



# **Constructing a New Military Training System**

## Introduction

The People's Liberation Army (PLA), under Xi Jinping's directives, has heavily focused on improving the quality of training for military forces. This focus was in response to serious concerns on combat realism in training, a lack of fighting spirit due to peace disease, obstacles to true joint training, and myriad other problems. Many conferences convened and initiatives launched over the years sought to bring PLA training up to the levels required for the future missions Beijing's leadership envisions. These have included revising and updating existing training regulations, creating new regulations on training supervision, and Xi personally launching the annual training schedule through his annual training orders.<sup>1</sup>

With many major reforms in the rearview mirror but still much development needed, the past few years have seen significant energy focused on enhancing training fundamentals across the military. In November 2020, the Central Military Commission (CMC) held a meeting focused on military training, where Xi issued directives and discussions to guide the PLA toward meeting its training commitments in combat realism, jointness, the incorporation of science and technology, and ensure that training is conducted according to regulations. Importantly, this meeting declared the PLA would accelerate building a new military training system, culminating in the CMC's February 2021 release of "Decision on Building a New Military Training System" (关于构建新型军事训练体系的决定). This decision also resulted in changes to doctrine that focused on training to fight the "powerful enemy" (强敌), a common euphemism for the U.S. For example, the PLA Navy subsequently issued a document called "Decision on Accelerating the Promotion of Transformation of Navy Military Training and Constructing a New-Type Navy Military Training System" (关于加快推动海军军事训练转型, 构建新型海军军事训练体系的决定) in September 2021. This [guidance?] directs and focuses naval training toward countering the U.S., and perhaps Japan, in the primary strategic direction and even encourages real encounters with adversary forces at sea to hone PLAN skills and confidence. The other services likely also issued updates to their own training doctrines to align with this new guidance.

While the services focused on transforming their respective training systems, the CMC's Training Management Department (中央军委训练管理部) had its own tasks in overall design of new training programs across the forces. This effort was important to ensure the joint forces can defeat the powerful enemy, adapt to an increasingly "intelligitized form of warfare" (智能化战争), and

---

<sup>1</sup> Since the Central Military Commission issued its "Opinions on Improving the Level of Combat Realism in Military Training" in early 2014, the PLA has striven to improve its military training system. Every year since has seen milestone events take place on a long path toward reform and resolution of longstanding training problems. Many of these events are included in a list compiled by the Academy of Military Science and published in October 2022. Xi Jinping, in his capacity, has personally launched annual training on the 1<sup>st</sup> of each year since 2018, giving the annual training order and highlighting points of focus to ensure training advances as intended.

overcome continuing obstacles to “integrated joint operations” (一体化联合作战). Among the many requirements toward building a new military training system would be an iterative improvement to the fundamentals of PLA training, or as the Training Management Department stated in a *PLA Daily* article in December 2023, “we must follow the basic logic of generating combat power from basic [training] to combined arms [training], then to joint [training]...” (要按照从基础到合成再到联合到战斗力生成基本逻辑). The following are introductions to the initial stages of this process.

## **Stage One: Basic Training**

This continuous process to carry out Xi’s directives shortly after the “decision” was issued began with a focus on basic training. On June 20, 2023, the CMC held the “Onsite Meeting for All Military Basic Training” (全军基础训练现场会) in Tianjin, presided over by CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia. An onsite includes both leadership “observing” (观摩) real training events in the field and then holding conference discussions, in this case, with major service leaders in attendance and military subdistricts, units at the brigade or regiment level and above, military academies, and leadership of training organs attending virtually. This session introduced the “Four Changes” (四化), which promoted more specialized trainers, intensive training, simulated training, and standardized assessments (专长化任教、集约化组训、模拟化训练、标准化考核), as well as emphasis on improving teaching, further enrichment of methods and practices, and increasing the quality and efficiency of basic training.

The CMC Training and Management Department developed the “Four Changes” to catch up military training with the other major transformations in the PLA, chiefly the force restructuring, equipment upgrades, and other occurring reforms. The first change, specialized trainers, addressed the problem of having well-qualified personnel such as non-commissioned officers and other specialists to provide more hands on and tailored training to new recruits in potentially smaller groups based on skill levels. It is focused on those conducting the recruit training. The second change, intensive training, refers to a general intensification of the training process that highlights more diverse specializations. The third change, simulated training, aims to reduce losses in equipment and ammunition consumption during the general course of training. Greater use and access to improving virtual reality technologies will reduce costs and barriers to giving troops broad exposure to training subjects. The fourth change, standardized assessments, intends to explore methods that rely on systems based on data and actual combat scenarios, and are standardized to integrate training and evaluation. These improvements, while not entirely novel, aim to not just improve the basic levels of training but also reduce the duration it takes to bring new recruits up to the appropriate skill levels.

