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From the Editor

It is my privilege to welcome readers to the inaugural issue of *China Military Studies Review* (CMSR), a new academic journal published by Marine Corps University Press. As the director of the Marine Corps War College (MCWAR), I am pleased to introduce this publication as the scholarly centerpiece of a broader effort launched this year: the **China Warfighting Initiative**.

The purpose of CMSR is straightforward—yet essential. This journal will serve as a professional forum for original research and writing that deepens our understanding of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), with a particular emphasis on their capabilities, doctrine, and behavior at the tactical and operational levels. These are the levels at which the Marine Corps will most likely encounter PLA forces in the contested littorals of the Indo-Pacific. Accordingly, CMSR is designed to support the operating force by addressing real-world problems, raising awareness of emerging challenges, and bridging the gap between scholarship and warfighting practice.

While *China Military Studies Review* is published under the auspices of Marine Corps University, it draws from a wide base of contributors, which include MCWAR and Marine Corps University students and faculty, as well as experts and practitioners from the broader academic, defense, and interagency communities. We welcome a diversity of perspectives and analytic approaches, so long as they advance the journal's core mission: to improve the Marine Corps' intellectual edge in an era of strategic competition.

This publication forms one component of the China Warfighting Initiative (CWI), which we launched this year to advance China-focused education across the Marine Corps' professional military education system. In addition to this journal, the CWI supports faculty and curriculum development, facilitates China-focused wargames and scenario design, and hosts a China Scholars Program—open to PME-attending officers of all grades—for deep-dive study of Chinese military strategy, doctrine, and operational art. MCWAR will also launch a China Warfighting Lecture Series in fall 2025, open to the wider PME and Joint communities, and anticipate the publication of a recurring CWI newsletter to highlight key findings, track developments, and promote ongoing research of operational relevance to the Fleet Marine Force.

As we look to future issues of CMSR, I encourage thoughtful, candid, and evidence-based contributions. The stakes of misunderstanding the PLA are too high, and the margin for error too slim. The Marine Corps must be ready—not just physically, but intellectually—

to fight and win in any future conflict. *China Military Studies Review* is one small but vital step in that direction.

Semper Fidelis,
Colonel Andrew Kelley, USMC
Director, Marine Corps War College

UNDERSTANDING *WEISHE*

China's System of Strategic Coercion

Daniel C. Rice

Abstract: The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is increasingly calling on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to build a strong strategic *weishe* force system to achieve political objectives short of war. Often called gray zone, deterrence, or sometimes coercive activities by Western analysts, the PLA uses the term strategic *weishe* to discuss a broader set of capabilities and military activities meant to make an opponent submit to their will. This article unpacks the concept of strategic *weishe* and its application in PLA activities and builds a framework for us to better understand the CCP's envisioned system of strategic coercion.
Keywords: People's Liberation Army, PLA, *weishe*, coercion, deterrence, compellence, gray zone, escalation, quasi-war

In October 2022, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its 20th National Congress of the CCP. The event takes place once every five years, acts as a critical event in which the CCP reports back the work of the past Party Congress, and sets the strategic guidance for the next five years and beyond. Section 12 of the work report of 20th National Congress is titled "Achieve the goal of the centenary of the founding of the army and create a new situation in national defense and military modernization."[1] Within this section, the CCP forecasted several requirements of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to include:

> Build a strong strategic *weishe* force system, increase the proportion of new domain and new quality combat forces, accelerate the development of unmanned intelligent combat forces, and coordinate the construction and use of network information systems.[2]

[1] Original Chinese: 实现建军一百年奋斗目标，开创国防和军队现代化新局面; Xi Jinping, "Xi Jinping: Hold high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics and work together to build a modern socialist country in an all-around way–Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China" [习近平：高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜 为全面建设社会主义现代化国家而团结奋斗——在中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会上的报告] (speech, 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing, 16 October 2022).

[2] Original Chinese: [打造强大战略威慑力量体系，增加新域新质作战力量比重，加快无人智能作战力量发展，统筹网络信息体系建设运用.]; Xi Jinping, "Xi Jinping: Hold high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics and work together to build a modern socialist country in an all-around way–Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China."

https://doi.org/10.33411/cmsr2025.01.001

While there are many terms within this section of the report that are worth exploring, one in particular is the focus of this article: "build a strong strategic *weishe* force system" (强大战略威慑力量体系). To fully understand what Xi Jinping is asking of the PLA, we first must understand what is meant by the term *weishe* and then understand it in the context of a system of *weishe*. *Weishe* as a concept can be roughly translated as some combination of deterrence, compellence, or perhaps more aptly, coercion. These terms are difficult enough to fully grasp in English, let alone in a translation from a different language. However, *weishe* and China's "strategic *weishe* force system" or "system of strategic *weishe*" can be fundamentally understood by authoritative texts that exist in open literature. This is particularly true for the role of the People's Liberation Army in the application of *weishe*. Through careful analysis of available PLA texts and other Chinese sources, we can create a mental framework to describe China's views of *weishe* and China's "system of strategic *weishe*," especially regarding its military application.[3]

Often when China analysts discuss Chinese deterrence, coercion, or gray zone activities it is through classifying Chinese activities into our understandings of these concepts. By doing so, we may inject confusion into the discussion and cause imprecision in the way in which we describe the People's Liberation Army's actions. This article aims to bring to light the conceptual foundation of *weishe* and to build a framework from which we can discuss Chinese deterrence, compellence and coercion activities with more specificity. In part, this is done by discarding interpretation of the term *weishe* and probing the fundamental concept and theories surrounding it. To do this, the article draws most of the information from the 2013 and 2020 editions of *The Science of Military Strategy*, as well as *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations, Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations, Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations*, and other key Chinese texts. By using these sources, the article first defines the idea of strategic *weishe* and tracks the conceptual development of *weishe* through the history of the CCP. Then, the article explores the modern application of strategic *weishe*, defining the domains and application of *weishe* according to the perceived phase of conflict. Next, the article examines how the PLA, across domains, envisions a spectrum of intensity for its *weishe* activities. From an understanding of the spectrum of intensity, the article explores in detail each of the *weishe* domains and

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[3] The primary PLA texts used in this analysis are the 2013 and 2020 editions from the In Their Own Words Series: *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2020); *Services and Arms Application in Joint Operations* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2020); *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2013); and *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2009). These texts are available in English from the China Aerospace Studies Institute. When available, the Chinese version of the texts was used with the author's translation and interpretation. When there are complex terms or sentences critical to the analysis and the original Chinese is available, the English and Chinese are offered. In certain cases, when only the English text is available and the term deterrence is used, it has been changed to *weishe* to reflect the original term used: *weishe* (威慑). While it is possible that a term other than *weishe* was used in some of these sources, it is highly improbable given the consistency between the Chinese use of the term *weishe* and its translation into English texts (both by machine and human translation methods) into deterrence.

the corresponding *weishe* activities across the spectrum of intensity. This includes exploration of the five main modern domains of *weishe*: nuclear, conventional, space, information, and people's war. Finally, the article expands on the idea of the system of strategic *weishe* and integrated *weishe* to describe how each of these domains and other nonmilitary domains theoretically integrate to give the CCP options to achieve political objectives across the spectrum of conflict.

It is the author's hope that by laying bare the conceptual foundation of *weishe* that it may help the U.S. Armed Forces and decisionmakers preserve decision-making space vis-à-vis the CCP and PLA. By more accurately understanding the intent, messaging and activities surrounding *weishe*, we can better tailor our responses and manage the escalation ladder as we face these kinds of activities and threats. To do so, we must first understand the concept of *weishe* and its application in modern PLA activities.

China's Strategic *Weishe: Zhanlüe Weishe* (战略威慑)

Strategic (战略), *weishe* (威慑), and strategic *weishe* (战略威慑) all have slightly different linguistic meanings in the context of the People's Liberation Army as compared to their English translations and usage. *Strategic thinking* is defined by the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* as:

> A rational understanding of the overall issues of military strategy. It is a scientific revelation of the objective and guiding laws of the use and construction of military forces. It has distinctive characteristics such as politics, times [时代性], innovation, guidance [指导性], and inheritance [继承性]. Strategic thinking embodies the fundamental position, viewpoints and guiding principles of the party and the country in understanding military issues, especially war issues, and is the theoretical basis for establishing military strategies.[4]

Strategic (战略) thinking includes the views of the party that encompasses a broader whole-of-society view. For the CCP, strategic resources and capabilities can refer to aspects of the country's comprehensive national power (综合国力) (CNP) comprised of: economic, political, military, cultural and technological power.[5] *Weishe* (威慑) (roughly vocalized as way-sure), typically translated as deterrence and sometimes translated as coercion, is another term with a slightly different meaning than its English translation. That is not to say that it is a completely foreign concept, but that the interpretation of the term changes based on context. This speaks to the concept of *weishe* containing a slightly broader spectrum of meaning. According to Western analysts, it is generally accepted that *weishe* incorporates aspects of deterrence, compellence, and coercion, and *weishe* may more closely resemble

[4] Xiao Tianliang, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), 28.
[5] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 26.

Thomas C. Schelling's expanded definition of coercion.[6] When combining strategic and *weishe* together, PLA writers note that "strategic *weishe* has two basic functions: One is, through *weishe*, to halt the other party from doing what you don't want them to, and the other is through *weishe* to coerce/compel the other party into having to do something. The essence of both (uses) is to make the other side submit to the will of the party conducting *weishe* (威慑者)."[7] From the PLA definition, it may be most appropriate to call *weishe* deterrence, compellence, or coercion, depending on the context. It is worth noting that, over time, Chinese authors and military strategists have used different terms to describe similar phenomenon; however, *weishe* appears to have been selected as the primary term to describe this concept.[8] Simply put, Chinese strategic *weishe* is a set of strategic-level capabilities and activities, with an emphasis on the military, meant to induce an adversary to accede to China's political objectives.[9] *Weishe* is also seen as a type of quasi-war, that is a form of confrontation that spans the spectrum of conflict, and *weishe* military activities fall under a broader category of quasi-war military activities.[10]

The foundations of strategic *weishe* are not so dissimilar to those of classic Western deterrence theory. The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* defines the requirements of having effective strategic *weishe* as possessing the "capability/strength, determination, and communication" to use military means for a political objective.[11] Even though the Chinese model of strategic *weishe* follows the Western deterrence equation, in practice Chinese strategic *weishe* may be implemented in a somewhat different or unexpected way. For example, an oft-used quotation by Mao Zedong states that "the U.S. atomic bomb cannot scare the Chinese people. My country has a population of 900 million and 9.6 million square kilometers of land. The U.S. atomic bombs cannot wipe out the Chinese people. If the U.S. with planes and atomic bombs launches an invasion of China, then China with

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[6] Michael S. Chase and Arthur Chan, *China's Evolving Approach to "Integrated Strategic Deterrence"* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2016), 3–4, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1366.

[7] The original text states: [战略威慑有两种基本作用，一种是通过威慑遏止对方不要干什么，另一种是通过威慑胁迫对方必须干什么，二者实质都是使对方屈服于威慑者的意志。] in Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 131.

[8] There is a plethora of terms that the Chinese use to describe different actions that may contain elements of deterrence, compellence and coercion. For example, terms such as 威迫 (*weipo*) or 胁迫 (*xiepo*) may both be used to describe compellence, whereas *weishe* is most often used to describe deterrence. It appears rather clear from research that the term *weishe*, while most often being used to refer to deterrence, in fact refers to a larger and more abstract concept that includes all three of the English concepts of deterrence, compellence, and coercion. The difference in the interpretation of *weishe* lies in the circumstances under which *weishe* is used. For example, in lower-intensity activities, *weishe* may be appropriately interpreted as deterrence, whereas in higher intensity applications of *weishe* it may more accurately be interpreted as compellence or coercion. For more on this, see Kevin Pollpeter, *Coercive Space Activities: The View from PRC Sources* (Maxwell, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2024), 4.

