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The PLA's Pursuit of Enhanced Joint Operations Capabilities

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- The 1991 Gulf War prompted the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) to begin full-scale research of joint operations premised on informatization. From around the mid-2000s, the PLA advocated the concept of integrated joint operations [*Yitihua Lianhe Zuozhan*, 一体化联合作战] (IJO).
- The Xi Jinping regime, inaugurated in November 2012, carried out the biggest PLA reforms since the founding of the People's Republic of China for realizing the IJO concept.
- The PLA reforms were set for completion in 2020.

▼ Purpose of this report

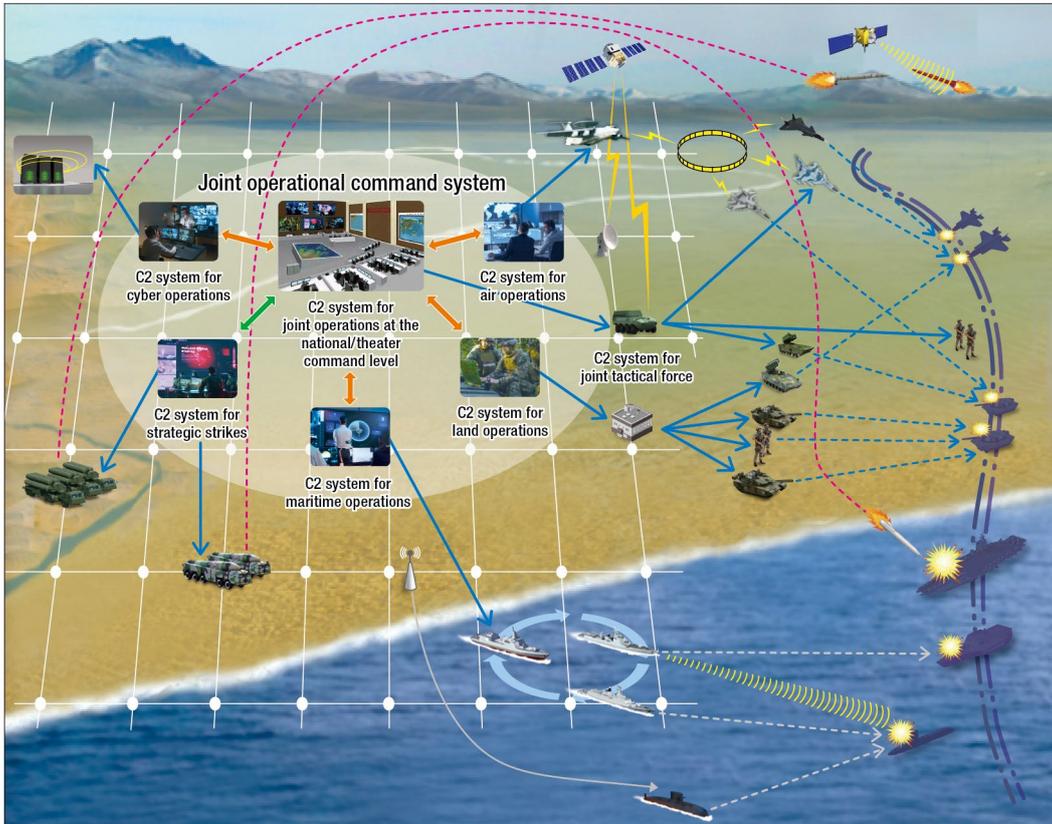
With the 2020 milestone year behind us, this report assesses the extent to which the PLA's joint operations capabilities have progressed since the 1990s from four perspectives: (1) the evolution of the concept; (2) the achievements of the joint operations structure established by the PLA reforms; (3) the development of joint operations training and education; and (4) the maintenance and strengthening of Party-Army relations.

