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Personnel of the People's Liberation Army

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Opening Comments

Commissioners, for someone who has been involved in observing and analyzing People's Liberation Army (PLA) personnel issues for over 30 years, it is an honor to be invited to present my views on this important topic to the commission.

Today, I will address personnel issues organized into 3 components: First, the two-year conscript force; Second, the non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps; and third, the officer corps.

Although the focus of the report is on the current situation, it is important to understand how the PLA got to where it is today, so I will begin by providing a very brief overview of the situation since 1999, including the current force size. I will then discuss the current situation.

In my opinion, the PLA's personnel continue to be the weak link, and we can expect even more changes over the next decade to address this issue.

Key Findings

- The PLA has continued to make major adjustments to its enlisted force since 1999. These include creating a 30-year enlisted force, recruiting college students and graduates as two-year conscripts, shifting from a one-cycle to a two-cycle per year conscription system in 2021, and directly recruiting personnel with special technical skills as NCOs.
- The turnover of conscripts each year affects the annual training cycle, such that units are missing a significant number of personnel for months at a time.
- The officer corps has also changed considerably by abolishing the National Defense Student program that began in 1999, reducing the number of officer academic institutions from 63 to 34 in 2017, and directly recruiting college graduates as officers.
- When addressing personnel issues, one must examine each service, force, and branch, which are not equal in terms of conscript and NCO percentages as well as in the turnover of officers each year.
- Males cannot get married until they are 25, and females until they are 23, so the conscript force consists almost entirely of unmarried personnel.
- Given problems identified in each of these programs, the PLA will most likely continue to make more major changes over the next decade.

Force Size

Since 1999, the PLA has had two force reductions, in 2003 and 2016, which has reduced the current size from 2.5 million in 2002 to 2.0 million personnel today. This number includes 450,000 officers

and civilian cadre representing 23% of the force, 850,000 NCOs representing 42% of the force, and 700,000 two-year conscripts representing 35% of the force. Of note, it appears that the civilian cadre system is disappearing and being replaced by a civilian personnel system, which is not part of the active-duty force. In addition, the People's Armed Police (PAP) conscripts/recruits about 110,000 two-year conscripts each year at the same time as the PLA. Over the past few years, the proportion of the NCO corps has grown as the proportion of the conscript force has been reduced. Of note, the PLA does not publish detailed information about its force composition, so this data is based on information from various analysts.

Historic Background for the Conscript Force

In 1999, the PLA cut the conscription period from 3-4 years to 2 years for each service and created a 28-year NCO program. However, NCOs must serve a full 30 years or reach age 55 before they can retire and receive retirement pay; otherwise, they are demobilized and sent home. Of note, women can join voluntarily, and are theoretically subject to conscription if deemed necessary, but have never been conscripted. By law, 2/3 of all new PLA conscripts at this time had to come from rural areas that were primarily limited to a 9th grade level of education. The PLA could not conscript college graduates because there was an age limit of 21.

Hoping to recruit more college-educated enlisted personnel, in the early 2000s the PLA increased the maximum age to 21 for high school graduates, to age 23 for students receiving a senior technical degree or vocational degree, and to age 24 for college students and graduates with a bachelor's degree. In 2009, the PLA began recruiting (not conscripting) 130,000 college students and graduates out of a total of 400,000 conscripts for that year. Today, applicants are:

- 1) graduates of high school (including technical secondary schools, vocational high schools, and technical schools) and above (including students in colleges and universities) between the ages of 18 to 22
- 2) graduates of ordinary colleges and universities, who meet the graduation requirements in the first half of the year and are between the ages of 18 to 24
- 3) graduate students and graduates who have a maximum age limit of 26.

The goal was to have a more highly educated enlisted force with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) backgrounds. The Central Military Commission (CMC) and Ministry of Education (MOE) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with certain incentives for college students to join the PLA, which consists of 3 key incentives: First, their college would write off their tuition debt the day they join the PLA; second, they could return to college after serving for two years and change their major; and third, they would get preferential treatment for government and civilian jobs.

Prior to 2009, all conscription was done in person by the local People's Armed Forces Department (PAFD) based on quotas by service. Most new conscripts merely replaced conscripts from the same location two years later. Following the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, soldiers were not allowed to serve in the same city or province where they were raised.

