



Understanding the PLA's New Conscript Regulations

5 June 2023

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A BluePath Labs Report

Table of Contents

New Regulations on Conscription	3
Recruiting High-Quality Personnel.....	3
Improving Organizational Leadership	5
Wartime Conscription.....	6
Optimizing Examination Procedures	6
Turning Recruits Over to the PLA and Final Review.....	7
Supervision and Punishments	8
Conclusion	9
Endnotes.....	10

In April 2023, China's Central Military Commission (CMC) announced through the Xinhua state news agency that it had made revisions to the "Regulations on Conscription Work" [征兵工作条例], taking effect on 1 May 2023.¹ With the previous incarnation of these Regulations dating back to September 2001, this round of revisions represents the first time that the Regulations have been amended in more than 20 years. Xi Jinping's tenure as head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been marked by a constant succession of reforms, revisions, and reorganizations geared toward creating a more capable People's Liberation Army (PLA) than the one he inherited, and these changes are only the latest in a wider string of reforms to the PLA over the past several years.² The past few years in particular have seen frequent calls from CMC leadership to improve the PLA's capabilities, especially in regard to personnel quality. At a 2021 CMC meeting on personnel work, Xi stated outright that the PLA needs to strengthen its sense of urgency in improving its personnel.³ This sentiment was immediately echoed by CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia, who emphasized that improving the PLA demanded improved personnel more than at other point in history.⁴ However, despite the PLA's clear emphasis on improving personnel, the sheer number of reform attempts and public proclamations in recent years strongly suggests that it still faces serious issues which it is struggling to overcome.

This report will briefly examine notable changes in the new Regulations, the PLA's likely rationale for these changes, and the broader context around the issues the Regulations seek to address. Overall, the PLA faces problems finding the educated military personnel it desires, retaining the personnel it has trained, recruiting a physically fit fighting force, and rooting out the deeply-imbedded culture of corruption and clientelism that has persisted over the years. While the new Regulations are tailored towards ameliorating some of these issues, the tasks it faces remain daunting.

New Regulations on Conscription

In the broadest sense, these revisions primarily aim to improve personnel quality and optimize recruitment methods while maintaining the leadership of the CMC with Xi Jinping at its helm. More formally, the announcement emphasized that the revisions implement “Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military, improve the overall quality of conscripts within the PLA, standardize procedures, clearly delegate responsibilities, and create a fast and efficient conscription system capable of transitioning between peace and wartime.”

In a follow-up press release, Ministry of National Defense spokesperson Colonel Tan Kefei [谭克非] explained the motives behind the revisions to conscription work:⁵

1. Improve leadership mechanisms for conscription organizations, strengthen the Party's leadership over conscription work, and build a leadership system for conscription organizations that runs vertically from the national level to provinces, cities and counties, and runs horizontally from the government to academic institutions.
2. Emphasize the recruitment of high-quality soldiers, establish comprehensive evaluation and selection mechanisms, focus on college students, and give priority to ensuring the recruitment of college graduates and soldiers with special or professional skills; qualified retired soldiers can also re-enlist in the PLA, and will be assigned to the original unit or the same type of billet.
3. Optimize the medical examination and political assessment procedures for conscription, standardize the recognition of results nationally, and focus on assessing the political attitudes of recruited citizens.
4. Improve methods of handing over recruits from military service agencies and self-reporting recruits to the PLA.
5. Improve the quarantine, review, and return mechanisms of recruits, and pay more attention to the protection of the rights and interests of returned recruits.
6. Strengthen comprehensive supports for conscription, promote the use of information technology for conscription, strengthen conscription supervision and inspection, commendations, and rewards, refine and improve identification and punishment for illegal acts of conscription, and ensure the efficient organization and implementation of conscription in accordance with the law.

