



CASI Commander's Toolkit:

PLA Army

Designation

Although it is a small point, the translation of the name of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) primary service for the conduct of war on land illustrates some points in scholarship concerning China. We commonly call that force the "PLA Army" or the "PLAA," which is an abbreviation of "People's Liberation Army Army." Perhaps it would seem less odd to abbreviate it as "APLA" for "Army of the People's Liberation Army," but it would not conform to the abbreviations that we use for the Chinese military's other services.

The two "armies" in the translation are not redundant; they are translations of two different words in Chinese that correspond to two different senses of the English word "army." The word originally referred to any armed force, but throughout much of history, of course, those forces fought on land. The use of the word "army" gradually narrowed as navies and naval warfare developed, but the original sense of the word can be seen in the French word "*armée*" as it is used in the name of the French air force: *Armée de l'air*, i.e., the "army of the air."

The first "army" in the designation "People's Liberation Army Army" is a translation of the Chinese word "*jun*," which refers to an armed force or armed forces in general, as the word "army" once did; the second "army" is a translation of the word "*lujun*," which refers to an armed force that fights on land, i.e., an army. Therefore, the name of the Chinese military could be less confusingly translated as the "Armed Forces for the Liberation of the Chinese People" and the Chinese army's name could be translated as the "Army of the Armed Forces for the Liberation of the Chinese People," but even though these are more precise, they are also wordy and unconventional, so we continue to use the more confusing translations.

The first point here is that although the translated names may seem to have implications about the relationships between the Chinese army and the other services of the Chinese military, that is an illusion. The second point is that the scholarship concerning China has its own jargon, which is full of awkward but direct translations whose relationship to the English words that they

use is more tenuous than it appears. Translations are often approximations, so they should not often be taken to represent the translated word in a perfect 1:1 ratio.

Mission: Similarities and Differences

As one would expect, and just like the U.S. Army, the Army is the CCPs' primary service for the conduct of war on land, but it differs from the U.S. Army in three major respects. First, although the PLA Navy has a marine corps, the PLAA has a larger amphibious force, so it is the Army which has primary responsibility for amphibious operations. Second, although the PLAA's special operations forces train to conduct airborne insertions, airborne operations are the primary responsibility of the PLA Air Force, which has a large airborne corps. Third, although the PLAA has air defense units, the PLAA is responsible for the point defense of its own units while the PLA Air Force is responsible for area defense and the air defense of its own bases. The PLA Air Force takes the lead in joint air defense operations.

History

Because the other services of the PLA were not established until the late 1940s, the first 20 years of the PLA Army's history are the history of the PLA as a whole, so it is useful to learn the history of the PLAA in detail. It is commonly thought that the purpose of history is to study the past in order to understand the present, but people often approach history as the production of a narrative of the past that supports a current political agenda. The Chinese Communists certainly approach history this way, and they have constructed a historical narrative of continuous victory that bolsters morale even as they simultaneously acknowledge serious deficiencies.

Before we learn about the history of the PLAA, we must first understand the context in which it was established. The last Chinese imperial dynasty was overthrown in 1911, and the first Chinese republic was founded in 1912, but it was founded on the shaky foundation of a compromise between the revolutionaries and the strongest element of the imperial army, whose leader was offered the presidency of the republic in exchange for the end of the revolutionary war. As one may expect, the leadership of the new republic was not committed to republican government, and the republic disintegrated throughout the decade.

Throughout the 1920s various armed groups vied for control of China. Their leaders are often disparaged as "warlords" in modern Chinese historiography, and although some or even most may deserve scorn, they were no less legitimate than the two groups who eventually emerged as the strongest in this contest: the Chinese Nationalist Party, also known as the "Kuomintang," and the Chinese Communist Party, which was established in 1921. The roots of the Chinese Nationalist Party extend to the 1890s, and it was established by the man whom both the Nationalists and the Communists recognize as the founding father of modern China, Sun Yat-sen.

