



China's Next Step in Modernizing the People's Liberation Army: A New Reserve Service System

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Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party's massive active-duty army—the largest in the world—understates the manpower available to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) during a future protracted war. Despite the hundreds of thousands of combat troops garrisoned around the country, a prolonged war of attrition will require more than movement of forces from one side of the country to another. The People's Liberation Army's reserve force has prepared to supplement troops and units since 1983, but unlike its US and Russian counterparts, China has yet to use its reservists during a time of war.¹ Nevertheless, Xi Jinping has emphasized the modernization and restructuring of PLA reserve forces in recent years. Chinese Premier Li Qiang, when announcing the 2024 defense budget, explicitly stated one of the main priorities for the People's Liberation Army would be expansion of its reserve force.²

The Chinese Communist Party's passing of a new reservist law (中华人民共和国预备役人员法) in December 2022 established the legal foundation for a more professional PLA reserve service, but changes had already been underway since 2020 as part of a yearslong effort. By the end of 2021, nearly all the People's Liberation Army's reserve divisions and brigades in each service, often equipped with antiquated equipment, quietly disappeared as a new reserve-base structure started training troops and small units to plug and play into active-duty units. Following the implementation of the reservist law in March 2023, the People's Liberation Army initiated a new program to train individual reservist augmentees for reintegration into their original units. The reserve reforms entered another phase in mid-2024 as former servicemembers applied to join the PLA reserve force under a new selection process, ultimately leading to the first batch of reserve personnel attending a new style of annual training at the reserve bases and with their former units in October and November. The opportunity to put the uniform on again while also receiving monthly allowances and the chance to work in their old units proved exciting for many former servicemembers, hundreds of whom proudly bragged about their acceptance into reserve service on Chinese social media.

Defining the PLA Reserve Service

The Chinese term for reserve service (预备役) is defined as “military service (兵役) performed by citizens outside of active-duty service in accordance with the law” in the 2011 *People’s Liberation Army Military Terminology*. The 2022 law defines reserve personnel, or reservists (预备役人员), as citizens that fulfilled their military service obligations in accordance with the law and are pre-assigned to Chinese PLA active-duty forces (现役部队) or reserve forces (预备役部队) to perform reserve service.

For clarity, this paper uses reserve force to incorporate all personnel and units affiliated only with reserve service. This should not be confused with operational reserve forces (预备部队), which describes alternate or emergency forces, locations, or equipment that are not committed to a current battle at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.

China’s creation of a modern reserve component is timely as the People’s Liberation Army faces Xi Jinping’s goal of accelerating the modernization of national defense and the armed forces by the People’s Liberation Army’s centenary in 2027. Western defense and intelligence officials assess the centenary as the date Xi ordered his military to be ready to conduct an invasion of Taiwan. This order placed an aggressive milestone for the People’s Liberation Army to meet while also adapting to requirements for achieving his demand to “basically complete the modernization of national defense and armed forces by 2035.”³ Maintaining a large pool of highly qualified reservists prepared to mobilize in a short period of time would represent a major improvement in PLA capabilities and could also strengthen Xi Jinping’s willingness to use the party’s military to accomplish his objectives.

The PLA Reserve Force: A Modernization Afterthought

The People’s Liberation Army’s reserve force, required by law but long neglected amid the rapid modernization of China’s active-duty military, has existed in its current form since 1983. Although the Military Service Law of the People’s Republic of China established a reserve system in 1955, the implementation of filling the ranks with former soldiers is a relatively new concept for China compared to the US and Russian militaries. Originally, under the command of provincial military districts and mobilized through People’s Armed Forces Departments (PAFDs) that were responsible for meeting conscription quotas at county, city, district, and town levels, the reserve forces were made up of units staffed by a backbone of active-duty military cadre that would be filled primarily with two types of personnel: demobilized soldiers and civilian technical experts without prior service.⁴ Reserve units trained far less than active-duty forces. The People’s Republic of China’s 2008 defense white paper noted the Outline for the Military Training and Evaluation of the Reserve Force only required one-third of the authorized strength of a reserve unit to undergo 30 days

of training per year.⁵ The reserve divisions, brigades, and regiments could be task assigned as combat units to campaign leadership but could also be called up to conduct disaster relief operations alongside active-duty and militia forces.⁶ Often confused with reserve forces, the People's Republic of China's militia is not a PLA organization but is the third element of the Chinese armed forces under command of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission, alongside the People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police.⁷

Various laws over the past 40 years have adjusted the subordination and mobilization requirements of the PLA reserve force, but the structure remained relatively unchanged. The PLA Army's reserve organization, made up of divisions and brigades based in single provinces or centrally administered cities since 1998, maintained units classified as infantry, artillery, antiaircraft artillery, antitank artillery, tank, engineer, chemical defense, communications, and other functional support arms. By the late 1990s, other PLA services increased their own number of reserve units, though the services remained a small percentage of the overall reserve-force structure.⁸ The PLA Navy, as of 2015, had at least five reserve units established to provide reconnaissance, countermine warfare, electronic warfare, and service support in the maritime domain.⁹ The PLA Air Force began developing reserve forces in 2004 and built airfield station flight support, surface-to-air missile, and radar units.¹⁰ The former Second Artillery Force, now the PLA Rocket Force, had reserve support units established around 2005 primarily focused on equipment maintenance and emergency support.¹¹

Following Xi Jinping's ascension to power and the PLA-wide restructuring in 2016, the reserve force found itself moving from subordination to provincial military districts to a dual chain of command that reported to the Central Military Commission (CMC) National Defense Mobilization Department and to the individual PLA services in February 2017.¹² Despite the updated chain of command, Chinese military researchers believed the outmoded organization of reserve units restricted their ability to generate combat power and adapt to the needs of modern intelligitized warfare.¹³