[9] For the remainder of the discussion, the pinyin for the term 威慑 (*weishe*) will be used, but its meaning includes aspects of deterrence, compellence, and coercion.

[10] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy, 2020*, 135; Yuan Zhengling, "On the Thought and Practice Conventional *Weishe* after the Founding of New China" [论新中国建立后常规威慑思想与实践], in *Military History* [军事历史], *Remembering 75 Years of Army Building in the PLA*, vol. 1 (Beijing: China National Knowledge Infrastructure, 2002), 26; and "On the Thought and Practice Conventional *Weishe* after the Founding of New China," 26.

[11] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 127.

millet and rifles will surely win."[12] At the time, the U.S. State Department interpreted this as an attempt to communicate the infallibility of the Chinese revolutionary spirit.[13] From the Chinese perspective, this statement leveraged the People's War and comprehensive national power elements of strategic *weishe* and was one of the earliest successful applications of what would come to be called integrated *weishe*.[14]

The modern concept of strategic *weishe* (战略威慑) is still evolving and now incorporates integrated *weishe* [整体威慑]; yet, at its core, strategic *weishe* still uses the military as its foundation.[15] In China's grand strategy, strategic *weishe* is the primary way to use military force to achieve political objectives short of war with integrated *weishe* as an evolution of the concept that emphasizes a more active role for nonmilitary *weishe* capabilities. The application of both strategic *weishe* and integrated *weishe* will be examined at the end of this article.

For the purposes of this article and to reduce the issues of misinterpretation, the term *weishe* will primarily be used to describe the concept of strategic *weishe* in lieu of deterrence, compellence, or coercion. By doing so, this article aims not to compare and contrast the Chinese concepts with their Western counterparts, but rather it seeks to lay bare the Chinese conceptual framework of strategic *weishe*.

The History and Evolution of *Weishe*

As a concept, and much like other strategic concepts in China, *weishe* has evolved as new leaders have adapted and developed their thinking or theories on the subject. For the concept of *weishe*, there are three distinct periods of time that have emerged as each leader expanded the concept of *weishe* by either adding specific *weishe* domains or modified the application of *weishe* in strategy.

Beginning with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, *weishe* was used to dissuade adversaries from invading or attacking China. To accomplish this, both leaders used war preparation, which involves building the military and the military industrial complex, as a primary way to dissuade larger powers from allowing regional wars to spill over into China. Throughout this period, China was encircled by war. The War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea (Korean War), the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Vietnam (Vietnam War), the counterattack in self-defense against India (Sino-Indian War), the counterattack

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[12] Yuan, "On the Thought and Practice Conventional *Weishe* after the Founding of New China," 26.
[13] Henry A. Kissinger, "Memorandum for the President," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. E-13, *Documents on China, 1969–1972* (Washington, DC: Office of the Historian, Department of State, 1972).
[14] Yuan, "On the Thought and Practice Conventional *Weishe* after the Founding of New China," 26.
[15] The author has chosen to translate 整体威慑 *(zhengti weishe)* as integrated *weishe*. Although the direct translation may be most appropriate as "overall *weishe*," in Chinese, 整体威慑 is most often used to describe to comprehensive and coordinated implementation of various types and domains of *weishe* for an effect. When the American concept of integrated deterrence is discussed in Chinese the terms 综合威慑 and 一体化威慑 are generally used; however, they do not appear to be used to describe the Chinese concept of integrated *weishe.* See Xu Sanfei and Wu Siliang, "An Analysis of the Development Trend of Foreign Military Strategic Deterrence Theory and Practice," *People's Liberation Army Daily*, 30 January 2024.

in self-defense on Zhenbao Island (Sino-Soviet border conflicts), and the counterattack in self-defense against Vietnam (Sino-Vietnamese War) all occurred during this time.[16] In each instance of war on China's periphery, from the Chinese perspective, the focus was on using military preparation and offensive campaigns as a means to stop the United States, India, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam from extending the battlelines into China's homeland. Mao and Deng's theories on *weishe* added nuclear *weishe* and People's War *weishe* to war preparation, expanding the ways in which China could apply *weishe*. Nuclear *weishe* at its core was meant to break the perceived nuclear monopoly held by China's potential adversaries such as the United States, Soviet Union, and later on India.[17] People's War *weishe*, or mobilization of the masses, is credited by Chinese strategic thinkers as being the primary method of successful mobilization against the United States during the Korean War, and the primary deterrent to a potential Soviet invasion during the border clashes of the 1960s.[18]

Weishe's second conceptual development phase came under Jiang Zemin. During Jiang's tenure as the chairman of the Central Military Commission, he elevated *weishe* to a strategic level, hence the term strategic *weishe*.[19] Jiang's interpretation of the importance of *weishe* built on his predecessors, taking nuclear *weishe* as a core capability and emphasized the need to study and develop a credible conventional military *weishe* capability. Jiang postulated that, "preparing (the military) to fight and win is the foundation of successful *weishe*, and successful *weishe* is the ideal state for winning the war; no matter if it is *weishe* or winning, for preparing for war the requirements are the same."[20] Included within this, Jiang called for the construction of a "modern operational system that is in accordance with requirements of high-tech wars."[21] The new system would "form a strategic *weishe* system complemented by multiple means in a step-by-step fashion."[22] This incremental or step-by-step fashion laid the foundations for applying *weishe* across an intensity spectrum. Jiang also stressed the need to adopt people's war to the new "high-tech" conditions.[23] In addition, he expanded the concept of *weishe* to emphasize the role of comprehensive national power in an overall *weishe* capability. It appears that during his tenure as general secretary of the CCP, Jiang assessed the PLA as relatively weak, and therefore China

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[16] The Chinese name is used in the text and English name is given in parentheses for the various wars/conflicts on China's periphery. See Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (Maxwell, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2021), 175.
[17] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 176.
[18] Yuan, "On the Thought and Practice Conventional *Weishe* after the Founding of New China," 22.
[19] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 177.
[20] Yuan, "On the Thought and Practice Conventional *Weishe* after the Founding of New China," 23.
[21] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 177.
[22] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 177.
[23] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 178.

Table 1. *Weishe* under different CCP general secretaries

Period	Core leaders	Effect on *weishe*	*Weishe* objectives
Founding of New China 1949–80s	Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping	Emphasizing war preparations, nuclear and People' s War *weishe* as the foundations for *weishe*	Preemptively stop border wars and conflicts from spilling over into China
1980s–the New Era (2010s)	Jiang Zemin and early Hu Jintao	Elevating weishe to a strategic level and integrating comprehensive national power as the base strength for *weishe*, growing recognition of the need for enhanced conventional military *weishe*	Contain, delay the outbreak of, or stop the escalation of war
The New Era (2010s–present)	Late Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping	Focus on building operational conventional military weishe capabilities under informationized conditions, inclusion of space and information *weishe* domains, introduction of military-civil fusion to enhance integrated *weishe*	Safeguard the "period of strategic opportunities," prevent and contain crisis, build a force capable of fighting and winning local wars under informationized conditions as the basis for *weishe*

Source: Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy, 2013, trans*. China Aerospace Studies Institute (Maxwell, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2021), 177–78.

needed to emphasize building comprehensive national power to deter its adversaries from initiating conflict with China.

During the third period, which began in the so-called "New Era" toward the end of Hu Jintao and solidified under Xi Jinping, the emphasis became enhancing military capability and the role of conventional military *weishe* in China's strategy. The objective of conventional military *weishe* became to safeguard the "period of strategic opportunities."[24] Furthermore, the emphasis fell on "enhancing *weishe* and actual combat capabilities under informationized conditions as the fundamental starting point."[25] In concrete terms, this meant that "the *weishe* capability under informationized conditions is highlighted and expressed as a system operational capability based on information systems."[26] The focus on military capability under informationized conditions is likely the reason for the addition of space and network/information *weishe* to the over-

[24] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy, 2013*, 178.
[25] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 180.
[26] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 180.

all strategic *weishe* system. These two domains are still under development, and with Xi Jinping's emphasis on "intelligentization," they are likely to expand in the future.

From the historical backdrop and evolution of strategic *weishe*, the modern definition has landed on five specific domains in which the PLA focuses. These strategic *weishe* domains are conventional military, nuclear, space, information, and People's War.[27] Before exploring each domain in detail, it is necessary to understand how *weishe* is applied in practice.

The Implementation of Strategic *Weishe*

Strength is the basis of strategic *weishe*, and in Chinese writings strength is calculated based on hard power and soft power, with the core of *hard power* being the military.[28] *Soft power* is defined as the nonmilitary aspects of comprehensive national power to include political, economic, diplomatic, technological, and cultural power.[29] In strategic *weishe*, the soft power aspects of comprehensive national power are used to set conditions and shape the overall situation as well as to amplify military *weishe* activities.[30] As such, where nonmilitary or soft power aspects of comprehensive national power are used to shape conditions, hard military power is relied on to actively exploit or otherwise change the situation through the use of force. With its implementation, strategic *weishe* also appears to be considered as a directed effect on a specific adversary.

As the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* puts it: "If strategic *weishe* is to create a *weishe* effect, it must be manifested through strategic *weishe* military activities."[31] And this is consistent with theory on modern PLA operations in which military *weishe* (军事威慑) activities fall under a set of larger activities called quasi-war activities. Quasi-war activities, "are between war and non-war military activities, and mainly include military *weishe* (军事威慑), border control, establishment of no-fly zones and limited military strikes."[33] In this context, military *weishe* is defined as a subset of strategic *weishe* activities carried out by the military that are "a form of military conflict (斗争) that forces (an adversary) to concede, compromise or submit."[32] Furthermore, military *weishe* activities are a fairly well-defined set of activities across the five modern strategic *weishe* domains. PLA authors also suggest that military *weishe* activities have some benefit as opposed to engaging in conflict outright. Most notably, military *weishe* activities are seen as lower-intensity, lower-

[27] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 128.
[28] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 127.
[29] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 131.
[30] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 127, 131.
[31] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 135.
[32] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 126–27.

Table 2. Implementation of strategic *weishe* based on the situation

Time	Primary type of *weishe*	Effect	Description
Peace	Integrated *weishe* to strengthen military *weishe*	To set favorable conditions for achieving political objectives	Stabilize/shape/preventive deterrence
In-between peace and war/crisis	Emphasis on applying military *weishe* with comprehensive national power in support	To make your opponent submit to your will; to contain or control the outbreak of a crisis/war	Normalized deterrence/ high-intensity coercion and compellence
War	Aggressive use of military *weishe*	To radically alter the course of the war and shift the momentum in your favor	Momentum-changing nonkinetic and kinetic strikes/compel adversary

Sources: Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2013, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (Maxwell, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2021), 136, 169; and Xiao Tianliang, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy, 2020* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), 132.

cost, and more flexible military options compared to outright war.[33] Part of this assessment comes from the applicability of military *weishe* activities in different phases of conflict.