This report carries out a multifaceted analysis and makes an accurate estimate of the PLA's joint operations capabilities

Chapter 1: Evolution of the PLA's Joint Operations Concept

- Based on the outcome of the Gulf War, the PLA started researching joint operations in earnest with informatized warfare in mind. From the mid-2000s, the PLA advocated the **IJO concept** and "**Information System-Based System of Systems Operational Capability**," and presented a joint operations concept that included traditional security domains (land, sea, and air) and new security domains (such as space, cyber electromagnetic, and cognitive domain). Meanwhile, during the Hu Jintao regime, the PLA's informatization was still in the initial stage. Therefore, the PLA set forth that, for the time being, the feasible joint operations were "joint operations under the conditions of informationization," which was based on the military doctrine of "local wars under the conditions of informationization." The joint operations capabilities of the PLA had not necessarily reached a sufficient level in the Hu Jintao era.
- The Xi Jinping leadership established "**informationized local wars**" as a military doctrine. Under this doctrine, the Xi leadership undertook large-scale military reforms in order to strengthen joint operations capabilities based on the IJO concept and "Information System-Based System of Systems Operational Capability."
- In October 2017, at the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi advocated the new concepts of "**Joint Operations Capability Based on Network Information Systems**" and "**All-Domain Operations Capability**" in order to deepen the IJO concept. The implementation of precision, stealth, and unmanned operations, as well as the gaining of information dominance, are positioned at the core of these concepts, **putting more pronounced emphasis on new security domains**.
- With "**intelligitized warfare**" proposed from 2019, the PLA is conducting ongoing research on new joint operations concepts, such as "**Multi-Domain Integrated Joint Operations**" and "**Joint Operations under the Conditions of Intelligitization**." These discussions include the possibility of further PLA reforms, such as the establishment of new military services and the implementation of bolder military reforms.

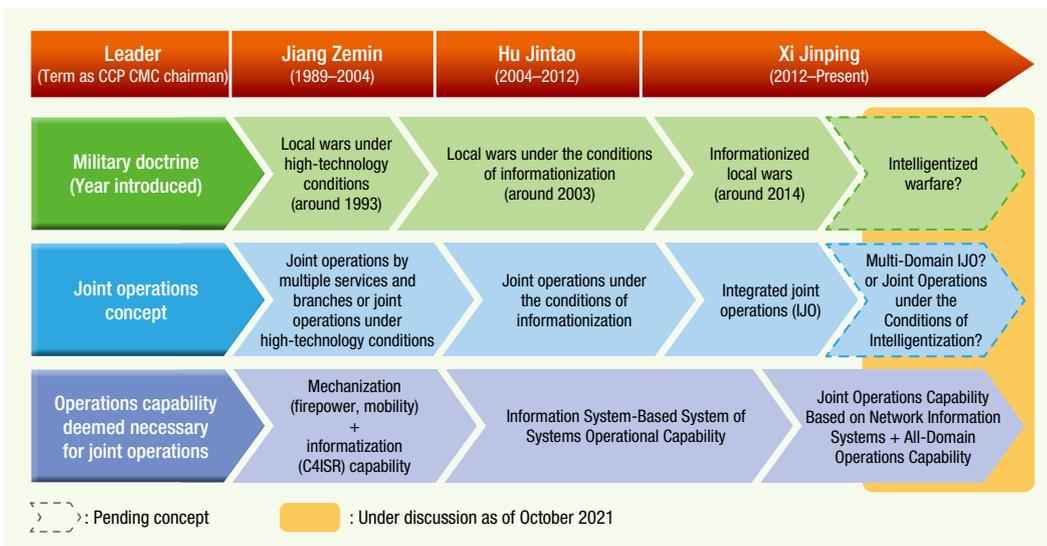
Conceptual Image of the PLA's IJO during the Xi Jinping Regime



↔: The C2 system for strategic strikes concerns the operation of nuclear assets and conventional warhead systems used for strategic targets, such as DF-21D, and is therefore considered to be under the command of the C2 system at the national level, not the theater command level.

Source: Compiled based on 蓝羽石、毛永庆、黄强 [Lan Yushi, Mao Yongqing, and Huang Qiang] et al., eds., 联合作战指挥控制系统 [Joint Operations Command and Control System] (Beijing: 国防工业出版社 [National Defense Industry Press], 2019), p. 12.