The unchanged organization and composition of the original reserve divisions and brigades in each PLA service left the force heavily oriented toward supporting army warfighting. According to an October 2018 article of *National Defense*, infantry, artillery, and other combat forces made up 41 percent of the reserve force. Reserve units specializing in communications, engineering, chemical defense, and other service support functions made up nearly a quarter of the force. In contrast, specialized technical forces of the PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, PLA Rocket Force, and former PLA Strategic Support Force accounted for less than 10 percent of China's reserve units. Most provinces in China had two to three reserve divisions and multiple brigades, though some smaller provinces had only one brigade or two regiments.¹⁴

The *National Defense* article, written by a reserve infantry division chief of staff and a staff officer in the Central Theater Command Joint Staff Department Mobilization Bureau, also decried the state of equipment in reserve units. According to the authors, more than 70 percent of artillery

and antiaircraft artillery systems in the army reserve force had reached or were approaching their maximum service life. Other weapons—especially certain antiaircraft artillery systems—had already been eliminated from the active force and replacement parts were usually unavailable, leading to cannibalization of existing platforms to allow for repairs. The reserve force (pictured in figure 1) also faced a general shortage of special vehicles, construction machinery, and professional equipment.¹⁵



Figure 1: PLA reserve soldiers in formation before new reserve law (with old rank insignia)

The PLA Reserve Force's Demand for Change

Recognizing the difficulties it faced in modernizing its reserve force, the People's Liberation Army opened an online suggestion box in late July 2018 to collect opinions and recommendations on how to adjust and reform the reserve force.¹⁶ Over the subsequent two years, articles were published describing the problems that needed to be solved and potential options for the People's Liberation Army. Even the 2020 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* dedicated a chapter to describing necessary changes for the reserve force.¹⁷ One of the most prominent problems was a complex chain of command that had reserve units taking operational orders from the People's Liberation Army but remaining beholden to local civilian government authorities for training area infrastructure and education support, as well as the requirement to provide those local authorities with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts.¹⁸ Some concerns also pertained to the idea the individual PLA services did not have adequate communications and coordination with the provincial military districts that carried out mobilization efforts, leading to a question of who calls up the reserve force and how, which remained unanswered.¹⁹

Experts also believed the reserve force deserved clarification of its functional missions. In the age of informationized local wars built around integrated joint operations, there remained a question of how reserve forces adequately fit into the puzzle. Military researchers argued the PLA reserve force needed to move from a “peacetime emergency response and wartime callup” concept to one of “wartime response as the core function, peacetime emergency response as secondary, and the provision of service support functions to active forces over direct participation in combat operations.” This move would require a transition from simply replacing soldiers to filling gaps in the joint force while also better ensuring reserve missions were clearly delineated from those of militia organizations and the People’s Armed Police.²⁰

The disparity in equipment modernization between the active and reserve force also led to numerous recommendations. Researchers argued modern weapons and equipment should be purchased early in the transition process to allow for improved integration of reserve forces into military operations and disaster relief efforts. This change would improve the readiness of reserve units and allow them to move from a “mobilize-train-equip” model into an “equip-train-mobilize” model.²¹ Authors of the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* specifically recommended the reserve force place an emphasis on updating equipment for air defense, border defense, and coastal defense alongside emergency rescue and disaster relief equipment based on expected missions, but the services also acknowledged reserve forces required modern command and control, reconnaissance and surveillance, and service support equipment to improve their ability to support active components.²²

Multiple media articles and the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* argued reserve-force training also required improvement. At the time, reserve training lacked realism and did not reflect the same standards as the active-duty forces.²³ Training needed to focus on modern informationized local wars, or limited wars along China’s periphery, which included mastery of new equipment and command information systems. Experts believed reserve forces should transition from training large numbers of unspecialized troops to smaller specialized teams. Training locations should include simulation technology to train forces on complex systems to allow those forces to interact more effectively with active-duty counterparts.²⁴

The authors of the reserve modernization chapter in the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* finished with a recommendation to improve the laws and regulations of the reserve force. The authors believed the 2010 National Defense Mobilization Law and 2011 Military Service Law of the People’s Republic of China helped lay a foundation for reserve-force mobilization and construction, but the country’s economic and social development—as well as new requirements for military conflict preparation—required an update to the existing legislation. The authors argued a new special law for building the reserve force should be passed to clarify the rights and obligations of state institutions, social organizations, and citizens in the process. This new legislation should also clarify various requirements, including political education, military training, and equipment and funding sources relevant to reserve forces. Finally, the law should refine support methods, compensation

standards, rewards, and punishment measures related to the reserve forces to protect the rights of units and individuals.²⁵

On July 1, 2020, the Chinese Communist Party passed its Decision on Adjusting the Leadership System of the Reserve Forces. Though the decision did not thoroughly consider all the recommendations from Chinese media and the *Science of Military Strategy*, the decision did eradicate the problematic dual chain of command. The decision placed reserve forces and the provincial military districts under the command of the Central Military Commission's National Defense Mobilization Department, thus removing local authorities from any form of command over reserve units.²⁶ Though relatively unnoticed amid China's troubles with Hong Kong and COVID-19, this move toward reforming the PLA reserve force was only the first step.

