



ADAPTING TO FUTURE WARS

The Reorganization of the PLA Army's Special Operations Forces and the Move Toward Professionalization

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Abstract: The People's Liberation Army (PLA) implemented major changes to the organization, accession, and training of its army's special operations forces (SOF) beginning in 2017, including the creation of a 12-man SOF team and establishment of a probable national-level army-subordinate counterterrorism unit. Beginning in 2025, the PLA introduced several changes to improve officer accession and noncommissioned officer retention in its special operations community. This article assesses observed changes since 2017 designed to improve the PLA's command and control of its army's SOF units and to set the foundation for China's elite forces becoming world-class by 2049.

Keywords: People's Liberation Army, PLA, PLA Army, PLAA, special operations forces, SOF

Following the completion of a highly publicized China-Serbia joint special operations training event in late July 2025, Belgrade claimed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces that participated "showed an exceptional level of organization and professionalism." Although many of the highlights surrounding Peace Guardian 2025, which took place in Hebei Province, China, emphasized both sides' use of Chinese equipment, including firearms and unmanned ground and air systems, Beijing could not have asked for a better compliment.¹

While Serbia's participating unit, the 72d Special Operations Brigade, is a well-trained and equipped combat force, the PLA Army's (PLAA) special operations units are typically reported as inexperienced and inadequately trained for optimal integration with conventional military forces.² Yet, the compliment from Serbia's Ministry of National Defense reflects eight years of quiet transformation within China's special operations forces (SOF). Driven by decades of engagement with foreign militaries and observation of conflicts where special operations units have played outsized roles on the battlefield, the PLA has not only

¹ Ryan Chan, "Chinese Special Forces Train with New Ally in Europe," *Newsweek*, 30 July 2025; "Joint Training of Serbian and Chinese Special Operations Units," Republic of Serbia Ministry of Defence, 29 July 2025; and Chen Zhuo, ed., "China-Serbia Peace Guardian 2025 Joint Training to Be Held This Month," China Military Online, 14 July 2025.

² "Serbian 72nd Special Operations Brigade," Joint-Forces.com, 3 January 2025; and Michael Peck, "China's Special Forces Are Untested. Success in a Taiwan Invasion Could Depend on Them," *Business Insider*, 7 December 2024.

changed the organization of its army's special operations teams to use a more Western style, but it also adopted innovative programs to retain more professional operators and leaders within its elite units.³

This article is intended to inform readers of how China is modernizing and professionalizing the army's special operations forces in preparation for future wars. This work also includes new findings about the creation of a 12-man SOF team construct, the establishment of a probable national-level army counterterrorism force, and major adjustments to how special operations officers and recruits are canvassed and trained. However, this work does not detail PLA special operations tactics, how SOF units will carry out missions in certain campaigns, and known special operations leaders.

The PRC's special operations community includes more than just the army. The PLA Air Force Airborne Corps (PLAAFAC), PLA Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC), PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), and People's Armed Police (PAP) all have special operations units. However, the army's SOF brigades make up roughly 80 percent of the total special operations units in the force, and the army controls the PLA's primary special operations training organizations. Although this article is designed to assess the PLAA's new changes, it will include references to those other services if they experienced similar adjustments.

China's Special Operations Forces: A Brief Overview

Although special operations units within the People's Liberation Army look much different than they did in 2015, their primary roles and functions on the battlefield remain relatively unchanged. As the Chinese military's units designed to execute key strategic and operational combat missions, in addition to military operations other than war, special operations forces are considered a force multiplier.⁴

With roots found in the army's earlier reconnaissance units, PLA special operations units were established in the 1980s and 1990s to carry out a host of missions that could create favorable conditions for main force units and disrupt enemy operational activities. However, the PLA does not prepare its units to conduct all U.S. Title 10 special operations core activities, including unconventional warfare and foreign internal defense.⁵

The People's Liberation Army has always intended to use its army's elite forces to carry out reconnaissance, raids, and key point seizure against traditional military targets like command posts, ports, airfields, missile launch sites, supply depots, transportation nodes, etc. As a result of Chinese media frequently broadcasting special operations units

³Jake Epstein, "Ukraine's Special Ops Soldiers Are Getting into More 'Mischief' behind Russian Lines," *Business Insider*, 31 July 2025.

⁴Dennis J. Blasko, "Chinese Special Operations Forces: Not Like 'Back at Bragg'," *War on the Rocks*, 1 January 2015; and Kevin McCauley, "PLA Special Operations: Combat Missions and Operations Abroad," *China Brief* 15, no. 17 (3 September 2015).

⁵Dennis J. Blasko, "PLA Special Operations Forces: Organizations, Missions and Training," *China Brief* 15, no. 9 (1 May 2015); and Monte Erfourth, "The Chinese Approach to Gray Zone & Irregular Competition," *Strategy Central*, 9 November 2024.

Table 1. People's Liberation Army special operations missions

Mission	Obejective
Special reconnaissance	Infiltrate to track and monitor key targets
Long-range strike guidance	Locate targets and transmit targeting data to joint fire units and/or execute battle damage assessments
Sabotage operations	Sabotage high-priority military targets, civilian infrastructure, and other strategic or operational targets
Key point seizure	Seize objectives when the action can significantly impact operational success
Rescue/retrieve key personnel and equipment	Rescue personnel in peacetime or wartime like downed pilots and retrieve vital equipment like classified documents
Harassing operations	Cause chaos in the enemy's rear using hard or soft attacks to divert forces or attrit, exhaust, deceive, and confuse the enemy
Search and suppress missions	Capture enemy political or military leaders to cause chaos, lower morale, and obtain information; hunt and eliminate terrorist leaders and enemy remnants in retreat
Network sabotage	Conduct network interference through network intrusion, jamming, network destruction, and other means
Psychological attacks	Support psychological warfare plans to cause chaos and lower enemy morale
Antiterrorism	External hostage rescue, assaults on terrorist groups and base camps, securing weapons of mass destruction and infrastructure during internal unrest and terrorist incidents; special security for high-level officials and important events

Source: Kevin McCauley, "PLA Special Operations: Combat Missions and Operations Abroad," *China Brief* 15, no. 17 (3 September 2015), adapted by MCUP.