Conceptual Diagram of the Evolution of the PLA's Joint Operations Concept

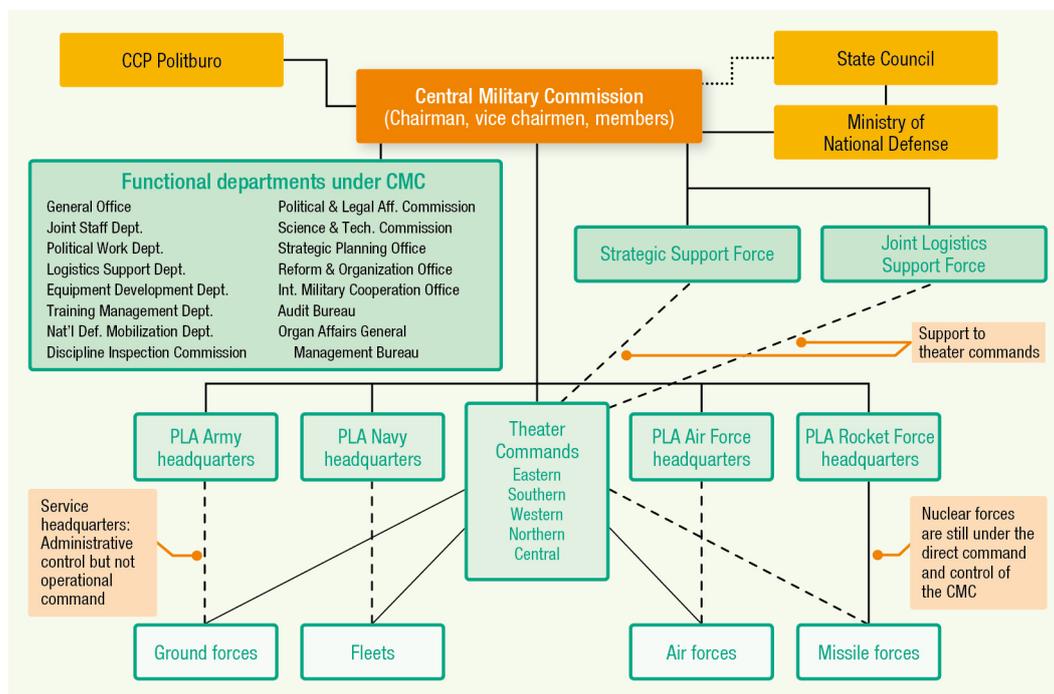


Source: Compiled by the author.

Chapter 2: The Reformed PLA's Joint Operations Structure

- The PLA carried out large-scale military reforms from the end of 2015 to 2016. The reforms were wide-ranging and included: (1) the dissolution of four general departments and the **launch of the multi-department system of the Central Military Commission (CMC)**; (2) the abolition of the seven military regions (MRs) and the **establishment of five theater commands (TCs)**; (3) the **creation of the PLA Army headquarters**; (4) the **upgrading of the PLA Second Artillery Corps to the PLA Rocket Force** and the **launch of the PLA Strategic Support Force and the PLA Joint Logistics Support Force**; and (5) the **expansion of the PLA Navy Marine Corps**.
- The PLA reforms **clarified the distinction between the operational chain of command (CMC-TC headquarters-operational units) and the administrative chain of command (CMC-service headquarters-operational units)**, based on the policy of “the CMC performs general management, the theaters are mainly in charge of operations, and the services are mainly in charge of force building” [*junwei guanrong*, 军委管总; *zhanqu zhuzhan*, 战区主战; *junzhong zhujian*, 军种主建]. Under this policy, TCs were described as “the only supreme joint operations command organization in their respective strategic directions.” The TCs have greater power and command and control (C2) authority than the MRs before the PLA reforms and have gained in importance.

PLA Organization Chart: After the Military Reforms



Source: Compiled based on Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, “Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA,” in Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019), p. 6.

