



## **Assessing People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force Missile Brigade Commander Competition – Jianfeng 2021**

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### **Introduction**

At the end of March, dozens of People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) Missile Brigade Commanders<sup>i</sup> competed in a new six-day competition assessment called Jianfeng (剑锋) 2021 at the Rocket Force Command College<sup>ii</sup> in Wuhan. Although the Jianfeng 2021 (JF 2021) competition on the surface is nothing new due to constant training, competition, and testing in the PLA, both the coverage itself and the sheer volume of articles and videos posted about the event provide some key insights. This paper will provide a general overview of the competition, examine the competition in the broader context of PLA reform under Xi Jinping, assess the role of joint operations, and explore the possible narrative the PLA wanted to convey with coverage of the event.

### **Overview of Jianfeng 2021**

The competition is called Jianfeng, or Edge of the Sword. Shi Hongyan<sup>iii</sup>, Director of the Training Bureau of the Rocket Forces Staff Headquarters (one of the organizers of the competition) emphasized the title of the competition stating, "The Brigade Commander is like the sword of our missile force. If you want to win the battle in the future, you must sharpen them."<sup>1</sup> Missile Brigade Commanders act as a key link in the Rocket Force's operational command chain, making critical decisions in real time on the battlefield.

Unlike some PLARF training exercises, no missiles were launched during the assessment, with news outlets writing, “no gunpowder smoke was seen, only tents lined up<sup>2</sup>”. Each Brigade Commander was assigned a tent for assessment designed to test “ability to command and fight battles<sup>3</sup>. The focus is on solving problems, improving war strategy and strategic thinking capabilities, and deepening operational design and tactical innovation.<sup>4</sup> All

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<sup>i</sup> The operational command of PLARF is quite centralized under the direct command of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Just under the CMC there is the Joint Staff Department which manages the Joint Operations Command Center and PLARF Staff Department. Under these there are the corps-leader grade base commands and finally missile brigades.

<sup>ii</sup> The most prestigious college of the PLARF. The College was founded in 1977 and formerly known as the Second Artillery Command College. Main responsibilities include training campaign commanders, intermediate commanders, PhDs and masters in military science, and some junior commanders. The focus is to educate leaders in the PLARF.

<sup>iii</sup> Previously, he held the position of Brigade Commander of a conventional missile brigade.

tests were timed and included combat planning, command and control capabilities, and were closely related to the combat tasks undertaken by each unit. Different from previous tests, the Brigade Commander did not “go it alone” (单打独斗), but instead “fought together” (共同作战) with his staff to better create a more realistic scenario.<sup>5</sup>



*Missile Brigade Commanders running to their designated tent for Jianfeng 2021*

The core examiners of the assessment were Liu Hua, Director of a Teaching and Research Section of the Command Department of the Rocket Force Command College and Wu Kaibin, Director of a Teaching and Research Section of the Tactics Department. Experts from various theater organizations and China’s National Defense University were brought in to challenge the proposed battle plans of the Brigade Commanders. A scoring system was created to, “not only scientifically evaluate the current competition assessment, but also guide and promote the training of the missile force in the future.”<sup>6</sup> Bao Wei<sup>iv</sup>, Director of the Commanding Department of the Rocket Force Command College, acted as the chief referee of the competition. On scoring he stated that there are “failures but no losers”.<sup>7</sup> The idea is that failures expose weaknesses that can be improved before going onto the battlefield, which is far more important than a numerical score.

### **PLA Reform: Training for Combat**

Looking at JF 2021 more broadly, the exercise is a clear result of Xi’s continued efforts to reform the PLA under “informationized conditions”. With the most recent operational experience for the PLA occurring in the 80s<sup>v</sup>, a clear gap in experience is a major weakness of the PLA. Thus, the PLA must heavily rely on military training exercises like JF 2021 to test and evaluate combat readiness across the force. Xi, in a speech to the military, has said, “Be firm and

<sup>iv</sup> He has acted as referee for major exercises many times.

<sup>v</sup> Battle of the Two Mountains and the Laoshan Border War, was a battle between the People’s Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to contend for the Laoshan and Zheyin Mountains. The battle was concentrated in April 1984, and the two sides fought fiercely for nearly three years.

unshakeable in placing military training as a central task.”<sup>8</sup> In the media coverage of the exercise, there is heavy emphasis on “actual combat” (实战牵引).<sup>9</sup> Lu Wenlong<sup>vi</sup> (a Brigade Commander participating in the test) stated, “the comprehensive innovations in content, methods and procedures make this competition more like a rehearsal of actual combat.”<sup>10</sup> Various accounts went on to say the competition was designed to induce “panic” (恐慌) and act as a “baptism of actual combat”.<sup>11</sup>