## Stage Two: Combined Arms Training

The next stage of building the new military training system focused on combined arms training and was the topic of the “Onsite Meeting for All Military Combined Arms Training” (全军合成训练现场会) held in Zhangjiakou, Hebei Province on October 20, 2024. Once again, Zhang Youxia led the event involving observation of training and a conference discussion to develop a new model of combined arms training, with attendance from the entire PLA including the CMC Joint Operations Command Center. In pursuit of the goal of building joint operations capabilities based on network information systems, combined arms training was in need of innovation and improvement. As the PLA describes, “combined arms training carries forward basic training and supports joint training” (合成训练承接基础训练、支撑联合训练), signifying the critical importance of this stage in the military training system. Through extended work by the CMC’s departments and experts involving systematic review of combined arms practices, experience, and results of various training activities and exercises, the new model needed to focus on combined arms training for joint operations. This requires new focus on the tactical coordination across different services and arms in organized confrontational training. With successful experimentation and proving completed, the meeting was meant to introduce and demonstrate the new model for the entire PLA. The primary results of this meeting refer to the “Three Trainings” (三训) as comprising the new basic model of combined arms training. The first is “unit integrated training” (单元集成训), which aims to organically aggregate the combat elements of a unit to raise its overall combat capabilities and “ability to conduct specific actions” (专项行动能力). The second is “tactical coordination training” (战术协同训练), aiming to coordinate and link unit actions and improve “front-line autonomous coordination” (一线自主协同能力). The third is “confrontational testing training” (对抗检验训), which seeks to verify and improve overall capabilities and set up the realistic confrontational conditions for exercises to test integrated or specific actions. As the CMC Training Management Department explains, this new model has created a new combined arms training theoretical framework, mechanisms for training missions, rules, activities, and results across different services, and resulted in the issuance of new training regulations.

In particular, “front-line autonomous coordination” is a critical aspect of the new model. As future combat operations increasingly become multi-domain, faster, and more intense, traditional combined arms training methods cannot meet the PLA’s requirements for force coordination. This change recognizes that command must be flattened to enable dynamic aggregation of combat forces at the bottom grassroots levels without any cross-service barriers to command and coordination. As one author from the Army Command College explains, essential to this model is the increased use of “networked command and control links that can reach end users” (直达末端的网络化指挥链路), “simple and efficient intelligent information systems” (简便高效的智能化信息系统), and “standardized and effective coordination rules” (实在管用的规范化协同规则).

Effective implementation will better enable manned and unmanned system coordination, reduce sensor to shooter time, break information barriers, and numerous other benefits to joint operations.

## **Conclusion**

The major changes occurring in the PLA training system have received the highest level of attention from PRC and CMC leadership. Each of the changes to training methods taking place will entail significantly different approaches depending on the service and arm conducting the training. Naval aviators and submariners will require very different skill sets from the mechanized infantry or armor of the group armies. A broader and more in-depth examination of the Theater Commands, services, and unit levels is required to explore whether the PLA's top-level design and heavy investment in numerous large-scale systems and training standards may have taken these nuances into account. Moreover, according to the logic introduced by the CMC Training and Management Department above, there could be a third stage focusing on achieving improved joint training under development by the end of 2025 that will be implemented in the following year. After all, the CMC had issued its "Joint Operations Outline (Trial)" (联合作战纲要(试行)) in November 2020, suggesting that smoothing out the general training requirements will take more time.

Certainly, these renewed efforts by the PLA to raise the level of force-wide training is reflective of longstanding issues plaguing the force, especially problems with peace disease affecting a military that has not fought a conflict in decades. Nonetheless, if it proves successful, broad improvements to the fundamentals of training, including basic, combined arms, and joint, will generate long-term dividends that the PLA hopes may help its forces prevail in a future conflict. If PLA technology and armaments are gradually catching up with the advanced militaries of the world, the sustained effort and investment by the PRC in the quality of its personnel will also likely eventually close some remaining capabilities gaps.