow its NCOs to advance beyond a certain point or simply re-classify these billets as NCO billets points to a lingering hierarchical culture which is still hesitant to completely empower NCOs.

Current Status of the NCO Corps

The PLA views its NCO corps as “end-point commanders” capable of taking initiative and being tactically proficient.⁴⁵² As such, they are the “backbone” force key to improving the professionalism and modernization of the PLA. Since the late 1990s, NCOs have been used as squad leaders, both directing subordinate personnel and coordinating with supporting units (e.g., artillery and aviation). The PLA is granting NCOs greater autonomy and flexibility as the ratio between officers and NCOs continues to shift towards a greater percentage of NCOs. In addition, many NCO duties have expanded since the 2000s, taking over officer billets such as trainers, vehicle and small boat commanders, and battalion and company quartermasters, as well as key technical billets for maintenance and equipment support at the company and higher-level units.⁴⁵³

The *PLA Daily* has numerous recent examples of NCOs taking on greater responsibilities, including interacting with officers and conscripts, conducting and leading training, and performing maintenance. Many of the articles indicate they are learning as they undertake new responsibilities, and also provide examples for others to follow and mistakes to avoid. One article from 2022 demonstrates this growing faith in NCOs via a PLARF brigade which has begun cultivating NCOs as launch commanders.⁴⁵⁴ Under this new approach, the brigade is “selecting the best, focusing on training them, grading them, employing them at relevant posts, and evaluating them periodically.” Over the past few years, these NCOs constitute more than half of the brigade’s launch commanders.

In order to help move NCOs up the career ladder and to also be prepared to deal with casualties during a conflict, the PLA began a program called “one specialty many capabilities” (一专多能) in the early 2000s which cross-trains personnel to be proficient in multiple billets. For example, one SAM unit assigned high-performing NCOs to key billets as backups for some officer’s responsibilities, allowing them to lead training and management work so as to reach “quasi-officer” level.⁴⁵⁵ Following this training, 65% of the unit’s NCOs had experience assuming different billets and 90% of them were considered to have “one specialty and many capabilities.”

That said, problems with NCO quality remain. Articles warning of poor NCO quality are a common theme of PLA media. For example, one 2016 article states that a PLAAF regiment in the Southern Theater Command identified issues with unqualified NCOs filling certain billets, and

regular assessments found that a number NCOs in the regiment were unqualified.⁴⁵⁶ Further, although the PLA has increased the size of its NCO corps and is modernizing its equipment, there are concerns that many veteran NCOs have been slow to master or keep up with new knowledge.⁴⁵⁷ In addition, these increasing responsibilities, along with societal bias and pay and benefit discrepancies, may lead to friction between NCOs and officers. Traditional notions of hierarchy and a top-down system of control may also hinder the development of effective NCO-officer relations and efforts to create a more decentralized system. Finally, although the NCO corps is increasing in size, there are still concerns about whether they are taken seriously. According to one source, unless an NCO is a squad leader or platoon leader with command responsibilities, they are not taken seriously by the enlisted force or even by some officers.⁴⁵⁸ As a result, their recommendations are ignored, which oftentimes leads to technical issues down the road.

Leaving the Service

According to the Ministry of Veterans Affairs, based on the *Military Service Law* and the *Regulations on the Placement of Retired Soldiers*, the following NCOs can apply for full retirement: 1) those who have reached the age of 55 or have served 30 years of active service; 2) those who are disabled due to war or duty; 3) those who have lost their basic ability to work due to illness.

Further, the PRC government is tasked with the placement of soldiers who retire or leave active service, which can include government employment, private employment, or continued education.⁴⁵⁹ The regulations stipulate that a veteran who meets one of the following conditions is eligible to receive government employment: 1) NCOs who have served for 12 years; 2) those who have been awarded a second-class merit award or above in peacetime or a third-class merit in wartime; 3) those who are disabled (at grade 5 to 8) due to war; and 4) children of martyrs.

After completing their required service time, enlisted personnel (including NCOs) are normally returned to their hometowns. Directly recruited NCOs who complete their service during the first three periods (10 years) are eligible to transfer to a comparable government job if one is available.⁴⁶⁰ However, they must return to their hometown, where they can apply for a position.

Although all NCOs who were not promoted to the next rank have been demobilized, this apparently changed in 2021 based on the amended *Military Service Law*.⁴⁶¹ For example, several NCOs assigned to a Northern Theater Command Navy air brigade were not promoted to the next rank but were allowed to remain on active duty in what is called a “deferred service” (延期服役) for an unspecified period of time.⁴⁶² This recent change to how NCOs are managed is further evidence that the PLA is facing problems filling billets with qualified personnel. While these personnel may not have earned a promotion to the next rank, their experience may help the PLA to maintain a level of readiness that they would otherwise have difficulty maintaining.

Section 9: Officer Corps

This section covers the PLA’s officer corps, and includes information on officer corps academic degrees, career tracks, categories and management, recruitment, the National Defense Student Program, direct recruitment of college graduates as officers, and retirement.

Academic Degrees

The PLA began offering 1-3 year programs for officers at its academic institutions in the 1950s, and began providing 1-2 year secondary education programs and 2-3 year post-secondary programs for technical officers in the 1970s.⁴⁶³ However, in the earliest days of the PLA, most

officers were illiterate, and education largely focused on basic literacy skills. Until the late 1970s, most PLA officers did not even possess a high school education, and the PLA only began requiring a basic college education for its officers in the early 1980s.