conducting direct action missions, many Western media outlets have regularly referred to them as having more in common with U.S. Army Rangers than Special Forces.⁶ However, unlike Rangers, Chinese special operations units, normally companies, were assigned as enablers to army divisions and brigades to support conventional force campaigns. In China's older writings on major campaigns, especially those focused on a joint island landing

⁶ Maxwell Goldstein, "Chinese Special Forces: Dragons of the East," Grey Dynamics, 25 July 2025.

campaign against Taiwan, special operations units would carry out those missions behind enemy lines to harass the adversary and enable freedom of maneuver for ground forces.⁷

The Need for Change: A Primer

In 2017, a PLAA senior colonel and lieutenant colonel assigned to the Southern Theater Command Joint Staff Department wrote an article for an early 2018 edition of *China Military Science* describing the weaknesses and requirements for change in all the PLA's special operations forces. The authors assessed that to catch up with the capabilities of world-class special operations forces like those in the United States, Russia, and India, the PLA was undertaking a series of modernization and development efforts:

- Specialized research (特研) into Chinese and foreign special operations case studies to develop new concepts and training. Emphasis would be placed on SOF development trends for objectives and missions, force organization and structure, weapons and equipment deployment, organizational and command processes, and joint support.
- Specialized composition (特编) to improve command and control of special operations forces at strategic, campaign/operational, and tactical levels. Emphasis would be placed on improving command and deployment capabilities for global and regional special operations, increasing the number of noncommissioned officers (NCO) in SOF units, and enabling multidomain strikes and maneuver.
- Specialized selection (特选) of new special operations officers and soldiers to focus on improved competency standards based on political qualities, SOF skills, cultural background, language proficiency, physical and mental reflexes, coordination and communication skills, and other characteristics. Emphasis would be placed on creating an elimination process that mirrored foreign forces' 50–80 percent attrition rates during training.
- Specialized fielding (特装) of advanced weapons, sensors, and intelligence fusion systems to support multidomain operations and analysis and speed up decision-making. Emphasis would be placed on systems that enhanced rapid mobility in any theater, long-range battlefield reconnaissance systems, and strike equipment.
- Specialized training (特训) to improve basic SOF skills, jointness, mission readiness, and the ability to address new special operations theories and technologies. Emphasis was placed on innovating the current training model for recruits and officers up to the battalion level, improving senior officer academic training, taking advantage of international exercises and training with other countries, and “normalizing” deployments to border areas and at sea.
- Specialized support (特保) to include establishing joint logistics support mecha-

⁷ John Chen and Joel Wuthnow, *Chinese Special Operations in a Large-Scale Island Landing*, China Maritime Report no. 18 (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, U.S. Naval War College, 2022), 1–2.

nisms, prepositioning of equipment and supplies, operational security of SOF personnel, and authorizing special incentives for special operations personnel. Emphasis would be placed on supporting soldiers' families, improving demobilization of SOF recruits to improve job prospects, and strengthening the overall "brand" of PLA special operations forces.⁸

The two authors of the *China Military Science* article wrote their detailed analysis while the PLA was in the middle of a major restructure that started at the end of 2015 with "above-the-neck" strategic level reforms that changed the organization of the Central Military Commission (CMC), established five joint theater commands, established an army headquarters, and led to several other overhauls. In April 2017, "below-the-neck" reforms changed the face of the PLAA's tactical formations, including the number and organization of the force's SOF brigades.⁹ While the two authors were probably not the architects of the special operations reforms that occurred during the restructure period, their critical analysis of China's special operations community provides foundational understanding as to why Beijing implemented the reforms detailed below.

PLAA Special Operations Forces Organization: New Brigades, New Teams

Following the PLA's 2017 reforms, new special operations brigades were established in each service, with the army expanding its special operations footprint to 15 brigades, and the navy's marine corps and air force's airborne corps both expanding their individual special operations units into full brigades. The newly established PLA Rocket Force kept its sole special operations regiment.¹⁰

The 2017 restructure did not lead to the creation of a U.S. Special Operations Command-style command and control system for China's forces.¹¹ Instead, the brigades fell under the command of regional corps-level and above headquarters, demonstrating a continued expectation that special operations units were designed to support conventional forces and use air lift assets assigned to the same corps. In the army, 13 group armies (units that are roughly equivalent to a U.S. Army corps) and two military districts in western China were

⁸ Tang Minhui and Xu Chang [唐旻晖, 徐常], "在新的历史起点上加快推动我军特种部队建设转型" [Reach a New Historical Starting Point and Accelerate the Transformation of PLA Special Forces], *中国军事科学* [*China Military Science*], no. 2 (February 2018).

⁹ Dennis J. Blasko, "The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms: The PLA Army," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, ed. Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019), 345–92.

¹⁰ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2024), 79–81; John Chen and Joel Wuthnow, *Sea Dragons: Special Operations and Chinese Military Strategy*, CMSI Red Books 18 (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, Naval War College Press, 2025), 10; and "The PLA Air Force's 'Thunder Gods' Airborne Commando Unit," U.S. Army TRADOC OE Watch–Indo-Pacific, 1 August 2018.

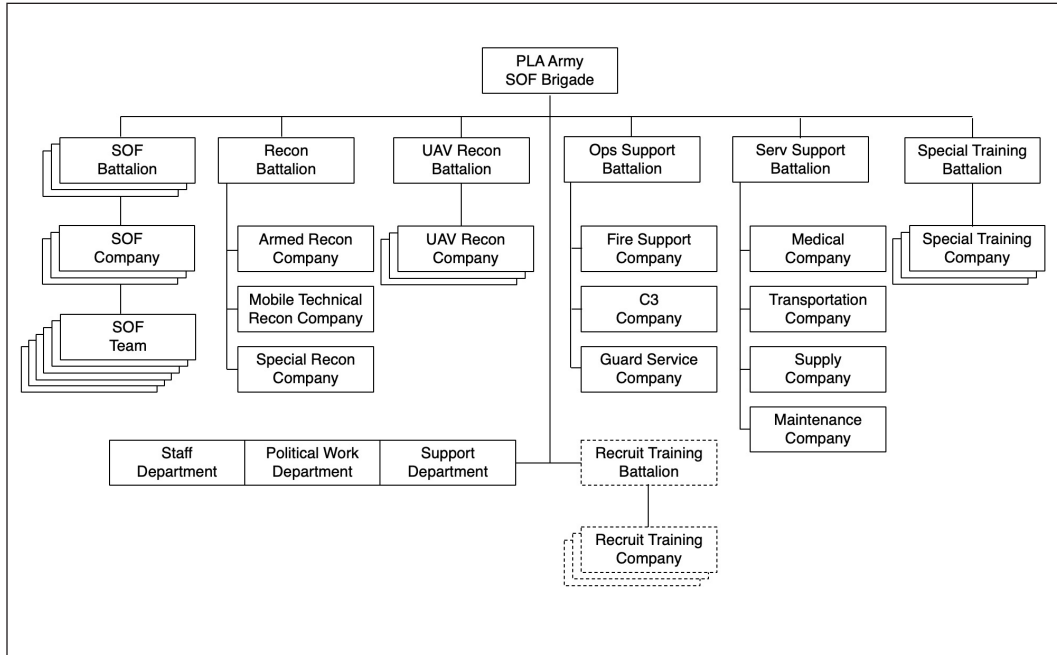
¹¹ Stavros Atlamazoglou, "How China's Special Forces Stack up Against the US's Special Operators," *Business Insider*, 1 December 2020.