Starting in 2009, college students were allowed to register online and each college had its own PAFD and quotas. At that time, all prospective conscripts registered for conscription in August. The six-week conscript selection, induction, and training process began on 1 November, with physical, political, and psychological examinations conducted the first week of November. After

being selected, conscripts departed for their units around mid-December, with most conscripts serving outside their home province. Of note, the first day of their two-year conscript period begins the day the screening process begins, not the day they depart for basic training.

As early as 2012, the PLA began a “pre-induction education and training” program in several provinces to provide 3-21 days of training for new personnel before they depart for basic training. The program was not officially incorporated into a regulation until 2018 and now ranges from 7-10 day. However, there still appears to be a lack of consistency, such that some personnel receive different amounts of training or no training at all. The program requires personnel to receive ideological education, some basic military training, heart-to-heart talks, and physical reexamination. Some personnel were weeded out during this process. Of note, it does not appear that females receive any pre-induction education and training.

In order to recruit civilian college students and graduates before they got a job or started school again, in 2013, the PLA moved the entire recruitment/conscription process forward by three months to align better with the school year. The PLA also reduced the requirement for 2/3 of conscripts to come from rural areas, to about 5%.

As a general rule, prior to 2015, all conscripts were sent to their operational base to receive their basic training for about six weeks. However this cut into their 2-year conscription and limited time with their operational units – by the time they finished basic and technical training, they had already served about several months of their 24 month conscription.

In 2015, the PLA largely stopped sending new conscripts to their operational base for basic training, opting instead for dedicated training units. However, the PLA does not have any single centralized training bases for new recruits. Of note, the PLA does not appear to conduct basic training for males and females together.

At this time, the PLA also increased its basic training from around seven weeks to three months, at which time they were sent to their operational unit or remained at the training base for technical training. Personnel began their basic training around 10 September, and the last day of their two-year cycle was 31 July. Thus, the PLA lost about 350,000 two-year conscripts on the same day each year, and these were not replaced at their operational unit for up to four months.

For several years, the PLA has had a program identified as “second enlistment,” whereby the PLA has brought back conscripts who had previously been demobilized following their two year conscription period. These personnel returned to their units as privates and skipped basic training. Beginning in 2021, the PLA began bringing these personnel back as a directly-recruited NCOs.

Of note, personnel receive special bonuses for serving in certain regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang. In addition, the families of all conscripts receive the same amount of their salary and their bonuses from their hometown government.

Current Reforms to a Two-Cycle System

Due to the previous once-per-year conscription cycle, units that were heavily conscript-oriented were not at 100% combat effective all year long. This issue would have presented a problem for the PLA’s combat effectiveness if hostilities broke out during the “off-season” just after beginning a new cycle, because untrained new conscripts would slow operations. Further, under the once-per-year conscription cycle, not only did units receive all of their new conscripts at the same time, but they also lost the same number of conscripts who had served their two years and were either

demobilized or promoted to NCO. The PLA also lost all of its NCOs who were not promoted to the next rank, and almost all new NCOs had to receive some type of technical training.

Thus, under the once-per-year system, the PLA was short about 350,000 trained enlisted personnel for a period of time, as that number had finished their conscription period and demobilized, while their replacements had not yet finished basic training. As such, the peak exercise season occurred during the spring and summer, when new enlisted personnel were integrated into their units in a step-by-step process of on-the-job training, squad training, platoon training, company training, battalion training, and then regiment or brigade training events. However, even at that time units were not typically at 100%, as this period coincided with the arrival of newly graduated officers with no operational experience and who were on probation their first year.

While this problem disproportionately affected conscript-heavy units such as Army Infantry, the PLAN Marine Corps, and the PLAAF Airborne Corps, even less conscript-heavy units were affected, with at least one PLARF missile brigade stating in 2018 that some of its elements were unable to participate in drills immediately following the demobilization period. Further, until the PLAN began retaining a higher number of NCOs in the late 2000s, naval vessels rarely conducted large at-sea training from November to February because of the November turnover of demobilizing conscripts.

To address this issue, in January 2020, the PLA announced that it would begin enlisting new personnel during two separate periods per year instead of just once per year. This new cycle was delayed for a year due to COVID but reinstated in December 2020 for 2021.

This shift to twice-per-year recruitment is designed to improve personnel readiness levels and ensure higher average unit-manning levels regardless of the time of year. Of note, the PLA does not appear to have a counterpart to the US military's Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), so, other than an interview by the PAFD, it is still unclear how conscripts are selected for certain specialties.