The first PLA academic institutions began offering bachelor's degrees in 1982, the first master's degree programs in 1985, and the first doctoral degree programs in 1989. However, not all institutions began offering these degrees at the same times, and the year varied depending on the service and specialty. For example, the Naval Submarine Academy only began awarding PhDs in 2003.⁴⁶⁴ Today, some, but not all, academic institutions offer master's and doctoral degrees.⁴⁶⁵

Over the past 20 years, one of the PLA's primary goals has been to create a more educated and well-trained officer and NCO corps. In June 2017, the PLA conducted a massive reorganization of its officer and NCO academic institution structure as part of its 11th force reduction.⁴⁶⁶ It reduced the number of officer academic institutions from 63 to 34, and standalone NCO institutions from four to three, leaving a total of 37 institutions. Several of the officer institutions also have subordinate NCO schools.

The PLA conducted this reorganization by downgrading, resubordinating, merging, and/or abolishing existing institutions and creating new ones. For example, the National Defense University was downgraded from Theater Command leader-grade to Theater Command deputy leader-grade,^{*} and the PLAN Marine Corps College and PLAAF Airborne College were abolished and replaced with training bases.⁴⁶⁷ † Further, many institutions have been resubordinated, including to the CMC (likely the CMC Training and Administration Department), PLAA HQ, PLAN HQ, PLAAF HQ, PLARF HQ, and PLASSF HQ. Unlike the pre-reform period, in which four of the Military Regions oversaw directly-subordinate academic institutions, no institutions are now subordinate to a Theater Command HQ.⁴⁶⁸ ‡

Despite this, PLA academic institutions are still widely marred by problems such as outdated curriculums, corruption, poor management, and poor coordination with operational units. It is widely agreed that PLA academic institutions are in need of further reform to better educate officers capable of complex joint operations (see Section 5, Problems with Personnel Quality).⁴⁶⁹ Compared to civilian universities, PLA academic institutions do not typically appear in rankings of China's top universities, with the exception of the National University of Defense Technology, which is ranked between 36th to 106th depending on the source and methodology.⁴⁷⁰

Today, the PLA has two levels of officer academic institutions. The first level is made up of universities (大学) (which can include subordinate *xueyuan* (学院), which translates to either “academy” or “college,” and NCO schools), while the second level is made up of independent *xueyuan*.[§] Academic institutions are organized into five categories: command, political, technical, flight (Army, Navy, and Air Force aviation), and enlisted force, which are in turn further organized by both level and service/branch. Only the National Defense University, under the CMC, offers joint education and training, at the corps level. None of the service Command Colleges offer this.⁴⁷¹

Only 15 academic institutions offer specialties for women, and these are limited compared to the specialties offered for men.⁴⁷² The primary specialties for women are communications, medical, foreign languages, and engineering. For example, in 2017, the National University of

^{*} Theater Command Deputy Leader is the highest possible grade for a PLA academic institution. Most PLA academic institutions are corps leader or corps deputy leader, while NCO schools are division leader grade.

[†] It appears that the Army's Special Operations Academy now provides cadet education and training for all new airborne and Marine Corps cadets. It is not clear if cadets enter already knowing to which specific service they will be assigned, and if not, at what point the cadets are split up by service/branch. Upon completion of their undergraduate education, they most likely attend their relevant training base at the former college.

[‡] However, the three PLAAF Flight Academies are subordinate to their respective TCAF HQs.

[§] There is no official English name for every institution, and even some of the English names are not consistent.

Defense Technology offered 32 specialties for men and only three for women (communications, networks, and big data engineering), while the PLASSF Information Engineering University offers only engineering, foreign language, and command officer specialties for women.

In recent years, the PLA appears to be moving to focus more training on the kinds of technical skills necessary for modern, informatized warfare. An MND spokesperson stated that the PLA is increasingly emphasizing majors related to new areas of modern combat, saying, “Enrollment will focus on defense and military modernization, and the needs of the military for combat-ready talents. Majors related to new-type and new areas of combat forces or in urgent need will have more students enrolled, while the majors related to traditional military specialties will see a reduction of enrollment. The category of majors and the ratio of commanding and technical majors will be further optimized.”⁴⁷³ In 2016, the CMC announced that military academic institutions would be admitting 16% more students in high-tech sectors of urgent need, such as space intelligence, radar, and drones, 14% more students in aviation, missile, and maritime fields, 24% fewer students in fields related to the army, including the infantry and artillery, and 45% fewer students in the logistics and support departments.⁴⁷⁴

Officer Career Tracks, Categories, and Management

Prior to 2021, the PLA’s officer corps, which it calls active-duty officers/cadres, was organized into five career tracks: military/operational officer,⁴⁷⁵ political officer, logistics officer, equipment/armament officer, and special technical officer. The PLA later combined the first four career tracks together and identified them as non-special technical officers, and in 2021 renamed them “command and administrative officers.”⁴⁷⁶ It still has the special technical officer track as a separate track. Unlike the U.S. military, the PLA does not have alpha-numeric codes like the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) for its officers or enlisted personnel.

The PLA further organizes its officers into three categories as follows, each of which receive different types of education and training as they move up the career ladder:⁴⁷⁷

- Commanding officers (指挥官), which includes the Commander, Political Commissar, Deputy Commanders and Political Commissars, the Director and Deputy Director for all of the first-, second-, and third-level departments within each service headquarters, Theater Command, and subordinate units, and the leaders in each of the 15 CMC organizations.
- Staff officers (参谋/干事), who serve in each of the four first-level departments and their subordinate second- and third-level departments, as well as the 15 CMC organizations.
- Special technical (专业技术) officers.

