

People’s Liberation Army: Overview

KOREAN WAR

In 1950 Peng backed Mao’s decision to invade Korea, while other military leaders urged the conquest of Taiwan. Consequently, in September 1950 Peng arrived in Shenyang, tasked with the enormous problem of assembling an army of a quarter of a million with field officers who had no experience fighting a conventional war. By mid-October, the first troops crossed the Yalu River, and soon Peng was commanding 380,000 troops. His forces eventually suffered a million casualties in a three-year war, which ended in stalemate and an armistice. Peng had difficulties dealing not only with Mao but also with Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) and Kim Il Sung (1912–1994), and on several occasions Peng offered to resign.

In 1954, in recognition of his success in fighting the United Nations forces to a standstill in Korea, Peng was made minister of defense, a largely honorary position. The following year, he was declared a field marshal and joined the Politburo. The outspoken soldier continued to complain about Mao’s personality cult and raised objections to his policies, especially after Nikita Khrushchev’s (1894–1971) denunciations of Stalin. Matters came to a head after the launch of the Great Leap Forward. In 1958 Peng toured parts of the country and discovered things were far different from what was being reported. In Gansu, he found orchards cut down to fuel furnaces, while harvests were left to rot in fields. After visiting Jiangxi and Anhui and his home village in Hunan, Peng sent telegrams to Beijing warning that the “masses are in danger of starving.” In early 1959 he visited Mao’s home village and found untilled fields, falsified production figures, and peasants dying of starvation.

LUSHAN PLENUM

At the Lushan Plenum, which Mao called in 1959 and which lasted six weeks, Peng was encouraged by more sophisticated leaders such as Zhang Wentian (1900–1976) to write Mao a petition, a handwritten letter that ran to ten thousand characters. The mildly worded petition did not even refer to a famine and instead praised the accomplishments of the Great Leap Forward, observing there were more gains than losses. In a meeting with Mao at the plenum, however, Peng’s temper exploded, and he accused Mao of acting despotically, like Stalin in his later years, and of sacrificing human beings on the altar of unreachable production targets. Peng warned of a rebellion and said the Soviet army might be called in to restore order. Mao interpreted this as a plot to overthrow him and believed that Peng, during his recent trip to Eastern Europe, had sought Soviet backing for a coup. At a showdown in Lushan, Mao summoned his military leaders to ask if they backed him or Peng. Afterward, Peng was dismissed as a rightist and put under house arrest in Sichuan. In the ensuing purge of the “rightist opportunists,” large numbers of Peng’s real or suspected followers and sympathizers were arrested and sent to labor camps. Many of them died of starvation.

When the Cultural Revolution started in 1966, Peng was arrested and taken to Beijing. In one of numerous struggle sessions, he was forced to kneel before forty thousand people and was savagely kicked and beaten. Peng was kept in a prison cell, where he was not permitted to sit or use the toilet. He was interrogated more than two hundred times, and finally died in prison in 1974 after an eight-year ordeal. He was cremated in secrecy. Peng was rehabilitated in 1979, three years after Mao’s death.

SEE ALSO *Communist Party; Cultural Revolution, 1966–1969; Korean War, 1950–1953; Mao Zedong; People’s Liberation Army; Rural Development, 1949–1978; Great Leap Forward.*

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PEOPLE’S LIBERATION ARMY

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OVERVIEW

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is one element of the Chinese armed forces. The Chinese armed forces are composed of the active and reserve units of the PLA, the People’s Armed Police (PAP), and the People’s Militia. The Central Military Commission is the highest command and policy-making authority for the Chinese armed forces (sharing command of the PAP with the State Council through the Ministry of Public Security). In 2008, the PLA had about 2.3 million active-duty troops and an estimated 800,000 personnel in

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Joint Chinese and Russian military exercises, Shandong Peninsula, August 24, 2005. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), together with the people's militia and the People's Armed Police, form the basis of the armed forces in China. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the PLA has embarked on an aggressive modernization campaign, investing in new weapons systems and conducting military training exercises with neighboring countries. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

reserve units. The 1997 National Defense Law states that the PLA has a "defensive fighting mission, [but] when necessary, may assist in maintaining public order in accordance with the law." The PAP, which is primarily responsible for domestic security, officially numbers about 660,000 personnel, though another 230,000 PAP personnel may be under the daily command of the Ministry of Public Security. The primary militia consists of about 10 million personnel and is tasked to provide support to both the PLA and PAP. The PLA is divided into the ground forces, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), and the strategic-missile forces (Second Artillery). At least 200,000 PLA coastal and border-defense units and roughly 100,000 PAP troops are responsible for border defense. All elements of the Chinese armed forces engage in societal activities (e.g., disaster relief and some infrastructure development). An unknown number of civilians (technical specialists, administrative and custodial staff, administrative contractors, and local government-paid staff) also support PLA operations.