The implementation of military *weishe* activities in each domain does not stop at the onset of war, but rather, the PLA sees the use of military *weishe* at any point along the Chinese spectrum of conflict during peace, conflict, and war.[34] During the different phases of conflict, the overall mix of strategic *weishe* changes slightly with an escalating emphasis on military *weishe* the closer to wartime the CCP perceives itself to be. In peacetime, the primary goal of strategic *weishe* is to leverage all levers of comprehensive national power to strengthen military *weishe* and shape China's internal and external environment to continue national development and to delay or stop the outbreak of war.[35] In essence, the peacetime application of strategic *weishe* is meant to stabilize or shape the internal and external situation and invoke preventive deterrence through military *weishe* against potential adversaries.[36] During a crisis, strategic *weishe* is applied to control the crisis, to create room to maneuver for other political agreements, or to either stop the outbreak of war or to successfully position forces to step-off into and seize the initiative in war especially in

[33] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 127.
[34] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 127.
[35] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 169; and Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 131.
[36] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 146.

the first battle.[37] Strategic *weishe* in this phase is more reliant on military *weishe* activities, which are meant to control a crisis that may erupt, deter an adversary from taking further action, or to coerce an adversary into abandoning their objectives, all while positioning the PLA to best be prepared for war.[38] During wartime, strategic *weishe* relies on military *weishe* activities to either shift the momentum of the war or to cause significant psychological damage to their adversary such that they are deterred from continuing the fight.[39] *Surgical strikes* are defined as the application of strategic *weishe* during war.[40] Wartime military *weishe* activities "force an opponent to acknowledge the difficulties and terminate when seeing danger."[41]

Across different military *weishe* activities, there is a strong emphasis on flexibly using capabilities and on strict control of the escalation ladder.[42] Based on the timing, whether in peace, crisis, or war, the types of military *weishe* activities and capabilities employed have a corresponding intensity. The basic exemplar types of military *weishe* activities as described in the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* include creating an atmosphere of war [营造战争气氛], displaying advance weapons [展示先进武器], carrying out military exercises [举行军事演习], adjusting military deployments [调整军事部署], increasing war preparation levels [提升战备等级], carrying out information attacks [实施信息攻击], using military activities to restrict an opponent [限制性军事行动], and using military strikes of a warning nature [警示性军事打击].[43] For most of these activities, there are corresponding times and escalations associated with carrying out the military *weishe* activity that can be described as a relative intensity of the activity. Furthermore, the military *weishe* activities can be placed along an escalation spectrum. A notable exception to this is creating an atmosphere of war that has its own spectrum of escalating subactivities.[44] The exemplar activities also reinforce the idea that *weishe* as a concept encompasses deterrence, compellence, and coercion, and depending on the intensity and timing of the *weishe* activity may be interpreted into English differently.

A spectrum of intensity and a gradual ramping up of activity intensity is reflected across descriptions of military *weishe* activities found in various texts that describe specific strategic *weishe* domains. For example, military *weishe* activities conducted by air forces are "hierarchical, and it is possible to differentiate air *weishe*, in accordance with differences in their intensity, into: low-intensity displays to deter the enemy, medium-intensity high pressure to deter the enemy, and high-intensity small strikes to deter the

[37] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 132.
[38] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 146–47.
[39] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 132.
[40] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 132.
[41] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 147.
[42] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 141.
[43] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 135–38.
[44] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 135, 137.

enemy."[45] Furthermore, "[we] usually should try to achieve the goal of containing antagonists at fairly low levels [of *weishe*]. If we cannot resolve issues in an effective manner, [we should] incrementally increase the level of *weishe*."[46] Similar discussions of spectrums of military *weishe* activities and their corresponding intensity can be found for the conventional military, space, and information domains. For example, in *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, the authors discuss the spectrum of intensity as the ability "to enhance the *weishe* effects, space *weishe* when applied usually adopts the method of gradual escalation, to constantly increase the degree of force in *weishe* of the enemy."[47] While *The Science of Military Strategy* paints the conceptual framework of a spectrum of activities at the strategic level, more service-oriented or operational texts such as *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations* and *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations* often provide detail on specific *weishe* activities in each domain.[48] It is possible that other texts not covered in this research or that are under development further flesh out the specific domain activities of other services beyond the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). For example, there appears to be a current CCP call for increasing the strategic *weishe* capabilities of the PLA Navy as evidenced through party reports.[49] It is likely that, if discovered or written, a PLA Navy-specific text on *weishe* would also incorporate a ramping spectrum of activities that are maritime centric.

The language and concepts used to describe a ramping spectrum of activities, even by different authors, is quite consistent. Throughout the different texts and across domains, the highest intensity of military *weishe* activity generally includes limited kinetic strikes, or as the exemplar military *weishe* activities describes, "military strikes of a warning nature." This is in line with the crisis or wartime application of strategic *weishe*, which aims to position the military in the best possible position to step into war, or to induce a war-changing

[45] Although the English translation of this text uses "deter" to describe these activities, the Chinese character is 慑, the second character of *weishe*, and the text refers to these activities on the whole as *kongzhong weishe* 空中威慑 or "aerial *weishe*." See Ji Rongren, ed., *Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations*, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (Maxwell, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2021), 175.

[46] It is worth noting that these statements come from Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations, which was part of a series of publications that comprised the Joint Operations Command Talent Cultivation Strategic Project. As such, it is unclear whether this type thinking on the PLA Air Force's application of *weishe* came from a PLAAF-affiliated author or more of a joint-minded author. The nuance being whether this *weishe* is organically thought of in the PLAAF in a similar way as other domains or services, or whether thinking on *weishe* takes a top-down approach of strategic thought interpreted by the services or branches of the PLA. See Ji, *Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations*, 175.

[47] Jiang Lianju, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (Maxwell, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2022), 154.

[48] While research did not uncover specific activity spectrums for maritime or ground domains, these seem to be incorporated into the thinking through the broader "Conventional military *weishe*" activities expounded on in the 2020 Science of Military Strategy.

[49] Lei Shaoxing, " 'Yongzhou People's Congress Study Time,' Issue 84 | Who Will Lead Our Country's Armed Forces? [《永州人大·学习时光》第84期 | 我国武装力量由谁来领导?]," Standing Committee of Yongzhou Municipal People's Congress, 19 November 2023.

momentum shift.[50] From the concept of intensity, we can create a relative spectrum of intensity to apply to military *weishe* activities in each strategic *weishe* domain (figure 1).

Conceptually framing the different military *weishe* activities across an intensity spectrum can help to understand the role of each independent strategic *weishe* domain. While mostly separate in execution, it is emphasized to "pay attention to the comprehensive use of each type of *weishe* method, which forms an effective *weishe* system, and produces a comprehensive deterrent effect on the adversary."[51] With this in mind, the sum of the parts creates a whole integrated effect. Each strategic *weishe* domain also has its own unique characteristics which impacts its use in strategic *weishe*.

Modern Types of *Weishe*

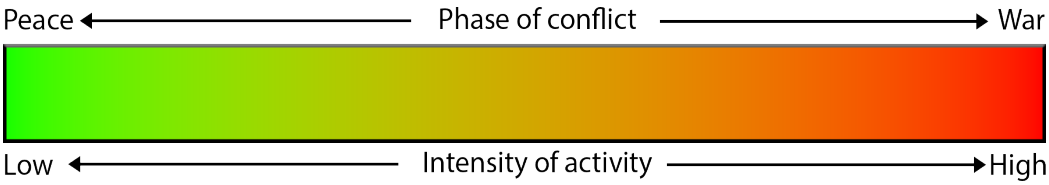
The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* breaks strategic *weishe* into five distinct domains: conventional military, nuclear, space, information, and People's War.[52] According to the text, "each of these different *weishe* domains have some overlap, but they are fairly independent in their application."[53] It is worth noting that "the types of *weishe* expands with the development of science and technology," and therefore the five categories enumerated in the 2020 Science of Military Strategy are not exhaustive, but should be used as a starting point to understand China's evolving strategic *weishe* capabilities.[54] This is especially true with the introduction of the term integrated *weishe* and the expansion of capabilities in new fields such as artificial intelligence (AI), drones, and others. Importantly, strategic *weishe* domains appear to be defined by the effects of specific activities.[55] This means, for example, that to be considered nuclear *weishe* one does not need to be a nuclear military unit, but any military unit that undertakes a strategic *weishe* military activity that impacts nuclear *weishe* would be considered as such. Likewise, a PLA Army unit that is undertaking information operations would be considered exercising military *weishe* activities in the information *weishe* domain. The current focal strategic *weishe* domains as of 2020 and their associated operational activities are outlined below.

Nuclear Weishe (核威慑)

According to the history of *weishe*, "the overall *weishe* power of People's War along with nuclear *weishe* are the basic methods of China's strategic *weishe*."[56] Part of the rationale is that without at least a basic nuclear capability, China would be beholden to overt pressure from nuclear armed states. However, the ideal number of Chinese nuclear weapons required to achieve nuclear *weishe* is dependent on global conditions. For Chinese strat-

[50] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 132.
[51] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 139.
[52] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 128–31.
[53] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 128.
[54] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 128.
[55] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 128.
[56] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 134.

Figure 1. *Weishe* activity spectrum



Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

egists, there is a critical lesson learned from the Soviet Union's arms race with the United States, in which nuclear weapons were one significant component. Unlike the Soviet Union, Chinese strategists believe that they should not engage in an arms race or, by extension, overinvest in nuclear weapons.[57] It is implied that this may cause an imbalance or damage to the Chinese economy, and more recently Xi Jinping has reiterated that the economy and military should be balanced.[58] As such, China sees that "nuclear *weishe* thinking arises as the times demand. The use of nuclear *weishe* is based upon the level of development in the nuclear strength of nuclear capable countries."[59] In plain terms, Chinese strategists view the required number of nuclear weapons to effectively achieve nuclear *weishe* as dependent on the number of nuclear weapons possessed by potential adversaries. There is also an abstract cap on quantity of nuclear weapons discussed as "limited and effective" such as to achieve a "medium strength nuclear *weishe*."[60] The intended effect of the medium-strength nuclear *weishe* capability is to "cause on your opponent a certain degree and unacceptable mutual destruction threat."[61] According to the PLA theory, once nuclear *weishe* has been achieved, it opens opportunities for the use of other *weishe* domains and limits the risk of escalation to nuclear war. Other methods of *weishe* include a more aggressive use of conventional military *weishe*, as "due to the increasing number of countries possessing nuclear weapons, conventional wars are often conducted under nuclear *weishe*, and their strategy is also a conventional war strategy under nuclear *weishe* conditions."[62]

Although nuclear *weishe* is a near prerequisite for the application of other types of *weishe*, there are likely specific *weishe* activities that can be taken in escalatory steps. The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), "employs ground-based fires of guided missile systems to carry out combat missions . . . possesses nuclear counterattack and medium and long-range

[57] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 133.
[58] Zhang Ming, "Striving to promote the coordinated development of economic construction and national defense construction–Study and understand President Xi's important instruction on achieving the unity of enriching the country and strengthening the military [努力推进经济建设和国防建设协调发展——学习领会习主席关于实现富国和强军相统一的重要指示]," China Military Network, People's Liberation Army, 10 December 2013.
[59] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 128.
[60] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 129.
[61] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 129.
[62] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 129.

conventional precision fires . . . and is the core capability of China's strategic *weishe*."[63] In its operations, the PLARF has several different military activities that it can use to escalate or otherwise reinforce strategic *weishe*. These activities are discussed in the context of conventional warheads; however, the nonstrike and potentially higher-intensity activities may apply to nuclear forces. This is particularly true in the case of PLARF systems that appear to be dual-capable such as the Dong Feng-21 (DF-21), DF-26, DF-31, or DF-41 medium, intermediate, long-range, and intercontinental ballistic missiles, where tests or limited conventional warhead strikes may be used as a confirmation of the capability to deliver the same strike with a nuclear-tipped missile.[64] Therefore, conventional PLARF military *weishe* activities can have an effect on nuclear *weishe*. Furthermore, there are at least indications that facing an insurmountable loss or a threat against the CCP regime's survival that the CCP could alter its nuclear policies to allow for nuclear strikes.[65] This could involve China' s leadership reducing the nuclear threshold when it is perceived that an adversary is about to make a crippling strike against Chinese assets.[66]

The military *weishe* activities conducted by the PLARF are as follows: displaying missile units in public media [舆论媒体展示导弹部队], displaying the power of missile units to an appropriate degree [适度显示导弹部队实力], limited and indirect missile firepower strikes [有限间接导弹火力打击], and limited and direct missile firepower strikes [有限直接导弹火力打击].[67] Once again, these are arranged across a spectrum of intensity of activity (figure 2).