Following the 2016 reforms, the CMC and service Political Work Departments now manage all personnel issues, with the subordinate Cadre Bureaus managing officers, and the new Enlisted Soldier and Civilian Personnel Bureau managing enlisted and civilian personnel.⁴⁷⁸

There does not appear to be a set pattern for how officers receive their next levels of education once they become an officer. However, there are different education paths for commanding and non-commanding officers. As a general rule, commanding officers return to their college for their next levels of education but only receive a certificate (not a master’s degree), while non-commanding officers only return to their original academic institution and can receive a graduate degree. The table below shows the 10-step career path for a naval surface branch officer.⁴⁷⁹ However, it is unclear how standard this model is across the PLAN, as the authors have never seen an officer biography which precisely matches this career path.

PLAN Surface Branch Officer Career Track

Step 1	New officers who have graduated from a PLAN or civilian academic institution or were selected from outstanding enlisted personnel who already had a college degree receive ten months of professional education at a PLAN academic institution.
Step 2	New officers are assigned to a vessel and assume initial billets at the platoon, company, and battalion levels.
Step 3	At the battalion level, attend a ten-month tactics command course at the Dalian Naval Ship Academy/College.
Step 4	Assigned as executive officers on vessel or as <i>dadui</i> (squadron) deputy commanders at regiment level.
Step 5	Attend a ten-month combined-arms command course at the Naval Command College.
Step 6	Assigned as a commanding officer at the division deputy-leader grade level.
Step 7	Attend a five-month campaign command course at the Naval Command College.
Step 8	Assigned as a commanding officer at the division leader-grade level.
Step 9	Attend a ten-month joint campaign command course at NDU.
Step 10	Assigned as a commanding officer at the corps and above level.

Almost all PLA officers remain in the same unit throughout their career up to the division level. They then may move to a different corps-level unit so they can gain broader experience. Moving senior officers in this way may also discourage the formation of patronage networks between commanders and their subordinates.⁴⁸⁰ They can then remain in the same Theater Command at the service level or move to a service HQ in a different Theater Command. One of the primary reasons personnel do not move around is because of family and housing issues. For example, not all married personnel, especially enlisted personnel, have access to base housing, which historically has been in short supply. Further, units are responsible for moving expenses, making transfers an expensive prospect.⁴⁸¹

Officers generally do not switch between career tracks and only move up the ladder when they receive a grade promotion, as discussed below. As some commanding officers move up the career path, available “commanding” billets are already filled, so they become a staff officer in the headquarters at the next level. This is becoming even more relevant as the PLA shifts to a brigade structure instead of a division-regiment structure. Specifically, a battalion commander cannot become a brigade deputy commander for three years, and a brigade commander cannot become a corps-level deputy commander for at least five years, so they have to take a staff officer billet in the next level headquarters. This means that commanders are taken out of the command track twice (after battalion and after brigade level) to become staff officers, losing their day-to-day command responsibilities and potentially affecting their command capabilities. It also means that the issue of a bloated officer corps, a primary reason for the most recent force reductions, continues to be a problem, with automatically-promoted officers pooling into overstuffed staff positions alongside officers who are running out the clock until they reach retirement age for their grade. The PLA has made initial efforts at improving this problem, and now allows some company and battalion-level officers to retire before aging out. However, while the PLA has worked for years to slim down its officer corps, it is still wrestling with the fundamental root of the problem.

Unlike the U.S. military, which has central promotion boards for its officers and enlisted personnel, the PLA does not have a central promotion board for promotions below the corps level.⁴⁸² All officer and enlisted promotions from the platoon to corps level are local promotions approved by the next higher level Party Committee. One reason for this is that most personnel remain in the same unit their entire career from platoon up to corps level. Corps-level (one star general) and above promotions are done at the national level.

Officer Grades and Ranks

Since 1988, the PLA’s officers have been assigned 15 grades and 10 ranks. Every grade has two ranks, so the Commander and Political Commissar, who have the same grade, can have different ranks.⁴⁸³ In addition, officer grade and rank promotions rarely occur at the same time (grade promotions are every three years and rank promotions every four years up to the regiment

commander level). However, this appears to be changing at the top tier as the PLA attempts to shift to a rank-centric system.⁴⁸⁴ Based on analysis of the last three groups of three-star rank promotions (2021-2022), it appears that the PLA is gradually implementing the new rank-based system one step at a time, beginning with syncing three-star promotions with promotions in grade. Of note, all officer ranks are based on the PLA Army. The PLA does not have Chinese terms for naval officer ranks that are equivalent to U.S. Navy ranks from ensign to admiral. Instead, they are identified in Chinese language articles by the Army rank with the term Navy in front of it, such as Navy General (海军上将).⁴⁸⁵ Although there are no official Chinese terms for U.S. Navy ranks, the PLA does use U.S. Navy ranks in English-language articles, such as *Admiral* Wu Shengli.⁴⁸⁶

Mandatory Retirement Ages

Each officer grade has a mandatory retirement age assigned to it. As such, officers can only retire when they have met the mandatory retirement age for their grade. If they have not met their mandatory retirement age, they are simply demobilized. There are also different mandatory retirement ages for officers holding combat-related billets and those who are serving in non-combat-related billets, such as in academic, research, and medical institutions.^{487*}

