



PLA UPDATE

A monthly newsletter focused on the internal and external affairs of the PLA

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Welcome to the April 2024 edition of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA's newsletter on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). We begin this issue with a look at a major reorganization of PLA forces responsible for space, cyberspace, electronic, information, communications, and psychological warfare missions. Other topics covered in this issue are shown below in the table of contents.

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ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

PLA CREATES AEROSPACE, CYBER, AND INFORMATION SUPPORT FORCES

China's defense ministry portrayed the three forces' creation and the disbandment of the Strategic Support Force as part of efforts to optimize the PLA's overall force structure. On April 19, Beijing unveiled the second major restructuring in less than a decade of PLA forces responsible for space, cyberspace, electronic, information, communications, and psychological warfare missions. The Strategic Support Force—established in late 2015 to centralize capabilities for such missions—was officially disbanded.¹ In its place, three new forces were created: the Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, and Information Support Force. These forces are directly subordinate to China's Central Military Commission, the highest-level authority over China's armed forces.²

PRC public messaging on the three new forces focused mainly on the Information Support Force.³ On April 19—the same day as the Strategic Support Force's disbandment—a ceremony was held in Beijing to mark the Information Support Force's establishment. There, PRC leader Xi Jinping described the Information Support Force as a strategic branch that would play a key role in coordinating the construction and employment of the PLA's information systems.⁴ He urged the force to integrate deeply into joint operations systems and to provide precise, effective support. An article published in the PLA's official newspaper on April 20 further asserted that the Information Support Force was expected to improve the PLA's ability to conduct joint, all-domain operations.⁵

On April 19, a spokesperson of China's defense ministry said that the latest reform marked a shift to a force structure of four services (the PLA Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force) and four arms (the Aerospace Force, Cyberspace Force, Information Support Force, and Joint Logistics Support Force). The spokesperson said China would continue to refine its force structure in response to changing tasks and circumstances.⁶



Xi Jinping (center) and Information Support Force Commander Bi Yi (left) and Political Commissar Li Wei (right) at the force's establishment ceremony.

Source: [Xinhua](#).

SENIOR LEADERSHIP GUIDANCE

AMS AUTHORS EXPOUND ON XI'S CALL FOR STRATEGIC CAPABILITIES

PLA scholars' editorial sheds light on Xi Jinping's remarks to the PLA delegation at the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) concerning improving strategic capabilities in emerging domains. As discussed in our [March edition of PLA UPDATE](#), on March 7 during the "Two Sessions,"⁷ Xi Jinping met with the PLA's delegation to the 14th NPC, telling them to "strengthen military responsibilities, deepen reform and innovation, and comprehensively enhance strategic capabilities in emerging fields."⁸ In a [March 19 op-ed](#) for Central Military Commission mouthpiece *PLA Daily*, two PLA Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) scholars stated that Xi exhorted the PLA to support PRC efforts to enhance strategic capabilities in emerging domains, including the deep sea, outer space, and cyberspace.⁹

According to the AMS scholars, Xi told the PLA that building strategic capabilities is vital to support the PRC's goals of becoming a global science and technology leader, developing "new frontiers" in pursuit of national security, "shaping new advantages" in strategic competition with great powers, and "creating new combat capabilities to win future wars."

In their opinion piece, the scholars discussed ways in which the PLA should integrate advanced technologies and information systems to strengthen the force's strategic capabilities. They stated that the PLA should actively streamline the transformation of scientific research results into new technologies and should ensure advances in emerging fields are shared between the defense industry and civilian economy. Addressing emerging warfighting domains, the authors stressed the need to provide timely warnings and detect strategic threats early, strengthen emergency and crisis management mechanisms, and respond to gray zone crises and conflicts.

The AMS scholars also urged the PLA to support the development of capabilities to improve the PRC's international influence in emerging fields. To do so, they recommended that the PLA participate in major international governance issues such as artificial intelligence (AI) control, space debris management, and deep sea environmental protection. They also recommended contributing to the formulation of international rules in matters such as AI standards, space traffic management, and marine protection regulations; providing "international governance public security products"; and establishing and maintaining China's "image as a participant and builder of security."