Table 2. Current People's Liberation Army special operations units

Higher headquarters	Unit
Eastern Theater Command Army	71st Group Army Special Operations Brigade
	72d Group Army Special Operations Brigade
	73d Group Army Special Operations Brigade
Southern Theater Command Army	74th Group Army Special Operations Brigade
	75th Group Army Special Operations Brigade
Western Theater Command Army	76th Group Army Special Operations Brigade
	77th Group Army Special Operations Brigade
Northern Theater Command Army	78th Group Army Special Operations Brigade
	79th Group Army Special Operations Brigade
	80th Group Army Special Operations Brigade
Central Theater Command Army	81st Group Army Special Operations Brigade
	82d Group Army Special Operations Brigade
	*Former 83d Group Army Special Operations Brigade (now likely part of marine corps)
Xinjiang Military District	84th Special Operations Brigade
Tibet Military District	85th Special Operations Brigade
Air Force Airborne Corps	Special Operations Brigade
Navy Marine Corps	Special Operations Brigade
Rocket Force	Special Operations Regiment

Source: *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2024), 81, adapted by MCUP.

Figure 1. Post-2017 PLA Army special operations brigade structure



Note: The brigade-battalion-company organization is derived from dozens of PLA articles and other Chinese media. While evidence exists confirming two UAV reconnaissance companies, this author assesses there are likely three because of the standard three-company PLA battalion structure.

Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

each assigned a brigade as part of their newly standardized organization.¹² The brigades assigned to the airborne corps and marine corps—strategic formations not directly assigned to China’s joint theater commands—were clearly designed to support the missions of their parent organizations rather than a national-level special operations headquarters.

In the case of the army, there was no apparent need to grow manpower within their special operations brigades, which each included around 2,500 personnel.¹³ Newly established brigades were created from existing infantry brigades, ensuring adequate but untrained manpower.¹⁴ While the size of the brigades remained unchanged, their organization was adjusted to adhere to China’s new corps-brigade-battalion modular construct.¹⁵

At the end of 2017, the PLAA completely reorganized the structure of special operations units by replacing their infantry-style battalion-company-platoon-squad construct with

¹² *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China, 2024*, 81.

¹³ Blasko, “PLA Special Operations Forces: Organizations, Missions and Training.”

¹⁴ “整治偏训，全面磨砺特战精兵” [Rectify Biased Training and Comprehensively Hone Elite Special Operations Forces], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 17 October 2018.

¹⁵ Ian Sullivan, *How China Fights in Large-Scale Combat Operations* (Fort Eustis, VA: U.S. Army TRADOC, 2025), 18.

a new battalion-company-team structure. The new 12-man teams (小队, more appropriately translated as a small team) were designated China's basic special operations combat unit as the force emphasized development of a "using small to defeat large" concept.¹⁶ The battalions are made up of three special operations companies, each with six teams. Every brigade, including those in the airborne corps and marine corps, has three special operations battalions, meaning they must equip, train, and command a total of 54 teams, in addition to their other organic reconnaissance teams and support elements.¹⁷

Although the new PLAA SOF battalion structure clearly took a page out of the U.S. Army Special Forces group organizational handbook, China's 12-man team was not designed to mimic the roles of Operational Detachment-Alpha, which specifically trains for and carries out unconventional warfare and foreign internal defense.¹⁸ Acknowledging the need for teams that are "small but elite, small but specialized, and small but powerful," China likely adopted the 12-man organization after decades of interaction with other countries' special operations teams that used a similar structure.¹⁹ Years of study and publication concerning the organization and capabilities of U.S. Army and Russian military special operations units has also demonstrated a sense of admiration for both countries' capabilities.²⁰ The other PLA services and the PAP also implemented the 12-man team in their respective special operations units, creating a standard special operations formation for the entire force. Notably, the army's reconnaissance units, even within SOF brigades, still maintain the traditional company-platoon-squad organization.

Under the leadership of a first lieutenant and noncommissioned officer deputy, the army's new special operations team is now considered the smallest operational unit capa-

¹⁶ Wei Yinjian [魏银建], "打赢 '特战小队长的战争'" [Winning the "Special Operations Team Leader's" War], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 10 April 2020; and Wu Yuanjin [武元晋], "特战保障像'蚂蚁搬家'" [Special Operations Support Is Like "Ants Moving a House"], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 31 August 2018.

¹⁷ There is ample evidence that each battalion has three companies and that at least five teams exist in each company. There is also evidence of a sixth team in PAP SOF units. Based on the PAP's SOF units maintaining a similar organization to PLAA SOF units, as well as the nearly identical similarity between PLAA SOF and U.S. Army Special Forces, it is highly likely that each SOF company has six teams. Yu Bo [俞博], "精准抓建:'一个字'改变了一个营" [Precision Construction: "One Word" Changed a Battalion], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 17 June 2019; Wei Bing [魏兵], "18招秘诀,让这个旅在和平时期28人立一等功" [18 Secrets that Helped This Brigade Achieve 28 First-class Merits in Peacetime], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 24 December 2018; and Chen Zhonghao [陈宗昊], "淬火加钢铸利刃 直击武警湖南湘西片区'魔鬼周'极限训练" [Hardened Steel Casts Sharp Blades to Hit the Extreme Training of the "Devil Week" of the Armed Police in the Xiangxi Area of Hunan], 搜狐 [Sohu], 18 September 2018.