Historically, officers received an automatic grade promotion up to the grade of regiment leader and, from that point forward with grade promotions, they could not leave the service until they reached their mandatory retirement age based on their grade. This contributed to officer corps bloat. According to the 2000 revised *PRC Active Duty Officer Law* all graduates from military and civilian academic institutions must serve for a minimum of eight years, which includes their time as a cadet.⁴⁸⁸ The law also established a minimum number of years for each grade before officers could leave the military.[†] The goals of the 10th force reduction in 2004 were to reduce the size of unit headquarters in order to increase their efficiency and quality and to improve the balance between leadership and management compared with the support structure.⁴⁸⁹ As part of the 10th force reduction (which included the demobilization of 170,000 officers) officers were encouraged to separate from the military after they had served 16 years and held the grade of battalion leader.⁴⁹⁰ In addition, as noted in Section 8, thousands of NCOs replaced junior officers as “acting leaders.” Following the 11th force reduction in 2016, which included the demobilization of a further 150,000 officers, officers were encouraged to separate after eight years.⁴⁹¹

Officer Recruitment

Historically, PLA officer corps recruits consisted of high school graduates and outstanding enlisted members with less than three years of service.⁴⁹² However, in more recent years the PLA has made a concerted effort to attract more college students and new graduates from civilian science, technology, and engineering undergraduate institutions. This trend reflects a larger effort by the PLA to create a more professional, educated military force capable of meeting the challenges of modern “informatized” warfare. All PLA officer cadets can be divided into four basic components: pilot cadets, non-pilot cadets, students in the former National Defense Student Program (previously), and directly-recruited civilian college graduates, which are described below.

* The *Law of the People's Republic of China on Officers in Active Service* was originally passed on September 5, 1988, by the Third Session of the Standing Committee of the Seventh National People's Congress. The first revision was in accordance with the “Resolution Regarding Amendments to the ‘Regulations of the Chinese People's Liberation Army for Active Duty Military Officers’” by the Seventh Session of the Standing Committee of the Eighth National People's Congress on May 12, 1994. The second (latest) revision was passed by the Nineteenth Session of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress on December 28, 2000.

† The number of years includes platoon (8), company deputy leader (10), company leader (12), battalion deputy leader (14), and battalion leader (16).

Every year, each academic institution recruits a certain number of new cadets from across China's 31 provincial-level administrative divisions. Based on the information provided for 2017 recruitment, the PLA recruited a roughly proportionally equivalent number of personnel from all 31 locations that year. Although no information was provided concerning ethnicity, it is presumed that a disproportionate majority of the recruits are Han Chinese, even those coming from the autonomous regions. All officer cadet recruits are subject to a thorough political background check.

Notably, pilot cadets go through a completely different process of recruitment than all other cadets. Air Force, Navy, and Army Aviation each run their own regional recruitment offices just for recruitment and selection of pilot cadets, unlike non-pilot cadets, who apply for acceptance to PLA academic institutions through the regular process described below.⁴⁹³

During 2021, officers in the PLA were selected from the following categories of personnel, with the first comprising the majority.⁴⁹⁴

- High school graduates who attend an officer academic institution.
- Outstanding enlisted personnel who do not already have a college education.
- Outstanding enlisted personnel who already have a three-year post-secondary diploma or bachelor's degree but must still attend an officer academic institution.
- Direct recruitment of civilian college graduates with science, technology, and engineering-related degrees, who receive a direct commission as an officer.
- Wives of officers, especially pilots, who already have a college degree and receive a direct commission as an officer.⁴⁹⁵
- Civilian cadres who transfer to become a special technical officer.
- Civilian personnel.

Excluding new officers who are assigned to remote areas and pilots who have completed their flight training at a flight academy, all new officers must serve their first year on probation.

High School Graduate Recruits

High school seniors can apply to a specific military academic institution based on their *Gaokao* National College Entrance Examination score.⁴⁹⁶ The minimum scores for 2021 military academy admission ranged between 550 and 630 with a high score of 750.

Table 3 below provides representative samples of the number of male and female PLA and PAP cadets who were selected from one province, one AR, and one municipality in 2018.⁴⁹⁷ It shows the total number for each province/AR/municipality, the total number of men and women, and the number of men and women divided into science and liberal arts, as well as by PLA and PAP. The final line shows the total number of cadets who were selected from 16 provincial-level administrative divisions. Of the 5,578 cadets selected, only 240 (4.3%) were women, and there was a ratio of about 4:1 for PLA to PAP. There was no mention of ethnicity.

2018 PLA and PAP Cadets from 16 Locations

Province/AR/ Municipality	Total	Total		Science		Liberal Arts		PLA	PAP
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women		
Fujian	304	290	14	279	11	11	3	237	67
Guangxi Zhuang AR	156	153	3	148	3	5	0	91	65
Tianjin	124	120	4	114	4	6	0	86	38
TOTAL	5,578	5,343	235	5,153	209	190	26	4,403	1,175

Although no similar data was found for 2019, 2020, or 2022, multiple articles provided detailed information about PLA and PAP recruitment to 27 officer academic institutions in 2021, which included a total of more than 13,000 high school students.⁴⁹⁸ The information was further broken down by academic institution into the number of cadets from each provincial-level division. For example, NUDT recruited a total of 2,270 cadets from 30 provincial-level divisions, ranging from 26 to 177 per division.⁴⁹⁹ The Army Academy of Border and Coastal Defense recruited a total of 165 cadets from 16 provincial-level divisions, ranging from three to 60 per division.⁵⁰⁰ Finally, the Navy Engineering University recruited a total of 730 cadets from 18 provincial-level divisions, ranging from nine to 60 per division.⁵⁰¹