Recruiting High-Quality Personnel

The drive for higher-quality personnel has been a constant throughline in PLA recruiting for the past 30 years. Following the U.S. victory in Operation Desert Storm, Chinese leadership recognized the need for a modernized, highly technical military force with requisite skilled personnel.⁶ This may have prompted the aforementioned 2001 revisions to the Regulations on Conscription Work and other amendments to the Military Service Law.⁷ In recent years, Xi has called personnel quality the key to advancing the development of the military and highly important to building a world-class military, and has vowed to continue focus on recruiting college-educated personnel. The CCP leadership associates educational levels with personnel quality, driving to improve the latter by improving the former.⁸

While the 2001 Regulations began to focus more on college-educated personnel, it had met only very limited success by 2009, when the PLA began to make concerted efforts via a series of policies and recruiting incentives to draw college students and graduates to military service.⁹ Beginning in 2009, the PLA and Ministry of Education worked together to provide student debt relief and other post-enlistment incentives to college students.¹ Other policies from this period included abolishing quotas for rural and urban recruits (increasing the percentage of personnel with an urban background strongly correlated with education),¹⁰ and restructuring the entire conscription training cycle to align with college graduation dates, attracting recent graduates who may be looking for employment after leaving college.¹¹

Beyond these softer incentives, the PLA also doubled salaries for enlisted personnel in 2010, and increased benefits specifically for college-educated personnel.¹² While numbers are uneven across provinces, today these benefit packages appear competitive compared with average outcomes for Chinese college graduates. For example, in Hubei Province, the overall economic benefits of joining the PLA for college graduate equaled roughly \$29,000 in 2018, while the average salary of a college graduate came to only about \$10,000.¹³ This strongly suggests that the salary, retirement benefits, medical insurance, endowment insurance, and various occupational subsidies form a compelling package for fresh college graduates when considering their future.

Additionally, the PLA has established numerous partnership programs with universities which may attract students who wish to study at higher-level colleges, but lack the test scores to get in. For example, in 2015 the PLA Air Force Aviation University found that its partnerships with China's high-caliber Peking and Tsinghua Universities were attracting a large quantity of cadets, albeit with the caveat that if those cadets failed to be selected for the program, they frequently left the PLA entirely.¹⁴ More recently, the PLA has also expanded its "precision recruitment centers" project, which was developed to recruit personnel with at least some college education and place them in the military billets that could properly utilize their skills.¹⁵

The 2023 Regulations repeatedly emphasize and expand upon the recruitment of college students and graduates, as well as personnel with critical skills. For example, Article 4 explicitly calls on colleges to assist military service agencies in handling conscription work, while Article 5 also stipulates that local governments give priority to recruiting college graduates and personnel with desirable professional skills.¹⁶ Other requirements in the Regulations attempt to streamline the recruitment process for college-educated personnel. Article 15 allows students to join the PLA from their school location instead of having to register from their hometowns, and article 33 ensures that students will retain their enrollment qualifications during their active service and be allowed to return to their university up to two years after leaving active service.¹⁷ The Regulations further incentivize college recruitment by providing the families of recruits with benefits and preferential treatment.¹⁸

The positive effect of such incentives are evident in PLA recruitment statistics. Data provided by China's National Bureau of Statistics shows a sharp decrease in personnel with only a ninth-grade education from 27.61% in 2000 to 3.43% by 2020.¹⁹ In 2020, personnel with a high school education accounted for 39.77%, while personnel with at least some higher education increased from 46.6% in 2000 to 56.81% by 2020. Although these numbers show a promising upward trend, anecdotal evidence points toward the PLA hoping for college education levels closer to 70%.²⁰ This shortfall may explain CCP leadership's insistence on pushing for higher education levels and targeting those with STEM backgrounds, graduates of advanced technical schools, and those with

¹ One of these incentives is the ability to change their academic majors, something not otherwise possible in the Chinese education system.

the high-tech skills needed for modern combat readiness.²¹ It remains to be seen if the new articles in the Regulations will help fill this gap, or if the gulf between aspiration and reality will remain for the PLA.

Improving Organizational Leadership

Another reason for the latest revisions was to streamline the conscription process by establishing clear lines of responsibility. The new Regulations accomplish this by adding additional steps for coordination and reiterating the need for adherence to the Party and CMC.