The Quiet Reserve-Force Reform Begins

The PLA reserve units made regular appearances in official Chinese media, with military-affiliated news outlets frequently broadcasting reports on reserve training and participation in disaster relief efforts. But following a June 8, 2021, China Central Television broadcast of the Guizhou PLA Army (PLAA) reserve division conducting emergency rescue training for flood relief and a July 3, 2021, publication referencing a Southern Theater Command PLA Air Force (PLAAF) reserve division on the theater command's official Tencent social media page, references to specific named PLA reserve divisions and brigades on official Chinese mediums no longer appeared.²⁷ Official media reporting on other service reserve units also appeared to become much more limited, with references to named PLA Rocket Force reserve support units and PLA Navy (PLAN) reserve components slowly disappearing after 2020.²⁸

In early November 2021, the official government website of the Qiantang district in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, publicized the establishment of the district's new PAFD on November 1. The ceremony described the district's role in mobilization and construction of national defense reserve forces according to the CMC order establishing the PAFD and featured several local senior Chinese Communist Party and military officials. One of those officials, Zhang Yongcai (张永才), was noted as the political commissar (政委) of the People's Liberation Army's 1st Army Reserve Base (陆军预备役第一基地)—possibly the first reference to a new reserve formation.²⁹ Zhang appeared again in January 2022 in an article published by Shaoxing University detailing the school leadership's visit to the Zhejiang (浙江) 1st Army Reserve Base. School leadership again visited the base in July 2022, but this time met with both Zhang and the base director (主任), Chen Xiao (陈晓).³⁰ Chen and Zhang, both reported as senior colonels (大校), were experienced officers. Chen had previously served as the commander of a reserve artillery brigade in Jiangxi.³¹ Zhang had been previously assigned as the political commissar of an artillery regiment in a maneuver brigade under the former 26th Group Army.³²

Following the appearance of the PLAA 1st Reserve Base in the media, other army reserve bases were quietly publicized. For example, the PLAA 2nd Reserve Base placed a requirement

for a Guizhou area food distribution project on a Chinese bidding website in early December 2021, and base leadership visited a small town in Guizhou as part of a Southern Theater Command working group.³³ This indicated the new PLAA reserve bases were designated in accordance with the standard protocol order numbering pattern for theater-specific units, with Eastern Theater Command (1st Army Reserve Base) first in order followed by Southern Theater Command (2nd Army Reserve Base), Western Theater Command (3rd Army Reserve Base), Northern Theater Command (4th Army Reserve Base), and Central Theater Command (5th Army Reserve Base). The remaining PLAA reserve bases were referenced on various media platforms over the next two years and included a 6th Army Reserve Base in Xinjiang Military District and 7th Army Reserve Base in Tibet Military District. Each base appears to have more than one garrison, with subordinate installations spread throughout the theater. Most, if not all, of the bases are now located on former reserve division or brigade garrisons. For example, according to an August 2023 military enthusiast post on WeChat, a member of the Army 76th Reserve Infantry Division of Shandong stated his unit, along with other reserve divisions, were merged to create the army reserve 4th Reserve Base in the Northern Theater Command in September 2021.³⁴

Additional names of army reserve-base directors and political commissars appeared in Chinese media in the years that followed. A post from the official WeChat page of the People's Hospital of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region referenced Senior Colonel Shao Xichun (邵喜春) as the director of the 6th Army Reserve Base in January 2022, while the official WeChat page for the Guizhou Provincial Military District public information release platform announced Senior Colonel Tang Yujun (唐豫军) as the political commissar of the 2nd Army Reserve Base in March 2022.³⁵ The grade of each officer remains unclear, but unofficial Chinese media sources have claimed the senior colonels in command of the bases are division-grade officials.³⁶

The other PLA services have also established reserve bases. Though one can assume each theater has one base for every service, the People's Republic of China has not publicly acknowledged the existence of each. The PLA Joint Logistics Support Force also appears to have reserve support brigades assigned to each theater. Although Chinese military enthusiast websites included discussions of PLA Rocket Force reserve bases, no official evidence exists as of October 2024. The following table details the known PLA reserve bases and units and their known garrisons.

References to named reserve divisions and brigades seem to have ceased by the end of 2022, but it appears each PLA service may not have completely dissolved all their reserve units. Instead, in addition to the new reserve base system, the services maintain small numbers of reserve support units. For example, the PLAA appears to maintain reserve aviation support units, while other PLAN, PLA AF, PLA Rocket Force, and even PLA Information Support Force (formerly PLA Strategic Support Force) reserve support elements still seem to exist.³⁷ Whether those PLA reserve support units have the same missions as reserve units prior to 2021 remains unclear. For example,

of the five known PLAN reserve units identified by Tiffany Tat (a professor in the US Naval War College's China Maritime Studies Institute), two of them included ship formations: a reconnaissance ship squadron and a minesweeper squadron. According to Tat, those two squadrons and three mobile radar and observation battalions could operate independently or alongside active-duty forces.³⁸ References to those five units appear to have ceased, but unspecified PLA Navy reserve *dadui* (battalion to regiment size units) still show up in PLA media.³⁹

Table 1. Known PLA reserve bases and units and their known garrisons

Theater / Military District	Service	Known Reserve Base / Unit	Known Garrisons
Eastern Theater	PLAA	1st Reserve Base	Hangzhou, Zhejiang ⁴⁰ Zhenjiang, Jiangsu ⁴¹ Jinhua, Zhejiang ⁴² Ji'an, Jiangxi ⁴³ Yichun, Jiangxi ⁴⁴
	PLAAF	Reserve Base	Yangzhou, Jiangsu ⁴⁵ Suzhou, Jiangsu ⁴⁶ Wuxi, Jiangsu ⁴⁷
Southern Theater	PLAA	2nd Reserve Base	Baiyun, Guangzhou ⁴⁸ Duyuncun, Guangxi ⁴⁹ Qianxinan, Guizhou ⁵⁰ Anshun, Guizhou ⁵¹ Guiyang, Guizhou ⁵²
	PLAAF	Reserve Base	Shenzhen, Guangdong ⁵³ Guangzhou, Guangdong ⁵⁴
Western Theater	PLAA	3rd Reserve Base	Yuzhong District, Chongqing ⁵⁵ Qinzhou, Gansu ⁵⁶ Deyang, Sichuan ⁵⁷ Chengdu, Sichuan ⁵⁸ Dazhou, Sichuan ⁵⁹
	PLAAF	Reserve Base	Chongqing ⁶⁰
	PLA Joint Logistics Support Force	3rd Reserve Joint Logistics Support Brigade	Chongqing ⁶¹
Northern Theater	PLAA	4th Reserve Base	Jinan, Shandong ⁶²
	PLAN	Reserve Base	Qingdao, Shandong ⁶³
Central Theater	PLAA	5th Reserve Base	Baodi, Tianjin ⁶⁴ Jinnan District, Tianjin ⁶⁵
	PLAAF	Reserve Base	Taiyuan, Shanxi ⁶⁶
		Airborne Corps Reserve Base	Yichang, Hubei ⁶⁷
	PLAN	Marine Corps Reserve Base	Queshan, Henan ⁶⁸
Xinjiang Military District	PLAA	6th Reserve Base	Shihezi, Xinjiang ⁶⁹
Tibet Military District	PLAA	7th Reserve Base	Lhasa, Tibet ⁷⁰