The failure of the republic convinced Sun Yat-sen that China required a second, and put bluntly- authoritarian, revolution. Failing to secure foreign support from the Western powers and Japan, Sun eventually sought the support of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the early 1920s. The Soviet Union obliged under the condition that the Nationalists accept members of the fledgling Chinese Communist Party into their movement. Between 1924 and 1927, the Chinese Communist Party operated as a party within the Chinese Nationalist Party. The Chinese Communists intended to ride on the backs of the Nationalists, eventually carrying out their own communist revolution after the Nationalists had carried out theirs.

This marriage of convenience did provide the Nationalists substantial military aid, making its army the most powerful of the armed groups vying for power. Through a combination of military victories and coalitions with rivals, the Nationalists eventually conquered China in the late 1920s. However, the marriage of convenience with the Communists did not last. The Communists' "revolutionary" violence and their machinations with leftist Nationalists resulted in the rupture in 1927, before the Nationalists had completely conquered China. In 1927 the Nationalists began purging the party of Communists. In response the Communists carried out an insurrection, beginning with the Nanchang Uprising on August 1, 1927, which is now regarded as the day on which the PLA was founded. Although the Communists succeeded in taking Nanchang, they withdrew two days later,¹ and the insurrection ended in failure.

The Communists and the PLA spent the 1930s on the back foot. Although the PLA was never victorious, it was also never annihilated, a kind of success that is embodied in the PLA's greatest achievement of the decade: a massive retreat into China's hinterland that is known as the Long March. There is a great deal of myth surrounding the Long March,² but it is true that Mao Zedong consolidated his power over the Communist Party through the Long March.

The PLA counts its performance in the second Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45 as its next great achievement, and it is in this period that the myth of the PLA as masters of guerilla warfare was born. In fact, the Communists and the PLA spent much of the war literally performing and propagandizing against the Japanese and the Nationalists alike, their one great military achievement being the Hundred Regiments Campaign of 1940. This campaign is also much mythologized, and while it should not be seen as insincere or even a failure, it is impossible to characterize it as anything other than a propaganda victory. The Communists also praise Mao Zedong for articulating the "victorious" strategy of protracted warfare during this period, but his rival, the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, was already practicing it before Mao had anything to say at all.³ In short, the Nationalists bore the brunt of the Japanese invasion as the PLA bided its time.⁴

The PLA's next great victory was its victory in the so-called "War of Liberation," the Communist conquest of China. Following Japan's defeat in 1945, the Communists moved to northeastern China, which was occupied by the USSR. Amply supplied, and with the Soviet

Union at their backs, the PLA achieved undeniable victories over Nationalist forces that were led by irresolute generals.⁵ Chiang Kai-shek threw his forces into the northeast in a gamble to recover the region, but the Nationalist army's losses only mounted, and Communist victory became only a matter of time once the Communists broke out of the northeast. The Communist victory was achieved through massive battles involving regular infantry, artillery, armor, etc. It was not achieved with popular support and through guerilla warfare, but it was a victory all the same.

The PLA also counts the Korean War, which is known in China as the “War to Resist America and to Aid Korea,” as a great victory. It cannot be denied that the PLA saved the Korean communist regime, but this was achieved at an incredible cost. The PLA ruthlessly employed “human waves” of soldiers, some of whom were not even armed, to overwhelm UN forces, producing true examples of bravery and endurance, but at a horribly unbalanced loss of Chinese lives. Ultimately, because both sides’ goals changed throughout the war, both sides can claim to have achieved their goals and to have therefore achieved victory, but the Korean War had far greater meaning to the Chinese because it was framed as a successful resistance to Western imperialism.

Historical movies and television dramas long focused on the Second Sino-Japanese War, but in recent years the focus has shifted to the Korean War. Perhaps there is no particular political reason for the shift, but it is certainly convenient for the PLA and the Chinese Communists as a whole. The Korean War is less morally ambiguous for the Communists because they were not allied with the Nationalists and the Americans during the war. Instead, they were fighting the Americans. PLA historiography emphasizes the preeminent strength of the U.S. military that it “defeated” in the Korean War as well as the villainy of the U.S. military for supposedly using biological and chemical weapons. This is meant to bolster confidence in the PLA’s capability to defeat today’s U.S. military and to underline the evil that the U.S. military supposedly represents.