Newly Established Five Theater Commands

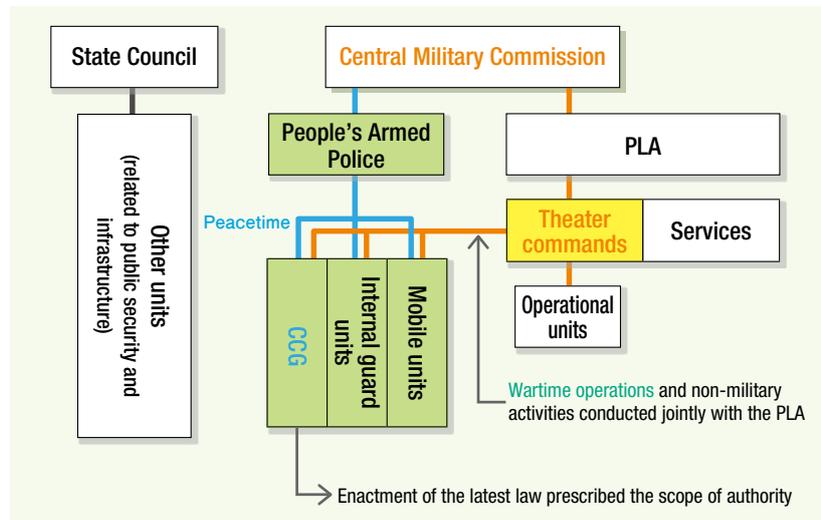


Notes: 1. 🚩 Theater Command headquarters ■ Theater Army headquarters ▲ Theater Navy headquarters
 2. Theater boundaries have not been officially announced. The above map was created based on U.S. Department of Defense reports, media reports, etc.

Source: Compiled based on Ministry of Defense of Japan, *Defense of Japan 2021* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2021), p. 66.

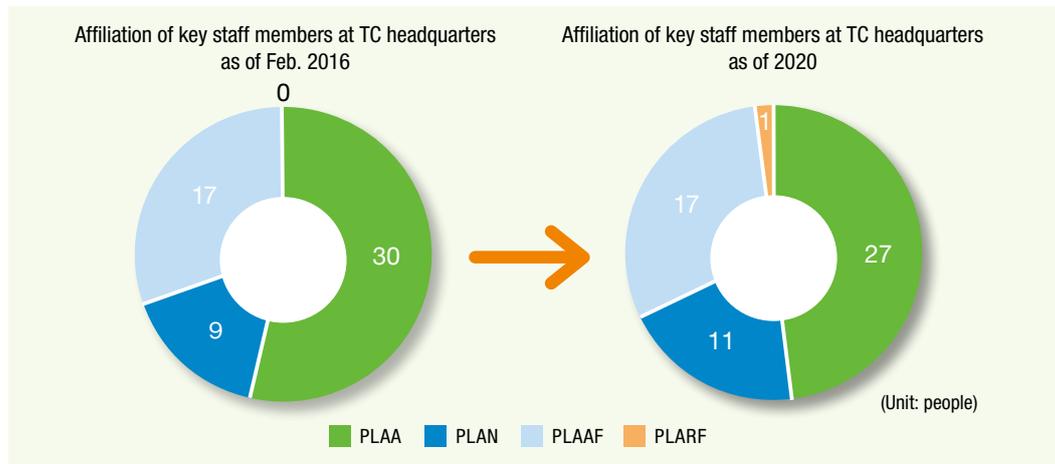
- As part of the PLA reforms, the C2 authority of the People's Armed Police (PAP) was centralized in the CMC, and the China Coast Guard (CCG) was placed under the PAP, **creating the new CMC-PAP-CCG maritime border security management system.**
- Enforcing the CMC chairman responsibility system **strengthened Xi Jinping's C2 authority over the PLA.** In addition, under Xi's leadership, **loyalty to Xi and joint operations were emphasized for selection of the PLA leadership.** Nevertheless, PLA Army personnel still dominate the TC headquarters.

CMC-PAP-CCG Chain of Command Following the Entry into Force of the Coast Guard Law



Source: Compiled based on the website of the Ministry of Defense of Japan.