National Defense Student Program

Under then-CMC Chairman Jiang Zemin, the PLA reduced the number of PLA academic institutions in 1998 from 115 to 67⁵⁰² and implemented the National Defense Student (NDS) Program, which was also called the Reserve Officer Program, to educate undergraduates as officers at 118 civilian engineering, science, and technology universities.⁵⁰³ The program also included a 5% quota for women. Upon graduation, NDS students were assigned to an operational unit, PLA academic institution, or training unit, where they received a couple months of specialty training. All NDS officer candidates underwent 450 hours of “military-political training” (军政训练) prior to assuming their billets.⁵⁰⁴ Alternatively, about 40% of NDS students moved directly to graduate school. Almost all NDS graduates were assigned to technical, rather than command, billets, often serving in engineering, research, or teaching roles.⁵⁰⁵

Although the PLA’s goal in 2010 was to have 40% of its new officers come from the NDS program, that goal was not met.⁵⁰⁶ After 19 years, the program apparently did not meet its goals and, as a result, the PLA did not recruit any new students starting in 2017.⁵⁰⁷ As such, the entire program ceased to exist when the last class recruited in 2016 graduated in 2020. The program was cancelled for a number of reasons. NDS officers who had graduated from civilian universities were reportedly seen as inferior to officers who had graduated from military academic institutions, having skipped both much of the training and the formative barracks experience which military academic institutions provide.⁵⁰⁸ They also failed to integrate into military life or establish rapport with other officers or enlisted men. Some of this was an institutional failure on the part of the PLA, as NDS officers were often sent to billets which had nothing to do with their training. Perhaps most crucially though, NDS officers reportedly received insufficient military training compared to other PLA officers, and were largely regarded as civilians in a uniform.

At present, it is unclear how the PLA intends to replace the NDS Program, but it is crucial that any new program better integrates personnel from civilian academic institutions and provides them with better military training, if the PLA wishes to take advantage of its civilian academic system to improve personnel quality.

Direct Recruitment of College Graduates as Officers

While the PLA abolished the NDS program and has yet to introduce a replacement, it has now broadened its program for directly recruiting civilian college graduates as officers. Although no data was provided for 2020 or 2021, the CMC announced in March 2022 that the PLA and PAP would directly recruit more than 3,600 new college graduates (bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees) as officers, with a focus on majors in science, technology, and other needed disciplines.⁵⁰⁹

Under this program, each service/force is responsible for managing its own officer recruitment. Applicants can check the specific recruitment positions and conditions through the

“Military Talent Net” (<http://81rc.81.cn>) and apply online from March 15 to 24.⁵¹⁰ Relevant military units carry out a screening process which includes physical examinations, political assessments, inspections and screenings, professional assessments, and other work in accordance with the recruitment procedures. Bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral students should be under the ages of 24, 29, and 34, respectively (as of June 30 of the year of graduation). For doctoral students who are in “urgent” need of work, as well as graduates from ethnic minorities and who have served in active service, the age can be relaxed by one year.

Officers with a bachelor’s degree enter with the rank of second lieutenant, those with a master’s degree are given the rank of first lieutenant, and those with a PhD are given the rank of captain.⁵¹¹ No information was found concerning the type of training they receive or where they receive it. Thus, it is unclear if these candidates, like their NDS counterparts, are regarded as receiving insufficient military training. However, depending on their billet, they most likely either go directly to an academic institution or research institute as an instructor or researcher, or to a training base for a short period before being assigned to an operational unit. A study of the PLA’s top officers over Xi’s first ten years indicates that very few civilian college graduates have been promoted to senior levels (equivalent to three- and four-star flag officers in the U.S.), again suggesting these personnel are not meant for command but to fill needed technical roles.⁵¹²

The monthly salary of master’s degree graduates is about 13,000 RMB (USD 2,045) and for doctoral graduates is about 15,000 RMB (USD 2,360).⁵¹³ They also receive 40 days of annual leave every year (plus 7-15 days of travel time), and enjoy free medical treatment in the military hospital system. Depending on their billet, they can also receive a basic performance allowance of 30,000 RMB (USD 4,720) per year, and performance incentives of up to 50,000 RMB (USD 7,867) per year based on the annual assessment results.⁵¹⁴ They can also receive funding for postdoctoral projects. Such salaries are roughly in line with average salaries for the cities of Beijing or Shanghai, and well above average for the rest of the country (even before performance bonuses are factored in), suggesting PLA salaries for at least some of its educated personnel are competitive.⁵¹⁵

In addition, the PLA has also experimented with dual-enrollment partnerships with civilian universities. In 2011, the PLAAF established the “Dual-Enrollment Program” (DEP) with Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Beihang University, whereby students with science or engineering majors attend these universities for three years and then transfer over to the Air Force Aviation University for their fourth year, where they began their flight training.

Section 10: Personal Life

This section provides some basic information about PLA marriage, families, housing, and benefits.* The PLA is continuing to improve its marriage, family, housing, and benefits policies in order to better attract and retain qualified personnel. According to Marcus Clay, family and personnel issues were a major concern of the PLA during the most recent period of military reforms.⁵¹⁶ These incentives are frequently updated, adjusted, and improved, suggesting that the PLA has still not sufficiently optimized this area.