For example, when discussing the macro-level organization of conscription work, the 2001 Regulations stipulated that conscription “shall be organized and implemented by the Ministry of National Defense under the leadership of the State Council and the Central Military Commission, and the specific work shall be undertaken by the Recruitment Office of the Ministry of National Defense.”²² The 2023 version of the document provides additional detail, stating that the State Council and CMC shall establish “an inter-ministerial joint meeting system to coordinate national conscription work.”²³ Likewise, when delegating tasks to the local level, the previous Regulations allowed provinces to make their own overall plans, while the new Regulations require the establishment of Conscription Work Leading Groups [征兵工作领导小组] for planning and coordination.²⁴ Similar changes and increased specificity exist throughout the modified document, and result in a document that is significantly longer and leaves less room for ambiguity regarding process and responsibilities.

Beyond assigning responsibilities, the revised Regulations also represent the latest addition to a long-running push from the CCP leadership to further consolidate the authority of the Party and Xi Jinping as its head. According to the newly added Article 2 of the Regulations, “Conscription work adheres to the leadership of the Communist Party of China, [and] implements Xi Jinping’s thinking on strengthening the military.”²⁵ In general, moves like this, which insert Xi Jinping Thought and Party centrality, have been a constant reality of Xi’s tenure as General Secretary.²⁶ Most notably, the doctrine of Xi Jinping Thought was added to the Party Constitution in 2017 and the National Constitution in 2018.²⁷ Xi has also been acquiring a string of informal titles meant to invoke parallels between his time as General Secretary and other key CCP leaders such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Since 2016, Xi has been called Core Leader, the Leader, People’s Leader, and the Great Helmsman, with the latter two only previously bestowed upon Mao Zedong.²⁸ More concretely, Xi has used his authority as General Secretary of the CCP, Chairman of the CMC, and President of the PRC to use appointments, investigations, reforms, and political campaigns to extinguish rivals and push forward his vision of a Chinese national rejuvenation.²⁹ This has included extensive efforts to ensure complete control over the military, including through a widespread and ongoing crackdown on corruption which may also have allowed Xi to promote officers personally loyal to him. Thus, the inclusion of Xi Jinping Thought into the Regulations is almost expected, as yet another sign that Xi Jinping still sits at the pinnacle of Party and military power.

Wartime Conscription

Conspicuously un-mentioned in the formal press release was the insertion of an entire chapter into the Regulations devoted to outlining the conscription process during wartime.³⁰ In the previous iteration of the Regulations, the word “wartime” [战时] did not appear, however the new Regulations contain five articles which discuss this topic. According to the new Regulations, after the CMC and State Council issue national defense mobilization measures, they may adjust the conditions and methods for enlisting citizens for active service (presumably including who can and can’t be drafted, from where, with what background, and for what purpose) however they see fit.³¹ These duties are overseen by the Ministry of National Defense’s Recruitment Office, which is tasked with coordinating with local organizations, who conduct ground-level recruitment tasks and the transportation and registration of conscripts.³²

The new wartime conscription chapter also discusses retired soldiers, stating that “during wartime, according to needs, retired soldiers can be recruited as a supplement to active service units.”³³ This addition to the Regulations strongly suggests that past retention issues persist to this day, despite numerous PLA programs in recent years. For example, the PLA already has a program for voluntarily returning to service in peacetime: beginning in 2021, the PLA began offering the opportunity for a “second enlistment” after a conscript’s two-year training period has expired. This applied to current personnel who were near the end of their enlistment period and had not been promoted to NCO,ⁱⁱ as well as personnel who had previously demobilized but wished to return to the military.³⁴

While the PLA has not publicly released any information on its rationale for creating either of these initiatives, the second enlistment program, along with the new Regulations’ recruitment of demobilized soldiers in wartime, indicates that the PLA continues to have problems with enlisted personnel retention. Allowing the PLA to rapidly mobilize old personnel would be the quickest and most straightforward way to make up for this shortcoming in an emergency.

Optimizing Examination Procedures

Beyond education levels, the Regulations on Conscription Work also seek to improve the physical and political examination procedures for conscripts entering the PLA.