MILITARY-CIVIL FUSION

PRC AGENCIES CALL FOR MODERNIZING MILITARY SUPPLY STATIONS

The announced effort seeks to improve local governments' provision of logistics support to PLA units' out-of-area operations. On March 27, the *PLA Daily* [reported](#) that 12 PRC military and civilian agencies—including the Ministry of Veterans Affairs and CMC Joint Logistic Support Department—recently released a document titled *Opinion on Strengthening Military Supply Station Building and Development in the New Era* (关于加强新时代军供站建设发展的意见). The report portrayed the opinion's release as an important development in military-civilian efforts to adapt to a new logistic support structure for joint operations that would make military supply stations more "operationally oriented."¹⁰

Military supply stations are local government organizations overseen by the Ministry of Veterans Affairs. The facilities supplement the PLA's military logistics system by supplying food, beverage, and lodging for servicemembers undergoing career transitions as well as personnel who are temporarily geographically displaced. The stations support activities including recruit onboarding, permanent changes of station, out-of-area exercises, emergency response operations, and retiree offboarding. The station staff are local government civilians, likely including some recently discharged PLA personnel.¹¹



Military supply station staff members (wearing black uniforms) provide food and beverage to new military recruits in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province (left), and Binzhou, Shandong Province (right).

Sources: [Shenzhen News Online](#); [Binzhou Online](#).

Although the full text of the opinion was not made public, the *PLA Daily* report summarizes its main points. These include the following:

- The geographic disposition of military supply stations should be improved to support combat readiness requirements.
- Military supply stations should continue providing their traditional means of support while also adapting to the needs of "long-range maneuvers."
- Military and civilian organizations should strive to better vertically integrate information systems and share data in support of a common operating picture and integrated command platform.

MILITARY DIPLOMACY & OVERSEAS ACTIVITIES

PLA COMPETES IN SNOWFIELD DRILLS AT INTERNATIONAL ARMY GAMES

A group of PLA female servicemembers participated in Sayan Range March for the first time and took first place among female teams. Sayan Range March is a snowfield combat and march competition of the International Army Games—an international military sports event organized by the Russian Ministry of Defense.¹² The 2024 iteration was held in the Western Sayan Range region in Russia from late March to early April and included participants from seven countries, including China, Russia, and Iran. China sent 23 personnel from a brigade of the PLA Army's 78th Group Army, who were divided into a male



PLA female team races to the finish line in the group skiing course of Sayan Range March.

Source: [China Military Online](#).

team and a female team.¹³ This was the first year that a female PLA team participated in the event, and they took first place among the female competitors.¹⁴

PRC DEFENSE MINISTRY COMMENTS ON PRC-RUSSIA-IRAN NAVAL DRILLS

Beijing portrayed the exercise series as an important measure for strengthening trilateral ties and for maintaining regional security. At a press conference on March 28, a PRC Defense Ministry spokesperson [commented](#) on the latest iteration of Security Belt, a China-Russia-Iran trilateral naval exercise held near the Gulf of Oman from March 11 to 15.¹⁵ The spokesperson's remarks addressed three aspects of the exercise:

- **Diversity of participating forces.** According to the spokesperson, Security Belt 2024 featured 18 vessels from the navies of China, Russia, and Iran, which included guided-missile destroyers, guided-missile frigates, a guided-missile cruiser, and a large anti-submarine ship. Also participating were eight aircraft of different types, which included shipborne helicopters.
- **Maritime security focus.** The PRC Defense Ministry spokesperson noted that the exercise focused on counterpiracy and search and rescue and that it featured more than 10 training topics. These topics included activities such as firing at sea targets and the simulated armed rescue of hijacked merchant vessels.
- **Coordination between navies.** The spokesperson said that the three navies' forces exercised in mixed groups and that China and Russia acted as the "officer conducting the serial (OCS) of complicated subjects" for the first time. Although the term OCS does not appear to be common in PRC writings, within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, it refers to an officer who exerts tactical control over assigned forces in a specific exercise serial.¹⁶

For more on the 2024 iteration of Security Belt, see [PLA UPDATE Issue 19](#).