Several specific aspects of these activities are worth clarifying. First, displaying missile units to an appropriate degree includes missile systems tests into a designated land or sea area. However, these tests are not necessarily directed toward an individual country. This would be consistent with the 25 September 2024 test of what is assessed to be the DF-31AG solid-fuel, road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missile in the Pacific.[68] While this test was not necessarily targeted at a specific country, it was a demonstration of capability to the broader regional actors. This kind of missile test differs from limited and indirect missile firepower strikes. In limited and indirect missile firepower strikes, the so-called missile tests are intentionally fired into, over, or near a specific country's territory or assets. As such, the August 2022 Joint Sword exercise, during which PLARF conventional missiles were shot over Taipei and into Taiwan and Japan's exclusive economic zones, can be described as a military *weishe* activity of the limited and indirect missile firepower strike variety.[69] During

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[63] The PLARF is often referred to in Chinese writing as the PLA Strategic Rocket Force, and as such is seen as a more strategic capability and unique as compared to other conventional force. See Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 381.

[64] For more information on the implications of dual-capable missile systems and their role in *weishe*, see Chase and Chan, *China's Evolving Approach to "Integrated Strategic Deterrence,"* 35–45.

[65] For more information, see Brandon J. Babin, "Xi Jinping's Strangelove: The Need for a Deterrence-Based Offset Strategy," in *Modernizing Deterrence: How China Coerces, Compels, and Deters*, ed. Roy D. Kamphausen (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2023), 73.

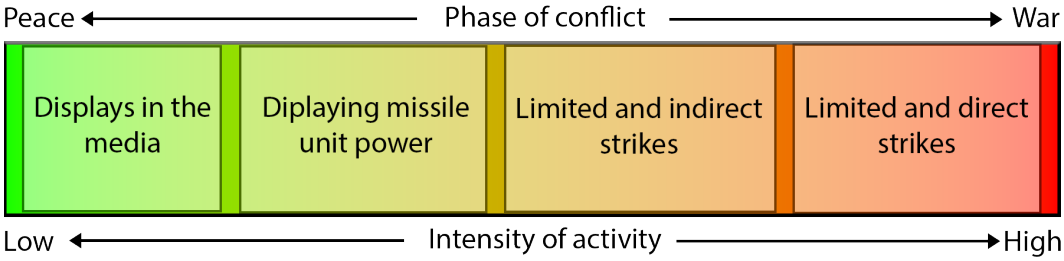
[66] Chase and Chan, *China's Evolving Approach to "Integrated Strategic Deterrence,"* 43–44.

[67] Ji, *Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations*, 255–58.

[68] Anushka Saxena, "What We Can Tell from China's ICBM Test," *Strategist*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 15 October 2024.

[69] China Power Team, "Tracking the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis," *China Power*, updated 8 November 2023.

Figure 2. PLA Rocket Force conventional *weishe* activities



Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

the highest intensity military *weishe* activity, limited and direct missile firepower strikes, there are direct strikes against an adversary's territory or assets. However, the strikes are limited in nature and are not the equivalent of a larger conventional missile strike operation called "missile firepower attacks and destruction."[70] Again, within the text, these activities are only described as being conducted by PLARF conventional missile forces, with no mention of PLARF nuclear forces conducting either a limited and indirect or limited and direct missile firepower strike as part of nuclear *weishe* military activities. By looking at the PLARF conventional military *weishe* activities, we can build an understanding of some of the potential types of nuclear *weishe* military activities that can be employed for a strategic *weishe* effect.

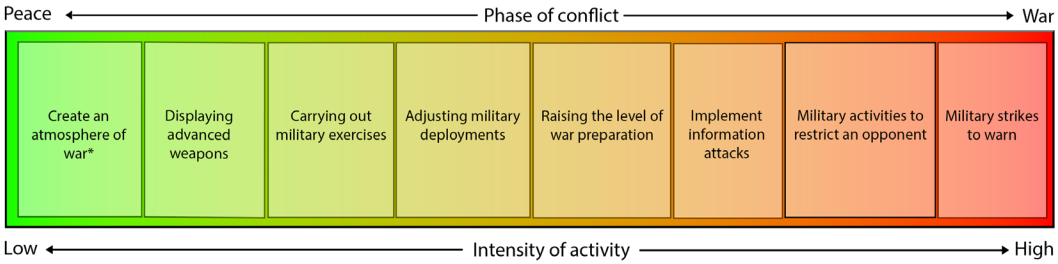
Conventional Military Weishe (常规威慑)

Conventional military *weishe* refers to the broad set of activities conducted by a military's conventional, or non-nuclear, capabilities. As a domain of strategic *weishe*, it has a unique direct relationship with nuclear *weishe* in that without having credible nuclear *weishe*, the use of conventional military *weishe* becomes less effective or even ineffective. In this balance, PLA authors assess that currently conventional military *weishe* is on the rise. According to the 2020 Science of Military Strategy, "with the development of the times, the limitations of nuclear *weishe* are becoming increasingly apparent, and the use of conventional military *weishe* has once again become prominent."[71] Conventional military *weishe* activities track closely with the exemplar strategic *weishe* military activities. Within that group, certain activities are most likely to apply to a jointly organized conventional force or individual service components. Those activities, according to intensity, include creating an atmosphere of war [营造战争气氛], displaying advanced weapons [展示先进武器], carrying out military exercises [举行军事演习], adjusting military deployments [调整军事部署], raising the level of war preparation [提升战备等级], implementing information attacks [实施信息攻击], using military activities to restrict an opponent [限制性军事行动], and deploying military strikes of a warning nature [警示性军事打击] (figure 3).

While there are no specific "joint conventional military" *weishe* activities found in available texts, there are several spectrums of independent service conventional military *weishe* activities. As mentioned before, PLARF conventional military *weishe* activities include:

[70] Ji, *Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations*, 259.
[71] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 129.

Figure 3. Conventional military *weishe* activitiies

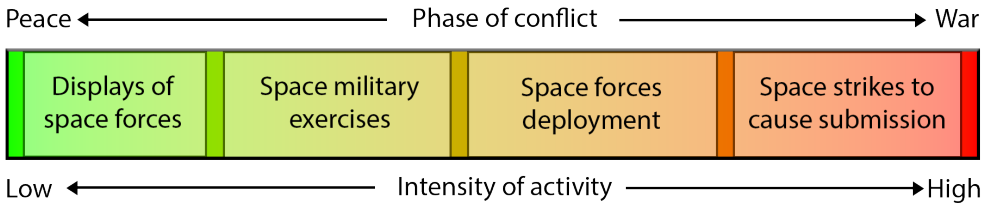


Note: Creating an atmosphere of war has its own subset of activities that follow the escalation of intensity and is described in the People's War weishe section of this article. As depicted in this graphic, creating an atmosphere of war refers to the lowest intensity of those kinds of activities.
Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

displaying missile units in public media [舆论媒体展示导弹部队], displaying the power of missile units to an appropriate degree [适度显示导弹部队实力], limited and indirect missile firepower strikes [有限间接导弹火力打击], and limited and direct missile firepower strikes [有限直接导弹火力打击].[72] These activities, conducted by conventional warhead-equipped PLARF forces could be conducted in conjunction with other services or used as standalone activities. Other PLA services and branches likely have their own set of activities that support a concept of "joint conventional military" *weishe*. Notably, the PLA Navy is actively building more capability to conduct conventional *weishe* activities, particularly when it comes to strategic access. According to PLA Navy writings, "when maritime strategic accesses are in a crisis stage or a potential crisis stage (for example, when a given maritime strategic accesses is blocked off by other countries) and when the PRC's maritime strategic accesses are threatened, the PRC should fully show its firm resolve and bring military *weishe* into play."[73] However, as previously mentioned, thinking on concrete *weishe* activities of the PLA Navy are likely still under development as there is a CCP internal emphasis on developing maritime *weishe* capabilities.[74] Conversely, the PLA Air Force, whose *weishe* activities are part of conventional military *weishe*, have their *weishe* activities laid out in detail in Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations. In the broader category

[72] These activities correspond to the graphic depicting the spectrum of intensity found in the nuclear *weishe* section of this article. See *Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations*, 255–58. For more information on the PLARF's conventional capabilities, especially the strategic nature of exquisite conventional missile capabilities, see Andrew S. Erickson, "China's Approach to Conventional Deterrence," in *Modernizing Deterrence*, 24–25.
[73] Liang Fang, *On Maritime Strategic Access* [海上战略通道论], trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (Maxwell, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2024), 274.
[74] Lei, " 'Yongzhou People's Congress Study Time' Issue 84 | Who will lead our country's armed forces?"

Figure 4. PLA Air Force low-intensity *weishe* activities



Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

of conventional military *weishe* activities, the PLAAF and other service-specific spectrums of activities can be considered subcategories.

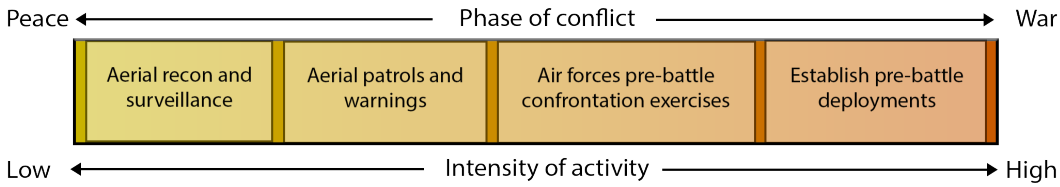
Within the PLA Air Force subcategory of conventional military *weishe* activities, activities are grouped into three levels: low-intensity, medium-intensity high pressure, and high-intensity small attacks.[75] Within these levels of intensity, there are scalable actions to undertake.

Low-intensity activities are comprised of a buildup of air forces [加强空军力量建设], air force systems and weapons testing [研制和实验新型空军武器装备], military displays and displays of equipment [军事表演和武器装备展示], and routine military exercises [组织日常军事演习] (figure 4).[76] Using this framework, events such as the Zhuhai Air Show (a.k.a. China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition), in which the PLAAF famously conducts military displays and displays of equipment, would be considered a low-intensity *weishe* activity.[77] These kinds of low-intensity *weishe* activities are likely meant to signal to an opponent the capabilities and the skills to employ those capabilities in combat-like scenarios. For this batch of activities, it may be appropriate to call them deterrent activities, but under the Chinese framework they would be called low-intensity *weishe* activities.

Medium-intensity, high-pressure activities include organize aerial reconnaissance and surveillance [组织空中侦察和监视], organize aerial patrols and warnings [组织空中巡逻警戒], organize air forces prebattle confrontation exercises [组织临战空军士兵对抗演习], and establish prebattle deployments [建立临战部署] (figure 5).[78] For this set of activities, they may more appropriately be called compellent or coercive activities. Activities here may include the consistent large-scale incursions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ), which could be classified as any one of the first three activities.[79] For establishing

[75] Ji, *Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations*, 175.
[76] Ji, *Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations*, 175–77.
[77] Nectar Gan, "Stealth Fighters and a Massive Mothership Drone: The High-tech Weapons China Unveiled at Its Largest Airshow," CNN, 19 November 2024.
[78] Ji, *Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations*, 177–79.
[79] Gerald C. Brown and Benjamin Lewis, "Taiwan ADIZ Violations," dataset, China Power, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024.

Figure 5. PLA Air Force medium-intensity, high-pressure *weishe* activities



Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

prebattle deployments and under the context of Taiwan, this likely includes the deployment of PLAAF brigades to forward airfields. The airfields are normally kept in high readiness, but without a permanently deployed brigade, and they are used as forward positions in high-tempo exercise periods. In the event of conflict, these airfields would be populated with a PLAAF brigade as their frontline airfield for conflict.[80] Therefore, if a PLAAF brigade more permanently deploys to these locations, and does not reset to their home airfield post-exercise, it may indicate the establishment of pre-battle deployments.