Personal problems frequently faced by PLA personnel include difficulty finding a partner, limited leave, and distance from family. As noted in Section 7, since 1989 PLA personnel are generally assigned outside of their home province.⁵¹⁷ This can create home-life problems that could affect retention, as uprooting and moving far away can be a major stressor. To address this,

* This subsection draws heavily from Marcus Clay, *Understanding the “People” of the People’s Liberation Army: A Study of Marriage, Family, Housing, and Benefits*, which provides an excellent analysis of all these topics.

the PLA has emphasized the role of grassroots political officers in ensuring that these issues do not affect combat readiness, as discussed in Section 6. For example, one PLAAF brigade NCO's parents were having legal issues back home that were affecting his performance.⁵¹⁸ The brigade sent administrative personnel to his hometown to help resolve the issue and ease his mind. However, it is easy to see how such a system, reliant on the diligence of a given unit's political officer, would be highly unit-specific in its effectiveness at resolving these issues.

Generally, until 2011 enlisted personnel were not allowed to marry someone from their unit or in their unit's vicinity. But by at least 2017 such social taboos appear to have eased, with one PLARF brigade reporting happily on a married couple serving together.⁵¹⁹ Likewise, Political Work Departments often assist male personnel to find life partners through organized matchmaking events, in which local single women* are bussed onto the base. For the PLAAF, a yearly "Military Matchmaking Gathering" program has been held since 2006.⁵²⁰ However, both male and female PLA military members still require approval from their units to get married, and restrictions still exist preventing civilians with spouses in the military filing for divorce.[†] It is easy to assume that such controls cause a degree of resentment in a subset of PLA personnel and their spouses. Although there is little information available in public sources about the direct effects of these policies on morale or warfighting capability, assisting with issues like finding employment for spouses, offering marriage counseling services, and assisting with housing appear to be a fairly large portion of political officers' daily responsibilities, as discussed in Section 6. Further, in 2016 the PLAAF Logistics Department noted that familial issues were a growing concern among its personnel and brought in outside experts to give lectures on dealing with marriage problems, indicating the prime salience of this issue.⁵²¹

Regarding housing, the PLA uses a qualification system to determine whether married military members are allowed to live together with their families. Generally speaking, newly enlisted personnel must live in the barracks, and the PLA does not allow its new officers and NCOs to live together with their new spouses and families until they meet a general minimum time-in-service ranging from 10-12 years.⁵²² While this may hurt the familial cohesion and mental health of PLA personnel, this policy may be meant to discourage frivolous marriages for the purpose of attaining numerous military benefits for families. Further, many family members choose to not live with personnel who are based in rural areas, due to the low quality of life and lack of job or education opportunities. Since 2015, military families who qualify for provided housing can borrow up to 400,000 RMB (USD 62,938) from the PLA's Housing Provident Fund with maximum 20-year term to purchase commercial properties.⁵²³ However, there are continuing issues of housing shortages due to corruption and abuse.⁵²⁴

These housing shortages can have serious impacts on PLA personnel from the countryside who serve in urban locations due to China's hukou system. At least one article mentioned that the rural hukou families of personnel serving in urban areas were required to find housing well outside the city due to their hukou status.⁵²⁵ Likewise, retiring personnel are generally expected to return to their hometowns after leaving the PLA, even if they would prefer to stay in the locality that they served.⁵²⁶ Reportedly, complexities around hukous, resettling, and leaving the PLA are so complicated that some officers have chosen to remain in the military rather than deal with China's bureaucratic system.⁵²⁷ Although not explicitly stated in open sources, it is possible this aspect of personal life could lead to increased problems and discrimination for rural personnel as well as possible tension between personnel from urban and rural backgrounds.

* There is no evidence of equivalent matchmaking events for female personnel.

† Of note, however, male civilian spouses are extremely rare in the PLA.

As a form of further incentive, the PLA has made numerous improvements to its leave and pay policies. Beginning in 2006, PLA officers and NCOs reportedly received pay increases ranging between 80 and 100%, and in 2017 they received another 40% increase.⁵²⁸ In 2018, a division-leader-grade PLA officer, roughly equivalent to a U.S. one-star general officer, made roughly 264,000 RMB (USD 41,538) annually in total compensation.* While this is not an extravagant salary by official conversion rates, in terms of purchasing power parity (2020 figures) it is equivalent to \$63,037, a very comfortable salary when considering China's lower cost of living, and nearly double that of a typical middle class resident of China's two wealthiest cities, Beijing and Shanghai.⁵²⁹ According to one PLA officer interviewed in 2017, flag officers are barred from finding employment with major defense contractors (e.g. AVIC, Norinco, etc.) after retirement, eliminating a major potential competitor for these officers' in-demand skills and likely improving retention.⁵³⁰ These officers can seek employment with non-defense industry companies, but the pay is typically not significantly better than their military pay, suggesting that pay at this level is competitive and that the private sector is not poaching significant numbers of PLA flag officers.

Likewise, the PLA's leave policy has improved from allowing hometown visits once every four years, to once every two years, to eventually once a year for a period of 40-45 days.⁵³¹ Most leave is taken around the Chinese lunar new year, which occurs in late January to early February. However, outside of holiday travel to hometowns, two-year conscripts are not allowed to take leave, while officers and NCOs receive different levels of leave depending on their grade level.⁵³² For example, some officers and NCOs can visit their spouse and parents once a year for a leave period ranging from 20 to 45 days.