Following the decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the PLA has become increasingly professional. Training has become increasingly sophisticated and realistic since the 1980s. Officers are being educated at a smaller number of more-advanced institutions, including civilian universities. Measures such as a National Defense Scholarship Program, initiated in 2000, have attempted to attract high school graduates to study in civilian institutions with the obligation to serve in the PLA upon graduation. This program, also known as the National Defense Student program, seeks to produce junior officers with the technical qualifications necessary for PLA modernization. Some military academies have been converted to training bases for the technical training of officers, noncommissioned officers, conscripts, and civilian college graduates, as well as small units.

The 1999 Service Law reduced the conscript service period to two years for all conscripts, but the overall quality of recruits remains low and the system is subject to corruption. The PLA has gradually increased its military exchanges,

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attaché offices abroad (though few have PLAAF and PLAN attachés), and educational exchanges, and has conducted a variety of joint exercises with Russia and Western nations. A limited number of port calls and the PLAN's first global circumnavigation in 2002 by the destroyer *Qingdao* and the support ship *Taicang* have furthered diplomacy. Since 1990, when it first deployed military observers, the PLA has greatly increased its role in United Nations peacekeeping. China has contributed roughly 6,800 personnel to twenty-one United Nations peacekeeping missions since first sending military observers in 1990. In February 2008, 1,962 Chinese personnel were deployed on peacekeeping missions. These activities are supported by training facilities at the PLA International Relations Academy in Nanjing and the China Peacekeeping Police Training Center in Langfang, Hebei Province.

PLA GROUND FORCE

The approximately 1.6-million-person (and gradually decreasing) ground force has historically dominated the PLA, both numerically and politically. Long equipped with obsolete Soviet equipment, since the 1980s it has been periodically downsized and restructured, and its equipment modernized. Its eighteen Group Armies, divided among seven military regions, each now generally have two or three infantry divisions or brigades and one armored division or brigade, plus other units.

A variety of paramilitary forces support the PLA. In the mid-1980s, as part of a major restructuring and personnel reduction, several organizations with largely nonmilitary functions were at least partially removed from PLA ground-force command. The PAP was formed in April 1983 from PLA units tasked with internal security missions and from the Ministry of Public Security's armed police, border-defense police, and firefighting police units. In wartime, the PAP will assist the PLA ground forces in defensive operations; in peacetime, the PAP performs such missions as internal security (in support of the Ministry of Public Security) and protection of China's forests, gold mines, and hydroelectric facilities, as well as firefighting, personal security, and border-defense tasks.

The People's Militia, which supports security operations during war or national emergency, has been augmented by the PLA reserve force (established in 1984). PLA reserve units are commanded by PLA provincial military district headquarters. The Xinjiang Production Construction Corps (XPCC), which operates state farms structured along military lines in remote regions, was formed in October 1954. While the XPCC (like the Railway Corps and the Capital Construction Corps) was removed from PLA control in the early 1980s, it still performs economic and social functions. Several militia units have been formed from personnel assigned to its work units. The XPCC also cooperates closely with PAP forces in the area.

PLA NAVY (PLAN)

In 1949 Mao Zedong declared, "to oppose imperialist aggression, we must build a powerful navy." Founded on April 23, 1949, the PLAN established its headquarters in Beijing in April 1950 and its first base in Qingdao in September 1950. Assisted by 2,500 Soviet advisers, the PLAN was initially led by PLA ground-force commanders, whose forces were primarily former Nationalist sailors, many of whom had defected voluntarily, and their vessels. During the Cold War, the PLAN was repeatedly reorganized, largely in attempt to improve equipment and maintenance. Until 1985, the PLAN was charged with coastal defense. As a subordinate organization, the PLAN would support the PLA in what Mao envisioned to be a major ground war against the superpowers. Following rapprochement with the United States in 1972, this concern was directed solely at the Soviet Union.

During the late 1970s, however, evidence emerged that China might be moving beyond a policy of coastal defense. The PLAN sent submarines into the South China Sea and beyond the first island chain into the Pacific Ocean for the first time. An "offshore defense strategy" was officially approved by the Central Military Commission in 1985 (Chiang Shang-chou 1998). This major paradigm shift was driven by Deng Xiaoping's assessment that a great-power war would not occur for some time and that coastal economic development should take precedence, and it was accelerated by increasing People's Republic of China (PRC) concerns with maritime resources and sovereignty (particularly over Taiwan as it began to democratize in the late 1980s, a process that would raise popular questions about its status vis-à-vis the mainland). This shift was further articulated and implemented by PLAN commander Admiral Liu Huaqing, who served as deputy director of the Defense Science and Technology Commission in the 1960s, chief of the PLAN (1982–1988), and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission (1989–1997), and who helped transform the PLAN into a more modern and professional force.

China's evolving platforms and weaponry suggest an "access denial" strategy consistent with Beijing's focus on Taiwan. Apparent inability to challenge U.S. Navy intervention in the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis may have motivated Beijing to accelerate PLAN development, with submarines as a major focus. China is simultaneously constructing two classes of indigenously designed diesel vessels (Song/Type 039 and Yuan/Type 041) and two classes of nuclear vessels (Shang-class/Type 093 submarines and Jin-class/Type 094 ballistic missile submarines), while importing Kilo-class diesel submarines from Russia. Rapidly upgrading its previously backward destroyer fleet, China has built five new classes of destroyers since the early 1990s. China's inventory of frigates has likewise substantially improved since the early 1990s, with major upgrades taking place both within and between four successive indigenously built classes—some of which have entered series production.