After the Korean War, the USSR provided substantial material aid to the PLA, helping it to modernize and professionalize. However, the next two decades severely damaged the PLA. In the mid-1960s Mao Zedong launched his Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in an effort to prevent de-Stalinization and to achieve retribution against those who opposed his economic policies in the late 1950s that had caused massive famine. The Cultural Revolution was essentially a second, absurdist revolution that destroyed the PLA through anti-professionalism and through units’ allying with competing groups of Red Guards, the activists of the Cultural Revolution.

What the Communists forget is as interesting as what they remember. The Cultural Revolution was too big of a disaster to cover up, so the Communists acknowledge the damage that it did to the development of the PLA, but they conveniently forget the degree to which the

PLA, and the PLAA in particular, became involved in the civil unrest of the period, instead emphasizing the role that the PLAA played in eventually ending the turmoil.

A final, key event in the PLAA's history is China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979, known in China as a "defensive counterattack." This has never been erased from history, but it is also usually ignored. Like a man who claims to have meant to stumble, the PLA claims that it never intended to do more than it accomplished in the war, which was not much, but the war revealed the degree to which the Cultural Revolution had diminished the capabilities of the PLAA and the PLA as a whole, and that brings us to the last four decades of reform.

Modernization

Summaries of the PLA's reform and modernization focus on the most recent of those efforts in the last decade, but both began as China emerged from the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s. There are four aspects of the PLAA's modernization that one can discern across the past four decades.

The first aspect of the PLAA's modernization is prioritization of quality over quantity, which is manifested in the reduction of personnel and units. In the PLA's first reduction of forces in 1980, the PLAA cut over 1.3 million personnel, and in 1983 another 300 thousand personnel and their units were transferred to the newly established Chinese People's Armed Police. Throughout the 1980s the PLAA cut more personnel as well as commands and units, and it did so again after the PLA began its most recent, major reorganization in 2016.

The second aspect of the PLAA's modernization has been its transformation into a more mobile force, which it has achieved through the mechanization of the force and the steady building of its aviation branch. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the PLA prioritized the development and acquisition of new missiles, ships, and fixed-wing aircraft over weapons and vehicles used for land warfare. However, beginning in the 2000s, the pace of the development of new weapons and vehicles for the PLAA increased. The pace increased again in the 2010s, and now most of the PLAA's units have an impressive array of new armor, self-propelled artillery, and helicopters.

The third aspect of the PLAA's modernization has been its transformation into a combined-arms force. In the early 1980s, the PLAA's maneuver units were large, single-branch formations like infantry and tank regiments. The PLAA has gradually consolidated these units into smaller, combined-arms formations. First it combined several single-branch divisions into a formation called a "group army," which is usually said to be equivalent to a corps of the U.S. Army, but that is more like a larger U.S. Army division. In the 2000s the PLAA began reducing and consolidating most of each group army's subordinate divisions into brigades, and in the last decade it made the combined-arms battalion the PLAA's basic maneuver unit.

Of course, making the combined-arms battalion the basic maneuver unit helps the army achieve modularization. The army is now organized so that battalions can be individually assigned to task forces that are tailored for particular missions, at least in theory, but judging from how the PLAA operates in exercises, it seems more usual for entire brigades to deploy and operate independently.

Organization

Below the Central Military Commission (the CMC) in the PLAA's administrative chain of command is the headquarters of the PLAA. The headquarters of the PLAA is roughly equivalent to the Department of the Army. At the apex of the PLAA's headquarters are the commander and the political commissar of the PLAA. The commander and the political commissar are *both* roughly equivalent to a combination of the Secretary of the Army *and* the Chief of Staff of the Army.