Developers of the competition attempted to heighten the panic of the Brigade Commanders through high levels of uncertainty and constant change to reflect real world combat scenarios. Idioms to describe uncertainty were abundant in the coverage of the event, such as “constant change” (忽明忽暗) and “hidden obstacles” (暗礁险滩). The verb “to throw off balance” (抓瞎) was used to describe the constant state of those going through the competition as well. Adding to both the unpredictability of the competition and realism, coverage also mentioned work went both, “day and night”.<sup>12</sup>

None of the news emphasized JF 2021 activities at night, even though this appears to be a common trend in PLA training. The April 22 edition of People's Liberation Army Newspaper ran five articles all mentioning conducting night operations.<sup>13</sup> Training at night is nothing new, but recently seems to have become a greater point of emphasis for the PLA.

### *Joint Operations*

The details of JF 2021 are purposely vague, including what scenarios are being tested, what regions are emphasized, as well as potential adversaries. Maintaining secrecy on these types of details is logical and something employed by all nations. However, it is interesting to note that in the *China Youth Daily*, which wrote the most in-depth article on JF 2021, there is a brief mention of a scenario where “optical cable communication is interrupted” and “satellite interference”.<sup>14</sup> Although this is a very small detail, it is possible to assume that technologies and capabilities beyond the PLARF were involved in the competition. To keep with the theme of “actual combat”, news coverage suggests joint operations were integrated into the competition scenarios the Missile Brigade Commanders faced. When satellites are involved, it is reasonable to expect the Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) to play a role. Space-based, airborne, and ground-based sensors managed by the PLASSF provide critical intelligence, surveillance for targeting and battle damage assessment information. In any real combat situation, the PLARF would be required to operate in an integrated joint environment.

Further indication joint operations were critical to JF 2021, “Chinese People’s Liberation Army Joint Operations Outline (Provisional)” (中国人民解放军联合作战纲要 - 试行) was referenced in the competition and used to help in scoring. Deputy Director of the Ministry of National Defense Information Office Senior Colonel Ren Guoqiang<sup>vii</sup> describes the outline as focusing on future wars that innovate and develop PLA’s joint operations and methods.<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>vi</sup> Commander of Brigade 611 (MUCD 96711) in Chizhou City (Base 61) with geographical coverage of eastern and some of southeastern China. The brigade is likely responsible for the DF-21A MRBM which is road mobile and nuclear capable.

<sup>vii</sup> Ren Guoqiang currently acts as a spokesperson for the Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China. His career has focused a lot on external communication for the Chinese military. His thesis at China’s National Defense University centered on image building of the PLA.

document draws on both the military exercises the PLA has conducted, but also utilizes lessons from other countries' actual combat experience. The content of the outline is also another element of Xi's overall push for military policy system reform under "informationized conditions" as new technology, strategy and tactics must be used to win future wars. JF 2021 is testing Brigade Commander's ability to work in an integrated and joint environment.

Finally, in a publication in the PLA daily released in June titled "Rocket Force 'Jianfeng-2021' Missile Brigade Competition Assessment: One Brigade, One Exam, Directly Pointing to the Battlefield", jointness (联合性) was explicitly emphasized. The article states, "The test method was changed to joint planning" and highlighted the necessity of jointness in modern warfare.<sup>16</sup> There was also mention of transforming PLARF Commanders to act strategically at the joint level. With this latest publication it is much clearer this competition strongly emphasized the importance of the PLARF improving its capabilities at the joint level.

### *Going Nuclear*

Media coverage of JF 2021 mentions only conventional ballistic missiles (导弹旅长), but the picture below from PLARF's official WeChat account includes nuclear force (核导弹旅) as a part of the exercise as well.<sup>17</sup> In fact, all Commanders were required to take the exam. If a Commander in the PLARF could not make it for the assessment they had to make up the assessment at a later date. In an article titled "Missile Brigade Commander Make Up Exam"<sup>18</sup> it goes into some detail about how Brigade Commanders went through the same rigors with their own two day exam.



*Photo indicates nuclear forces involved in competition*

## **What is the Message?**

There was extensive coverage of the JF 2021, not only in military publications, but in more mainstream outlets such as Xinhua News (albeit each article was nearly identical). However, no articles were translated by Chinese media into English. This could mean it was simply for a Chinese audience, or also targeted toward China watchers proficient in Mandarin. The sheer quantity of coverage on various TV channels, streaming, newspapers, social media, etc. clearly indicates this was meant to be a highly visible competition. There are constant competitions and exercises like this one across the PLA, but often they receive very little coverage or none at all. Perhaps simply as a new competition, there was more coverage; or perhaps there was strategic intent to have so much Chinese-based media cover this competition.