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In 2008 the PLAN commander, Admiral Wu Shengli, together with coequal political commissar, Admiral Hu Yanlin, led approximately 290,000 personnel in submarine, surface, naval aviation, coastal defense, and marine corps units, as well as ten institutions of professional military education. Personnel include 25,000 naval aviation personnel in seven divisions

with twenty-seven regiments, 8,000 to 10,000 marines, and a coastal defense force of 28,000, reportedly including members of civilian militias. The PLAN has approximately 97,000 each of officers, noncommissioned officers, and conscripts, with the former being further divided into command, political, logistics, equipment, and technical career tracks.

MILITARY REGIONS

China’s vast territory, diverse populations, and complex geography, with attendant transportation and logistics challenges, initially necessitated a regional approach to national defense, with centralized control imposed on decentralized operations. The area control of the People’s Liberation Army was originally divided into six levels (see Table 1), though terms have varied over time, restructuring has occurred, and mission overlap persists.

Since February 1949 the People’s Liberation Army has employed a geographically delineated system of military regions (*junqu*), which comprise military units permanently allocated to them. During wartime, a theater of war (*zhanqu*) encompasses both these geographically based units and any additional units deployed or otherwise operationally assigned there.

In the late 1940s Red Army forces were organized into five field armies (*yezhan jun*) (see Table 2). As part of a larger consolidation of forces at multiple levels, in 1948 the Central Military Commission combined the field armies into five military regions, and four military-region levels were established. The Central Plain (Zhongyuan) Military Region, later renamed the Central South (Zhongnan) Military Region, comprised Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, and Guangxi; the East China (Huadong) Military Region comprised Shandong, Jiangxi, Jiangsu, Anhui, Zhejiang, and Fujian; the Northeast (Dongbei) Military Region comprised Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning; the North China (Huabei) Military Region comprised Shanxi and Hebei; and the Northwest (Xibei) Military Region comprised Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, and Shaanxi. In February 1950 it established a sixth military region, the Southwest (Xinan) Military Region, comprising Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Xizang.

In 1955, under Soviet influence, China’s six military regions were reconfigured into twelve ground-operations military regions: Shenyang, Beijing, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, Kunming, Lanzhou, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Xizang. Each was under a single commander, with some of the thirty-five infantry corps of the People’s Liberation Army directly subordinate. The People’s Liberation Army Navy was divided into the current North, East, and South Sea Fleets. The operations of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force were divided

into six air-defense regions. The following year, a thirteenth military region, Fuzhou, was added.

By 1969 the military regions of the People’s Liberation Army were reduced to eleven: Shenyang, Beijing, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, Kunming, Lanzhou, Fuzhou, and Xinjiang (renamed Wulumuqi Military Region in May 1979). (In May 1967 the Inner Mongolia Military Region was reduced to a provincial military district (*sheng junqu*) subordinate to the Beijing Military Region, and in December 1969 the Xizang Military Region was reduced to a provincial military district subordinate to the Chengdu Military Region.)

In 1985 the eleven military regions were reduced to the current seven (with over twenty provincial military districts) as part of a major demobilization. The Shenyang Military Region contains Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang; the Beijing Military Region contains Hebei, Shanxi, and Inner Mongolia; the Lanzhou Military Region contains Gansu, Shaanxi, Xinjiang, Ningxia, and Qinghai; the Jinan Military Region contains Shandong and Henan; the Nanjing Military Region contains Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Fujian, and Jiangxi; the Guangzhou Military Region contains Guangdong, Guangxi, Hunan, Hubei, and Hainan; and the Chengdu Military Region contains Yunnan, Xizang, Guizhou, and Sichuan—as well as the Hong Kong and Macau garrisons.

Below the military-region level, military units answer to the local government/party. The headquarters of provincial military districts command local border, coastal defense, and logistics units of the People’s Liberation Army, for example.

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Functional groups and missions of the People’s Liberation Army*		
Functional groups	Organizational entity	Missions
General departments	General departments (<i>zongbu</i>)	National military strategy (<i>zhanlüe</i>)
Theaters of war (<i>zhanqu</i>)	Military regions (<i>dajunqu</i>)	Theater strategy
Front army (<i>fangmian jun</i>), Field army (<i>yezhan jun</i>)	N/A	Eliminated in the 1950s
Army group (<i>bingtuan</i>)	N/A	Eliminated in the 1950s
Units (<i>budui</i>)	Corps (<i>jun</i>) / combined Arms group army (<i>hecheng jituan jun</i>) Division (<i>shi</i>) Brigade (<i>li</i>) Regiment (<i>tuan</i>)	Operational and tactical (<i>zhanyi zhanshu</i>) Operational and tactical Operational and tactical Tactical (<i>zhanshu</i>)
Elements (<i>fendui</i>)	Battalion (<i>ying</i>) Company (<i>lian</i>) Platoon (<i>pai</i>) Squad (<i>ban</i>)	Tactical Tactical Tactical Tactical
*Major reorganization is in progress to reduce bureaucracy and thereby further mechanization and informatization. For example, some combined arms group armies (particularly ones of secondary importance) have transitioned from division-regiment-battalion format (with its numerous bureaucracies) to brigade-battalion format (with its substantially reduced bureaucracy), thereby eliminating one layer of bureaucracy.		