The Mystery of the Reserve Bases

Although the new reserve bases appear to have replaced most—if not all—divisions and brigades, this replacement was just the first step in implementing a massive overhaul of the People’s Liberation Army’s reserve force. As the bases stood up, very few details were released, and information on them remains limited even as of 2024. Like the reserve divisions and brigades that preceded them, the bases appear to maintain a skeleton active-duty staff of officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to oversee training and preparation of the mobilized forces. According to PLA researchers, this core cadre is primarily responsible for the advance organization and holding of military personnel in relevant professional positions who had been recently demobilized, in addition to prepositioned storage of equipment for reserve elements.⁷¹ The bases also served as training grounds for soldiers and force modules that could be augmented to active-duty units as needed. According to Chinese media, the bases trained individual reservists to embed into squads, squads made up of reservists to embed into battalions and companies, and *zhongdui* (中队, company-size elements) made up of reservists to embed into brigades and regiment-size units.⁷² This training likely indicated reserve personnel transitioned from filling billets in dissolved reserve units to serving as individual augmentees or small units that could attach to active-duty units, but how quickly this transition occurred remains unclear.

The use of the title director instead of commander (司令) for the operational counterpart to the political commissar in the People’s Liberation Army’s traditional shared command structure represents the training nature of the army reserve bases’ mission.⁷³ The director is likely responsible for the development and implementation of training plans for mobilized reservists, but the elements within his base do not serve as combat units. Therefore, the director lacks combat command authorities, as well as the title that accompanies them. The army reserve-base political commissar both oversees fundamental political work and grassroots training and probably lacks combat command authorities. The overall command and staff structure of the army reserve-base system remains unknown, but the system is likely built to support training and equipping mobilized reservists.

Information on the specifics of training and equipping reservists within the new reserve bases remains nearly nonexistent in Chinese media, but a small number of Chinese journal articles published in 2022 were written to assist in developing reserve training at the bases. The People’s Liberation Army’s *National Defense* journal included several articles on reserve transformation throughout 2022, but the final edition of the year featured an article from officers in the Southern Theater Command Army Staff Department arguing for the newly established reserve bases to adapt to changes and improve the quality and efficiency of military training (as shown in figure 2) to ensure reservists training at bases enter the force from a higher starting point.⁷⁴



Figure 2: PLA reservists training with simulated equipment



Figure 3: Small-unit training at an army reserve base in July 2023

The People's Liberation Army appears to have struggled with how best to define training requirements within the new reserve bases immediately following the bases' establishment. Figure 3 shows soldiers training at an army reserve base several months after the implementation of the reservist law.⁷⁵ Chinese military academics from the PLA Army Engineering University, in an April 2023 article from *Military Operations Research and Assessment*, determined recent reforms had gradually reduced reserve-force combat roles while strengthening reserve forces'

service support functions. Since an Outline for the Military Training and Evaluation had not been released for the reserve force by that time, the quality standards for base training were not yet identified to prepare reservists for those new roles.⁷⁶

A separate August 2023 article from additional PLA Army Engineering University researchers published in *Fire Control and Command Control* argued reserve-base training, a necessary integration of soldiers and civilians, needed to implement safety measures to allow for smooth completion of base training and an improvement of reserve-force combat effectiveness. The article, like the abovementioned paper, also noted the 2020 reforms resulted in a change in roles and missions for the PLA reserve force. According to the researchers, those changes led to the organization of brigade / regiment-scale base training (旅团规模的基地化训练) as a new development for reserve forces.⁷⁷

New reserve bases for the navy and air force likely also stood up at the end of 2021 and slowly began to publicize their training efforts in official media, though like their army counterparts, specific details of their roles and responsibilities were not released. For example, PLA reporters at the air force reserve base in the Western Theater Command (figure 4), in December 2021, noted the base was still in the initial stages of standing up and leadership hoped to “write the first page of the base’s development.”⁷⁸

The first year of the PLA reserve bases’ existence likely created chaos in reserve-force readiness as units that had existed for decades were disbanded and the new bases had to set up a training pipeline to prepare recently demobilized troops for small-unit or company-sized integration into active-duty brigades and regiments. This restructuring represented an unprecedented change in how the People’s Liberation Army manages its reserve force, but the restructuring also happened as even greater changes were pushed through China’s legal system. Although both military



Figure 4: Reservists training at the Western Theater Command PLAAF reserve base

journal articles were published in 2023, the journals were clearly written in 2022 because neither referenced the major reserve reform law adopted at the end of the year.

The PLA services appeared to have codified their reserve-force training programs by the end of 2023, two years after the reserve-base establishment. For example, in October 2023, an unspecified navy reserve element—almost certainly a reserve base—noted it had been working on developing new models for reserve personnel and management, in addition to training in both the classroom and on surface ship units. The new training models were implemented to improve processes for preassignment of reservists to combat units to prepare them better for quick supplementation to combat forces, thus establishing combat effectiveness during wartime.⁷⁹

The PLA Reserve Reform Abides—A New Law in 2022

The Chinese Communist Party passed the Reservists Law of the People’s Republic of China (中华人民共和国预备役人员法) during the 38th session of the Standing Committee of the 13th National People’s Congress in December 2022. Designed to regulate reserve leadership and management, identify the attributes and ranks of reservists, clarify education and training requirements, and establish benefits and retirement regulations, the 65-article law went into effect on March 1, 2023.⁸⁰ This new law provided the foundation for new changes to meet the needs of individual reservists to keep them in the force, many of which only started going into effect in late 2024.