¹⁸ Troy J. Sacquety, "The Evolution of the Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha," *Veritas* 19, no. 1 (2023).

¹⁹ Zhang Yinkai, Li Junbo, and Huang Wei [张银锴, 李君博, 黄伟], "试析未来特种作战行动样式" [An Analysis of Future Special Operations Styles], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 20 March 2025; and Cai Linlin [蔡琳琳], "中国特战精英眼中的外军'王牌'演训" [Foreign Military "Ace" Exercises in the Eyes of Chinese Special Operations Elites], 新华社 [Xinhua], 25 April 2017.

²⁰ Shi Zhida and Zhao Weibin [史志达, 赵蔚彬], "不是每名特战队员都戴绿色贝雷帽" [Not Every Special Forces Soldier Wears a Green Beret], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 8 January 2016; and Liu Youbei [刘优贝], "俄军全面提升特种部队实力" [The Russian Army Comprehensively Enhances the Strength of Its Special Operations Forces], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 17 January 2022.

ble of carrying out strategic missions.²¹ Team leaders are typically recent graduates from the PLA Army Special Operations Academy with normally one year of experience in the SOF unit. Despite their limited time with the unit, they are required to master each special operations skill their soldiers may be ordered to perform. Additionally, they serve as their team's primary trainer and fitness leader—tasks previously assigned to the SOF company before the restructuring.²²

The army's SOF team members typically have expertise in multiple specialties, including operational command, firepower direction, combat, satellite communications, reconnaissance, battlefield surveillance, datalink relay transmission, drones, network reconnaissance, and other modern information-based capabilities. These skills allow the team leader to divide the team into two smaller six-man teams or, as most seen in Chinese media, several two-man groups (小组) that can be used for assault, reconnaissance, explosives, sniping, firepower, security, and other measures.²³ However, unlike their U.S. special operations counterparts, Chinese teams do not include a combat medic; instead, the operators are trained in basic battlefield first aid and rely on tiered rear area support from a SOF company medical office, battalion medical platoon, and a brigade medical company. A PLA medical journal article from 2020 noted that although some military researchers have proposed attaching medics from the brigade medical company to SOF teams for support, such a move has not occurred because PLA medical support personnel generally lack special operations training.²⁴

The army's small team concept has existed since the 2000s, but without standard organization. According to the PLA's 2009 *Army Combined Arms Tactics under Informationized Conditions*, an infantry division in the offense could temporarily receive up to one SOF battalion, an infantry brigade up to two companies, and an infantry regiment up to one company. The SOF units were then expected to break into smaller ad hoc formations for

²¹ Zhang Zhengju [张正举], “特战小队体能极限在哪里?看完这场考核再猜” [What Is the Physical Limit of the Special Operations Team? Guess after Watching This Test], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 8 April 2020; Wen Junyi [温俊意], “持续提升特战能力 陆军第82集团军进行‘敌后猎杀’演练” [The 82d Army Group of the PLA Army Conducts a “Hunting Behind Enemy Lines” Exercise to Continuously Enhance Its Special Operations Capabilities], 央视网 [CCTV], 17 August 2019.

²² Wang Yukai and Sun Libo [王钰凯, 孙利波], “特战小队长是怎样练成的” [How to Become a Special Operations Team Leader], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 10 April 2020.

²³ Wang Shichun [王世纯], “专业复杂编组美式我军特战部队并不存在‘特战不特’问题” [Our Special Operations Forces Are Organized in a Professional and Complex Way, and There Is No Such Thing as “Special Operations Not Being Special”], 观察者网 [Guancha], 23 May 2018; and “西藏军区特战部队年度考核来袭!揭秘特战精英的真实训练到底什么样?” [The Tibet Military Region's Special Operations Forces' Annual Assessment Is Here! What's the Real Training Like for Elite Special Operations Forces?], 央视网 [CCTV], 23 August 2020; and Wen, “The 82d Army Group of the PLA Army Conducts a ‘Hunting Behind Enemy Lines’ Exercise to Continuously Enhance Its Special Operations Capabilities.”

²⁴ Wang Ying et al. [王莹], “某特战旅训练伤一体化防护模式的构建” [Construction of an Integrated Protection Model for Training Injuries in a Special Operations Brigade], 白求恩医学杂志 [Journal of Bethune Medical Science] 16, no. 4 (August 2018); and Huang Ruifeng et al. [黄瑞锋], “特种作战行动卫勤保障问题刍议” [A Brief Discussion on Medical Support Issues in Special Operations], 人民医院 [People's Military Surgeon] 63, no. 5 (May 2020).

specific infiltration, direct assault, and reconnaissance missions.²⁵ While companies still occasionally train together for larger missions, it has become increasingly rare to observe special operations battalions doing the same.

There have been no noticeable changes to the new PLAA special operations organizational model since the 2017 restructuring. The only major exception involves the probable transfer of at least one army brigade to the marine corps in 2023. Although never formally announced in official media, Chinese military enthusiasts gathered and published information that clearly details how the Central Theater Command Army's 83d Special Operations Brigade changed subordination and is now a part of the marine corps.²⁶ It is unclear if the brigade is a new PLANMC special operations unit or if it became a new conventional marine brigade.

PLAA Special Operations Forces Missions and Training: More than Just Direct Action and Reconnaissance

After three years of reforms in the People's Liberation Army, key military educational texts like the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* noted that future campaigns would be reliant on the success of special operations forces, which required an increase in the number of personnel and improvements to their equipment. It also highlighted a pivot in mission sets for China's special operations forces that would push them toward using more technical and psychological warfare means to be better suited for informationized and intelligentized wars.²⁷

The PLAA's development and fielding of well-equipped and more capable light infantry forces like air assault units and high-mobility battalions is a part of the decades-long program to "special operations-ize" (特战化) many of its conventional infantry units, thus reducing the need for its special operations forces to conduct their traditional tasks.²⁸ This allows those teams to carry out more strategic missions to support their group army commanders

²⁵ Ping Zhiwei and Wang Lijie [平志伟, 王立杰], *Army Combined Arms Tactics Under Informationized Conditions* [信息化条件下陆军合同战术] (Beijing: PLA Press, 2009), 25–26.