PLAN SHIPS STOP OVER IN TANZANIA, MOZAMBIQUE, AND MADAGASCAR

Two of these countries are locations that Beijing may be considering for future overseas bases. Following their participation in Security Belt 2024, the three ships of the PLAN's 45th Naval Escort Task Force—the Type 052D guided-missile destroyer CNS *Urumqi* (118), Type 054A guided-missile frigate CNS *Linyi* (547), and Type 903A comprehensive supply ship CNS *Dongpinghu* (960)—conducted port visits in countries along Africa's east coast. These visits included the following:

- **Tanzania (March 23 to 27).** The PLAN ships berthed at Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's largest port. While in country, the commanding officer of the task force met with Tanzanian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ramson Godwin. Representatives of the task force also visited the Dar es Salaam Station of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway and paid respects at the Chinese Experts Cemetery in Tanzania.¹⁷
- **Mozambique (April 1 to 5).** The PLAN task force stopped over in the Port of Maputo in southern Mozambique. There, its commanding officer met with the chief of staff of the Mozambican Navy. Representatives of Mozambique's navy also visited CNS *Linyi*, where PLAN sailors demonstrated the operations of fireproof gear and damage-control devices.¹⁸
- **Madagascar (April 10 to 14).** The PLAN ships stopped over at Toamasina, the island country's main port. Members of the task force reportedly conducted official courtesy calls and visits to Madagascar military facilities.¹⁹

Of note, the US Department of Defense's 2023 *China Military Power Report* identifies both Tanzania and Mozambique as locations which the PLA is likely considering for future logistics facilities. Whether a PLAN base is ultimately constructed in one of these countries will depend on factors such as the host country's willingness and the PRC's assessment of the location's strategic value.²⁰



Left: a PLAN cadet shows around members of the Tanzanian navy during an open deck event in Dar es Salaam. Right: a PLAN open deck event in Maputo, Mozambique.

Sources: CCTV-7 (a), (b).

PLA PROMOTIONS

TWO OFFICERS PROMOTED TO THREE-STAR GENERAL

Officers from organizations responsible for legal affairs and joint education were promoted to the PLA's top military rank. On March 28, PRC leader Xi Jinping presided over a [ceremony](#) in Beijing in which two PLA officers were promoted from two-star vice admiral/lieutenant general to three-star admiral/general, the highest military rank in the PLA.²¹ The officers promoted were as follows:

- **Wang Renhua (王仁华)**, secretary of the CMC Politics and Law Commission. This commission is responsible for preventing, investigating, and dealing with criminal activities within the PLA.²² Although Wang is currently a naval officer, he spent most of his career in the PLA Army before transferring to the PLAN in 2017.²³
- **Xiao Tianliang (肖天亮)**, president of the PLA's National Defense University (NDU), China's central academic institution responsible for cultivating joint operations personnel.²⁴ Xiao served as editor-in-chief of multiple editions of NDU's *Science of Military Strategy*, a core textbook for senior PLA officers on war planning and execution.²⁵



Scene of the promotion ceremony. Xi Jinping and other CMC members are in the front; in the back are Wang Renhua (left) and Xiao Tianliang.

Source: [Xinhua](#).