Table 1

The five field armies		
Long March	Anti-Japanese War	Civil War
First Front Army	115th Division of the Eighth Route Army	Fourth Field Army, North China Field Army
Second Front Army	120th Division of the Eighth Route Army	First Field Army
Fourth Front Army	129th Division of the Eighth Route Army	Second Field Army
Red Army remnants in Southern China evacuating for the Long March	New Fourth Army	Third Field Army

Table 2

NAVAL AVIATION FORCE

Under Soviet guidance, the PLA established a Naval Aviation Force in 1951. Initially subordinated to the PLAAF, it subsequently was divided into three fleet air divisions. In 1950 a naval air academy was established in Qingdao to provide fifteen months of primarily technical instruction. By January 1953, the PLA Naval Aviation Force had a fighter division and a light bomber division. By 1958, the force had grown to a shore-based force of 470 aircraft charged with coastal air defense.

MARINE CORPS

Taiwan long expected that China would develop a marine corps to defend its offshore islands. Despite persistent rumors,

however, the PLA lacked air-cover capabilities and did not deploy such a force in a meaningful way. Since the 1990s, China has made significant progress concerning amphibious warfare, probably because of its perceived relevance to a Taiwan contingency. In 2008 the PLAN possessed at least fifty medium and heavy amphibious lift vessels.

PLA AIR FORCE (PLAAF)

Founded on November 11, 1949, the PLAAF began operations with captured Nationalist and Japanese aircraft. Like the PLAN, its early leaders had only ground experience. The PLA Air Defense Force was merged into the PLAAF in 1957. Lin Biao’s doctrine of imminent war during the Cultural Revolution was particularly damaging to the PLAAF, which suffered from a low level of training and high accident rates on aircraft that were poorly constructed and maintained.

Since 1949, the PLAAF has implemented six reductions in force (1960, 1970, 1975, 1985, 1992, 2003), all of which were part of larger PLA force-reduction programs designed to create a more capable, professional force. Early programs were aimed primarily at cutting the size of headquarters staffs from 15 to 20 percent. In December 1975, the PLAAF reduced its entire force by 100,000 people, and in August 1985, it further downsized 20 percent by eliminating some organizations, reforming the unit-organization structure, and eliminating old equipment. In October 1992, it carried out yet another 20 percent reduction. In September 2003, the PLA initiated its tenth downsizing since 1951 (Zhu Rongchang 1996, pp. 973, 977, 980, 982). The

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2003–2004 downsizing included 200,000 troops, of which 170,000 (85%) were officers (*People’s Daily* 2006).

The PLAAF also has a surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft artillery corps and three airborne divisions assigned to the Fifteenth Airborne Army. It has multiple academies and research institutes. Together with the PLA Naval Aviation Force, the PLAAF possessed 2,300 operational combat aircraft of varying degrees of capability in 2008. Their range is severely limited by lack of deck-aviation platforms, substandard aerial-refueling capabilities, and overseas bases. Long hampered by the inadequacy of China’s domestic aviation industry, the PLAAF still relies on massive imports of Russian planes and their components, particularly aerial-refueling tankers and jet engines. Helicopters have been an area of particular weakness for the PLA. Most platforms in its disproportionately small fleet (roughly three hundred in the PLA and forty in the PLAN) are either imports or copies of foreign models.

SECOND ARTILLERY FORCE

The PLA’s surface-to-surface missile troops were established under the Central Military Commission’s artillery troops in December 1957. Following China’s successful detonation of a nuclear weapon in 1964, the PLA Second Artillery headquarters was established in 1966. The following year, it received China’s artillery corps’ missile troops and schools. Guided and directed by the Central Military Commission (which has had wartime release authority for all nuclear and strategic weapons since at least 1982), Second Artillery has operational control for all nuclear missiles and is responsible for most of China’s conventional and nuclear ballistic missiles (although the PLAN may have operational control of ballistic missile submarines).