In June, months after the exercise was held, more coverage was given to Jianfeng. The articles (as mentioned previously) emphasized that all Brigade Commanders must go through the assessment process (to include make-up exams) and that joint was an important element. Even the official Ministry of Defense of the People's Republic of China website reposted the PLA Daily's latest article.<sup>19</sup> The message seems to be that JF 2021 is very important not only to the PLARF, but the PLA as a whole as they attempt to improve overall effectiveness for future wars.

The People's Liberation Army Newspaper also released a story on the deployment of long-range rocket launchers in the Himalayas "on a plateau at an altitude of more than 5,200 meters."<sup>20</sup> This action is clearly aimed at both border defense and a deterrence toward India. Interestingly enough, the PLARF conducted exercises in extreme cold and high altitudes in February.<sup>21</sup> It is clear PLARF training, competitions and exercises can give significant insight to PLA future actions, tactics and strategy. Although coverage of exact scenarios undertaken in JF 2021 were not disclosed, the focus of a "real combat rehearsal" focusing on "combat operations, the deployment of forces, coordinated guarantees, and operational tactics" can give some insight. At minimum, we can expect an ever increasing role of the PLARF as it continues to grow in sophistication not only in its technology, but also training.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, JF 2021 is not a special or unique training assessment for the PLARF. However, JF 2021 was unique in the amount of coverage not only in official PLA and other Chinese military outlets, but also mainstream Chinese media such as Xinhua. Clearly, with media invited to film, interview and showcase JF 2021 on their platforms, this event was designed to be a very highly visible event for the PLARF. Because the coverage was so extensive (while still keeping many details vague), certain insights were able to be made. Although making sweeping assessments, such as that the PLARF are significantly more capable on the future battlefield (something the Chinese media articles clearly intend) is not possible, this competition did provide a small window into what the Rocket Force is doing and deems important.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup>新华网. “‘中军帐’大考，砥砺大国剑锋——火箭军‘剑锋—2021’导弹旅长竞赛考核侧记。” [Xinhua News – “Military Account”-Big Test in the Rocket Force Jianfeng 2021 Missile Brigade Commander Competition] Accessed April 12, 2021. <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2021-03-26/doc-ikkntiam8698852.shtml>.
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- <sup>4</sup> [http://www.81.cn/hjj/2021-06/07/content\\_10045130.htm](http://www.81.cn/hjj/2021-06/07/content_10045130.htm)
- <sup>5</sup> “导弹旅长上考场-中青在线。”[Missile Brigade Commander in the Examination Room – China Youth Daily] Accessed April 9, 2021. [http://zqb.cyol.com/html/202104/08/nw.D110000zgqnb\\_20210408\\_1-06.htm](http://zqb.cyol.com/html/202104/08/nw.D110000zgqnb_20210408_1-06.htm).
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> “火箭军‘剑锋-2021’导弹旅长竞赛考核：一旅一卷，直指战场。”[Rocket Force “Jianfeng-2021” Missile Brigade Competition Assessment: One Brigade, One Exam, Directly Pointing to the Battlefield”. Accessed June 24, 2021. [http://www.mod.gov.cn/power/2021-06/06/content\\_4886888.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/power/2021-06/06/content_4886888.htm).
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- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> “解放军报。” [PLA Newspaper –April 12 Edition] Accessed April 28, 2021. [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-04/22/content\\_287693.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-04/22/content_287693.htm).
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- <sup>17</sup> “火箭军组织‘剑锋—2021’导弹旅长竞赛考核。” [Rocket Force Organizes “Jianfeng-2021” Missile Brigade Commander Competition Assessment] Weixin Official Accounts Platform Accessed April 13, 2021. [http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MzI0NzQ1NTQxNg==&mid=2247547551&idx=2&sn=e8ff0991679090cf48bd990997a9db0e&chksm=e9adb148deda385e3e6ebae624b1c85fb5a3fc555074c0752ead5e2df330a4ccb7a95a43bb7d#rd](http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzI0NzQ1NTQxNg==&mid=2247547551&idx=2&sn=e8ff0991679090cf48bd990997a9db0e&chksm=e9adb148deda385e3e6ebae624b1c85fb5a3fc555074c0752ead5e2df330a4ccb7a95a43bb7d#rd).
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<sup>20</sup>“雪山见证转型突击” [Transformation of the Snow Mountain Assault]. People’s Liberation Army Newspaper. Accessed April 21, 2021. [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-04/19/content\\_287427.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-04/19/content_287427.htm).

<sup>21</sup> “火箭军部队严寒条件下训练见闻 - 中国军网.”[What the Rocket Force has Learned training Under Extreme Cold Conditions – Chinese Military Network]. Accessed April 28, 2021. [http://www.81.cn/yw/2021-02/18/content\\_9987135.htm](http://www.81.cn/yw/2021-02/18/content_9987135.htm).