Shift in Composition of Key Posts at TC Headquarters

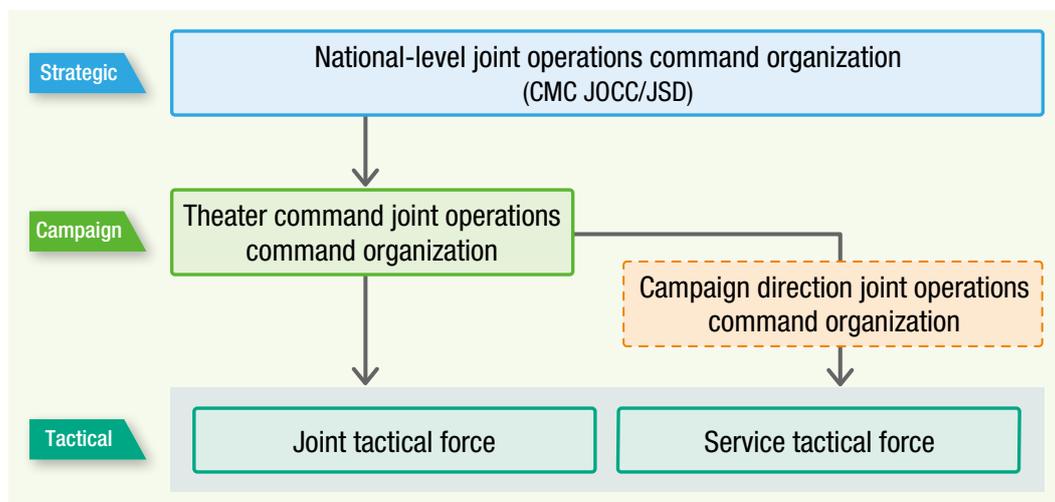


Note: Key posts at TC headquarters refers to commander, political commissars, deputy commanders (including TC chief of staff), and deputy political commissars (including director of the TC Political Work Department).

Sources: Compiled based on 中共研究杂志社 [Studies on Chinese Communism Publishing Co.], ed., 军改后共军重要领导人事评析专辑 [Collection of Evaluations of Important Leaders of the Communist Military after the Military Reforms] (Taipei: 中共研究杂志社 [Studies on Chinese Communism Publishing Co.], 2016), pp. 69-101; 中共研究杂志社 [Studies on Chinese Communism Publishing Co.], ed., 2020年共军事事专辑 [Feature: 2020 Communist Army Personnel] (Taipei: 中共研究杂志社 [Studies on Chinese Communism Publishing Co.], 2020), pp. 110-147.

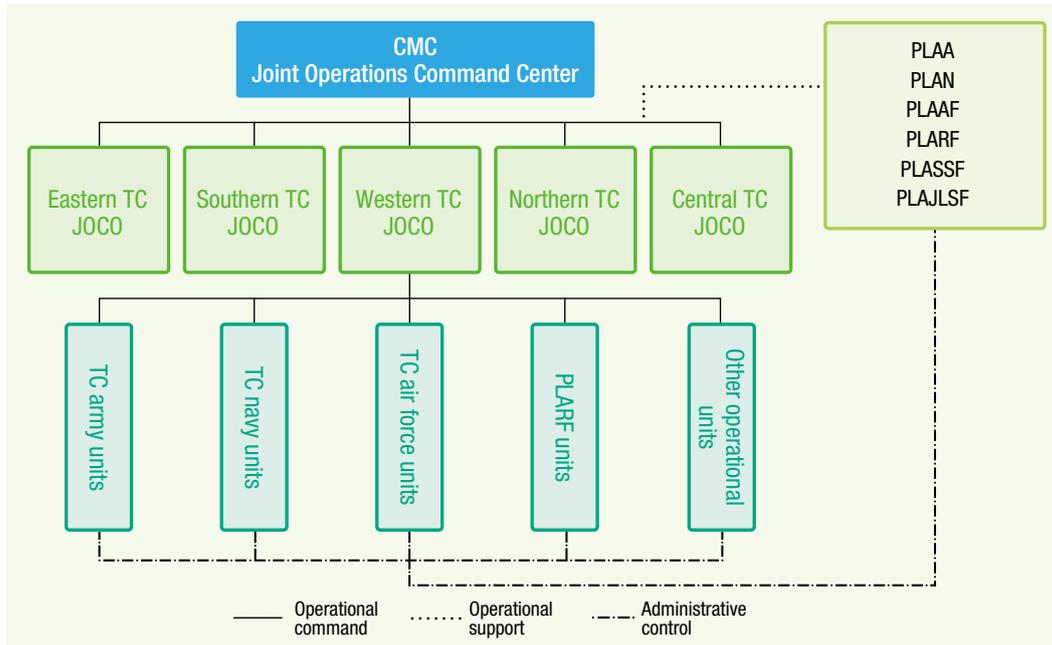
- With the formation of the standing CMC Joint Operations Command Center and TC Joint Operations Command Organizations, the PLA established a joint operations command structure for “unification of peacetime structure and wartime structure” [Ping Zhan Yiti, 平战一体]. In addition, the PLA has been developing C2 systems for joint operations, interconnecting them with the C2 systems of the military services and integrating them with the C2 systems of government organizations and the civilian sector.