²⁶ Joseph Wen, "解放军海军陆战队扩编" [The People's Liberation Army Navy Marine Corps Is Expanding], X.com, 3 October 2023.

²⁷ Xiao Tianling [肖天亮], ed., *战略学* [Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), 355.

²⁸ Tom Fox, *The PLA Army's New Helicopters: An "Easy Button" for Crossing the Taiwan Strait?*, China Maritime Report no. 17 (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, Naval War College, 2021), 3; Joshua Arostegui, "An Introduction to China's High-Mobility Combined Arms Battalion Concept," *Infantry*, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 12–17; "陆军步兵特战化集训 检验实战能力水平" [Army Infantry Special Operations-ize Training Tests Combat Capabilities], 央视网 [CCTV], 6 June 2024; and Sun Yunfei [孙晔飞], "步兵特战化 '特' 在哪儿?" [What Is the "Special" of Infantry Special Operations-ize?], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], 16 March 2023.

without assigning them to highly susceptible assault infantry missions in the same way Russia used its Spetsnaz forces during the first year of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.²⁹

China understands the modern battlefield has expanded beyond hard targets, thus requiring smaller covert teams with information-based capabilities. Although traditional military targets remain part of special operations brigade mission objectives, there has been increased emphasis on using special operations teams to raid civilian soft targets like network management centers and servers, command information systems, satellite base stations, and other information nodes.³⁰

Additionally, the PLA believes its army's special operations teams should be capable of conducting multidomain infiltration, particularly using artificial intelligence and manned-unmanned teaming, to deliver effects and collect pivotal battlefield information. An official Chinese media article from 20 March 2025, noted that special operations units could activate hidden preplaced unmanned systems and use remote control to carry out surprise attacks on important targets more than two months prior to Ukraine carrying out just such a strike against Russian bombers.³¹

These new applications of special operations units fit neatly with China's implementation of its all-domain operations concept.³² Chinese special operations experts claim the use of operators for traditional reconnaissance is less necessary because of the sheer number of new air- and space-based surveillance platforms. Instead, they believe special operations teams are better suited for more covert technical missions like human-enabled network reconnaissance that can support national-level forces conducting information and cognitive warfare.³³

With the prospective missions that will be assigned to PLAA special operations teams in the future, what happens to their long-held primary missions of direct action, special reconnaissance, and counterterrorism? Currently, very little as they are still the missions for which special operations teams most often train. Without an all-encompassing U.S. Special Operations Command-style organization, the teams remain bound to the demands of the group army or equivalent-level commander assigned. To train for those basic missions, the SOF brigades still regularly detach their teams to carry out combined arms exercises with conventional forces in the same group army. They have also trained alongside foreign

²⁹ Michael Peck, "Russia's Brash Invasion Plan for Ukraine Wasted Special-Operations Units on Missions They Weren't Meant to Do," *Business Insider*, 23 May 2023.

³⁰ Chen Zhiqi and Zhao Yunfeng [陈志奇, 赵云峰], "信息化战争背景下联合特种作战任务新特点" [New Features of Joint Special Operations Missions in the Context of Informationized Warfare], 国防科技 [National Defense Technology], no. 3 (August 2019).

³¹ Zhang Yinkai et al. [张银锴], "试析未来特种作战行动样式" [An Analysis of Future Special Operations Styles], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 20 March 2025; and Masao Dahlgren and Lachlan MacKenzie, "Ukraine's Drone Swarms Are Destroying Russian Nuclear Bombers. What Happens Now?" Center for Strategic & International Studies, 4 June 2025.

³² Brennan Deveraux and Joshua Arostegui, *More than a Numbers Game: Comparing US and Chinese Landpower in the Pacific Requires Context* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2025), 15–19.

³³ Dong Wei and Chen Xi [董伟, 陈希], "军事科技引领特种作战新变化" [Military Technology Leads to New Changes in Special Operations], 央视网 [CCTV], 23 February 2025.

forces in antiterrorist and direct action scenarios in dozens of exercises and international competitions.³⁴

The SOF brigades' continuing requirement to prioritize more tactical group army actions over higher-level national missions can also be seen in their organization. For example, each brigade still maintains an organic firepower company with truck-based 82mm mortar systems, man-portable air defense systems, and antitank weapons, demonstrating the expectation that many of the team missions will not be deep behind enemy lines.³⁵ Additionally, the army's special operations brigades continue to lack organic airlift and special mission aircraft, ensuring they must rely on their respective group army aviation brigades for air mobility and air resupply.

Special operations teams still train for reconnaissance, but the PLAA's need for them to perform as the primary campaign-level intelligence gathering force is less necessary now because of how widespread trained scouts are across the services. A Chinese combined arms brigade reconnaissance battalion maintains mobile technical and UAS reconnaissance companies with soldiers that are similarly equipped and attend the same training pipeline as scouts in a special operations brigade reconnaissance battalion and unmanned aerial vehicle reconnaissance battalion.³⁶ Additionally, new theater army intelligence reconnaissance brigades have longer-range surveillance capabilities than special operations brigades.³⁷ Yet, despite the widespread fielding of high-tech reconnaissance platforms and well-trained scouts across the force, army SOF brigades each still maintain a unique special reconnaissance (特种侦察) company trained for sensitive missions deep in enemy territory.³⁸

Finally, counterterrorism remains a common training scenario for Chinese special operations brigades, but the People's Armed Police's special operations units are considered China's primary forces for counterterrorism operations. Since domestic counterterrorism operations fall within the PAP's lanes of responsibility and the army's special operations

³⁴ Hu Ruizhi and Wang Yue [胡瑞智, 王越], "空突先锋" [Air Vanguard], 中国青年报 [*China Youth Daily*], 17 November 2022; Wang Jingzhi [王金志], "中泰'突击-2023'陆军联训中方参训分队抵泰" [The Chinese Contingent of the China-Thailand "Strike-2023" Joint Army Training Arrived in Thailand], 新华社 [*Xinhua*], 17 August 2023; and Xu Jiankun and Wei Yinchu [徐健昆, 尉寅础], "中泰'突击-2024'陆军联训组织反恐特情处置训练" [China and Thailand Hold Joint Army Training on Counter-terrorism and Special Situation Handling in the "Strike-2024" Joint Training], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 22 October 2024.