According to an interview with CMC Political Work Department leadership in early January 2023, the new law was necessary for four purposes.

- The Chinese Communist Party had issued several reserve reform documents in recent years but lacked a legal and regulatory framework to allow for reserve-force compatibility.
- To show the necessity of improving the reserve force’s objective of effectively supplementing active-duty PLA forces to allow for the goal of preparing for war.
- To provide a fundamental measure for improving several issues in the reserve force, including professional capabilities, benefits, and management systems, to allow for a better starting point when called to duty.
- To show the need for the rule of law in the reserve force, defining powers and responsibilities in military and local organizations to protect the rights and obligations of citizens.⁸¹

After it went into effect in March 2023, the Center for Naval Analyses published an overview of the new Reservists Law of the People’s Republic of China in the March issue of *PLA Update*. In the article, the Center for Naval Analyses summarized several key areas of the law.

- Definition of reservists: People’s Republic of China citizens 18 years or older who are “preassigned” to PLA active-duty units or are assigned to reserve units.⁸² Reservists include both enlisted personnel and officers.

- Oversight of reservists: The law divides specific responsibilities for work related to reserve personnel among various CMC departments. Of note, the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department is responsible for assigning reservists to units and calling up reservists for duty when needed.
- Sources of reservists: The People's Liberation Army shall recruit reservists mainly from the ranks of former PLA active-duty personnel and highly qualified civilian technicians. New reservists must serve a minimum of four years.
- Reservist ranks: The law specifies the ranks for reserve officers and enlisted personnel. Reserve field grade and company grade officers, NCOs, and junior enlisted ranks correspond with those of active-duty personnel, but general officers ranks were removed from the reserve force.
- Reservist retirement: The law specifies mandatory retirement ages for specific ranks. Reserve field grade officers have a mandatory retirement age of 60; company grade officers range from 45 to 50 depending on command technical career tracks. Reserve enlisted mandatory retirement age spans 30 (junior enlisted) to 55 (senior grade).⁸³

Although the law was in effect starting in March 2023, full implementation of a new reserve-force recruitment effort did not appear to begin until 2024. Before then, reservists continued to join based on the original requirements stated in the long-standing Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China, last amended in August 2021, which obligated all males to register for service at the age of 18. The same law also required all demobilized enlisted servicemembers to update their service information with their local PAFD within 40 days of demobilization. Recently demobilized officers were required to do the same within 30 days of demobilization. This demobilization kept those personnel in the military registry but did not require them to become drilling reservists. But the law also stated demobilized personnel who met reserve service requirements and were "deemed necessary by the military" should then register for reserve service.⁸⁴

The new reserve law required most reservists to have previously served on active duty, though exceptions could be made for professional and technical personnel that met the requirements.⁸⁵ This law marked a change from the 2011 Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China amendment where citizens eligible for service but not drafted could register to serve in the reserve force.⁸⁶ Though approval by the military had always been a requirement for reservists to register, the new reserve law determined specific organizations and units should make the recommendations for those deemed qualified and the local PAFD office would manage the coordination of bringing the personnel back to uniformed service.⁸⁷

Once a reservist completed the registration and recruitment process, the law delineated responsibilities for educating and training reserve personnel to multiple echelons. The PLA services and the military units are designated to carry out education and training according to relevant regulations, which included the provision of individual vocational programs to improve soldier

skills. The law also required reservists to participate in various training events that would be included in the Outline for the Military Training and Evaluation and for purposes of promotion. Military organizations at theater level and above were responsible for determining the amount of annual training time for reservists but the Central Military Commission was authorized to implement mandatory prewar training (临战训练) for reserve personnel at any time. In addition, reserve personnel would now be required to complete assessments that would serve as the basis for promotion, position appointment, salary adjustment, rewards, and punishments.⁸⁸

The law also outlined requirements for reserve mobilization. The PLA services and their units are responsible for informing local PAFDs of requirements to activate reservists for participation in military training, performance of combat readiness duties, and carrying out nonwar military operations. According to the law, reserve personnel could only be activated for combat readiness duties and nonwar military operations if approved by military authorities at the theater level or above. Upon call-up, reservists would be required to report to the designated location at specific times. The law makes exceptions for reservists that are ill, taking care of a family member, pregnant, or under investigation for criminal activity. The law also requires transportation organizations to give priority to transporting activated reservists moving to their designated location.⁸⁹

To make reserve service more palatable to young Chinese citizens, the law also establishes a system of allowances and subsidies that combines incentives with compensation. In addition to medical benefits, reservists would now receive allowances while in an inactivated status but would receive normal pay when in combat, in military training, and performing combat readiness duties and nonwar military operations. During those same periods of activation, reservists would also receive subsidies for food and transportation. The new law is especially beneficial for reservists with careers in government and government-affiliated organizations as the reservists will maintain their civilian wages, bonuses, insurance, and other benefits. For reservists that do not work for the government, the law only states the member cannot be terminated or face any other restrictions because of their mobilization to active duty.⁹⁰

Do You Want to Be a PLA Reservist?

As initial notifications from local PAFD offices went out to prospective reserve candidates, the excitement surrounding the application process and chance to rejoin the People's Liberation Army led to a surge in social media activity late spring 2024. Countless demobilized soldiers were sharing their plans to apply for reserve service whereas others complained of not having received the notice. The conversations continued through summer and fall as thousands of people described their experience going through physical exams and preparing documentation for political review. Successful applicants were notified in mid-September and instructed to wait for follow-on information about when to report to a reserve base to begin training. Not long after, new reservists were provided instructions reporting to the reserve bases in mid-October to begin an initial three-week training period at the base and their original unit.⁹¹

According to thousands of comments on Chinese social media platform Douyin (TikTok), the following information appears consistent.

