



Preparing the People’s Liberation Army Militia for War

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Since the inception of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) the militia has played an important role. In an interview with the Director of the Political Work Bureau of the Hunan Military District Liu Xinwen sums up this sentiment stating, “The militia is the backbone of the people’s war [人民战争]¹. To respect the militia is to carry forward the fine tradition of the people’s war. All of society reveres the occupation of the militia.”¹ In a recent five-part series in Chinese National Defense News the role of the militia is examined with the question, “What can the militia do in modern warfare?”² It is a question, the authors write, that “lingers” [萦绕] in many people’s minds. As the authors assess, “the militia has changed from focusing on emergency response to strengthening its ability to fight in a war”.³ In the series the authors focus on five main areas in which the militia is preparing for future wars including: integration into the military, combat training, better organization, political work, and expanding the cyber militia. The goal is to build the militia into a well-organized and powerful force that can mobilize quickly for future wars.

Integration into Military with Expanded Role

A major focus of the PLA’s leadership is on integrating the militia into the military to play an expanded role closer connected with “actual combat”. The idea is that with a higher degree of integration there will be increased joint efficiency. According to PLA media, future operations will require militia support areas that expand to multiple domains of land, sea, air, space, electricity, and network⁴. New militia forces covering the fields of intelligent reconnaissance, network communication, helicopter rescue, special equipment maintenance, big data, electromagnetic countermeasures, drones, metrology, hydrology and other fields have been established.⁵ Long Xingqing, Commander of a Militia Equipment Maintenance Company in Jingzhou County, Hunan Province commented on the shift stating, “In the past, we trained by ourselves and had little connection with actual tasks. The first time we participated in joint training was like playing a game. Now we participate in more tasks and have a stronger sense of

¹ The idea of people’s war is associated with Mao and his strategy in the Chinese Civil War and the struggle against the Japanese. Now, it can essentially be understood as a war in which there is a whole of society effort where every citizen has a role to play.

responsibility.”⁶ Staff Officer Dong Ming of the Huaihua Military Sub-district's Combat Readiness Construction Office, echoed the sentiment;

“After the joint exercises and training in recent years, the military units have paid more attention to the use of militia support forces. Our new forces can provide diversified support, such as drone units, which can make the alert range wider, provide higher clarity, and require fewer personnel.”⁷

Dong Ming concluded his interview stating that the militiamen he works with feel they have a role to play on the battlefield and the feeling of being a “soldier” is much stronger.

Combat Training

The militia has made major reforms to improve and enhance their role in the military with focus in training on establishing a clear orientation for combat preparation. The idea is to, “shorten the distance between the training ground and the battlefield and let the training ground act as a “battlefield whetstone””⁸. A three-level militia training base system has been established at the provincial, city, and county levels equipped with combat training for the militia. Recently, the Guangxi Military Region conducted a mass military competition in which the militia played many support roles such as light weapons shooting, drone reconnaissance, comprehensive combat injury treatment, and cooking in the field. They were required to complete their tasks during bad weather and without the ability to redo or make up time if mistakes were made. In Jiangxi Province Yugan County, technical experts from the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) industry were used to assist in training. Yugan County People's Armed Forces Department Commander Zhou Jun commented on the UAV industry training, stating, “Strict training is required, and militia trainers are very important.”⁹ In Yunhe District, Cangzhou City, Hebei Province the People's Armed Forces Department signed a cooperation agreement with a UAV experimental test base to use local professional venues to train militia units. The training courses solve the problems of equipment, teachers, and training venues at one time to enhance the effectiveness of militia training. More broadly, the Ministry of National Defense has adopted the method of seeking out and inviting trainers from active duty troops to lead militia training. If possible, they also look to design joint military and militia training to continue to improve combat effectiveness.