³⁵ Gao Fei [高菲], "火力全开 看特种作战'尖刀部队'如何炼成" [Full Firepower to See How the Special Operations "Sharp Knife Force" Is Forged], 中国军网八一电视 [China Military Network], 25 November 2020.

³⁶ *Chinese Tactics*, ATP 7-100.3 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2021), 2–17; Li Jubiao et al. [李巨标], "高清图:走进侦察尖兵训练场" [HD Image: Entering the Reconnaissance Vanguard Training Ground], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 18 January 2023; and "王牌再升级!82军特战旅编入无人侦察营,装备战法首次曝光" [Ace Upgrade! The 82d Army Special Operations Brigade Incorporates an Unmanned Reconnaissance Battalion, and Its Equipment and Tactics Are Revealed for the First Time], 央视网 [CCTV], 24 June 2020.

³⁷ Peter Wood and Rob Taber, "Intelligence and Reconnaissance Brigades Give PLA Theater Commands Unprecedented Reach," *Red Diamond*, 18 August 2025.

³⁸ Ni Guanghui and Li Longyi [倪光辉, 李龙伊], "走近抗战英模部队:砥砺血性胆魄 不断走向胜利" [Approaching the Heroic Troops of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression: Tempering Courage and Bravery and Marching towards Victory], 人民日报 [*People's Daily*], 7 September 2020.

brigades are primarily focused on supporting their respective group army commanders in large-scale combat operations, the PLAA established its own counterterrorism formation in Korla, Xinjiang, sometime in 2017.

Very little is known about the PLA Army's Counterterrorism Special Operations *Dadui* (陆军反恐特种作战大队, roughly a large battalion-size formation). Comprised of special action teams (特种行动队) that oversee 12-man teams, the unit has only appeared in official Chinese media a handful of times, normally to announce the success of certain members in various sports or marksmanship competitions, indicating a certain level of secrecy not typically seen in traditional special operations units.³⁹ The few references that have appeared indicate its soldiers are well-trained in high-elevation parachute operations and the use of gyrocopters.⁴⁰ Its garrison in northwestern China, separate from the Xinjiang Military District's 84th SOF Brigade, leaves it optimally placed to conduct small-scale counterterrorism operations abroad in unstable mountainous regions of Central and South Asia.⁴¹ The unique subordination and naming convention of this force might indicate that it is the first national-level special operations unit in the People's Liberation Army.

PLAA Special Operations Forces Accession and Professionalization: Less Recruits, More NCOs, Better Officers

China's reliance on two-year conscripts, while sufficient for filling many other career fields in the military, is a challenge for military leaders hoping to retain top-tier talent in the force's most critical technical positions. The People's Liberation Army equates its special operations personnel with other soldiers that have expertise in information technology and equipment repair, all of which require lengthy training time to create capable soldiers.

A recruit entering the PLAA's special operations community has one of the longest training pipelines in the force. This timeline is even more lengthy if a conscript comes from

³⁹ “体育总局关于表彰2017–2020年度全国群众体育先进单位和先进个人的决定” [Decision of the General Administration of Sport on Commending the National Advanced Mass Sports Units and Individuals in 2017–2020], 济源产城融合示范区教育体育局 [Jiyuan Industry-City Integration Demonstration Zone Education and Sports Bureau], 2021; and Mei Changwei and Ju Zhenhua [梅常伟, 琚振华], “彰显大国风范 维护世界和平——军队代表委员谈中国军事力量的世界贡献” [Demonstrating the Demeanor of a Great Power and Safeguarding World Peace: Military Representatives and Committee Members Discuss the Global Contribution of China's Military Power], 新华网 [Xinhua], 9 March 2018.

⁴⁰ Wang Junhua [王军华], “刚刚, 陆军第二届‘四有’新时代革命军人标兵揭晓” [The Second Batch of “Four Haves” New Era Revolutionary Soldier Models of the Army Have just Been Announced], 澎湃新闻 [The Paper], 22 December 2019. The original links for the article from *The Paper* were on China Military Online and Xinhua but have since been deleted. “21式作训服高调亮相 大批国产战鹰划破长空! 直击解放军2022开训时刻 看中国军队全副武装火力全开!” [The Type 21 Combat Uniform Makes a Splashy Debut, and Many Domestically Produced Warplanes Soar through the Skies! Watch the PLA's 2022 Training begin and See the Chinese Military Fully Armed and Firing!], 央视网 [CCTV], 18 January 2022.

⁴¹ Although official Chinese media has never announced the unit's location in Korla, it is widely referenced in Chinese discussion boards and social media like Douyin.

another career field.⁴² Initial three-month basic training takes place at one of several regional comprehensive training bases before the soldier is assigned to their special operations brigade. There, the conscript will enter a recruit training company for around three more months before assignment to the special training battalion—a unique instructional element created in special operations brigades at the end of 2017 to better prepare soldiers for permanent assignment in one of the brigade’s companies. The battalion has three companies made up of teams of instructors skilled in parachuting, marksmanship, and other SOF-specific skillsets.⁴³ After several more months of training, the conscript joins their company with only a little more than a year left on their contract.

Efforts are made to remove prospective special operations personnel deemed unfit throughout each phase of the training pipeline. During boot camp at comprehensive training bases, if recruits are not capable of meeting fitness standards, they are reclassified to other military career fields. In SOF brigades, personnel, including those already assigned to teams, are subject to a variety of new training methods like the “Devil’s Week” (魔鬼周), a program mirrored after the “Hell Week” phase of Venezuela’s jungle warfare Hunter School, to stress and exhaust the participants as both a team building and attrition method.⁴⁴

As small teams are required to be capable of carrying out strategic missions in support of theater- and corps-level campaigns, there is an expectation that team members must be well-trained and confident in their abilities. While the expanded training time with the special training battalion and events like Devil’s Week are intended to enable those requirements, conscripts still represent a weak link in the readiness of China’s special operations teams for rapid deployment and mission execution.