- Local PAFD offices sent out notifications around May 2024.
- Active-duty units made the personnel requests based on retain in reserve recommendations upon the servicemember's demobilization; not all servicemembers received that recommendation.
- The first batch of notifications appeared to target personnel under the age of 25, but several people who received notifications claimed to have been out of the service for much longer.
- The first batch of notifications appeared to target personnel that were in professional or technical fields in each of the PLA services, but some personnel claimed to be traditional infantry and other combat arms.
- The PAFD offices coordinated in-person physical examinations in June and July 2024; personnel that passed physical examinations were then submitted for a political review.
- The original military units made the final decision on whether candidates met the requirements and then informed the local PAFD offices.
- The PAFD offices sent the first batch of approval notices (服预备役通知书) to successful enlistees in their respective areas in mid-September 2024 (see figure 5); applicants were asked to provide uniform sizes.⁹²
- The PAFDs in large cities notified thousands of applicants whereas smaller PAFDs were limited to notifying roughly a dozen or less. For example, the PAFD in Cangzhou, Hebei province (河北省沧州市), a prefecture-level city with a population of 7.3 million in 2020, notified more than 2,300 applicants.
- Notifications were sent in late September to new reservists to travel to their respective reserve bases in mid-October 2024 to begin three weeks of training; each reserve base had multiple garrisons and personnel appeared to have to report to the closest in proximity to the active-duty unit despite their own residence location.
- One week of training would take place at the reserve base closest to their original unit, followed by another two weeks of training at the reservists' assigned active-duty units.
- Returning conscript (non-NCO) reservists would earn RMB 200 (\$28) per month and NCOs would earn RMB 300 (\$43) per month, but other salaries were reported to be as high as RMB 600 (\$85) per month depending on region.
- An end of year payment of at least RMB 4000 (\$570) would be made to the soldier for passing all assessments and attending all exercises throughout the year; an additional RMB 1000 (\$142) would be paid for excellent scores on annual assessments; the overall end of year payment was reported to be different depending on region.⁹³

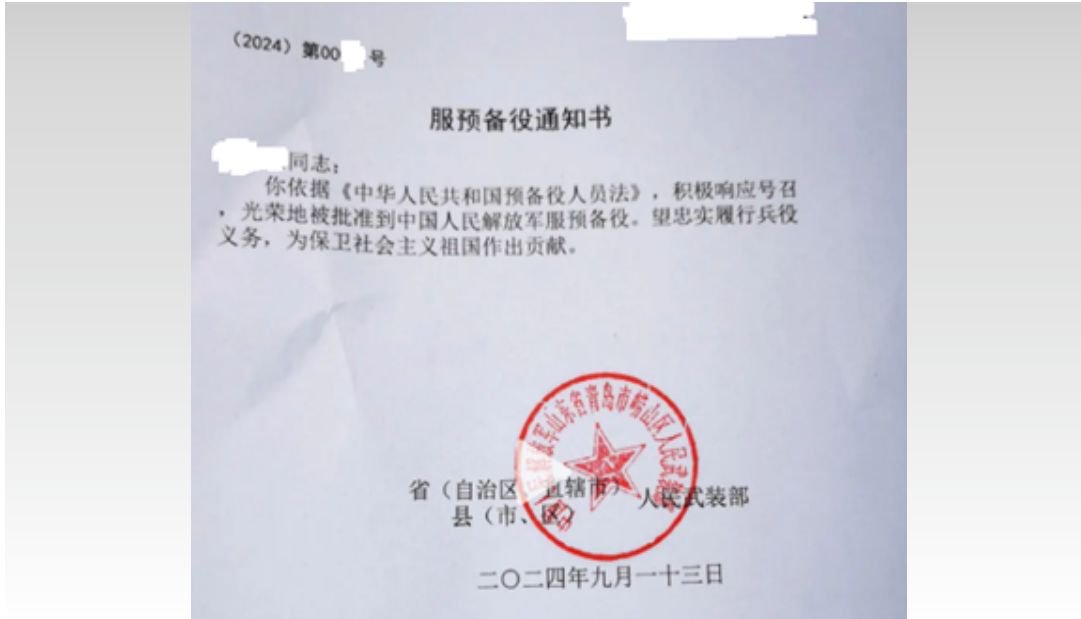


Figure 5: A notification of approval for an applicant to serve in the PLA reserve force

Although the reservists' PLA service affiliation was never identified in their original notifications, the conversations on Douyin made indicated the PLA Army, PLA Air Force (and its Airborne Corps), and the PLA Navy (including the Marine Corps) had set quotas for reservists. Additionally, small numbers of nonprior service personnel discussed their acceptance; the personnel were typically technical personnel with lengthy experience in fields like vehicle repair. Acceptance appeared to become a bragging right as new reservists and PAFD members celebrated the new program, but the group shared concerns about a lack of information on what to expect at the reserve base and follow-on training at their original unit.⁹⁴

What Pushed the People's Liberation Army's Rapid Reserve Reforms?

International media articles published following the March 2023 implementation of the new reservist law decried it served as an indicator Xi Jinping was planning for a possible conflict.⁹⁵ Similar discussions took place on Douyin in response to new reservists proclaiming their acceptance into the reserve force, with dozens of reservists' friends and relatives concerned the government was preparing for an impending war.⁹⁶ Although the recent reserve reform represents a major change in manpower support to the active-duty force, the limited numbers of reservists approved for service and the slow response time to answering all interested citizens' applications means the first year or two of implementation would likely be of minimal use to active-duty forces if a major conflict erupted. But the changes, many of which reflect lessons learned from analysis of reserve-force concepts in foreign countries, will improve the People's Liberation Army's defense spending, readiness levels, servicemember quality of life, and ability to carry out a future protracted war.