In sum, the PLA has made significant strides toward improving quality of life and personal incentives for its personnel and their families, with likely positive effects on retention. However, other major issues, such as base housing, distance from family, and hukou complications, remain unresolved and likely have the opposite effect.

Section 11: Conclusion

The PLA has faced numerous reforms in recent years. It has improved the educational levels of its personnel, increased benefits and pay to attract more capable recruits, abolished systems that weren't working, and introduced new organizations for the challenges it expects to face. Yet fundamental issues still persist, including low morale and political awareness, low social standing of military personnel in Chinese society, and trouble retaining its best personnel. The CMC continues to issue new reforms, implying either a lack of concrete progress addressing the PLA's problems, or a lack of confidence in the PLA's abilities.

For decades, Chinese leadership has fretted over the quality of the personnel in the PLA. Xi Jinping's emphasis on talent cultivation has led to numerous recent changes, both major and minor, that have affected recruitment and training of personnel. Concentrated drives to recruit college students and graduates as enlisted conscripts have reportedly seen some success, having shifted the proportion of personnel with some post-secondary education to around 57% at the time of writing. Likewise, NCOs with needed skills can now be recruited directly from the civilian population, or from amongst personnel who have undergone civilian academic education. In a similar manner, the PLA also reformed its officer corps education system by abolishing the National Defense Student Program, and is now focused on directly recruiting civilian graduates for operational billets. This paring down of military education for both officers and NCOs in favor

* While this is a direct conversion, this does not account for the generally lower cost of living in China.

of finding recruits with previous civilian education is still in the early stages and may yet fail, as have other similar programs.

Concerning the conscript force, the PLA has implemented several significant changes over the past few years, including consolidating basic training in training units instead of in operational units, extending the amount of training from less than two months to three to four months, and shifting to an annual two-cycle process, which only began in 2021. The PLA has also introduced numerous additional benefits such as improving pay, leave, and housing policies, overhauling tuition assistance, and providing post-service technical training. Yet the PLA may also be facing significant retention issues as the conscript force emphasizes second enlistment options and the NCO program updated its policies to retain personnel beyond their maximum age. As with other major personnel reforms, we can expect to see more reforms of these programs on a rolling basis as the PLA's situation evolves.

As part of its ongoing reforms, PRC leadership has stressed not only improved capabilities, but improved loyalty and reliability from the PLA as well. Anti-corruption, Party loyalty, and political control of the military have been constant throughlines since Xi Jinping assumed the CMC chairmanship, and the PLA remains fixated on its duty as a Party army, internally monitored and answerable only to the CCP. This has led to an increased emphasis on political work, which is largely carried out by the numerous political elements attached to PLA organizations from the grassroots level up to the CMC. While commanders are likely given a greater degree of leeway during wartime, it remains largely untested how well the military command and political elements within the PLA will mesh during an emergency. The tension between duty to the Party and pursuit of strategic military objectives may bear unforeseen consequences in the event of a full-scale war. Possible issues include operational disagreements between political officers and commanders, bureaucratic inefficiency from commanders who feel the need to seek approval before every action, commanders ordered into operationally untenable situations by political officers, or able commanders facing career roadblocks for taking initiative.

Thus, the picture of the modern People's Liberation Army is a mixed one. It is undergoing both focused reforms of education, training, and organization, with tangible results in the educational levels of its personnel. Yet the very fact of this ongoing series of reforms, which show no sign of slowing, hints at the continued *need* for reform, implying a lack of efficacy of previous attempts and casting a degree of doubt on the likely efficacy of the current attempt. Nonetheless, Xi Jinping has shown a willingness to make bold reforms, even when painful in the short-term and even in the face of pushback from entrenched and powerful interests. His reforms of the PLA are no exception to this. Under Xi, China's military appears prepared to frankly recognize, assess, and overcome its own flaws, and is determined to get its personnel in shape to "fight and win," even if some individual reforms may fail to hit the mark. In this way, it is likely that the PLA will present as a much more formidable foe in the coming years.

Appendix 1: List of Acronyms

Acronym	Term
AFSC	Air Force Specialty Codes
AR	Autonomous region
AUAF	Air Force Aviation University
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CMC	Central Military Commission
DEP	Dual-enrollment program
DWP	Defense White Paper
DOD	United States Department of Defense
FYP	Five-Year Plan
GPD	General Political Department
GSD	General Staff Department
HPF	Housing Provident Fund
HQ	Headquarters
HVAC	Heating, ventilation and air conditioning
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
MD	Military District
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOS	Military Occupation/Occupational Specialty
MR	Military Region
MSD	Military Sub-district
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
NDMD	CMC National Defense Mobilization Department
NDS	National Defense Student
NDU	National Defense University
NUDT	National University of Defense Technology
NIDS	National Institute for Defense Studies
NPC	National People's Congress
OJT	On-the-job training
PAFD	People's Armed Forces Departments
PAP	People's Armed Police
PC	Political commissar
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAA	People's Liberation Army Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PLARF	People's Liberation Army Rocket Force
PLASSF	People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force

PRC	People's Republic of China
RMB	Renminbi
SAM	Surface-to-air missile
TC	Theater Command
TCAF	Theater Command Air Force
USCC	U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
USD	U.S. dollar

Endnotes

Note: Although the USCC citation guidelines recommend adding the author's names in English as well as the Chinese characters and the English translation for the titles in PLA journals and newspapers, much of the data from *Air Force News*, *People's Navy*, and *China Air Force* magazine in the following citations do not include this information. Specifically, data from *Air Force News* and *People's Navy* during the 2000s comes from a database that Ken Allen compiled that includes the publication date and page number as well as a gist translation of the article. The database does not include the authors' names or the article titles in English or Chinese. The majority of the data from *Air Force News* and *China Air Force* magazine during the 2010s comes from CASI's archives, which includes the authors' names in English, the publication date and page number, and a gist translation of the article. The archives often do not include the article title in Chinese or English. Unfortunately, the links for some articles from the 1990s through the 2010s are not available or are no longer accessible.