Under the new system, registration and screening takes place for men between 10 December and 20 February, and the final selection process takes place between 20 February and 31 March for the first cycle. For the second cycle, registration and screening takes place between 1 April and 15 August and the final selection process takes place between 15 August and 30 September. Although overall conscription numbers have not changed, according to a staff officer in one mobilization bureau, the spring recruitment accounts for 45% of the annual quota, while fall recruitment takes in the remaining 55% of the total annual force. As such, each cycle now has approximately 175,000 new conscripts. Given that this system only began in 2021, the conscripts who began in 2021 will not be demobilized or promoted as NCOs until 2023. It is still unclear whether both cycles have an equal percentage of college, high school, and ninth grade graduates.

Concerning the percentage of college students/graduates, in recent years quota targets appear to have increased significantly, with anecdotal reports indicating something in the range of 50% college students/graduates at the low end, to over 90% at the high end in places like Beijing, with most appearing to fall in the 70-75% range.

While the goal of the two-cycle system is to offer a more regular flow of new personnel, an article from July 2022 laid out some ongoing problems with the new system in Army units. Most significantly, the two-cycle system still does not fit into the overall annual training cycle as it is currently conceived. Since the annual cycle of training, drills, and exercises is still set up to

progressively develop personnel arriving in the autumn, spring conscripts arrive in the middle of this cycle and thus are unable to develop in the same progressive fashion. As a result, they struggle to master the advanced skills needed for their respective roles and are more likely to commit significant errors during training events and exercises. One Army brigade noted that spring conscripts struggle to gain combat effectiveness. The presence of such articles in PLA media suggests that the PLA is aware of the problem and will likely overhaul its annual training cycle in the coming years to better accommodate spring arrivals.

The new system has also increased inter-personal friction between the members of the different conscript cycles. For example, stories have accrued of bullying between “senior” members of an earlier conscript cycle and the “junior” newer conscripts. In addition, the increased amount of training is impacting their mental health.

While this early evidence suggests that the transition to the new system has been rocky, it remains to be seen how successful it will be in the long term in smoothing out the spikes of incoming recruits and better enabling consistent year-round operations. Changes are likely over the next few years. Although no information was found, the following provides some informed speculation about the new system:

- Given that the new system does not completely overlap with the previous one-cycle system, the conscripts who began their training in August 2019 and August 2020 most likely remained or will remain on active duty until the end of their two years. However, once the first group of conscripts who began their training in February and August 2021 complete their two-year period, they will leave in February and August of 2023.
- No recent information was found concerning new soldiers being assigned to any technical training bases, where they receive their basic training and technical training. However, until a viable alternative comes to light, such bases are presumed to still exist.
- Once the new conscripts complete their basic training and are assigned to their operational units, their next steps most likely remain the same, including on-the-job training and specialty training.

There are also several outstanding questions about the new system:

- It appears that basic training has been consolidated at the corps/army/theater level for the PLAAF, though this cannot be confirmed force-wide. Further, it remains unclear precisely *why* training has been consolidated at these levels. Which training bases specifically are employed for this purpose? How many training bases are there in total? Are all new-soldier training bases used during both conscription/basic training periods?
- Assuming that only one-half (175,000) of the previous number of conscripts (350,000) begin their training at the same time now, has the number of training brigades and subordinate training battalions remained the same or been cut in half?
- Are the trainers/instructors at the bases assigned to training bases full-time? If so, how are they selected and how long do they serve there?
- After basic training, do all units receive new soldiers twice a year, or do they go to half the units once a year, or to one-quarter of the units once every two years (which would allow units to have a single set of conscripts for the longest period of time)?
- Finally, how successful has the PLA been at retaining the most critical personnel as NCOs?

Following their two-year conscription, conscripts have four basic options: First, they can be demobilized and sent back to their hometown. Here, they can seek out a government or private job.

Alternatively, college students who did not complete their degree before joining the PLA can return to their academic institution to finish their degree.

Second, they may apply and be selected for promotion to NCO. In order to be selected as an NCO, two-year enlistees must pass each of the following prerequisites: 1) win a National or Military Science and Technology Progress Award; 2) win an Outstanding Personnel Award for Non-commissioned Officers of the Army; 3) be commended by units at or above the corps level; 4) win an award of third-class or above; and 5) be one of three winners of the military assessment competition at the brigade and higher level. They must also have the relevant education level for each rank and, depending on which category they are assigned to, must undergo corresponding training for six to 12 months at an NCO school or training unit.