Although there is no expectation that the People’s Liberation Army will fully professionalize its army special operations community, China has implemented multiple programs to improve retention. The first, a major reconfiguration of the reserve force, allows demobilized servicemembers to serve in a reserve capacity while conducting their annual training with their original unit. This new program, started in 2024, focused on highly technical personnel for its first iteration, giving prior special operations soldiers a chance to rejoin their community without a full-time commitment.⁴⁵

To supplement its active duty accession program, beginning with 2025’s first recruiting cycle, Beijing also implemented a dedicated “Demobilized Soldier Re-entry Program” for high-performing servicemembers who have been out of service for less than five years.

⁴² “陕西男神军人：服役于北部战区特战旅，担任狙击手，获重要表彰” [Shaanxi Male God Soldier: Served in the Special Operations Brigade of the Northern Theater Command as a Sniper and Received Important Commendations], 西安邮电大学 [Xi’an University of Posts and Telecommunications], 19 February 2021.

⁴³ Chen Hao [陈豪], “新训结束，新兵为何不下连” [After the Initial Training, Why Don’t the New Recruits Go to the Company?], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 13 April 2018; and Liao Xiaobin [廖晓彬], “训练内行加入机关督查组” [Training Experts to Join the Agency Inspection Team], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 16 December 2020.

⁴⁴ Wang and Sun, “How to Become a Special Operations Team Leader.”

⁴⁵ Joshua M. Arostegui, “China’s Next Step in Modernizing the People’s Liberation Army: A New Reserve Service System,” Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, 5 December 2024.

The program targeted 5,000 personnel for specific technical positions, including special operations, to take advantage of their experience and ability to quickly reintegrate into the force, while also enabling around 85 percent of them to become noncommissioned officers. Although reenlistment programs have existed in the PLA since at least 2015, the new program appears to direct China's People's Armed Forces Department conscription offices to prioritize recruitment of the highly specialized veterans with increased economic subsidies and professional development opportunities.⁴⁶

With more than 900 special operations teams across the joint force, there is also a distinct need for a continuous stream of hundreds of well-trained lieutenants to lead them. As recently as 2024, less than 270 high school graduates were selected for entry into the PLA Army Special Operations Academy, in addition to an unknown number of active duty accessions; however, the academy does not only train future special operations officers. It has also been responsible for training future officers for the army's reconnaissance forces, the navy's marine corps, and the air force's airborne corps.⁴⁷ This means the academy is likely required to produce officers for thousands of positions across the military.

Beginning in 2025, the PLA stopped permitting high school graduates to apply directly to the Army Special Operations Academy. Instead, China is adopting a 2 + 2 model of education for its future special operations and reconnaissance officers. The prospective officers now must apply to more generalized army academies to attend their first two years of education. During that time, they will receive some special operations training as part of their requirements. The second half of their undergraduate education will then take place at the Army Special Operations Academy.⁴⁸ By 2026, this new model could enable the military to push two to three times as many students into special operations and reconnaissance officer training than in years past.

The academy enrollment optimization is not limited to just special operations and reconnaissance students, with other army and People's Armed Police academies refining their recruitment plans, but it also established a new special operations professional selection mechanism for all academy students across the country. The program allows all interested students to participate in special operations talent selection and to receive special operations professional education during their undergraduate studies.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “2025年参军入伍机会增加，二次入伍渠道拓宽” [Opportunities for Military Enlistment Will Increase in 2025, and Channels for Secondary Enlistment Will Be Broadened], 搜狐 [Sohu], 16 July 2025; and Mo Li et al. [莫利], “二次入伍，找回军营虚度的那几年” [Enlisting for the Second Time, Making Up for the Wasted Years in the Military Garrison], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 5 November 2015.

⁴⁷ “2024陆军特种作战学院招生计划” [2024 Army Special Operations Academy Admissions Plan], 大学生必备网 [College Students Essential Network], 13 June 2024.

⁴⁸ “2025军校招生有新变化 政策解读来了” [2025 Military Academy Admissions: New Changes and Policy Interpretation], 央视网 [CCTV], 17 June 2025.

⁴⁹ “2025 Military Academy Admissions: New Changes and Policy Interpretation.”

Table 3. PLA education pipeline for SOF officers

PLA academic institution	Related SOF academy major	Relevant career field
Army Engineering University	Operational command	Reconnaissance <i>fendui</i> (company) junior officer command
	Reconnaissance and intelligence	
Army Combat Arms University	Operational command	Special operations <i>fendui</i> junior officer command (including females)
Army Infantry Academy	Operational command	Special operations <i>fendui</i> , marine corps special operations <i>fendui</i> , and airborne <i>fendui</i> junior officer command

* The Army Combat Arms University [陆军兵种大学, can also be translated as Army Branches University], headquartered in Hefei, Anhui Province, was established in May 2025 as part of a CMC decision to restructure military academy training. The new university combined the campuses of the former Army Armored Forces Academy [陆军装甲兵学院] and the Army Artillery and Air Defense Academy [陆军炮兵防空学院] into one institution. The CMC's education restructure also led to the establishment of the new PLA information Support Force Engineering University and the PLA Joint Logistics Support Force Engineering University. Guo Yanfei [郭妍菲], "军校报考新选择, 一键解锁陆军兵种大学!" [A New Option for Applying to Military Academies, Unlock the Army Services University with One Click!], [China Military Online], 5 May 2025; and Wang Can [王燦], "中央军委决定调整组建3所军队院校" [The Central Military Commission Decided to Restructure and Establish Three Military Academies], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 15 May 2025. Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

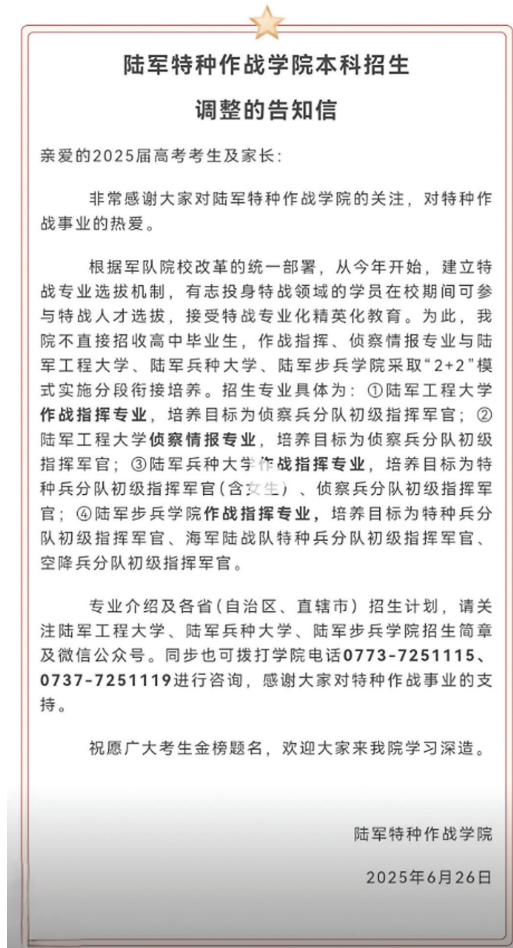
PLAA SOF Modernization and Challenges to CCP Command and Control