PRC MILITARY MEDIA

“MILITARY DIALOGUE” SHOWCASES FOREIGN MILITARY TIES TO PLA

PRC media used footage from the “Military Dialogue” conference to portray foreign militaries as supportive of PLA modernization and welcoming of China’s regional and global military activities. In late March and early April, PRC state television broadcast a series of segments from “Military Dialogue” (军事对话), an in-person conference that celebrated cooperation between the PLA and foreign militaries. The event, held during an unspecified date, emphasized programs that have brought foreign servicemembers to China to study and train with the PLA.²⁶ Approximately 120 senior foreign military officers from more than 60 countries attended Military Dialogue, including past participants in programs hosted by PLA NDU’s International College of Defense Studies in Beijing and the PLA Naval Command College in Nanjing.²⁷

The broadcast included the following notable segments:

- Multiple foreign military officers singing PLA songs in Chinese on the event stage.
- Footage of foreign servicemembers participating in bilateral and multilateral exercises and training with the PLA.
- Featurettes of foreign troops visiting historical sites with military significance across China.



Left: The audience at Military Dialogue applauds a speech by a PLA senior colonel. Right: A Bangladeshi brigadier general sings a song in Chinese at the event.

Source: [CCTV-7](#).

As a common feature in all these segments, foreign military personnel praised various aspects of China and the PLA. Specifically, foreign servicemembers commented favorably on China’s culture, people, and military capabilities. Absent from their remarks were any criticisms of China or its armed forces.²⁸

NOTES

¹ “Xi Focus: Xi Presents Flag to PLA’s Information Support Force,” Xinhua, Apr. 19, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240419/58e7b3a4d1f043858a0d29fce5da4cf4/c.html>.

² “PLA Embraces a New System of Services and Arms,” Ministry of Defense of the People’s Republic of China, Apr. 19, 2024, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16302054.html>.

³ PRC media reporting did not mention whether there were also establishment ceremonies held for the Aerospace Force and Cyberspace Force.

⁴ “Xi Focus: Xi Presents Flag to PLA’s Information Support Force.”

⁵ “PLA Daily Commentator: Strive to Build a Strong Modernized Information Support Force” (解放军报评论员：努力建设一支强大的现代化信息支援部队), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Apr. 20, 2024, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16302154.html.

⁶ “PLA Embraces a New System of Services and Arms.”

⁷ The “Two Sessions” is the common name the PRC adopted for its two most important annual legislative meetings: the National People’s Congress and the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (NCCPPCC). For more on Xi’s remarks and military-related affairs that occurred during the 14th NPC and NCCPPCC in 2024, see Brian Waidelich and Patrick deGategno, eds. *PLA UPDATE* 19, Mar. 22, 2024, <https://www.cna.org/our-media/newsletters/pla-update/issue-19>.

⁸ Quotation from Song Xin and Tong Xinyu, “PLA and PAP Delegation Spokesperson Answers Reporters’ Questions” (解放军和武警部队代表团新闻发言人答记者问), 81.cn, Mar. 9, 2024, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-03-10&paperNumber=02&articleid=926711.

⁹ Qiu Hao (仇昊) and Chen Xiaoqian (陈小迁), “Understanding and Thought on Comprehensively Improving Strategic Capabilities in New Emerging Fields” (对全面提升新兴领域战略能力的认识与思考), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Mar. 19, 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-03-19&paperNumber=07&articleid=927285.

¹⁰ Sun Xingwei (孙兴维) and Liu Wei (刘伟), “12 Agencies Including Ministry of Veterans Affairs and CMC Joint Logistic Support Department Jointly Release Opinion: Strengthening Military Supply Station Building and Development in the New Era” (退役军人事务部、中央军委后勤保障部等 12 部门联合出台意见 加强新时代军供站建设发展), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Mar. 27, 2024, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-03-27&paperNumber=01&articleid=927891.

¹¹ “2024 Organization Budget Information Disclosure Catalogue” (2024 年单位预算信息公开目录), Chengde Municipal People’s Government (承德市人民政府), accessed Apr. 2, 2024, <https://www.chengde.gov.cn/attach/0/59138c8a632b45aca583bee18b9ab819.pdf>. The editors would like to thank Dennis Blasko for his comments on this section.

¹² “Int’l Army Games 2022 Ends in Russia,” *Xinhua*, Aug. 28, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/europe/20220828/f9cf85fdd7954e0c887e381916f3869d/c.html>.