Third, they may be selected to attend an officer academic institution to become an officer.

Fourth, if they already have a bachelor's degree from a civilian college and have met the relevant requirements of service time, performance, political requirements, age, and physical and psychological requirements, they can receive a direct promotion as an officer.

Conscription Guidance

Each year, the CMC and the Ministry of National Defense, on behalf of the State Council, hold a National Conscription Work Teleconference to provide overall guidance for that year's conscription process. Each province, autonomous region, and municipality then hold their own teleconference to pass down the guidance to every PAFD. It appears that each city also holds its own teleconference, as do their subordinate districts as well. Under the new two-cycle system, there is only one national-level teleconference but it appears that each province, AR, municipality, and city hold their own teleconference before each of the two cycles.

NCO Corps

Grade Level	Service Period	Rank (2009)	Rank (2022)	Time in Rank
Conscript (义务兵)	1st year	Private 2nd Class (列兵)	Private 2nd Class (列兵)	About 9 months
	2nd year	Private 1st Class (上等兵)	Private 1st Class (上等兵)	1 year
Junior Grade NCO (初级士官) (6 years)	3rd to 8th years	Corporal (下士)	Corporal (下士)	3 Years
		Sergeant (中士)	Sergeant (中士)	3 Years
Intermediate Grade NCO (中级士官) (8 years)	9th to 16th years	Sergeant First Class (上士)	Sergeant Second Class (二级上士)	4 Years
		Master Sergeant Class-4 (四级军士长)	Sergeant First Class (一级上士)	4 Years
Senior Grade NCO (高级士官) (14 years)	17th to 30th years	Master Sergeant Class-3 (三级军士长)	Master Sergeant Class-3 (三级军士长)	4 Years
		Master Sergeant Class-2 (二级军士长)	Master Sergeant Class-2 (二级军士长)	4 Years
		Master Sergeant Class-1 (一级军士长)	Master Sergeant Class-1 (一级军士长)	6 Years

Although the PLA created a 28-year NCO corps in 1999, it is still looking for better ways to recruit a more educated NCO corps. In my opinion, we will continue to see changes in order to meet its goal. Currently, NCOs can come from the following sources:

First, conscripts can elect to be retained as an NCO. Of particular note, college students/graduates who remain on active duty as an NCO skip the rank of corporal and are given the rank of sergeant. Those with a three-year post-secondary degree get 1 year of service applied and only have to serve for 2 years before being eligible for promotion to the next rank. Those who already have a bachelor's degree get 2 years of service applied and only have to serve for 1 year before being eligible for promotion.

The PLA has also begun bringing back conscripts who were not originally selected, which indicates they are not filling their quotas with the right people. Normally, NCOs who are not promoted are demobilized and sent home; however, the PLA has created a program to allow NCOs who have not been promoted to remain on active duty anyway.

The PLA has a program to directly recruit college students as NCOs to fill specific billets. It has also created a program to select high school graduates to receive two-and-a-half years of service-designated technical training at a civilian polytechnic/vocational college, followed by six months of military training, before entering the PLA with NCO rank and benefits. Once they are assigned to their billet, their general service period is from four to seven years, which begins with four months of training. In 2022, 32 civilian polytechnic/vocational colleges were part of this program, graduating personnel who would become PLA and PAP NCOs.

In 2014, the PLA created a Master Chief system in 2014 at company to brigade levels. However, none of these personnel serve on the unit Party Standing Committee, so they are not involved in the daily leadership discussions.

All of this implies that the PLA still does not have a solid program for selecting and retaining its NCOs.

The ultimate proportion of college students who are selected as NCOs remains unclear. However, the clear emphasis on promoting college-educated personnel as NCOs raises questions about how non-college-educated personnel are perceived, and what signal this sends to them about their value.

During the 10th force reduction in 2003, the PLA began allowing NCOs to replace officers and serve as “acting” leaders up to the battalion level, but they have glass ceilings at each level because they cannot be promoted to a higher officer-level grade.

Today, the PLA has only three standalone NCO schools (Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force), but a few officer academies have subordinate NCO schools that focus on limited specialties, so only certain NCOs have the opportunity to attend an academic institution and focus only on their specialty.