Better Organization

According to Chinese military media sources, organization of the militia is becoming more streamlined and coordinated to meet the needs of the battlefield. The general trend has been to decrease the number of militia, but increase specialization, improve management, and increase mobilization speeds. For example, the militia of the Zhanjiang Military Sub-district in Guangdong Province has decreased the number of militia by 6%, but the number of teams has increased by 77.¹⁰ The Director of the Zhanjiang Combat Readiness Construction Division

explained, "The purpose of subdivision is to precisely match the battlefield."¹¹ Although each team is small, every one corresponds with a "warfighting requirement".¹²

In the past, simply tracking data on members of the militia was poorly managed. Some areas such as the People's Armed Forces Department of Nayong County, Guizhou Province have made major strides in this area. The department is now utilizing big data to identify, analyze, and store militia information, to assess current capability and potential future need. Jilin Provincial Military Region has integrated industry data of relevant military and local departments to establish professional teams with specific technical capabilities. To address issues such as difficulty in concentrating personnel, carrying out activities rapidly (such as emergency response) and difficulties in education, many provinces (such as Jiangsu, Hubei, and Guangdong) have also adopted a "smart militia" management platform.¹³ This software allows for real time sorting and analysis on personnel information, handling of equipment and rapid emergency response. Tianjin Garrison, utilizing the "smart militia" platform, held a drill in which they were able to position the militia in a simulated emergency in half the time in prior drills.¹⁴

Political Work

Political work is an overarching term that describes "all the efforts and activities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) aimed at managing human capital and influencing the civilian environment in order to achieve the political and military objectives accorded to it by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)"ⁱⁱ. Political work, like many other areas in the militia, has been an area of emphasis and reform to bring the militia closer in line with the rest of the military. The authors of the Chinese National Defense News article "Enter the Mind and Heart, Play a Strong Tone and Let it Advance with Time" emphasize the need for "absolute loyalty" to fulfill the mission of winning future wars.¹⁵ In pursuit of cultivating "absolute loyalty" the PLA has made full use of social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, in the form of online classes, videos and live broadcasts in their political work education. Classes focus on patriotism, combat readiness, and fighting spirit in the face of a powerful enemy.

As the role of militia has changed to focus more on war there have also been major reforms in militia political work exercises and training to enhance loyalty and responsibility as part of the PLA. Historically, with lack of organization, the militia did not have a real identity within the military. More recently, the militia has taken steps to give its members a sense of loyalty to the larger military mission of the CCP. Political work of the militia is also evaluated by local government leaders. For example, the Ji'an Military Sub-district has regular militia political work training in areas such as psychological assessment, emergency battlefield simulation and propaganda dissemination. Chen Hui, Political Commissar of the Ji'an Military Sub-district, noted, "Faced with the profound changes in the functions and missions of the militia, political work must be a fundamental part of service."¹⁶ To achieve guarantees of

ⁱⁱFor more information on political work read: <https://jamestown.org/program/military-political-work-at-the-ccps-centennial/>

“spiritual fortitude” in future wars the PLA has established combat effectiveness standards for the political work of the militia, focusing on preparations for military struggles that will be faced in war. Without strong political work training and exercise the militia will not be prepared for the realities of actual combat and will not be able to effectively support the PLA.

Expanding Cyber Militia

The Science of Military Strategy (2020)ⁱⁱⁱ identified a major weakness of the militia, stating, “The technology content of the reserve force is not high enough to meet the needs of informationized local wars.”¹⁷ To address this issue the PLA has been working on recruiting and developing a cyber militia prepared for future wars. The Chinese National Defense News article “Build and Share Together, Seek Development Together” states, “Many national high-tech enterprises in cities have become fertile ground for the establishment of new militia forces.”¹⁸ This is in line with Xi’s thinking to, “Promote the deepened development of military-civilian integration for cybersecurity and informatization” put forth during the 19th Party Congress.¹⁹ An example given in the article is in Anhui where they, “closely followed the needs of support tasks and attracted a large number of high-precision and cutting-edge technical talents to join the militia team.”²⁰ The Chinese Academy of Sciences^{iv}, which has played a critical role in science and technology planning for the CCP from the beginning of the Party, has been sponsoring various capture the flag^v competitions in collaboration with some of China’s top internet companies to train cyber militia units. The Academy wants to “transform the power of science and technology into combat power”.²¹ The goal is to enhance civil and military resources to achieve superiority in the cyber domain.