The Layers of the PLA's Joint Operations Command Structure



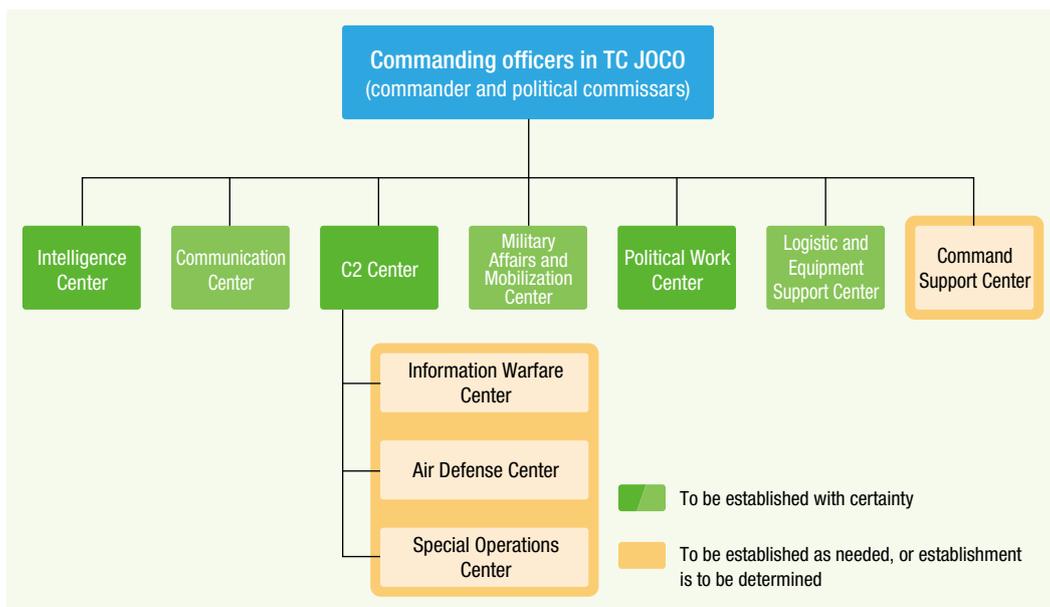
Sources: Compiled based on 谭亚东 [Tan Yadong], ed., 联合作战教程 [Lectures on Joint Operations] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Academy of Military Science Press], 2013), pp. 88-92; 蓝羽石、毛永庆、黄强 [Lan Yushi, Mao Yongqing, and Huang Qiang] et al., eds., 联合作战指挥控制系统 [Joint Operations Command and Control System] (Beijing: 国防工业出版社 [National Defense Industry Press], 2019), p. 47.

The PLA's Joint Operations Command Structure



Source: Compiled based on 刘伟 [Liu Wei], ed., 战区联合作战指挥 [Theater Command Joint Operations Command] (Beijing: 国防大学出版社 [NDU Press], 2016), p. 340.