High-intensity, small-strike *weishe* activities include information soft-kill [信息软杀伤] and warning-style aerial firepower (surprise) assaults [警示性空中火力突击] (figure 6).[81] These activities are fairly straightforward and would likely include things such as electromagnetic or cyber suppression of an adversary's radar systems for information soft-kills or deliberate limited air strikes for warning-style aerial firepower assaults.

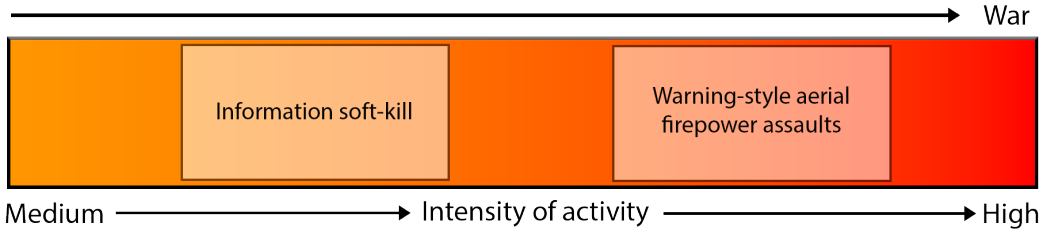
PLAAF activities, like other domains and subcategories, can once again be arranged along a spectrum and ramped up as the situation develops or used independently at any stage of the conflict as the situation requires. As previously mentioned, although it is expected that different services under conventional *weishe* would have their own set of activities, the research up to this point has only revealed the fleshed-out PLA Air Force and PLA Rocket Force subcategories within conventional military *weishe*. The research indicates that there is at least a discussion of a theory of using *weishe* activities specific to the PLA Army and the PLA Navy.[82] However, a detailed breakdown of these activities for the two services was not found in the research.

Space Weishe (空间威慑)

Space *weishe* occupies a unique position within the overall system insofar as it is understood that space is a strategic high ground that may have certain restrictions whether technological, economic, legal, or otherwise. Space-based capabilities require significant technological and economic investments to build and have national-level significance. Be-

[80] Daniel Rice, *Hardened Shelters and UCAVS: Understanding the Threat Facing Taiwan*, Mitchell Forum, no. 47 (Washington, DC: Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, 2022).
[81] Ji, Service and Arms Applications in Joint Operations, 179–80.
[82] Liang Lihua (editor), *A Comparative Study of New Type Army Operational Theories Under New Circumstances* (新形势下新型陆军战役理论比较研究) (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2017), 3, 4, 277, 280, 394, 398, 502; and Liang Fang, *On Maritime Strategic Access* [海上战略通道论] (Beijing: Current Events Press, 2011), 274.

Figure 6. PLA Air Force high-intensity *weishe* activities



Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

cause of this, militaries have basically adapted"'joint military-civilian use that combines peace and war' model(s) of construction."[83] Therefore, space-based assets that have military value may be either civilian or military-owned and most likely dual-use. Furthermore, "although the main body in space operations strengths is military space strengths, still, large numbers of civilian space strengths inevitably will be requisitioned in wartime, thus forming an integrated military-civilian system of operational strengths."[84] In practice, it may be difficult to differentiate between those space-based assets that are military or civilian and may become targets for military or political objectives. This means that within China's application of space *weishe*, it is possible that activities may be carried out against an adversary's civilian assets with the expectation that those targeted assets would play a role in a military conflict. For satellite constellations such as Starlink, on which Chinese authors have written on its civilian and military applications, the constellation is likely to be the target of Chinese space *weishe* activities.[85] Due to the blending of civilian and military custody and application, and their significant effects on different levers of comprehensive national power, space-based activities are considered to be an increasingly important domain. Furthermore, "since space (*weishe*) in terms of use has a strategic quality, convenience, and controllability, it thus will become the main form of military weishe, and the frequency of its use will grow increasingly frequent."[86]

Despite the growing importance of space *weishe*, in Lectures on the Science of Space Operations, the author highlights the risk of inadvertent escalation during space weishe activities.[87] This causes a need to appropriately adapt the measures of space *weishe* to achieve political objectives but not cause undue escalation or compromise of China's space-based assets. For this reason, the overall situation [全局] is incredibly important for "if these situations are not well grasped, it could lead to failure of the *weishe* and then set off a war or

[83] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 76.
[84] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 76.
[85] Ren Yuanzhen et al., "The Development Status of Starlink and Its Countermeasures [星链计划发展现状与对抗思考]," *Modern Defence Technology* [现代防御技术], 50, no. 2 (2022): 11–17, https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1009-086x.2022.02.002.
[86] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 153.
[87] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 157.

an escalation of the war."[88] In this vein and as previously mentioned, "in order to enhance the *weishe* effects, space *weishe* when applied usually adopts the method of gradual escalation, to constantly increase the degree of force in *weishe* of the enemy."[89] Due to the sensitivity of space activities, there is also a risk of overdoing space *weishe*. Accordingly, while gradual escalation is the primary method of raising the cost to the adversary, there is also gradual de-escalation if it is perceived that the current activities are too escalatory.[90] The objective of having this flexibility in space is to create a situation in which "the intensity of *weishe* must be moderate the key points will be leaving the adversary leeway to come to terms and make concessions, and to prevent an escalation of the confrontation cause by the adversary not having an out."[91] At the highest end of space *weishe* activities, the ultimate goal is to "force them to dare not adopt large-scale military activities, or force them to sign a '[peace] treaty made under *weishe*'."[92]

The primary space *weishe* activities as enumerated by *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations* are grouped into four categories: displays of space forces [展示空间力量], space military exercises [空间军事演习], space forces deployment [空间力量部署], and space strikes to cause submission [慑服空间打击] (figure 7).[93] Of note, displays of space forces usually entails exploitation of the media to create propaganda and display strength in support of integrated *weishe* efforts such as diplomatic and economic *weishe*.[94] Space military exercises also include exercises within the space domain as well as space-based capabilities such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance in support of military exercises in other domains.[95] The most famous examples of space military exercises may be the 2007 Chinese antisatellite weapon test or the test of the robotic arm on Chinese satellites to remove space debris.[96] Both of these activities may be called medium-low intensity space *weishe* activities. Space forces deployment includes the launch, recovery and on-orbit maneuver, as well as maneuver in other domains to support the rapid reconstitution or build-up of the spaced-based battle network.[97] Space strikes to cause submission are described as limited strikes against an adversary and can take the form of "soft" or nonkinetic and potentially reversible attacks and "hard" kinetic strikes on the adversary's space systems. Of note, the primary targets of both soft and hard kill strikes are critical nodes or space-based assets that are vital to the command-and-control systems of Chi-

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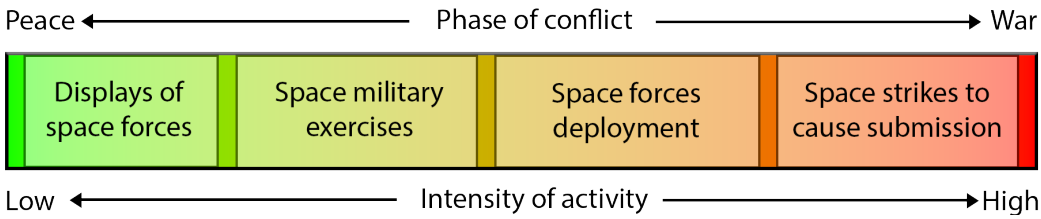
[88] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 157.
[89] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 154.
[90] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 159.
[91] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 158–59.
[92] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 157.
[93] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 154–57.
[94] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 154.
[95] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 154–55.
[96] Greg Hadley, "Saltzman: Chain's ASAT Test Was 'Pivot Point' in Space Operations," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 13 January 2023.
[97] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 156.

Figure 7. Space *weishe* activities



Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

na's adversary.[98] Military and civilian information networks are also a key target for soft-kill strikes.[99] Deliberately targeting these nodes may enhance the psychological impact of the space strike, therefore increasing its value in strategic *weishe*.

As noted by Kevin Pollpeter in his article *Coercive Space Activities: The View from PRC Sources*, a deeper analysis of Lectures on the Science of Space Operations and other sources indicates that there may be additional space *weishe* activities or concepts in development. These include four additional space *weishe* activities or sets of activities: enhancement of conventional force capabilities, deterrence by denial, deterrence by punishment, and deterrence by detection.[100] Although the term deterrence is used in Pollpeter's description of these types of activities, he notes that it is in reference to the broader concept of *weishe*.[101] Furthermore, these four additional types of *weishe* appear to be more potential effects or results of traditional *weishe* activities and are brought to light in analysis of Chinese authors looking at Western *weishe* applications. What is clear from the analysis is that space *weishe* is growing in terms of the theoretical application of space *weishe* activities in strategic *weishe*.

Information Weishe (信息威慑)

The information *weishe* domain is less well described conceptually in the researched PLA texts, but this may be a function of the expanding definitions of what falls under this domain. In the 2013 iteration of *The Science of Military Strategy*, information *weishe* was described as network *weishe*, and notably it mentions that "there is nonetheless very great diversity in the various understanding of network [*weishe*], and both the theory and practice of network *weishe* await further development and perfection."[102] Based on the evolution of the information domain, other authors have included different types of *weishe* that may fall

[98] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 156–57.
[99] Liang, *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, 156.
[100] Kevin Pollpeter, *Coercive Space Activities: The View from PRC Sources* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2024), 12–14.
[101] Pollpeter, *Coercive Space Activities*, 4.
[102] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 193, 244.

into this domain to include cyber, electromagnetic spectrum, and "intelligent" *weishe*.[103] As the definition of the information *weishe* domain evolves, the 2020 Science of Military Strategy may have settled on information *weishe* as a catch-all term for military *weishe* activities that effect the information domain. According to the 2020 Science of Military Strategy, information *weishe* "is reliant on information science and information technology's strong functions, and is a *weishe* carried out with the momentum and power of information warfare."[104] The types of activities that encompass information *weishe* include but are not limited to unauthorized access and query, malicious software, destruction of databases, obtaining electronic intelligence, electronic attacks, and others.[105]

Although a bit older, the 2009 *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations* provides some detail into what concrete information *weishe* activities may look like across a spectrum of intensity. The text offers two sets of information *weishe* activities; the first set is broad and includes electronic feigning, electronic jamming, network attacks, psychological spoofing (deception), antichemical destruction, and precision attacks.[106] These activities are recommended to accompany other campaign-level *weishe* operations to "create a formidable information attack momentum and form a psychological perspective."[107] The second set of information *weishe* activities is broken into four intensity groupings. The first group has media exploitations to highlight military strength, misinformation and disinformation about operational strength, and publicizing preparations of information attacks.[108] The second group includes electronic feigning, disguising, and jamming on the adversary's information systems, as well as their network spoofing and virus attacks.[109] The Volt Typhoon infiltration and dwell on U.S. critical infrastructure systems may be considered a medium-low intensity information *weishe* activity.[110] The third group of information *weishe* activities includes using virtual reality (cyberspace) to create an information offensive and supplementing military

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[103] Dong Zhou, "Research on the concept of system-based superior warfare, Part 5: Hot to fight system-based warfare in informationized warfare I Analysis of nine typical combat styles [体系聚优战作战概念研究之五：信息化战争体系作战怎么打 | 九大典型作战样式解析]," *Academic Plus* [学术plus], 8 September 2022; and Roy D. Kamphausen and Jeremy Rausch, foreword, *Modernizing Deterrence*.

[104] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 130.

[105] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 130.