In 2008 Second Artillery had approximately 90,000 personnel and 100 to 400 nuclear weapons, divided among a headquarters, two command academies, one engineering

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design academy, four research institutes, and six corps-level launch bases that have multiple missile-launch brigades: Shenyang, Huangshan, Kunming, Luoyang, Huaihua, and Xining. China has positioned 675 to 715 mobile DF-11 (300-kilometer range) and 315 to 355 DF-15/CSS-6 (600-kilometer range) SRBMs (short-range ballistic missiles) in coastal areas opposite Taiwan. At least five brigades are presumably commanded by the Huangshan base, two by PLA ground forces. China is also fielding a number of new strategic nuclear systems. An upgraded version of China's twenty DF-5/CSS-4 liquid-fueled ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles) have a range of more than 13,000 kilometers and may be equipped with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles. Based on the JL-1 SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile), China's sixty to eighty 2,500-kilometer-range DF-21s are solid-propellant and road mobile. China's 7,250-kilometer-range DF-31/CSS9 ICBM and its 11,200-kilometer-range-31A variant are also solid-

propellant and road mobile (initially deployed c. 2007), making them extremely difficult to target, as would be any 8,000-kilometer-range JL-2 SLBMs (said to be a derivative of the DF-31) eventually based on Type 094 ballistic missile submarines at sea (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2008).

HISTORY

Founded during the Nanchang Uprising on August 1, 1927, and throughout the Long March, the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), and the War of Liberation (1945–1949), the Red Army gradually incorporated subordinate units until the PRC's establishment on October 1, 1949. While the term *People's Liberation Army* was used to describe individual units as early as 1945, only a Central Military Commission order on November 1, 1948, made the term *PLA* broadly applicable to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) armed forces. In 1949 the PLAN and PLAAF were

NEW FOURTH ARMY

The New Fourth Army was the smaller of two Communist armies that fought against Japan’s aggression during the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945) as part of the National Revolutionary Army led by Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi), head of the Guomindang, or Nationalist Party, and military ruler of the Republic of China.

The New Fourth Army, twelve-thousand men strong, was organized at the time of the anti-Japanese second United Front of the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party. First established under nominal Nationalist command on December 25, 1937, in Hankou, the army was in fact controlled by the Communist Party leadership. Its original four divisions and one special-operations battalion, which assembled for action in Anhui Province in April 1938, were composed of survivors from the Communist guerrilla units that stayed behind in Jiangxi and Fujian provinces under the command of Xiang Ying (1895–1941) after the main Red Army forces had embarked on their historic Long March to the northwest in 1934–1935.

The New Fourth Army was led by Communist commander Ye Ting (1897–1946), with Xiang Ying as his deputy. The Guomindang War Ministry assigned it to conduct military operations in an area south of the Yangzi River near Shanghai. Much like the Eighth Route Army, the New Fourth Army operated in Japanese-occupied territory, employing the same tactics of large-scale guerrilla warfare that had proved so effective in southern China during the civil war with the Nationalists following the collapse of the first United Front in 1927.

Sporadic skirmishes between Nationalists and Communists erupted into full-scale fighting during the New

Fourth Army incident, when Nationalist troops ambushed and destroyed the New Fourth Army on January 6–7, 1941. Thousands of Communist soldiers, including the deputy commander Xiang Ying, were killed. About 4,000 survivors were captured and imprisoned, including the wounded army commander Ye Ting, while only about a thousand men escaped and joined the Eighth Route Army. Even though President Chiang had officially disbanded it, the New Fourth Army was reorganized by the Communists on January 20, 1941. Based at Jiangsu, the army remained operationally active until the end of the Anti-Japanese War under the leadership of the commander Chen Yi (1901–1976) and his deputy Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969). Amid bitter recriminations from both sides, the New Fourth Army incident ended all substantive cooperation between Communists and Nationalists, thus confirming the virtual collapse of their second United Front.

During the renewed civil war (1946–1949) between Nationalists and Communists, the New Fourth Army was incorporated into the new People’s Liberation Army. Its heroic military exploits and temporary defeat at the hands of Guomindang troops have now acquired an iconic, almost mythical role in Chinese Communist historiography, especially as a symbol of Chiang Kai-shek’s treachery.

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established. In practice, however, these services would be subordinated to the army through the end of the Cold War. A survey of PLA uses of force during the latter half of the twentieth century reveals primarily ground-force actions on China’s land borders with some degree of air support, but also several naval efforts to assert sovereignty over disputed islands.

The War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea (Korean War, 1950–1953) came at a terrible human cost and convinced Mao’s generals that modernization and professionalization were essential. By 1958, however, Mao determined that “people’s war” of attrition was the correct choice for China, and by 1965 officers seeking to emphasize professional training were actively persecuted.

In the first decades after Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) and the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan, many low-level skirmishes took place between Communist and Nationalist forces near the mainland’s coastal islands. The most dramatic of these was part of the 1954 Yijiangshan campaign, the PLA’s one truly “joint” campaign as of 2008. On October 25, 1949, thirty-thousand Third Field Army soldiers had attempted to take Jinmen via small boats across the 10-kilometer strait, but suffered heavy casualties and only seized a small beachhead, which they failed to reinforce, and withdrew. In spring 1954, the PLAN began to shell Jinmen and Mazu, prompting U.S. naval and air force deployment to the region and support for the Nationalist garrisons. In September, the PLA amassed

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RED ARMY

The Nanchang Uprising of August 1, 1927, was the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) first independent military action and—even though a dismal failure—August 1 (*ba-yi*) is still celebrated annually as the birth of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Survivors of the Nanchang Uprising, including Zhu De, He Long, Zhou Enlai, and Ye Jianying, eventually joined with Mao Zedong to form the Red Army and organize a peasant-based revolutionary movement.