Internal Structure of Main Command Post of TC Joint Operations Command Organization

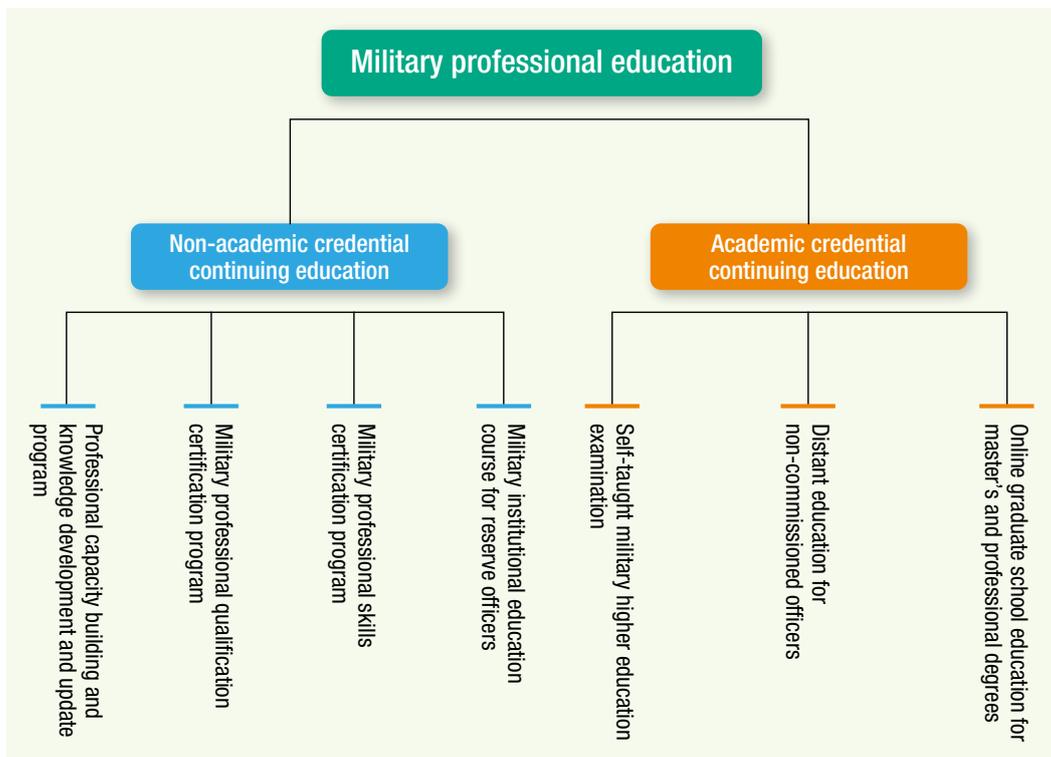


Sources: Compiled based on 刘伟 [Liu Wei], 联合作战指挥 [Joint Operations Command] (Shenyang: 白山出版社 [Baishan Publishing House], 2010), pp. 50-53; Liu, *Theater Command Joint Operations Command*, p. 82.

Chapter 3: The Transformation of Joint Operations Training and Talent Cultivation Programs through the PLA Reforms, and the Quest for Strengthening Party-Army Relations

- In accordance with Xi Jinping's instruction to become an army that is "ready to fight and win wars," the PLA further strengthened its joint operations training after the PLA reforms, **stepped up trainings in Taiwan's vicinity and in the South China Sea**, and is enhancing its capabilities for commanding joint operations in China-Russia joint exercises. Through a series of joint operations trainings, the PLA has especially **strengthened information sharing among the services and connecting their C2 systems**. In addition, the PLA improved the quality of trainings by strengthening the training supervision structure.
- In order to overcome the shortage of personnel for commanding joint operations, the PLA **developed the "triad" System for training new types of military personnel**, consisting of military institutional education, unit training practice, and military professional education (online education). The PLA National Defense University is the central academy for cultivating personnel for joint operations, and the joint operations personnel who have been trained at the university are assigned to operational units.
- The PLA sought to strengthen the education and training structure by **establishing and improving related documents, laws, and regulations**. In terms of training, the PLA updated the "Military Training Regulations" and the "Military Training Outline" and enacted the "Trial Guidelines on PLA Joint Operations." In terms of education, it enacted the "Military Education Policy in the New Era," the "Trial Regulations on the Education in Military Academies," and the "Trial Regulations on Military Professional Education for Armed Forces."
- As the PLA strengthens its joint operations structure, some scholars note that the traditional system for maintaining Party-Army relations will become a setback. To address this, the PLA **seeks the coexistence of the IJO concept and the maintenance and strengthening of Party-Army relations** by: (1) enforcing the "system of division of the leader's responsibilities under the unified collective leadership of the Party committee"; (2) focusing on military expertise and scientific and technological knowledge in the selection and cultivation of political officers; and (3) emphasizing the "Three Warfares" and promoting informatization in wartime political work.