The headquarters of the PLAA comprises the entirety of what the U.S. Army calls the "institutional Army," that is, the organizations that organize, equip, train, and deploy operational forces. The PLAA does not have functional major commands. Instead, the PLA has established a multi-departmental bureaucratic structure that extends from the CMC down to the group army. These departments serve the same functions as those of many of the U.S. Army's commands and direct-reporting units.

Below the CMC in the PLAA's operational chain of command are the five theater commands. There are five theater armies, one in each theater, that function as the theaters' service component commands, much like U.S. Army Pacific is the Army's service component command in the Indo-Pacific Theater. The five theater armies are: the Eastern Theater Army, the Southern Theater Army, the Western Theater Army, the Northern Theater Army, and the Central Theater Army.

Each theater army has two or three group armies. The PLA has a total of 13 group armies, but the special, sub-theater commands in Xinjiang and Tibet command much the same number and types of units as those of a group army, so they can be considered "shadow" group armies. Again, a group army is roughly equivalent to a division in the U.S. Army. Each group army commands five or six combined-arms brigades and seven other brigades: an artillery brigade, an air defense brigade, an engineer brigade, a chemical brigade, a service support brigade, an aviation brigade, and a special operations brigade. Group armies seem to be largely administrative formations. The combined-arms brigades, in particular, are designed to be self-sufficient.

Army Aviation

The aviation branch of the PLA Army (PLAA) is relatively new. The PLAA began planning to establish an army aviation branch in 1986, and it was not until 1988 that it established its first helicopter unit within a group army in Northern China.⁶ However, by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the branch had grown to include an army aviation regiment in each military region except the Nanjing Military Region, which had two. The PLAA's aviation branch has grown at an even faster pace in the past decade.

The mission of the PLAA's aviation branch is to provide close air support and reconnaissance as well as airlift for air assault operations and the infiltration and exfiltration of special operations forces. Of course, the aviation branch also conducts noncombat missions, such as medevacking injured personnel and transporting men and materiel for deployments or disaster relief operations.

The development of the PLAA's aviation branch is key to the modernization of the PLAA. The PLAA's modernization program initially focused on rationalizing and modularizing the structure of the force; now its focus is on improving its capability to conduct combined-arms operations in multiple domains and environments, for which the aviation branch is essential. The PLAA's aviation branch is still in the process of modernizing its fleet of helicopters. Perhaps attesting to the difficulty of developing aircraft, almost all the PLAA's helicopters are either of foreign design or are based on foreign designs. For the first two decades of the aviation branch's existence, the branch did not even have a proper attack helicopter, relying instead on a modified French civilian helicopter to fulfill that role. However, this was just a stopgap; throughout the past three decades the PLA has worked to develop more appropriate designs, which have rapidly been operationalized in the last decade and are being fielded at a steady pace.

The PLAA has a total of 15 aviation brigades. Two of the PLAA's aviation brigades are air assault brigades. The aviation brigades generally comprise four transport battalions, two attack battalions, and one reconnaissance battalion, and they have indeed been observed to have at least two attack battalions and four battalions of another type as well as a maintenance battalion.⁷ Air assault brigades may have as many as six transport battalions and as many as three infantry battalions. Each battalion is estimated to have, or eventually have, 8 to 12 helicopters. Aviation brigades have also been observed to have unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) companies that operate reconnaissance drones, primarily the WZ-6 tactical reconnaissance UAV, and that are

likely subordinate to a combat support battalion or a combined combat and combat service support battalion.^{8,i}

Air Defense

In contrast with its aviation branch, the PLAA has had air defense units since the late 1940s, but until the reforms beginning in 2016, the PLAA's air defense branch was not rationally organized for modern warfare, mostly consisting of large and separate antiaircraft artillery (AAA) and air defense formations. The reorganization of the PLAA that began in 2016 resulted in the amalgamation of AAA, air defense, and even electronic warfare (EW) elements into single air defense and combined-arms brigades. The PLA has also had EW units for decades, its first being established in 1958.⁹ However, like its air defense units, until the reforms of the last decade, the PLAA's EW units were direct-reporting units of the military regions, so they functioned independently and were therefore not well integrated into the training and operations of the PLAA's other units.