By 1930, the rural Jiangxi Soviet was composed of about a dozen liberated areas, while the Red Army had grown to approximately 60,000 to 65,000 soldiers. Beginning in December 1930, Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) launched a series of five encirclement campaigns. In October 1933, the Fifth Encirclement campaign, with a combined force of 700,000 soldiers, successfully used a blockhouse strategy devised by Chiang’s German military advisers (who had replaced the Soviet advisers expelled in 1927) to surround and blockade the Jiangxi Soviet.

The Communists retreated from South China on the Long March to Yan’an in China’s northwest. Although the CCP later treated this as a heroic era, in reality, the Long March was a strategic disaster. For example, after the yearlong 6,000-mile Long March, only about 10,000 Red Army soldiers reached Yan’an in October 1935.

Subsequently, following Mao’s adoption of guerrilla tactics, the Red Army played a key role in the Communists’ rise to power. During the War of Resistance (1937–1945), the Communists cooperated with the Nationalists, and the Red Army was divided into the Eighth Route Army and the New Fourth Army. On August 9, 1945, the two armies were merged to form the PLA as Mao declared the anti-Japanese offensive.

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forces near the Dachen Archipelago’s Yijiangshan Islands, engaged in drills, and conducted aerial reconnaissance. On November 1, the PLAAF and PLAN staged a seventy-eight-day blockade of the islands. On January 18, 1955, with an amphibious landing supported by air and naval forces, the PLA captured the island. From February 2 to February 9, the PLA seized four other islands.

In the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis, mainland China fought seven air battles with Taiwan, while U.S. ships escorted

Nationalist ships to resupply Nationalist-held offshore islands and the Soviet Union supplied SA-2 missiles to China. Following Sino-Soviet disagreement, the crisis ended inconclusively (although intermittent shelling would continue until Beijing and Washington normalized relations on January 1, 1979). The crisis highlighted the fact that PLA and PLAN limitations and U.S. support precluded Beijing from taking Taiwan and that Moscow would not provide Beijing with a nuclear umbrella. Before the crisis, Nationalist aircraft were able to overfly the mainland as far north as Tianjin; subsequent deployment of PLAAF aircraft opposite Taiwan limited Nationalist overflights to U.S.-sponsored U-2 reconnaissance flights. Five were shot down before the program ceased in 1967.

The McMahon Line is a product of the 1914 Simla Convention between Britain and Tibet. Though as late as 2008 it represented the effective boundary between India and China (and is accepted by the former), the PRC has always maintained that Tibet lacked the sovereignty to conclude treaties and has claimed 150,000 square kilometers of territory south of the line. Following a series of border disputes beginning in 1959, in a series of attacks in 1962 the PLA routed Indian forces before unilaterally declaring a cease-fire and withdrawing 20 kilometers behind the “line of actual control.” Three years later, China conducted a noninvasive mobilization to assist ally Pakistan.

During the Vietnam War (1957–1975), China provided military assistance to Communist allies in Southeast Asia. The PLA made incursions into Burma (Myanmar) in 1960 and 1961. In the 1960s, the PLA assisted Laos by constructing roads and providing air defense. China supplied North Vietnam with large amounts of weaponry throughout the Vietnam War.

Despite major Chinese preparations for a conflict with the Soviet Union, which absorbed considerable resources and planning from the mid-1960s through the early 1980s (and impeded development of a rationally configured defense industrial base or significant efforts to assert sovereignty over territorial claims on China’s maritime periphery), actual hostilities erupted only once, and on a minor scale, in the Zhenbao Island conflict of March 2, 1969, when fire was exchanged as Chinese troops approached the island in the middle of the Ussuri River (Beijing claimed it represented the boundary demarcation line based on the “thalweg principle”). Subsequent Russian attempts to retake the island failed, both sides desisted, and tensions eased several years later. The question of which side initiated the conflict remains disputed. Some scholars believe Mao ordered the conflict to demonstrate resolve and thereby deter Soviet invasion.

While supporting North Vietnamese forces during the Vietnam War, Beijing opposed Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) during the 1974 Xisha Islands defensive campaign. On January 11, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that China had incontestable sovereignty over the Xisha and their

EIGHTH ROUTE ARMY

The Eighth Route Army was the larger of two Communist armies that fought against Japan’s aggression and occupation during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). It formed part of the National Revolutionary Army led by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi, 1887–1975), head of the ruling Nationalist Party (Guomindang) and the Republic of China.

On September 6, 1937, during the anti-Japanese second United Front alliance between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party, the Eighth Route Army was created by combining three divisions of the Red Army, the Communist military arm, and placing them formally under Nationalist command. Comprising the 115th, 120th, and the 129th Divisions, the newly created army, 45,000-men strong, was led by legendary Red Army commander Zhu De (1886–1976) and his deputy Peng Dehuai (1898–1974). On September 25–26, 1937, the 115th Division, under the command of Lin Biao (1907–1971), ambushed units of the Japanese Imperial Army at the Great Wall pass of Pingxingguan and won China’s first major military victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War.