In general, the 2023 Regulations are more detailed than the 2001 Regulations when stipulating the chain of command regarding physical examinations. For example, although the 2001 Regulations state that the local conscription office is responsible for organizing hospitals and establishing exam locations, the 2023 Regulations go a step further and stipulate that the local office must consult with the provincial government’s Conscription Office and Health Administration Department before establishing temporary exam stations.³⁵ Further, primary standard-setting responsibility is given to the CMC in conjunction with the State Council in the

ⁱⁱ Prior to 2021, such personnel who were not promoted would have been automatically demobilized. Conscripts could occasionally have their 2-year service period extended. However, this typically only happened because of mission requirements that took place during the end of their cycle. For example, see: Peng Liang [彭亮], “Four classes for four companies, combined into one class for the whole battalion” [四个连队四堂课, 合成全营一堂课], *PLA Daily* [中国军网], 15 April 2023, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbqxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2023-04-15&paperNumber=04&articleid=903357

2023 Regulations, while the 2001 Regulations give that authority to the Ministry of National Defense.³⁶ Finally, the 2023 Regulations also introduce an extra layer of guarantee, stipulating additional spot checks for those who pass the physical exam.³⁷ If too many within a batch fail this extra step, then the entire batch of candidates will be re-examined.

Evidence suggests that this additional stringency regarding physical examinations may be in response to an ongoing issue of fitness among PLA recruits. At least as far back as 2013, the sedentary lifestyle of many modern Chinese citizens contributed to high levels of failure on the physical examination. For example, one Beijing recruiting office found that 60% of its college recruits were failing due to high BMI and shortsightedness, both symptoms associated with modern urban lifestyles.³⁸ Likewise, these physical problems also led to a significantly higher injury rates among new PLA recruits in recent years due to lower amounts of physical activity among China's youth.³⁹ It also appears that these issues persist well into the enlistment period, with physical fitness often leading to poor training performance.⁴⁰ Despite additional scrutiny brought by the changes to the Regulations, it seems unlikely that the PLA will resolve this issue any time soon.

Following the physical exams, recruits are also subjected to political assessments for attitudes that might undermine the PLA's position as the Party's military. While both the 2001 and 2023 Regulations call for the local conscription office to conduct political assessments, the 2023 revisions explicitly add that the assessments should also encompass the political attitudes of recruits' family members.⁴¹ Anecdotal evidence suggests that this extra scrutiny was applied at least as far back as 2018. For example, one PLA Air Force cadet was discharged after his initial political screening when his political evaluation office partnered with the local police force and discovered that his aunt was in prison, most likely for political reasons.⁴²

As with the additions asserting the primacy of Xi Jinping Thought, the additional scrutiny that the 2023 Regulations introduce is part of a broader movement from the PLA to improve the loyalty and political reliability of its personnel. Some key billets have introduced a quantified loyalty evaluation system, while other provinces have introduced additional ideological education as part of "pre-induction education and training."⁴³ However, despite these moves, political reliability appears to still be a major preoccupation of the CCP. As recently as 2021, when introducing a set of promotional standards, Xi listed loyalty to the Party as first in a list of priorities which included military expertise, leadership capabilities, past performance indicators, and moral integrity.ⁱⁱⁱ⁴⁴ Given the PLA's ongoing necessity for political work and indoctrination after recruitment, it is unclear how much utility these additional screening procedures provide, and may only select against overt anti-CCP indications.

Turning Recruits Over to the PLA and Final Review

Following initial physical and political examinations, new recruits are then turned over to the PLA and face a final review. This can be accomplished by either the local military service agency, personnel dispatched from the PLA, or by self-reporting from the recruits themselves.⁴⁵ In a

ⁱⁱⁱ Likewise, PRC state media has equated possessing "integrity" with being politically reliable to the CCP. See "Start a new journey of military education" [开启军事教育新征程], *PLA Daily* [中国军报], 20 July 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2020-07/20/c_1210711602.htm

similar vein to the other revisions mentioned above, the 2023 Regulations greatly increase the overall specificity of instructions, including stipulations on time periods for accomplishing tasks, requiring liaison between agencies, and specifying areas of responsibility.⁴⁶ For example, articles 36 and 39 set a deadline of 15 days for the PLA to send a liaison group to settle matters with the local conscription office, and a 10-day deadline to review files and meet the new recruits.⁴⁷ Articles 45 and 46 further clearly spell out the responsibilities of the CMC, State Council, and PLA Joint Logistic Support Force to create and carry out planning and coordination for transporting new recruits to their training centers.⁴⁸