[106] The English translation of the text includes antichemical destruction (防化). In the text, it is difficult to understand exactly what is meant by this, but it may refer to the destruction of an adversary's chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN)-like forces or the employment of PLA antichemical (防化) forces. For destruction of an adversary's CBRN-like forces, this may be due to the increased psychological effect of not having the ability to sense or scan an area for contaminants or the ability to deal with large unconventional chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear threats. For the use of antichemical (防化) troops, PLA antichemical units employ things such as smoke decoys and flamethrowers. The use of these types of weapons and units would likely have a strong psychological impact with things like smoke inhibiting the adversary's ability to gather information on their opponent and therefore becoming part of information *weishe*. See Yuan, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations*, 98.

[107] Yuan, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations*, 98.

[108] Yuan, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations*, 99.

[109] Yuan, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations*, 99.

[110] Jen Easterly, "Strengthening America's Resilience against the PRC Cyber Threats," *Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency*, 15 January 2025.

feigning activities.[111] And the fourth group focuses on the use antiradiation-guided missiles, antiradiation unmanned aircraft, and others to carry out "eye-gouging military tactics" on the adversary's command information systems as well as kinetic strikes on the adversary's command, control, communication, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) nodes.[112] On the whole, these different activities can be described as media exploitation, electronic warfare and cyberattacks, information offensives, and strikes on C4ISR nodes (figure 8). While a simplified spectrum of information *weishe* activities is referenced here, it could be expanded to incorporate each escalatory step within each category.

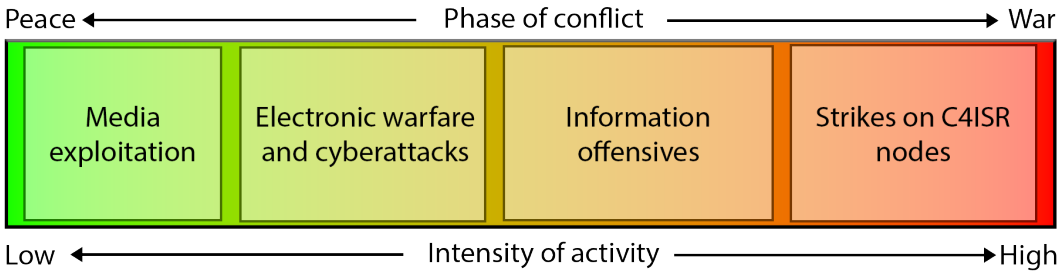
People's War Weishe (人民战争威慑)

People's War *weishe* is considered a unique and bedrock capability of China. Despite this, there are few concrete details on how to carry out People's War *weishe* or more broadly a People's War in the modern context. As a component of military thinking, People's War stems from the early phase of *weishe* and Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping thinking on how to stop an adversary from invading China through the threat of facing the Chinese masses. Fundamentally, People's War *weishe* relies on the notion that "all people are soldiers" and that any would be adversaries face not just the PLA but China as a whole.[113] People's War and the corresponding *weishe* activities are important for the idea of strengthening national will to fight in the face of an adversary as well as mobilization of national resources. Chen Dongheng, a senior lecturer and researcher within the Military Political Work Research Institute of the PLA Academy of Military Sciences in 2023 defined *People's War* as, "mobilizing the broadest masses of the people, forming the broadest united front, and gathering all resources and forces to unite against the enemy are the essence of the strategies and tactics of the People's War."[114] Yuan Zhengling, an assistant researcher in the Strategic Department of the Academy of Military Sciences, described core thinking on People's War *weishe* as:

> Build a People's army that is complete and high quality to serve as the backbone strength of waging war and implementing *weishe*; maintain the "three-in-one" system of the armed forces, which should see the people's militia building elevated to a strategic position, and improve its ability to mobilize quickly; explore the tactics of people's war under high-tech conditions; construct an extensive, unified front, and integrates multiple efforts in various domains and forms; and sustain the basic policy of protracted war, etc. It can be seen that People's War *weishe* is the multi-layered overall strength *weishe* that organically combines actual strength and potential strength and tangible and intangible forces. It possesses the special

[111] Yuan, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations*, 99.
[112] Yuan, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Information Operations*, 99.
[113] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 176.
[114] Chen Dongheng, "Developing the Strategy and Tactics of People's War [发展人民战争战略战术]," *China National Defense News*, Tianjin City National Defense Mobilization Office, 1 January 2023.

Figure 8. Information *weishe* activities



Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

> characteristics of all of the people (全民性), comprehensiveness, and sustainability. (People's War *weishe*) has many important differences from the thinking of implementing *weishe* that solely relies on some advantage of armed force.[115]

From the description of People's War *weishe*, it is quite clear that this specific domain is multifaceted and complex. At its foundation, it involves some aspect of mobilizing civilian nonmilitary and military capabilities to enhance strategic *weishe*. Although there are no explicit discussions in PLA sources on how this mobilization may occur short of war, Dean Cheng's analysis of population-wide participation (全民参与, *quanmin canyu*) in mobilization may offer some insight into how this could work for People's War *weishe.* Cheng points out that population-wide participation in mobilization includes two key aspects. The first aspect focuses on "actively integrat(ing) the broad civilian populace and associated resources into the planning and implementation of mobilization process."[116] Cheng assesses that "national defense mobilization work includes not only military forces, but also political, economic, [science and technology] S&T, education, culture, health, and many other resources."[117] With mobilization, there is a formal bureaucratic process necessary, and the decision for mobilization carries the risk of strongly impacting the nation. For this reason, the decision to mobilize the nation requires senior national-level leaders.[118] Once mobilization does occur, there are concrete measures to gradually increase the scale and intensity of mobilization. In this sense, it seems that there is an intensity spectrum for People's War *weishe* that includes a break point between activities taken in relative peacetime and those take after mobilization has occurred. To understand how People's War *weishe* may be implemented, it is possible to separate the associated activities into indirect and direct activities. Indirect

[115] Yuan, "On the Thought and Practice Conventional *Weishe* after the Founding of New China," 22.
[116] Dean Cheng, "Converting the Potential to the Actual: Chinese Mobilization Policies and Planning," in *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, ed. Andrew Scobell et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 114.
[117] Cheng, "Converting the Potential to the Actual," 114–15.
[118] Cheng, "Converting the Potential to the Actual," 121.

activities are those which may take place before mobilization and are meant to enhance the conventional military *weishe* capability of the PLA. In contrast, direct People's War *weishe* activities are those that would be undertaken after mobilization of the nation and would involve organizations and processes that are created in the act of mobilization.

Indirect ways in which People's War *weishe* may be implemented include the continuation and leveraging of military-civil fusion.[119] In practice, military-civil fusion would see a higher integration of civilian capabilities into combat capability. This could be in the form of increased civilian logistical support in extreme and hard-to-reach locations, a closer integration of civilian technological research and development into the PLA equipment supply chain, or other methods. To some extent, integration of civilian logistical support into the PLA is currently underway with large-scale logistics exercises and the signing of contracts for logistical support between provincial governments and the PLA.[120] Other examples include the government program to requisition civilian shipping through the maritime militia for contingencies such as a cross-strait invasion.[121] In terms of an increased presence in the research and development of PLA weapon systems, there are numerous examples across different industries. Most notably, China's civilian space companies are known to be a critical player in the PLA's space-based capabilities.[122] Beyond these indirect applications of People's War *weishe*, there may also be direct applications and operations that support People's War *weishe* along the intensity of activity spectrum.

Direct applications of People's War *weishe* likely involve the integration of militia and the civilian air defense and civilian organizations into military *weishe* activities around the time of or after mobilization. Within the "three-in-one" system that Yuan Zhengling refers to in his description of People's War *weishe*, the three organizations that comprise the one armed forces are the People's Liberation Army, the People's Armed Police force, and the Militia of China (中国民兵). According to a special report from the Standing Committee of Yongzhou Municipal People's Congress:

> The Chinese militia is a mass armed organization led by the Communist Party of China, an important component of the armed forces of the People's Republic of China, a reserve force of the People's Liberation Army of China, an important force for consolidating grassroots political power, maintaining na-

[119] Chase and Chan, "China's Evolving Approach to 'Integrated Strategic Deterrence'," 32.
[120] Li Wenyue, Huang Zhiming, and Li Weiming, "Military-Civilian Integration: A Chorus of Military and Civilians in Logistical Equipment Support and Sustainment [军民融合：后装保障中的军民大合唱]," *China Military Network*, 19 July 2018.
[121] Lonnie D. Henley, *Civilian Shipping and Maritime Militia: The Logistics Backbone of a Taiwan Invasion*, China Maritime Report no. 21 (Newport, RI: China Maritime Studies Institute, Naval War College, 2022).
[122] Ashwin Prasad and Rakshith Shetty, "China's Military-Civil Fusion Space Program: China Is Actively Pursuing Space Superiority while Acquiring and Developing Counter-space Capabilities and Technologies," *Diplomat*, 27 April 2024.

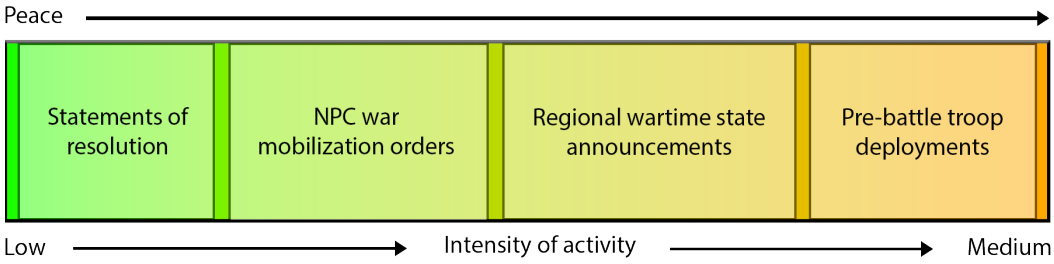
> tional security and social stability, and the basis for conducting People's War under modern conditions.[123]

Presumably, the militia acts as a link between the citizenry and the military and is an important part of mobilization of the population. Included within the Chinese militia is the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM). Therefore, military *weishe* activities undertaken by the PAFMM may well be included within the scope of People's War *weishe* activities. Just because the militia may make up the backbone of People's War *weishe* does not immediately mean that there is coordination between the PLA and militia to implement *weishe*. A closer look at the civilian and militia mobilization structure can provide that potential link. Militia and civilian mobilization appear to be tied together and fall under a series of National Defense Mobilization Committees (NDMC).[124] At the highest level of these committees is the national-level NDMC. This committee is "headed by the premier of the State Council, while its vice chairmen are the vice premier of the State Council and one of the vice chairmen of the CMC (Central Military Commission)."[125] The combined military-civilian leadership of the highest-level NDMC may provide more military oversight and closer integration of militia and civilian mobilization into the application of People's War *weishe* across the spectrum of conflict.