While China's efforts to modernize its special operations units may improve professionalization and combat capability, they also present unique challenges to command and control. As the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the People's Liberation Army uses a rigid top-down guidance structure from the Central Military Commission down to company levels. Through the long-time implementation of a shared command structure with both a unit commander who trains and executes operations and a political officer who ensures operations adhere to political guidance, the party has maintained close control over the military.⁵⁰

Tang Minhui and Xu Chang, the authors of the 2018 *China Military Science* article, believed the PLA's model of command and control could struggle in future special operations. Of particular concern to the officers were inefficiencies in the Central Military Commission and joint theater command systems that could make it more difficult for them to adapt to the requirements of high-intensity operations. They also expressed concern about the lack of

⁵⁰ Kenneth Allen, Brian Chao, and Ryan Kinsella, "China's Military Political Commissar System in Comparative Perspective," *China Brief* 13, no. 5 (March 2013).

Figure 2. PLA Army SOF Academy notification



Note: This notice was posted on *Douyin*. The notification explains the change and provides prospective SOF applicants with the universities they should apply to for their initial training pipeline.

Source: image captured on the *Douyin* social media website but identifying data is redacted to protect the identity of the poster; courtesy of the author.

information-based equipment integration in SOF units, along with the continued emphasis on training for conventional operations, which would ultimately hamper special operations units in future campaigns.⁵¹

The PLAA's new special operations team, which is considered a platoon-level unit, does not include a political officer, leaving the team leader responsible for interpreting com-

⁵¹ Tang and Xu, "Reach a New Historical Starting Point and Accelerate the Transformation of PLA Special Forces."

mander's intent. If teams are expected to complete strategic missions away from friendly forces, the team leaders will be required to make use of a level of mission command that is historically anathema to CCP control over the force.⁵² It would also require fielding of advanced communications systems to keep team leaders connected with political leadership. Those types of problems cannot be resolved overnight and may be the reason China has not established a U.S. Special Operations Command-style organization. There is probably a lack of party and senior military leader trust in independent teams operating outside of political control, thus ensuring SOF units remain under corps-level command.

This challenge is not lost on the People's Liberation Army. Researchers at the Army Special Operations Academy assessed that traditional command methods restrict the efficiency of special operations decision-making, stating that frontline team commanders must be given as much command power as possible to improve initiative and effectiveness. Using human-computer interactive decision-making, the researchers believed that strategic commanders could stay in "the loop" and control the "right to fire," campaign commanders remain in "the loop" to conceive combat scenarios and plans, while tactical commanders can execute those plans.⁵³

While the military has relied on an integrated information-based system of systems to manage its forces since the mid-2010s, lessons learned from Ukraine's use of space-based systems like Starlink for wartime command and control have not been lost on China's special operations forces. The PLA is already promoting the use of Starlink or other similar systems to enable decentralized control of special operations units in future conflicts.⁵⁴

Ultimately, whether China's special operations teams can function in such a future intelligentized environment, with its reliance on artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, and multidomain capabilities, is determined by the skill and experience of the team leader and members.⁵⁵ To educate its future leaders for this type of warfare, the Army Special Operations Academy established a new major for its students. The academy's operational command major was traditionally the training pipeline for special operations officers alongside the intelligence reconnaissance major for future scout leaders; however, beginning in 2021, the academy started a command information system engineering (指挥信息系统工程) major explicitly for future special operations commanders. The new program trains cadets to become proficient in applying computers, network communications, intelligence

⁵² Larry M. Wortzel, *The PLA and Mission Command: Is the Party Control System Too Rigid for Its Adaptation by China?*, Land Warfare Paper no. 159 (Arlington, VA: Association of the United States Army, 2024).

⁵³ Wang Jian et al. [王健], "未来特种作战发展趋势前瞻" [Outlook on the Development Trends of Special Operations], 中国社会科学网 [China Social Science Network], 12 January 2024.

⁵⁴ Edmund J. Burke et al., *People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR394-1>; Katie Hawkinson, "Starlink Has become the 'Blood' of Ukraine's Communication Infrastructure, but Officials Are Reportedly Growing Concerned about Relying on Elon Musk's Tech," *Business Insider*, 29 July 2023; and Zhou Xuan and Zhao Zejun [周旋, 赵泽军], "天基互联网与特种作战" [Space-Based Internet and Special Operations], 中国军网 [China Military Online], 7 September 2023.

⁵⁵ Koichiro Takagi, "New Tech, New Concepts: China's Plans for AI and Cognitive Warfare," *War on the Rocks*, 13 April 2022.

and reconnaissance systems, electronic countermeasures, information security, and other capabilities to manage battlefield information systems in future informationized operations.⁵⁶

With better trained junior officers, increased numbers of noncommissioned officers in its special operations teams, and soldiers capable of remaining connected with leaders through advanced technologies, Beijing will undoubtedly feel much more comfortable deploying its army SOF teams to carry out special operations missions abroad. While the PLAA has not fully detached its special operators from their legacy corps-level missions, that is destined to change as the military continues adhering to Xi Jinping's goals of achieving overall basic modernization of the force by 2035 and creating a world-class military by 2049. The advances they have made in organization and professionalization, especially in 2025, demonstrate that China's special operations forces are set on meeting those objectives.

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⁵⁶ “2024陆军特种作战学院有哪些专业招生” [What Majors Are Available for Admission to the Army Special Operations Academy in 2024?], 大学生必备网 [College Students Essential Network], 13 June 2024.