In 1938 the Eighth Route Army was reorganized into the Eighteenth Army Group, nominally under the command of Nationalist-aligned warlord Yan Xishan (1883–1960), the “model governor” of Shanxi Province. But the army group, which grew to some 600,000 troops by 1945, remained under Zhu De’s direct control throughout the war and operated behind Japanese lines independently of the Nationalists, especially after the collapse of the second United Front in December 1940. As early as December 1939, Guomindang armies in southern Shanxi joined the Japanese in attacking the troops of the former Eighth Route Army that were waging large-scale

guerrilla warfare in northern China. From August to December 1940, Zhu De and Peng Dehuai directed the successful Hundred Regiments campaign (which involved 115 regiments from the 115th, 120th, and the 129th Divisions), launching a series of conventional military attacks against Japanese-held cities and railway links in central China.

American observers visiting Communist-held Yan’an during the Second Sino-Japanese War reported that the highly mobile and self-sustaining Eighth Route Army was the best-organized and best-led fighting force in the world for its size and purpose, skillfully using rural guerrilla operations to defeat an enemy that was many times superior in numbers and heavy weaponry. During the renewed civil war between the Nationalists and Communists (1946–1949), all units of the former Eighth Route Army were incorporated into the new People’s Liberation Army. The famous military exploits of the Eighth Route Army later acquired an iconic, almost mythical role in Chinese Communist historiography.

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surrounding waters. Over several days, a PLAN force of eleven vessels and 600 assault troops attacked South Vietnamese ships after they reportedly resisted PRC patrol boats and fishermen. Within two days, this largest PLA amphibious operation to date gained Chinese control of the islands, reportedly at the cost of 300 South Vietnamese casualties. In 1978 the PLAN confronted Japanese forces in the area surrounding the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.

China launched a “self-defensive counterattack against Vietnam” from February 17 to March 17, 1979. While moving thirty to forty divisions to the Vietnamese border, China

simultaneously prepared to deter an attack by the Soviet Union. Encountering heavy resistance when its forces crossed the border, Beijing stated that the PLA would not proceed farther than 50 kilometers into Vietnam. The PLAAF did not engage in air combat. After sustaining what it claimed were 20,000 casualties, which Vietnam claimed were 42,000, the PLA withdrew systematically. Severe problems with coordination, command, control, and logistics demonstrated how unprepared for combat the PLA had become.

In March 1988, the PLAN sank three Vietnamese supply vessels and seized several reefs in the disputed Nansha

People's Liberation Army: Overview



Chinese soldiers watching an outdoor military movie, July 26, 1997. Protecting the border of China for over seventy years, the People's Liberation Army continues to be influenced by traditional Confucian values of self-reliance that have been practiced by military leaders throughout the history of China. AP IMAGES

Islands. In 1995 the PLAN seized Mischief Reef in the Nansha Islands, also claimed by the Philippines.

The PLA was directly involved in politics through the PRC's founding in 1949, and became reinvolved during the Cultural Revolution, but since then has minimized its political activity. A challenge for civil-military relations

emerged when, despite protests from retired senior generals, Deng Xiaoping ordered the PLA to crack down on popular demonstrations in Beijing on June 4, 1989, after police and PAP units failed to disperse protesters, many of whom were killed. Reportedly, some commanders and units refused to participate in the crackdown. The PLA

had also suppressed an uprising in Xizang earlier that year. For the next few years after Tiananmen, many PLA units were subject to intensive political indoctrination.

During the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the PLA fired ten DF-15 SRBMs to the north and south of (not over) Taiwan (or in the strait) as part of large-scale military exercises and accompanying political rhetoric to discourage independence moves by Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui (Li Denghui) before and during his election.

MAJOR LEADERS

In its initial decades, the Red Army had considerable leadership continuity, as commanders of the campaigns from the 1930s to the 1950s largely rose through the ranks together in the same military regions and forged a variety of reciprocal bonds. Schooled on the battleground of “people’s war,” these first-generation commanders had little naval or air experience. They also played a major role in affairs of state: Mao and Deng became national leaders; Zhou Enlai became premier; and Chen Yi became foreign minister.

Paramount leaders have always had disproportionate influence on the PLA because it is a party army. Mao Zedong is the most prominent example of the interrelation between PRC political and military leadership. He led the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to victory in the anti-Japanese and civil wars, and was China’s paramount leader from 1949 to 1976. During that time, he commanded the PLA as head of the Central Military Commission and served as China’s foremost military strategist. In developing PLA tactics, Mao drew on both traditions of peasant insurgency and guerrilla warfare experience. Deng Xiaoping served in a variety of military leadership roles during the civil war. In 1975 he was named CCP vice chairman, Central Military Commission vice chairman, and PLA General Staff Department head. From 1978 until his last public appearance in 1994, he was China’s preeminent leader. In 1979 he ordered China’s self-defensive counterattack against Vietnam, and in 1989 he ordered the PLA Tiananmen crackdown. Deng stepped down as CCP Central Military Commission chairman in 1989 and as State Central Military Commission chairman in 1990. Jiang Zemin increased PLA budgets and directed significant PLA modernization. Hu Jintao, like his predecessors, chairs the Central Military Commission, in addition to serving as general secretary of the CCP and president of the PRC.