In terms of direct People's War *weishe* activities, one interpretation of these may be represented by the set of activities called "creating an atmosphere of war [营造战争气氛]." This set of activities is defined by the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* as party, country, and military leaders publicly issue statements of resolution of willingness to go to war [党、国家和军队领导人发表声明，宣示不惜一战的决心]; the National People's Congress issues war mobilization orders at the appropriate time [全国人大适时发布战争动员令]; announcement of theater regions entering a wartime state [宣布局部地区进人战时状态]; troops unfold and enter prebattle preparations [部队展开，进行临战准备]; carry out public opinion, psychological, and legal warfare [展舆论战、心理战、法律战]; organize theater emergency mobilization, civil air defense, transportation infrastructure protection and defensive combat exercises [组织局部应急动员、人民防空、保交护路利防卫作战演练]; organize front-line evacuations of the public [组织一线群众疏散]; and issue public announcements urging the relevant countries to evacuate their nationals and government officials [发布公告，敦促有关国家撤走侨民和办事机构人员] (figures 9 and 10).[126] While these activities are not directly attributed to People's War *weishe*, the effect of the actions is mass mobilization of the Chinese citizenry and establishing a wartime posture. They also seem to reflect some

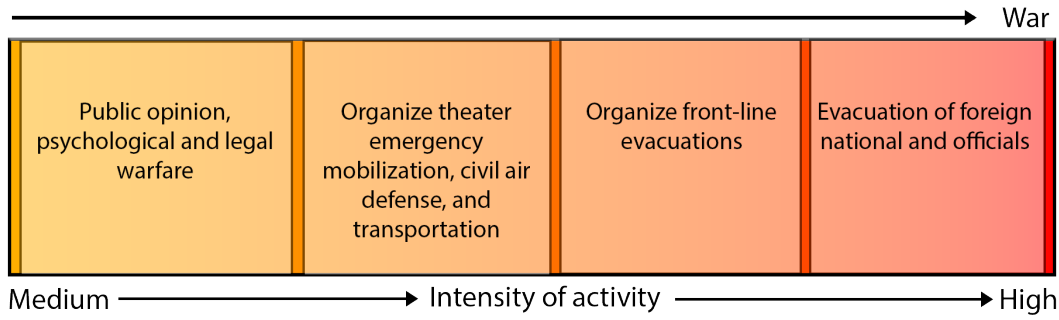
[123] Lei, " 'Yongzhou People's Congress Study Time' Issue 84 I Who will lead our country's armed forces?"
[124] Cheng, "Converting the Potential to the Actual," 122–23.
[125] Cheng, "Converting the Potential to the Actual," 122.
[126] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 135.

Figure 9. Potential low-medium intensity People's War *weishe* activities



Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

Figure 10. Potential medium-high intensity People's War *weishe* activities



Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

sort of escalation matrix across the activities, beginning with statements of resolution and ending with full wartime mobilization and readiness.

People's War *weishe* does have some restrictions. According to the 2020 Science of Military Strategy, People's War *weishe* can only be implemented "if the (fight of) the People's Army is in line to a high extent with the interests of the people."[127] This implies that there must be a concerted effort and political work to get national buy-in from the people toward a strategic objective. According to theory, People's War represents "the basic interests of the broad masses of the people, and it possesses the political basis for implementing mobilization of the entire people, and participation in the war by the people, which to the maximum extent can give play to the warfighting potential of the people and nation."[128] Mobilization of civilian potential in line with and supporting the military is the key to People's War *weishe*. Even though there appears to be some direct and indirect applications of

[127] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 131.
[128] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 131.

People's War *weishe* to aid in an integrated *weishe* capability, methods for modernizing people's war *weishe* appear to still be under development.[129]

The System of Strategic *Weishe* (战略威慑体系) and Integrated *Weishe* (整体威慑)

At the highest level, "a strategic system is an organizational structure composed of strategies at different levels."[130] From looking at the individual strategic *weishe* domains and their different activities, we can begin to understand how China envisions building its system of strategic weishe. Essentially, the system of strategic weishe and integrated weishe are one in the same. In this context, the term used for integrated, zhengti (整体), refers to the overall system of weishe and is simply a different way to express an integrated whole. The envisioned system of strategic *weishe* is meant to better coordinate and integrate multiple domains of strategic *weishe* to provide the CCP with a more comprehensive application of strategic *weishe* against its adversaries.

According to Yuan Zhengling, "*Weishe* is quasi-war (准战争), and it requires taking advantage of the comprehensive use of each aspect and the various methods, it is very difficult to achieve a good outcome by solely relying on the military method."[131] Ironically, it appears that strategic *weishe* military activities are possibly the most mature aspect of applying strategic *weishe*. As previously discussed, the nonmilitary aspects of strategic *weishe* are, as of now, envisioned as primarily used in "peacetime" to set conditions for the application of military *weishe* or used in between peace and war to enhance military *weishe* activities.[132] In the future, it is highly likely that the nonmilitary aspects of integrated *weishe* will grow in importance and application. To this effect, in *Lectures on the Science of Space Operations*, Jiang Lianju argues that space *weishe* can only be effective when paired with other forms of *weishe* and the different levers of comprehensive national power.

> Under informationized conditions, the diversity and complexity of threats and conflicts have decided that military *weishe* by a single means or a single avenue will have increasing difficulty in forming effective *weishe* of the enemy. Only when space *weishe* is combined with *weishe* forms such as nuclear *weishe* and conventional forces *weishe*, and at the same time complemented by struggle in the political, economic, and diplomatic fields, so that all forms of *weishe* benefit by mutual association, can the effectiveness of *weishe* be brought into play to the maximum extent.[133]

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[129] Chen, "Developing the Strategy and Tactics of People's War."
[130] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 19.
[131] Yuan, "On the Thought and Practice Conventional *Weishe* after the Founding of New China," 26.
[132] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 169; and Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 131.
[133] Liang, Lectures on the Science of Space Operations, 159–60.

However, harnessing and coordinating multidomain strategic *weishe* capabilities, especially nonmilitary capabilities is unquestionably very difficult. One effort to integrate military and nonmilitary strategic *weishe* into a coordinated system may be the building out of China's Integrated National Strategic System and Capabilities (INSS&C). According to the 2024 Department of Defense report *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, the INSS&C aims to synchronize top-level planning organizations within China's governance system to better leverage China's comprehensive national power.[134] It would logically follow that integrated *weishe* and its supporting capabilities would fall within the scope of the INSS&C's responsibilities. The INSS&C as a component of military-civil fusion, which is an aspect of People's War *weishe*, further strengthens this connection. Moreover, the planning and implementation of *weishe* activities at an integrated whole-of-comprehensive-national-power level would require a mechanism such as the INSS&C to execute.

When conceptualizing how China's integrated *weishe* or system of strategic *weishe* works, the intensity spectrums of each domain can help to visualize the system. Each domain and its military *weishe* activities spectrum act as one lever from which the CCP can ratchet up or down as necessary to achieve their political objective. When individual domains are combined, and in line with PLA systems thinking, "the adjusting-coordination among every subsystem directly decides the functions of the entire system, so the subsystems can realize an integrated-whole effect [整体效应] of 1 + 1 > 2."[135] In plain language, this means that each strategic *weishe* domain is equivalent to a subsystem and coordination between the different domains increases the overall (整体) effect of strategic *weishe.* In the case of the system of strategic *weishe*, depending on the adversary, China may ramp up one or more of the activities within each *weishe* domain to attempt to drive the opponent into negotiations or to accede to their demands. As such, "strategic *weishe* is aimed at the opponent's psychology, cognition and decision-making system. Its functioning mechanism is to make the adversary recognize, as they weigh the pros and cons, that taking action will incur severe costs, (costs that) will be unacceptable and surpass any benefit gained. When the adversary's perceived costs and losses are increasingly large, the produced *weishe* effect on its psychology, cognition, and decision making are increasingly large, and *weishe* becomes increasingly effective."[136] In effect, by building and using a system of strategic *weishe*, the CCP and PLA hope to have different levers of pressure across multiple domains to increase or decrease until they achieve their desired psychological effect; the submission of their adversary.

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[134] *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2024), 24, 163.
[135] Shou, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2013*, 114.
[136] Xiao, *The Science of Military Strategy*, *2020*, 127.

Conclusion

China's views of strategic *weishe* continue to evolve, however, this research aims to provide a common framework for analyzing and understanding China's actions when it attempts to deter, compel, or coerce its adversaries. By understanding the fundamental concept of strategic *weishe*, we can build a clearer picture of how China sees employing military *weishe* activities and their desired effects. After evaluating Chinese texts on military strategy and operations in different domains, the methodology for pursuing strategic *weishe* is quite consistent. Considering this level of consistency and given it is across a near 20-year period, it is likely that future thinking on strategic *weishe* will at least follow a similar pattern. Even as technology evolves and newer domains for strategic *weishe* become solidified, they are likely to consist of a set of military *weishe* activities that follows an intensity spectrum and that can be applied across the spectrum of conflict. Furthermore, the accompanying military *weishe* activities within these domains are likely to resemble, in some way, the standard set of military *weishe* activities that begins with a display of the capability and ending with nonkinetic or kinetic strikes. Understanding this framework can be helpful to create a guide for unpacking Chinese thinking on new and emerging *weishe* capabilities such as "intelligent" or biological *weishe*.[137]

Further studies on domain-specific military *weishe* activities as newer PLA texts become available would help to better flesh out specific anticipated PLA *weishe* activities across a broader swatch of conventional capabilities. Additionally, applying the framework explored in this article to modern case studies can help analysts, academics, and policymakers better assess and understand the ways and means that the PLA is used for political objectives. This may also include assisting in identifying indications and warnings for if the CCP and PLA may escalate a situation into armed conflict. If activities within one or more of the *weishe* domains have escalated to the point of threatening or carrying out limited nonkinetic strikes against their opponent, the next rung of escalation would then likely be nonkinetic or kinetic strikes and positioning the PLA for stepping off into war. Tracking the strategic *weishe* intensity level of PLA activities in different domains may provide some insight into which part of the conflict spectrum the CCP and PLA perceive themselves to be at.

Perhaps the most important thing to take away from understanding the Chinese concept of strategic *weishe* is to build an understanding on Chinese escalation thinking. By thoroughly understanding the escalation matrix that the Chinese see in strategic *weishe*, it can better help the United States and its allies and partners interpret and respond to PLA and CCP military *weishe* activities. Rather than assigning the term gray zone to these activities, we can, with specificity, describe the different military *weishe* activities that we observe and tailor our responses for our own political objectives. This can theoretically give

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[137] For more information on Chinese discussions of intelligent and biological *weishe*, see Else B. Kania, "Designing Deterrence: The PLA's Outlook on Disruptive Technologies and Emerging Capabilities," in *Modernizing Deterrence*.

us an advantage in escalation control as we will better understand the paradigm in which the CCP and PLA operate.

About the Author

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THE ROLE OF MILITARY-CIVIL FUSION IN PLA STRATEGY

How China's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy Supports PLA Modernization and Enhances Operational Capabilities

Major Jonathon Lee

Abstract: The People's Republic of China's (PRC) Military-Civil Fusion strategy seeks the rapid modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The strategy applies a whole-of-society approach to integrate civilian industries, universities, and defense initiatives to develop advanced dual-use technologies. While the strategy has accelerated PLA modernization, internal barriers—such as bureaucratic delays and organizational inefficiencies—hamper the coordination of research efforts and delay technological advancement. Reliance on foreign semiconductor technologies further complicates progress. Failure to swiftly navigate these challenges could hinder the PLA's development and limit the Chinese Communist Party's capacity to project power regionally.

Keywords: People's Republic of China, PRC, People's Liberation Army, PLA, Military-Civil Fusion, MCF, modernization, operational readiness, dual-use technologies, intelligentized

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) implementation of its Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) strategy aims to radically transform the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into an advanced fighting force capable of challenging the United States within the Indo-Pacific region. Analysts within the United States' PLA-watching community emphasize the importance of the PLA integrating military-civil strategic thinking into its overall economic development and national defense planning, aligning economic and social progress with its military requirements.[1] The MCF strategy conceptualizes a whole-of-society approach to enable President Xi Jinping's vision of transforming the PRC into a leading global power. The MCF strategy is pivotal for modernizing the PLA. It fosters collaboration between civilian industries and military operations to enhance technological capabilities and operational readiness. Nevertheless, the PRC is encountering considerable domestic challenges in implementing MCF.

[1] *Science of Military Strategy 2020*, In Their Own Words series (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 2022), 36.

https://doi.org/10.33411/cmsr2025.01.002

Understanding the implications of these challenges is crucial to assess the effectiveness of MCF in achieving the PRC's strategic objectives.