Conclusion

Per the PLA’s media coverage^{vi}, China’s militia is evolving into a powerful force supporting and strengthening the overall combat capability of the PLA. The authors write, “If the spear is not sharpened, it is not good, and if the soldier is not trained, it is not strong”.²² With major reforms taking place, the CCP hopes to build a militia prepared to support and fight future wars in all domains. With a greater sense of identity, accountability and organization, the militia will play a vital role in any future conflict and will pose a serious challenge to the United States and its allies.

ⁱⁱⁱ Science of Military Strategy 2020 is a capstone document on PRC’s current military strategy. The text was prepared by China’s Academy of Military Sciences faculty with a very high-level review. To read the translated text of SMS: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2913216/in-their-own-words-2020-science-ofmilitarystrategy/#:~:text=The%202020%20Science%20of%20Military,%2C%202001%2C%20and%20013%20publications.>

^{iv} To learn more about Chinese Academy of Sciences : https://english.cas.cn/about_us/introduction/201501/t20150114_135284.shtml

^v Capture The Flags, or CTFs, are a kind of computer security competition. Teams of competitors (or just individuals) are pitted against each other in a test of computer security skill.

^{vi} It always important to remember all news coverage from CCP run media has a built in bias as a tool for Party propaganda.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Lu Jun [卢军]. “Enter the Mind and Heart, Play a Strong Tone and Let it Advance with Time” 入脑入心，与时俱进奏强音]. *Chinese National Defense News*. Accessed September 3, 2022. http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2022-05/17/content_315689.htm.

²Zhu Hongbo [朱宏博]. “Building and Sharing Together, Seeking Development as One Body” [共建共用，一体同心谋发展]. *Chinese National Defense News* Accessed September 3, 2022. http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2022-05/20/content_315921.htm.

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⁴ Zhu Hongbo [朱宏博]. “Building and Sharing Together, Seeking Development as One Body” [共建共用，一体同心谋发展]. *Chinese National Defense News* Accessed September 3, 2022. http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2022-05/20/content_315921.htm.

⁵ Wang Jingyu [王京育]. “New Domain and New Quality, Winning New Feathers on the Road” [新域新质，打赢路上展新羽]. *Chinese National Defense News*. Accessed September 7, 2022. http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2022-05/18/content_315763.htm.

⁶Yu Bin [于斌]. “Fighting for War, Tempering a Strong Combat Team” [向战为战，淬炼过硬战斗队]. *Chinese National Defense News*. Accessed September 8, 2022. http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2022-05/16/content_315611.htm.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰Zhang Heyun [张和芸]. “Innovation and Excellence, Answering the New “Accurate” Exam Well” [创新创优，答好‘精准’新考卷]. *Chinese National Defense News*. Accessed September 8, 2022. http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2022-05/19/content_315840.htm#.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lu Jun [卢军]. “Enter the Mind and Heart, Play a Strong Tone and Let it Advance with Time” 入脑入心，与时俱进奏强音]. *Chinese National Defense News*. Accessed September 3, 2022.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ China’s National Defense University [中国人民解放军国防大学]. “Science of Military Strategy 2020” [战略学2020]. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2913216/in-their-own-words-2020-scienceofmilitarystrategy/#:~:text=The%202020%20Science%20of%20Military,%2C%202001%2C%20and%202013%20publications>.

¹⁸ Zhu Hongbo [朱宏博]. “Building and Sharing Together, Seeking Development as One Body” [共建共用，一体同心谋发展]. *Chinese National Defense News* Accessed September 3, 2022. http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2022-05/20/content_315921.htm.

¹⁹Theoretical Studies Center Group, Cyberspace Administration of China [中央网信办理论学习中心组]. “Deepening the Implementation of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Strategic Thinking on Building China into a Cyber Superpower: Steadily Advancing Cybersecurity and Informatization Work” [深入贯彻习近平总书记网络强国战略思想 扎实推进网络安全和信息化工作]. *Seeking Truth [求是]*. Accessed September 20, 2022. http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2017-09/15/c_1121647633.htm

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http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2022-05/20/content_315921.htm.

²¹ Wang Jingyu [王京育]. “New Domain and New Quality, Winning New Feathers on the Road” [新域新质，打赢路上展新羽]. *Chinese National Defense News*. Accessed September 7, 2022.

²² Ibid.