The mission of the PLAA's air defense branch is to provide point defense of PLAA units and facilities from aerial threats. Those air defense elements of the PLAA's combined-arms brigades are more narrowly focused on the defense of the brigade from the same. PLAA air defense units may also support the PLA's overall integrated air defense system. However, the shorter range of the PLAA's air defense systems compared to those found in the PLAAF and the PLAN is a substantial limiting factor. The PLAA's air defense units are well equipped with a variety of mobile, modern weapons systems.

In the past, the PLAA's air defense branch was hindered more by its organization than it was by its armament and equipment. The post-2016 reorganization of the PLAA's air defense units has helped them to better integrate with other branches for combined-arms operations. Moreover, of all the branches of the PLAA, the air defense branch seems to most frequently participate in joint training, mostly with the PLAAF's air defense units. The PLAA's air defense units have digitized their maintenance of the air picture and they have established joint datalinks with the PLAAF's air defense units, and they have also fully integrated EW into their training.

Like the aviation branch, each of the PLAA's group armies had an air defense brigade, and the Xinjiang and Tibet Military Regions each have an air defense brigade. However, in 2022 the 72nd Group Army's air defense brigade was reorganized into a long-range artillery brigade. Therefore, the PLAA has a total of 14 air defense brigades. In addition, each group army has six combined-arms brigades that each have an air defense battalion.

ⁱ Aviation brigades are not the only units in the PLAA that operate UAVs, so they are not solely responsible for providing UAV-based support. Artillery brigades operate UAVs for spotting, and it is very likely that other types of units, such as special operations forces, have organic UAV assets.

The PLAA's air defense brigades have been observed to have four missile battalions and at least one antiaircraft artillery battalion as well as one electronic warfare battalion, one combat service support battalion, and even one quartermaster battalion.¹⁰

Training

A major trend in the PLAA's training has been the increase in combined-arms training. The PLAA did conduct combined-arms exercises prior to, and throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but these were not ordinary events, and they were limited by a force structure militating against them. What the PLAA calls "new types of forces," aviation, electronic warfare, and special operations units, have had to be built almost from scratch over the last four decades. However, as the PLAA has built these units up and organized its forces for combined-arms operations from the group-army-level down to the battalion-level, the frequency and quality of its combined-arms training has increased. The novelty of the so-called "new types of forces" is gone; it is no longer unusual for relatively small formations like battalions to conduct training with them. The PLAA is becoming increasingly adept at utilizing the range of tactical options that combined-arms operations provide.

Another trend in the PLAA's training is an increasing emphasis on operations in a greater range of environments, one meaning of the PLA's term "all-domain operations." The PLAA, particularly its border defense units, have always functioned in difficult environments under austere conditions, but throughout the past two decades, the PLAA has forced all its units out of their garrisons to train in a greater range of climates and terrain, which has the added benefit of forcing them to practice long-distance deployments.

One major training event is the annual exercise "KUAYUE", or STRIDE in English. This is a large-scale, combined-arms, force-on-force exercise against a dedicated, division-sized opposing force known as a "blue force." The PLAA has conducted this exercise since the late 2000s at their equivalent of our Fort Irwin, the Zhurihe Combined Tactical Training Base. The base has facilities enabling the PLAA to practice urban warfare in addition to large field maneuvers.

However, the army, and the PLA in general, is still not as proficient in joint operations. The PLAA does more regular joint training, but this is most often in combination with the PLA Air Force and revolves around air defense operations. They are still just beginning to develop the capability for the air force to provide close air support to the army, and the army and the air force's airborne corps conducted their first joint training only about three years ago. The PLAA's aviation units frequently train over the sea, but the PLAA rarely trains with the PLA Navy, including with the navy's marine corps. Still, given how far the PLA has come, especially in the

last two decades, it is likely that the army and the PLA as a whole will become more adept at joint operations.