MCF fosters collaboration between civilian industries and the military by integrating the university sector and research institutions to support the development of an intelligentized force. The intelligentized force concept aims to gain a military edge over the PRC's geopolitical competitors by leveraging emerging disruptive technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and autonomous systems, to integrate automation and shorten the decision cycle across the PLA.[2] Achieving intelligentization requires the MCF strategy to focus on six lines of effort: (1) integrating the PRC's defense industrial base with its civilian technology and industrial base, (2) integrating science and technology across military and civilian sectors, (3) synthesizing military and civilian expertise, (4) building military requirements into civilian infrastructure, (5) leveraging civilian logistical capabilities for military purposes, and (6) expanding the PRC's mobilization plan for use in competition and conflict.[3] This approach centers on incorporating science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) research and development (R&D) initiatives at universities through military funding to pursue AI and autonomous systems, driving modernization.[4] The pledge of PLA funding spurs an explosion in privatized research, with several hundred Chinese universities signing up for MCF initiatives. Many of these universities launched their own MCF platforms and national defense laboratories to support PLA STEM requirements.[5] Key to these requirements is the focus on integrating advanced military-civilian dual-use technologies within the PLA, including technologies such as deep learning, machine vision, and intelligent robots.[6] Yet, as the PRC learned during its prolonged cybercriminal campaign against the United States, codeveloping technology with the university sector increases the vulnerability of intellectual property (IP) to cyber espionage activities. Managing the risk of cyber espionage required the Chinese Communist Party to establish state secrecy protocols to protect PLA R&D. As Zi Yang describes, "universities seeking MCF participation need to reorganize themselves according to the Office of the Central Secrecy Commission requirements and submit to repeated secrecy inspections."[7] Despite these stringent requirements, continued collaboration between universities and the PLA drives innovation and the development of advanced dual-use technologies. In turn, this innovation positions the PLA to accelerate its achievement of an intelligentized force by 2035.

The MCF strategy enhances PLA modernization and operational readiness by establishing a central oversight committee, leveraging civilian logistics capabilities, and

[2] *Science of Military Strategy 2020*, 174.
[3] *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2024), 24.
[4] Manoj Joshi, *China's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy, the US Response, and Implications for India* (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2022), 19.
[5] Elsa B. Kania and Lorand Laskai, *Myths and Realities of China's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2021), 14.
[6] *Science of Military Strategy 2020,* 179.
[7] Zi Yang, "Opening Up while Closing Up: Balancing China's State Secrecy Needs and Military-Civil Fusion," *Asia Policy* 16, no. 1 (2021): 59.

deepening defense mobilization. The Central Military-Civil Fusion Development Committee (CMFDC), headed by Xi, comprises 26 high-level leaders representing the Politburo Standing Committee, the State Council, and the Central Military Commission. The CMFDC leads, manages, and oversees the MCF ecosystem to address deficiencies in top-level coordination and management systems.[8] High-level membership in this committee ensures sufficient political clout and critical mass within the leadership elite to offer steady administrative guidance for integrating state-owned enterprises (SOEs), privately owned enterprises (POEs), and the PLA. Cross-sector alignment ensures that all parties are aware of the strategic direction of innovation requirements while creating a pathway to establish and support logistics needs for power-projection purposes. The PLA Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF) and the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), in particular, leverage e-commerce and logistics companies to create dual-use logistics hubs. Cooperation agreements with China Railway Express, China Postal Express and Logistics, JD Logistics, and Deppon Logistics have significantly enhanced the JLSF and PLAAF's overseas logistics and basing infrastructure, enabling the PLA to meet its power projection requirements.[9] The establishment of these dual-use logistics hubs significantly deepened the PRC's national defense mobilization MCF, enabling a coordinated military-civilian response to crises through a modernized transportation and distribution system designed to project and sustain the PLA's global reach.[10] Thus far, the MCF strategy has proved broadly successful, assisting with revolutionizing the PLA to expand its antiaccess/area-denial capabilities beyond the first island chain.[11] With the acceleration of the Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies, including AI, big data analytics, and autonomous systems, the PRC's MCF strategy has positioned the PLA to respond to contingencies with a nationally coordinated response force.

While the MCF strategy has enabled the rapid modernization of the PLA, the PRC faces considerable domestic challenges with its implementation, including structural and institutional barriers, a lack of incentives for POEs, and reliance on foreign-owned advanced technologies. SOEs, which form the basis of the PRC's military-industrial base, are often lumbering and inefficient in driving innovation. As the traditional custodian of the defense industrial base, SOEs maintain a significant advantage in resources and capital over privatized start-ups. Consequently, SOEs prioritize maintaining their monopolization of the sector rather than fostering a culture of innovation. Concurrently, there is a lack of incentives for privatized technology firms to pursue dual-use technologies with the defense industry. As Elsa Kania and Lorand Laskai describe, "high tech firms outside of the traditional defense industry, few companies have found sufficient incentives to actively participate in supporting national defense . . . [over more lucrative] commercial applications."

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[8] Tai Ming Cheung, *Innovate to Dominate: The Rise of the Chinese Techno-Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), 106.

[9] Joshi, *China's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy, the US Response, and Implications for India*, 21.

[10] *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024*, 29.

[11] Richard Bitzinger, "China's Shift from Civil-Military Integration to Military-Civil Fusion," *Asia Policy* 16, no. 1 (2021): 24.

Furthermore, Lauren Yu-Hsin Lin and Curtis J. Milhaupt found that, until 2018, fewer than 60 percent of SOEs and 26 percent of POEs had adopted decision-making provisions that supported party compliance. The low adoption rates among SOEs and POEs indicate that compliance is more often a symbolic gesture, questioning the effectiveness of party control over innovation. Consequently, the low adoption rates suggest that state-driven coercion to force collaborative innovation and integration between SOEs and POEs has had limited success. The PRC's reliance on foreign semiconductor technology further complicates its defense programs, with 2 percent of the PLA's official defense budget apportioned to purchasing semiconductors for MCF programs. However, the United States has implemented tighter trade restrictions on Chinese technology companies, such as Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation and Huawei Technologies, restricting the sale of end-user licenses for equipment that could be used for military purposes. Consequently, demand for high-tech semiconductors within the defense industrial base outpaces supply, significantly impacting MCF R&D initiatives. Semiconductor supply concerns, combined with the structural and institutional barriers between SOEs and POEs, threaten to stagnate the development of advanced dual-purpose technologies.

Implementing the MCF strategy serves as a crucial foundation for the modernization and operational readiness of the PLA. The integration of civilian industries, universities, and the PLA enables the PRC to adopt a whole-of-society approach to leveraging the development of advanced technologies, granting the PLA a decisive advantage over its geopolitical competitors. The establishment of the CMFDC exemplifies Xi Jinping and the CCP's commitment to this strategy, streamlining processes across all sectors. This strategy, however, faces considerable domestic challenges that jeopardize its effectiveness. The prioritization of SOEs maintaining their monopoly over the defense industrial base, combined with a lack of interest from POE start-ups in developing dual-use technologies and a reliance on the foreign semiconductor industry, hinders the full realization of the MCF strategy. Navigating these complexities will determine the PLA's ability to evolve into an intelligentized force and shape the PRC's standing in the global balance of power, influencing geopolitical stability in the region. As the world shifts away from globalization, future scholarship can build on this analysis by examining the PRC's ability to overcome disrupted supply chains and technological isolation from Western markets to achieve its goals of intelligentization.

ADAPTING TO FUTURE WARS

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

Joshua Arostegui

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.

https://doi.org/10.33411/cmsr2025.01.003

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

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

[4] Dennis 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).

[5] Dennis 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	Objective
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

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[8] Tang Minhui and Xu Chang [唐旻晖, 徐常], "在新的历史起总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.

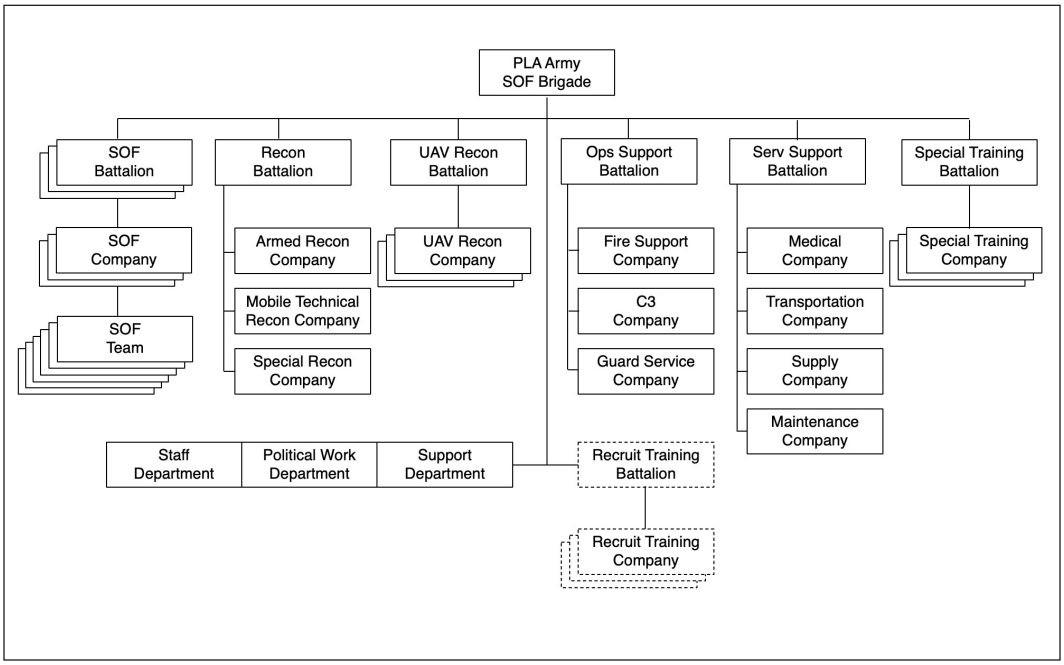
[11] Stavros Atlamazoglou, "How China's Special Forces Stack up Against the US's Special Operators," *Business Insider*, 1 December 2020.

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 Operation*s (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-

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[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

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[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 [温焌意], "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. [王营], "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

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[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, "解放軍海軍陸戰隊擴編" [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

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[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

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[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], "高清大图：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

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[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.

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[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]

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[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 *fendui* (company) junior officer command
	Reconnaissance and intelligence	
Army Combat Arms University	Operational command	Special operations *fendui* junior officer command (including females)
Army Infantry Academy	Operational command	Special operations *fendui*, marine corps special operations *fendui*, and airborne *fendui* 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 [王粲], "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

陆军特种作战学院本科招生

调整的告知信

亲爱的2025届高考考生及家长：

非常感谢大家对陆军特种作战学院的关注，对特种作战事业的热爱。

根据军队院校改革的统一部署，从今年开始，建立特战专业选拔机制，有志投身特战领域的学员在校期间可参与特战人才选拔，接受特战专业化精英化教育。为此，我院不直接招收高中毕业生，作战指挥、侦察情报专业与陆军工程大学、陆军兵种大学、陆军步兵学院采取“2+2”模式实施分段衔接培养。招生专业具体为：①陆军工程大学**作战指挥专业**，培养目标为侦察兵分队初级指挥军官；②陆军工程大学**侦察情报专业**，培养目标为侦察兵分队初级指挥军官；③陆军兵种大学**作战指挥专业**，培养目标为特种兵分队初级指挥军官（含女生）、侦察兵分队初级指挥军官；④陆军步兵学院**作战指挥专业**，培养目标为特种兵分队初级指挥军官、海军陆战队特种兵分队初级指挥军官、空降兵分队初级指挥军官。

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祝愿广大考生金榜题名，欢迎大家来我院学习深造。

陆军特种作战学院

2025年6月26日

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

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[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/RRA394-1; 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.

About the Author

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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.


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