¹³ “Chinese Participating Team Sets Out for ‘Sayan Range March,’” *China Military Online*, Apr. 1, 2024, [¹⁴ Yang Guiliang \(杨贵良\), “The ‘Sayan Range March’ Competition Comes to an End. The Chinese Participating Teams Have Excellent Results” \(“萨彦岭行军” 比赛落幕 中国参赛队战绩优异\), *China Military Online* \(中国军网\), Apr. 10, 2024, \[http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16299678.html\]\(http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16299678.html\).](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16298123.html#:~:text=During%20the%20event%2C%20each%20team,50%20kilometers%20in%20the%20snowfield;‘Sayan Range March’ Snowfield Combat and March Competition Kicks Off,” China Military Online, Apr. 8, 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16299369.html.</p>
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¹⁵ “Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on March 28,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, Apr. 2, 2024, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/NewsRelease/16298423.html.

¹⁶ NATOTerm, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, accessed Apr. 6, 2024, <https://nso.nato.int/natoterm/Web.mvc>.

¹⁷ Chen Xing and Zhou Jianlong, “Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Concludes Visit to Tanzania,” *China Military Online*, Mar. 29, 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16297562.html.

¹⁸ Chen Xing and Zhou Jianlong, “45th Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Arrives in Mozambique for Goodwill Visit,” *China Military Online*, Apr. 2, 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16298347.html; Chen Xing and Zhou Jianlong, “45th Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Concludes Goodwill Visit to Mozambique,” *China Military Online*, Apr. 7, 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16299162.html.

¹⁹ “45th Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Visits Madagascar,” *China Military Online*, Apr. 11, 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16300057.html; “45th Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Wraps Up Visit to Madagascar,” *China Military Online*, Apr. 15, 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16300966.html.

²⁰ US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, 2023, p. 155.

²¹ “Xi Presents Order to Promote Military Officers to Rank of General,” Xinhua, Mar. 28, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240328/749273e268824ff1acf93a856fab0b73/c.html>.

²² “CMC,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, accessed Apr. 10, 2024, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/CMCDEPARTMENTS/index.html>.

²³ “Zhang Ping Becomes Political Commissar of Navy Logistics Department, Wang Renhua Becomes Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary of East Sea Fleet” (张平任海军后勤部政委，王仁华任东海舰队纪委书记), *The Paper* (澎湃新闻), Apr. 25, 2017, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1670071.

²⁴ Kenneth Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People’s Liberation Army’s 37 Academic Institutions*, China Aerospace Studies Institute, June 11, 2020, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/Other-Topics/2020-06-11%20PLA%20Academic%20Institutions.pdf>, p. 34.

²⁵ For a review of the 2020 edition of NDU’s *Science of Military Strategy*, see Joel Wuthnow, “What I Learned from the PLA’s Latest Strategy Textbook,” *China Brief* 21, no. 11 (May 25, 2021), <https://jamestown.org/program/what-i-learned-from-the-pla-latest-strategy-textbook/>.

²⁶ The first broadcast appears to have been released on March 26, but it is unclear when the event took place. “Military Report: Military Dialogue, Connecting the World, Working Together for Peace,” CCTV-7, Mar. 26, 2024, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/03/26/VIDEiN2MXuoN9y8icfVG6Llc240326.shtml?spm=C52346.PiumOrlyLNUM.E0VXtwLj8YU7.27>.

²⁷ “Military Dialogue: PLA in Eyes of Foreign Military Members,” CCTV-7, Mar. 27, 2024, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/MEDIA/Videos/16297005.html>.

²⁸ Using foreign voices to promote good news stories about China is among Beijing’s common tactics for shaping the global media environment. For more information on related tactics, see Heidi Holz and Anthony Miller, *China’s Playbook for Shaping the Global Media Environment*, CNA, IRM-2020-U-024710-FINAL, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/02/IRM-2020-U-024710-Final.pdf>.

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