Applying Lessons Learned from Other Countries' Reserve Forces

The PLA reserve reforms started in 2020, well before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet, the Russian armed forces' lackluster use of its unprepared reserve forces may have influenced the People's Liberation Army to maintain a more ready reserve force for future combat. According to analysis from the Institute for the Study of War, the Russian reserve force had more than two million personnel on paper, but only about 5,000 troops that could be considered a trained and active reserve force based on numbers from 2019. Although the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation hoped to recruit 100,000 reservists starting in August 2021, the analysis found the Kremlin likely could not achieve that goal in time for the invasion.⁹⁷ Seven months after the invasion began, Russia declared a partial mobilization of military reservists, calling up 300,000 former military personnel in September 2022. The Pentagon believed it would take time to train those forces that had been out of service for years and likely confuse the command and control of the already 100,000 Russian troops in Ukraine.⁹⁸ The mobilization ended a month later at the end of October, but was beset by problems like mistaken conscription of ineligible citizens, the eruption of nationwide anti-war violence, and the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the country to escape the call-up.⁹⁹

Many of the reserve reforms Beijing has implemented are designed to ensure the People's Liberation Army does not face the same mobilization problems as Moscow. To learn from better examples, Chinese military researchers regularly analyzed and reported on observations of foreign militaries' use of professional reserve forces in modern conflicts over the past decade. A 2015 *China Military Online* article from an Academy of Military Sciences researcher recognized the benefits of Israel's reserve-force integration, which placed demobilized conscripts into a reservist capacity with their original unit, leaving the unit responsible for peacetime training and wartime mobilization.¹⁰⁰ A 2018 *China Military Online* article analyzed US think tank and media assessments recommending the US military reduce its active-duty forces and better integrate professional reservists that could improve the capability of the force and greatly reduce defense spending.¹⁰¹ A 2021 article from the *Journal of Naval University of Engineering* found the People's Republic of China could benefit from following the US model of incorporating reserve forces into joint training and carrying out maritime domain awareness missions.¹⁰²

As the People's Liberation Army prepared to implement the reforms laid down in the March 2023 reservist law fully, an Army Command College researcher published an article assessing the mobilization and use of foreign reserve forces in *China Military Online* at the end of the year. In the article, Peng Weibin (彭卫彬) provides examples of how the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, and France all employ their reserve forces for important domestic and global missions as part of their joint forces. He noted, except for the United States, those countries—in addition to the reserve forces in Germany, India, and Japan—built a model that kept active-duty servicemembers as the backbone cadre in reserve units that would later be filled with mobilized

reservists. This model made it convenient for the countries to carry out joint operations and quickly form combat capability when required. Finally, he lauded how some countries pay closer attention to their reserve forces and built laws to protect them, while also ensuring the forces receive the same treatment, allowances, and promotion opportunities as active-duty servicemembers when mobilized.¹⁰³

The People's Liberation Army clearly recognizes it will require the use of a professional reserve force in a future war—especially if the war is large and protracted. Though the militia will still be used to support war efforts at home in such a conflict, a People's Liberation Army determined to develop capabilities for force projection abroad will likely require well-trained and highly qualified reservists. The new reservist reforms are designed to streamline mobilization efforts and better differentiate the purposes of militia and reserve forces for these types of events. In a separate *China Military Online* article in December 2023, Peng Weibin argued the People's Republic of China should update the 2011 *People's Liberation Army Military Terminology* to remove any confusion between reservists and militia. Peng reasoned the militia, a mass armed organization that is the backbone of civilian-military integration, should no longer be considered a form of military service, while the reserve force is a vital component of the People's Liberation Army.¹⁰⁴

Increased Manpower and Cost Savings

The People's Liberation Army has never publicly acknowledged what percentage of its annual defense budget is spent on its reserve force. Chinese Premier Li Qiang, when announcing the RMB 1.67 trillion (\$231.3 billion) defense budget in March 2024, noted the budget had grown by 7.2 percent.¹⁰⁵ According to Li, strengthening national defense mobilization and ramping up support for war readiness through the expansion of reserve forces were two of the People's Republic of China's defense priorities for the year.¹⁰⁶ One of the likely reasons the People's Liberation Army could expand its reserve forces is because its overall size had probably significantly decreased over the past decade.

As PLA experts Shanshan Mei and Dennis J. Blasko point out in a July 2024 article in *War on the Rocks*, the reserve force had already been changing over the past 15 years. During that period, army reserve units decreased overall and some of their personnel were transferred to other PLA service reserve units. Mei and Blasko note the often-referenced number of 510,000 reserve personnel is probably no longer accurate despite its appearance in US documents like the 2023 *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*. In fact, that number comes from official Chinese sources in 2009, but the People's Liberation Army has not publicly provided confirmation on reserve forces numbers since.¹⁰⁷

The breakup of PLA reserve divisions and brigades in 2021 probably led to a reduction in registered reservists, though the overall reserve-force size remains unknown. Yet, even prior to those reforms, PLA divisions and brigades most likely did not have adequate bodies to fill

each billet assigned to the regiments and battalions within them. The reforms and establishment of the reserve-base system served as an initial step to rightsizing the force while moving away from the reserve division and brigade construct. The active-duty officers and NCOs assigned to those units were probably reduced in number with some reassigned to the new bases that had been established on former division and brigade garrisons. Additionally, many of the remaining garrisons of the former reserve units were likely shut down officially. The reduction in force numbers and garrisons would allow for major cost savings to the People's Liberation Army.

Another factor that would contribute to cost savings is the elimination of large quantities of obsolete equipment. Now that reservists would be assigned to their original units and could practice on active-duty training set, maintaining thousands of obsolete armored fighting vehicles, artillery, aircraft, and other combat systems was no longer necessary. This change would also include the need to preserve storage, repair, and other logistics facilities necessary to keep the equipment combat ready.