Officer Corps

Finally, I will discuss the evolution of the PLA’s officer corps.

The base for the PLA’s officer corps is a 15-grade system shown below. Although officers are assigned 10 different ranks, the grade system provides the foundation of how the PLA assesses seniority. However, the PLA appears to be slowly implementing a rank-centric system since the 11th force reduction that began in 2016. This has partially been driven by the shift from a division-

regiment structure to a brigade structure, which has created major problems for officers moving up their career path.

Of particular note, unlike the US military, the PLA does not assign an alpha-numeric Military Operational Specialty (MOS) or Air Force Specialty Codes (AFSC) to its officers or enlisted personnel.

Officers' 15 Grades

Retirement Age		Grade (Non-Special Technical Officers)	Grade (Special Technical Officers)	Primary Rank	Secondary Rank
Combat Troop	Non-combat				
N/A		CMC Chairman (军委主席) Vice Chairmen (军委副主席)	N/A	N/A GEN/ADM	N/A
See Note Below		CMC Member (军委委员)	Grade 1 (1级)	GEN/ADM	
65	65	TC Leader (正战区职)	Grade 2 (2级)	GEN/ADM	LTG/VADM
63		TC Deputy Leader (副战区职)	Grade 3 (3级)	LTG/VADM	MG/RADM
	60	Corps Leader (正军职)	Grade 4 (4级)	MG/RADM	LTG/VADM
55	58	Corps Deputy Leader (副军职)	Grade 5 (5级)	MG/RADM	SCOL/SCPT
50	55	Division Leader (正师职)	Grade 6 (6级)	SCOL/SCPT	MG/RADM
		Division Deputy Leader (副师职) (Brigade Leader)	Grade 7 (7级)	COL/CPT	SCOL/SCPT
45	50	Regiment Leader (正团职) (Brigade Deputy Leader)	Grade 8 (8级)	COL/CPT	LTC/CDR
	45	Regiment Deputy Leader (副团职)	Grade 9 (9级)	LTC/CDR	MAJ/LCDR
40	40	Battalion Leader (正营职)	Grade 10 (10级)	MAJ/LCDR	LTC/CDR
		Battalion Deputy Leader (副营职)	Grade 11 (11级)	CPT/LT	MAJ/LCDR
35	35	Company Leader (正连职)	Grade 12 (12级)	CPT/LT	1LT/LTJG
		Company Deputy Leader (副连职)	Grade 13 (13级)	1LT/LTJG	CPT/LT
30	30	Platoon Leader (排职)	Grade 14 (14级)	2LT/ENS	1LT/LTJG

Since 2002, CMC members who are 67 or younger at the time of the Party Congress can remain until the next congress (age 72). Members who are 68 at the time of the Party Congress must retire.

The PLA is apparently still looking for the best way to recruit, educate, train, and promote its officers. The following bullets provide a brief overview of PLA officer academic institutions since 1949:

- **Period 1 (1949-1958):** In 1950, the PLA had 57 officer institutions, rising to 246 in 1956. During the 1950s, most officers were still illiterate or barely literate. As such, the primary focus was on basic literacy.
- **Period 2 (1958-1966):** The number of institutions was reduced from 246 in 1957 to 116 in 1965.
- **Period 3 (1966-1976):** The number of institutions fluctuated dramatically in both directions as a result of the Cultural Revolution. At the beginning of 1969, there was a total of 125 academic institutions. However, by the end of 1969, a total of 82 academic institutions had been abolished, leaving only 43. From 1966 to 1980, the majority of officers came from the direct promotion of enlisted personnel with one to three years of service. For example, both current CMC Vice Chairmen, Generals Zhang Youxia and He

Weidong, joined the PLA as enlisted soldiers and were directly promoted to officer three years later.

- **Period 4 (1976-1985):** In 1977, there were a total of 115 academic institutions, including those that were reestablished and adjusted. In 1980, the PLA abolished the program for direct promotions of enlisted personnel and required all new officers, including enlisted personnel selected to become officers, to receive basic college-level education at a PLA academic institution. A high proportion of those officers still came from outstanding enlisted personnel, but they now had to attend an academic institution before they received their promotion.¹ The first bachelor's degree programs in military academies began in 1982, the first master's degree programs began in 1985, and the first doctoral degree programs began in 1989.
- **Period 5 (1985-1999):** By 1986, the PLA had increased the number of institutions back up to 117.