After transportation to training centers, new recruits are subjected to final medical and political re-examinations. During the final review, new recruits are most likely given a cursory background check. If found to be suspected of a crime, if their political loyalty is found lacking, or if they have a serious underlying medical condition, the new recruit will be dismissed and returned to their original recruitment location.⁴⁹ One major change in the 2023 Regulations clearly outlines that recruits who are dismissed in this way will have their remuneration, pension, preferential treatment, and all other benefits cancelled and recovered by the offices that issued them.⁵⁰ This addition may indicate previous underlying legal problems, with failed recruits seeking benefits despite being dismissed before training.

Supervision and Punishments

The new Regulations also strengthen the various mechanisms within the PLA for supervision and punishments by adding an entire chapter which outlines that acts such as evading a conscription call, refusal to serve once recruited, obstructing citizens from fulfilling their military service obligations, corrupt acts and malpractice, or dereliction of duty will be punished.⁵¹

The fact that the PLA even felt it necessary to include a chapter devoted to personnel failures suggests that these issues remain malignant under the surface. A recent ten-year study showed that it's not uncommon for new PLA recruits to refuse to serve after receiving their conscription notifications, or even after they have fully entered service.⁵² In 236 publicly available cases, this behavior occurred most frequently among young recruits with little life experience who were unable to endure military conditions. In one example from 2020, a fresh 20-year old college student joined the PLA in Anhui Province, only to then request to quit on the first day of training, citing maladjustment.⁵³ Although his training unit and family attempted to convince him otherwise, he fully refused to participate and was expelled. In situations like this, the PLA can retaliate and make life difficult for recruits who attempt to drop out. While the Regulations do not specify punishments, the PLA has been known to issue fines of up to 46,866 RMB,^{iv} and prohibit the recruit from resuming college, going abroad, obtaining government aid or subsidies, obtaining civil service or state-owned enterprise employment, or receiving a business license for varying periods of time.⁵⁴

Corruption, bribery, and personnel networks are another pervasive issue within the PLA. One of Xi's opening moves as the new Chairman of the CMC was to purge at least 70 officers via the CMC's Discipline Inspection Commission.⁵⁵ Due to its power over career trajectories, the former General Political Department in particular was known for egregious corruption, to the point that

^{iv} This is roughly equivalent to \$6,561 USD as of May 2023.

each military rank had implicit prices connected to it, with bidding wars between officers not uncommon.⁵⁶ Although Xi Jinping declared an “overwhelming victory” in his campaign against PLA corruption in 2018, problems most likely persist.⁵⁷

Corruption travels along personnel networks, which, according to a series of interviews conducted in 2018, exist in part because the formal standards for promotions are subpar.⁵⁸ For instance, when assessing an officer's level of integrity, the assessment assumes the positive: officers automatically pass as long as there are no significant blemishes on their record. Likewise, when asking cohorts for recommendations on who should get a promotion, it is made known in advance who had already been chosen by those above. Those who are already well-connected and preferred by superiors inevitably receive glowing recommendations from their peers. Even when efforts are made to enhance the promotion process, problems like this still exist. According to the interviews, when standards and selection criteria were revised in the past, those making the changes simply skewed them in favor of their preferred candidates. These poor criteria and informal understandings between those conducting promotions and those who wish to be promoted breed conflicts of interest and potential for bribery. The fact that the Regulations included an entire article just to reiterate that corruption and bribery are illegal does not boost confidence in the PLA's efforts to fight graft in the ranks.

Conclusion

Although the new Regulations are an important step in formalizing a number of key processes in the PLA's conscription system, the underlying issues that they are intended to ameliorate are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. The PLA is facing retention problems necessitating further policy adjustments and incentives, gaps between targets and reality for conscript educational backgrounds, a low quality of physical fitness among recruits, possible issues with dereliction of duty, and an undercurrent of corruption and clientelism. These are all deep-rooted problems that will have direct effects on the PLA's ability to fight and win wars. And while it is indeed making progress in certain aspects, it's yet unclear if these changes will be more successful than previous efforts to address these issues and make the PLA into a world-class military organization.

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