In 1955 the PLA’s postwar military leadership was established. Ten leading officers were named marshals: Zhu De, Peng Dehuai, Lin Biao, Liu Bocheng, He Long, Chen Yi, Luo Ronghuan, Xu Xiangqian, Nie Rongzhen, and Ye Jianying. Ten were named senior generals: Su Yu, Xu Haidong, Huang Kecheng, Chen Geng, Tan Zheng, Xiao Jingguang, Zhang Yunyi, Luo Ruiqing, Wang Shusheng, and Xu Guangda. Fifty-seven were named generals, including Chen Zaidao, Han Xianchu, Hong Xuezhi, Li Kenong,

Song Renqiong, Ulanhu, Wang Zhen, Xie Fuzhi, Yang Dezhi, and Zhang Aiping. One hundred and seventy-seven were named lieutenant generals.

Like other governmental systems, the PLA has vertical and horizontal lines of authority. The PLA has long had a specific institutional culture (focused on taking orders based on hierarchy) and a significant degree of autonomy. At various times, such horizontal factors as localism, provincialism, and factionalism have undermined the vertical system. As the PLA becomes more like other large Chinese government bureaucracies, policy processes are becoming more complex and negotiated.

SEE ALSO *Army and Politics*; *Central State Organs since 1949*; *Central Military Commission*; *Lin Biao*; *Military Culture and Tradition*; *Peng Dehuai*; *Zhu De*.

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The views expressed in this entry are those of the author alone and do not represent the official policies or estimates of the U.S. Navy or any other element of the U.S. government.

COMMAND STRUCTURE OF THE ARMED SERVICES

Like all other major parts of government, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has parallel Communist Party– and state-bureaucratic structures. Every headquarters of the PLA has a

party committee (*dangwei*) and a party standing committee (*dangwei changwei*). Political commissars (usually the committee secretary) and military commanders (usually the deputy secretary) make decisions using a party-committee system that brings them and their deputies into a collective decision-making process. Staff departments (e.g., command, political, logistics, armaments) support their decisions by providing information and analysis to relevant party committees and then monitor and guide implementation at lower levels.

On the party side, the Central Military Commission (Zhongyang Junshi Weiyuanhui), established in February 1930 as part of a gradual, negotiated process, makes decisions on operational policy (*zuozhan fang’an*) for the PLA as its party committee and determines national military strategy, as China’s national command authority. It currently has eleven members: Chairman Hu Jintao, China’s president; two vice chairs; a defense minister; four general department heads, and the commanders of the PLA Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery. The general office (*bangongting*) of the Central Military Commission (CMC) coordinates the general departments, services, and premier professional-military-education institutions (the National Defense University and the Academy of Military Science) to realize national military strategy. Four general departments, led by commission members, are responsible for operational command (*zuozhan zhihui*), and assist in the promulgation and implementation of CMC policy (e.g., by

A comparison of administrative levels			
Organization	First level	Second level*	Third level**
General departments (<i>zongbu</i>)	4 departments (<i>bu</i>)	Department (<i>bu</i>), general office (<i>bangongting</i>), bureau (<i>ju</i>)	Bureau (<i>ju</i>)
Service headquarters (<i>junzhong</i>)	4 departments (<i>bu</i>)	Department (<i>bu</i>), office (<i>bangongshi</i>), bureau (<i>ju</i>)	Division (<i>chu</i>)
Military-region headquarters (<i>junqu</i>)	4 departments (<i>bu</i>)	Department (<i>bu</i>), office (<i>bangongshi</i>)	Division (<i>chu</i>)
Military region of the Air Force/fleet headquarters (<i>junqu Kongjun/Jiandui</i>)	4 departments (<i>bu</i>)	Office (<i>bangongshi</i>), division (<i>chu</i>)	Office (<i>ke</i>)
Army/corps (<i>jun</i>)	4 departments (<i>bu</i>)	Division (<i>chu</i>)	Office (<i>ke</i>)
Base (<i>jidi</i>)	4 departments (<i>bu</i>)	Division (<i>chu</i>)	Office (<i>ke</i>)
Division (<i>shi</i>)	4 departments (<i>bu</i>)	Office (<i>ke</i>)	
Brigade (<i>liu</i>)	4 departments (<i>bu</i>)	Office (<i>ke</i>)	
Regiment (<i>tuan</i>)	Headquarters department (<i>bu</i>); political, logistics, and armament/maintenance divisions (<i>chu</i>)	Branch (<i>gu</i>)	
Battalion (<i>ying</i>), group (<i>dadui</i>)	N/A		
Company (<i>lian</i>), squadron (<i>zhongdui</i>)	N/A		
*Some second level departments are in the process of being consolidated.			
**Third level organizations are in the process of being consolidated and reduced, particularly below the division level.			

Table 1