Main Types of Military Professional Education



Source: Compiled based on *PLA Daily*, March 1, 2018.

List of Wartime Political Work

Wartime political work	Description
Wartime publicity (propaganda) and education work	Conducts political mobilization and ideological education for the purpose of completing operational missions, and carries out wartime publicity activities to raise the morale of participants.
Wartime organization work	Organizes CCP and Chinese Communist Youth League groupings of the participating units, promotes military democracy, turns those who have made outstanding achievements into examples and commends them, selects heroes, and provides care for the wounded and sick soldiers.
Wartime cadre work	Makes personnel appointments, including selection of officers for war and the filling of vacant positions during a war.
Execution of the “Three Warfares”	Performs public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.
Wartime mass work	Conducts mass mobilization at the local level including militias, conducts ideological and political work and discipline maintenance for mobilized personnel, and addresses masses and minorities in other countries during wartime. Forms militia units that provide information support to engage in cyber operations.
Wartime public security, procuratorial and judicial work	Guards key headquarters staff, performs political reviews, conducts counterintelligence activities, and prevents and deals with military crimes.
Wartime liaison work	Conducts intelligence activities, such as intelligence collection on the enemy, clandestine dismantling (infiltration) work, and the management, education, and return of prisoners of war.

Source: Compiled based on 吴志忠 [Wu Zhizhong], ed., 战时政治工作教程 [*Lectures on Wartime Political Work*] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Academy of Military Science Press], 2013), pp. 105-128.

Conclusions

- Since the 1990s, the PLA has advocated IJO, a concept with broad applicability, in order to adapt flexibly to the developments in U.S. military theories and science and technology. The PLA sought to **deepen the IJO concept by pursuing uniqueness, combining tradition (such as “Three Warfares,” military-civil fusion, and maintenance and strengthening of Party-Army relations) and innovations (such as emphasis on long-range precision attack capability, shift to new security domains, and intelligentized warfare).**
- Under the strong initiative of Xi Jinping, the PLA reforms developed a joint operations structure that can realize the IJO concept. In line with this, the PLA evolved its joint operations training and personnel cultivation programs and aimed to reconcile the effective execution of the IJO concept and the maintenance and strengthening of Party-Army relations.
- In the PLA reforms, the PLA accomplished many achievements in deepening its joint operations. Meanwhile, there still remain numerous challenges even after the reforms, such as: (1) **coordination of authority and roles among the CMC, TCs, and services;** (2) insufficient awareness of joint operations and service parochialism; (3) the formalism of joint operations training and coordination between the joint operations training led by the TCs and the training of the services and branches; (4) **difficulties with recruiting, cultivating, and retaining personnel skilled in science and technology;** and (5) **the nature of command authority and capability of political commissars.** Overcoming these challenges is expected to take time.
- The timetable for the PLA's modernization sets 2027, 2035, and 2050 as milestone years. In these years, **it will be important to estimate the joint operations capabilities of the PLA from multiple aspects,** paying attention not only to the increase in defense spending, introduction of new equipment, and statements and actions directed at other countries, but also to the PLA's joint operations concept, military reforms and the formation of an organizational culture, qualitative improvements in education and training and personnel, and Party-Army relations.