¹ Zhu Yongjun [朱永军], "Selecting talent for the war: Specialty soldiers speed up to the battlefield" [为战选才：特长兵加速奔向战位], *PLA Daily*, June 13, 2022. Translation. http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-06/13/content_317609.htm.

² Zhang Kejin, ed., "The leaders of the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission answered questions from reporters on the study and implementation of the 'Interim Regulations on the Administration of Officers in Active Service' and related supporting regulations" [中央军委政治工作部领导就学习贯彻《现役军官管理暂行条例》及相关配套法规答记者问], *PLA Daily*, January 9, 2021. Translation. http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2021-01/09/content_4876776.htm.

³ The remaining 11 documents included *Supplementary Provisional Regulations on the Selection of Active-duty Officers* (现役军官选拔补充暂行规定); *Interim Provisions on Education and Training for Active-duty Military Officers* (现役军官教育培训暂行规定); *Interim Provisions on the Examination of Officers in Active-duty Service* (现役军官考核暂行规定); *Interim Provisions on Promotion and Appointment of Officers in Active-duty Service* (现役军官晋升任用暂行规定); *Interim Provisions on the Exchange of Active-duty Officers* (现役军官交流暂行规定); *Interim Provisions on Retirement of Active-duty Military Officers* (现役军官退役暂行规定); *Interim Provisions on the Management of the Treatment Levels of Officers in Active-duty Service* (现役军官待遇级别管理暂行规定); *Interim Provisions on the Management of Professional and Technical Officers* (专业技术军官管理暂行规定); *Opinions on Promoting the Management of Officer Posts* (关于推进军官岗位管理的意见); *Opinions on Promoting the Management of Officers' Career Development Paths* (关于推进军官职业发展路径管理的意见); and *Notice on Regulating the Rank Transfer Methods and Transition Policies in the Reform of the Military Officer System* (关于规范军官制度改革中等级转换办法和过渡政策的通知).

⁴ Marcus Clay and Dennis J. Blasko, "People Win Wars: The PLA Enlisted Force, and Other Related Matters," *War on the Rocks*, July 31, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/people-win-wars-the-pla-enlisted-force-and-other-related-matters/>; Dennis J. Blasko, "China's Law on Conscription Under Revision," *Lowy Institute*, July 14, 2021. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-law-conscription-under-revision>; Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, Routledge, Second Edition, 2012.

⁵ Sugiura Yasuyuki, "China Security Report 2022: The PLA's Pursuit of Enhanced Joint Operations Capabilities," *The National Institute for Defense Studies*, 2021. <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/chinareport/index.html>.

⁶ Xinhua, *Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China* [《中华人民共和国兵役法》], August 21, 2021. Translation. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-08/21/content_5632513.htm.

⁷ Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, *PRC Military Service Law (1998)* [《中华人民共和国兵役法(1998年)》], December 29, 1998. Translation. http://www.law-lib.com/law/law_view.asp?id=406; NPC.gov.cn, *Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China*, June 20, 2021. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2021-06/29/content_4888367.htm.

⁸ Xinhua, *Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China* [《中华人民共和国兵役法》], August 21, 2021. Translation. http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-08/21/content_5632513.htm; Liu Xuanzun, "China's amendment of the military service law highlights the role of non-commissioned officer, 'key to modernization'," *Global Times*, August 23, 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1232170.shtml>.

⁹ *People's Navy*, "PLA Downsizing History," September 13, 2003, 3. Translation; *Hong Kong Tzu Ching*, "Reduction of 200,000 Troops is Aimed at Paving the Way for Informatization of the Armed Forces," Number 156, October 1, 2003, 64-65. Translation.

¹⁰ Xinhua, "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces" [中国武装力量的多样化运用], April 16, 2013. Translation. http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2013-04/16/content_2618550.htm; Xinhua, "Full Text: The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces," April 16, 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20130614105122/http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2013-04/16/content_5301637.htm.

¹¹ *The Military Balance 2022*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, February 2022, 255.

¹² Marcus Clay and Dennis J. Blasko, "People Win Wars: The PLA Enlisted Force, and Other Related Matters," *War on the Rocks*, July 31, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/people-win-wars-the-pla-enlisted-force-and-other-related-matters/>.

¹³ Dennis J. Blasko, "China's Law on Conscription Under Revision," *Lowy Institute*, July 14, 2021. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-law-conscription-under-revision>.

¹⁴ Ken Allen correspondence with Dennis J. Blasko.

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- ¹⁶ Jiang Yanyu, *60 Years of New China National Defense and Military Building*, [新中国国防和军队建设 60 年], (Beijing: Dangjian Duwu Press, September 2009), 62. Translation.
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