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Notes

¹ Liu Guoyu et al., ed., *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junshi*, vol. 1, 1927 nian 8 yue – 1937 nian 7 yue (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 2010), 13.

² See Sun Shuyun, *The Long March: The True History of China's Founding Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).

³ See Iechika Ryōko, *Shō Kaiseki no gaikō senryaku to nicchū sensō* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 2012).

⁴ See Hans J. van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China, 1925-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵ See Harold M. Tanner, *Where Chiang Kai-shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015).

⁶ 军事科学院军事历史研究所 [Military History Research Institute of the Academy of Military Science], 中国人民解放军改革发展 30 年 [Thirty years of reform and development of the Chinese People's Liberation Army] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Military Science Publishing House], 2008), 95-96.

⁷ “陆军：跨昼夜海上射击 锤炼实战能力” [Army: day-to-night overwater gunnery tempers real-war capability], 中国新闻 [China News], aired May 24, 2019, on CCTV-4, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQykhYH7Qto>; 赖文湧 [Lai Wenyong], 赵欣 [Zhao Xin], and 石芝鹏 [Shi Zhipeng], “三个连队官兵同上一堂课” [Three companies' officers and enlisted men all attend same class], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], April 1, 2021, accessed April 1, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-04/01/content_286153.htm; “零下 30° C 陆航直升机多课目飞行训练” [Multiple helicopters of the army aviation branch conduct flight training in multiple subjects at minus 30 degrees Celsius], 董超 [Dong Chao], 刘杨 [Liu Yang], 尹昊生 [Yin Haosheng], and 于朋飞 [Yu Pengfei], 军事报道 [Military Report], aired January 14, 2021, on CCTV-7, accessed January 26, 2021, http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202101_239149.html.

⁸ “有人无人协同飞行 战鹰配上“千里眼”” [Manned-unmanned cooperative flight: warbirds are accompanied by a ‘far-seeing eye’], 曹倬恺 [Cao Zhuokai], 于大双 [Yu Dashuang], 郭嘉悦 [Guo Jiayue], 郭雁灵 [Guo Yanling], 沈敬尧 [Shen Jingyao], 吴晨 [Wu Chen], 解玉龙 [Jie Yulong], and 时帅 [Shi Shuai], 国防军事早报 [Morning Report on National Defense and Military Affairs], aired March 1, 2021, on CCTV-7, accessed March 3, 2021, http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202103_242315.html; Yefim Gordon and Dmitriy Komissarov, *Chinese Air Power* (Manchester, UK: Hikoki Publications, 2021), 347.

⁹ 军事科学院军事历史研究所 [Military History Research Institute of the Academy of Military Science], 中国人民解放军改革发展 30 年 [Thirty years of reform and development of the Chinese People's Liberation Army] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Military Science Publishing House], 2008), 97.

¹⁰ 陈典宏 [Chen Dianhong], 冯邓亚 [Feng Dengya], and 周宇鹏 [Zhou Yupeng], ““身负重伤”咋能迅速“满血复活”？” [How can the ‘seriously injured’ quickly ‘come fully back to life?’], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], February 19, 2021, accessed February 22, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-02/19/content_282982.htm; “播出，陆军第 81 集团军某旅：创新驱动 打造科技创新实践基地” [A certain brigade of the army's 81st Group Army is on the air: driven by innovation, building a base for the application of technological innovation], 陈龙 [Chen Long], 赵志远 [Zhao Zhiyuan], 李明钟 [Li Mingzhong], and 姚明昊 [Yao Minghao], 军事报道 [Military Report], aired February 24, 2022, on CCTV-7, accessed February 25, 2022, http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202202_271236.html; 王旭 [Wang Xu], 刘晓帅 [Liu Xiaoshuai], and 宋子洵 [Song Zixun], “战士们“暖胃”更“暖心”” [Warriors ‘warm their hearts’ more than they ‘warm their stomachs’], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], February 19, 2021, accessed February 22, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-02/19/content_282998.htm.