In 1999, CMC Chairman Jiang Zemin cut the number of academic institutions down to 67 and created a National Defense Student Program in 118 civilian universities. This program was intended to educate future PLA officers at civilian academic institutions, but it was abolished in 2016 and the last class graduated in 2020. This was primarily due to a failure to properly integrate these officers into the PLA, and a general idea that they were not “real” PLA officers. Graduates did not typically fill “command” billets but mostly served in special technical and support billets. During the program, 40% of the graduates could go to grad school, and there was a 5% quote for women. The program was run by the General Political Department and the respective service Political Departments. In 2006, the eventual goal was laid out to have 40% of all PLA officers come from this program in 2010, but the PLA apparently never met that goal.

Major changes occurred in the officer academic system starting in 2017, when the PLA reduced its officer academic institutions from 63 to 34, including abolishing the Airborne College and Marine Corps College and replacing them with training bases. Airborne and Marine Corps cadets now receive their education at the Army Special Forces College/Academy.

As a replacement for the National Defense Student Program, the PLA is now directly recruiting civilian college graduates to fill specific support (not command) billets. Although no data was provided for 2020 or 2021, the CMC announced in March 2022 that the PLA and PAP would directly recruit more than 3,600 new college graduates (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees) as officers, with a focus on majors in science, technology, and other needed disciplines. It appears that they receive two months of pre-billet training at their new unit. In addition, some officers receive training at a relevant officer academy. For example, in December 2022, more than 100 naval officer candidates, including a few females, received pre-commissioning training at the PLA Naval Submarine Academy, which included seven-days of offshore seamanship training aboard the Zhenghe training ship. Although no specific information was found, these officers must serve at least five years from the day they sign their contract before they can leave the military. It is not clear if they are required to already be a Communist Party member or to join the Communist Party after they are assigned to their billet. Normally, it takes two years to become a Party member, and most, but not necessarily all, cadets in officer academies go through this process during their first two years. As a general rule, all “commanding officers”, meaning anyone who is in a leadership position, including a deputy director of a third-level administrative department, must be a Party

¹ Of note, very few enlisted members now enter officer academic institutions to become an officer.

member because they are part of the unit's Party Committee; however, support personnel who are not "commanding officers" or part of the Party Committee do not necessarily have to be a Party member.

Of particular note, all non-pilot cadets graduate around 1 July and are assigned directly to their operational unit, and are on probation for the first year. However, there are various exceptions, including officers who are assigned to remote areas. This is important, because it is the peak of the summer training cycle, and none of these new officers have any operational experience.

Concerning promotions, the PLA does not have a central promotion board for the enlisted force or office corps. All promotions up to the corps level are local promotions, which are made by the unit Party Standing Committee.

Prior to 2021, the PLA's officer corps, which it calls active-duty officers/cadres, was organized into the following five career tracks: military/operational officer, political officer, logistics officer, equipment/armament officer, and special technical officer. The PLA later combined the first four career tracks together, and in 2021 renamed them "command and administrative officers." It still has the special technical officer track as a separate track.

The PLA further organizes its officers into three categories as follows, each of which receive different types of education and training as they move up the career ladder:

- Commanding officers, which includes the Commander, Political Commissar, Deputy Commanders and Political Commissars, the Director and Deputy Director for all of the first-, second-, and third-level departments within each service headquarters, Theater Command, and subordinate units, and the leaders in each of the current 15 CMC organizations.
- Staff officers, who serve in each of the four first-level departments, including the Staff Department, Political Work Department, Logistics Department and Equipment Department, which have been merged into the Joint Logistics Support Force at the Theater Command level and a Support Department at the Theater Command service level and below, and their subordinate second- and third-level departments, as well as the 15 CMC organizations.
- Special technical officers.

Prior to the 2016 reforms, the General Staff Department and service Headquarters Departments managed enlisted force assignments and all academic institutions, while the General Political Department and service Political Departments managed officer corps assignments and the National Defense Student Program. Following the 2016 reforms, the CMC and service Political Work Departments now manage all personnel issues, with the subordinate Cadre Bureau managing all officer issues, and the new Enlisted Soldier and Civilian Personnel Bureau managing all enlisted and civilian personnel issues. In addition, the new CMC Training and Administration Department manages all academic institutions.