The assessed reductions in manpower and expenses are necessary to enable the People's Liberation Army to fund the expenses of a more professional reserve force. The monthly stipends, active-duty pay when mobilized each year, and the annual assessment bonus greatly multiply the cost of each individual reservist, which previously was only paid when activated. Unfortunately, for many new reservists employed in the private sector, that salary does not always match their civilian positions' salaries. For example, a former junior enlisted conscript who recently joined the reserve force will earn the following benefits during one year of service.

- Monthly subsidies: RMB 200 (\$28) per month = RMB 2,400 (\$342) per year
- Active-duty salary: RMB 1,200 (\$170) for one month of training¹⁰⁸
- Assessment bonus: RMB 4,000 (\$570)
- Total annual pay: RMB 7,600 (\$1,083) per year
- Pay and bonus sizes may differ by region
- Additional food and medical expenses are also covered while activated

Reserve NCOs and officers will earn far more money during the year, but it still may not be sufficient to replace their civilian salary during their month of annual training as private companies are not liable for covering reserve-induced pay losses. The pay problem appears to be the most controversial topic concerning the new reserve reforms discussed on Douyin, with spouses worried the short-term activation of their significant others would leave families unable to cover household costs during the period of absence.¹⁰⁹

Improved Unit Readiness

Arguably the most important aspect of the PLA reserve reform is how it will improve the readiness of each service's units. According to US Department of Defense estimates, conscripts number about 700,000 (or 35 percent of the overall force).¹¹⁰ The PLA units are wholly reliant on the twice-a-year conscription cycle that started in 2021. The spring and fall recruitment phases were designed to improve personnel readiness levels by optimizing training schedules rather than increasing the total force size, based on a 2022 article from Marcus Clay, Dennis J. Blasko, and Roderick Lee. According to their analysis, the periods of January to March and July to September allow for the highest levels of conscript readiness based on experience and training within their units.¹¹¹ These levels could be why the first batch of PLA reservists will conduct their annual training at reserve bases and in their original units during parts of October and November.

The temporary influx of experienced reservists integrated into undermanned work centers or combat formations will improve unit readiness as PLA brigades, ships, and other tactical units await conscripts completing their basic training. If a unit is ordered into action while the reservists are attached, the reservists will remain in an active-duty status for as long as required by theater-level leadership and higher. Although whether the People's Liberation Army will implement a standard training rotation for different groups of reservists remains unclear, to see the next batch of applicants begin their training in late spring 2025, when readiness levels drop in preparation for the second annual conscript evolution, would not be surprising.

Putting qualified bodies in empty billets is only one benefit of having experienced reservists join units. Another is the technical expertise many of those reservists will bring to both tactical and operational level components of the People's Liberation Army. Many reservists will have acquired advanced training and more technical experience during their work in the private and government sectors. These skills can range from vehicle repair in a combined arms battalion to strategic plans development within corps and theater-level organizations. Although no evidence exists concerning how new reserve senior colonels—the senior-most rank authorized in the new reservist law—will be integrated into active-duty components, the senior colonels are unlikely to be given operational command of ships and brigades. In the past, reserve senior colonels often came from the medical field where they were placed in positions of responsibility within PLA hospitals.¹¹² The new generation of senior ranks will likely be used similarly, as well as to supplement staff officers within upper echelon command organs. Officers at that grade may be proficient leaders in major industries or experts in emerging technologies, thus capable of providing guidance that would prove vital to campaign commanders.

Rapid Support to Protracted War

In addition to its requirement to activate rapidly to deal with local emergencies, the PLA reserve force is officially designated as the first batch of mobilization targets in the early stage of war (战争初期的首批动员对象).¹¹³ If the People's Liberation Army successfully maintains a continuous influx of reservists to fill quotas for active-duty units over the next few years, it will have a ready pool of fully qualified personnel to activate when conflict breaks out. Those mobilized servicemembers will also be highly familiar with their units and leaders, allowing for relatively rapid and seamless integration into combat formations. This integration will prove crucial if the People's Republic of China finds itself in a protracted war with the United States or any of its neighboring adversaries.

In recent years, experts have become less optimistic a future conflict between the United States and People's Republic of China will be quick and decisive. Instead, the prevailing assessment is such a conflict between two global powers will become protracted and lead to a war of attrition.¹¹⁴ The People's Liberation Army has the largest military in the world but would not preclude it from sustaining massive human casualties that could devastate the combat readiness of its units. Each branch of service would be susceptible to combat losses, though the branch would likely affect the PLA Air Force and PLA Navy more quickly than the PLA Army, which could rely on support from other theater command group armies. But those ground forces also have important missions for which they regularly train in their respective areas of operation, limiting the number of troops that may be dispatched across theater lines. Even the Central Theater Command, designated as the People's Liberation Army's strategic reserve, would have to maintain some of its combat forces in theater for critically important mission of protection Beijing and Chinese Communist Party leadership.¹¹⁵

The People's Liberation Army clearly does not have unlimited manpower to push in any direction—especially when many of its units are specialized for specific campaigns. For example, army and marine corps amphibious brigades are purpose-built for joint forceable entry operations on Taiwan and no other units in the People's Liberation Army can replace their capabilities.¹¹⁶ If those units suffer human casualties during combat operations, other brigades cannot provide trained forces to fill the gaps adequately. Reservists that have trained and are familiar with amphibious brigade equipment are optimal replacements. Some of these forces may have already been called up in advance to reinforce the brigades before they maneuvered to combat.

Even as a conflict between China and the United States evolved into a protracted war, the People's Liberation Army would be incapable of training adequate numbers of new conscripts rapidly enough to tilt the balance early on. China relies on a series of comprehensive training bases in each theater to train the conscripts of each service. The army has at least two of these bases located in each theater command and one each in Xinjiang and Tibet.¹¹⁷ The number of troops trained at each base during a single conscript training cycle can range from 3,000 to 5,000.¹¹⁸ If each base can train up to 5,000 conscripts in one cycle, that would mean a new batch of 60,000 army conscripts could

be trained across the country twice a year, but those numbers may be unreasonable as each base is likely designed to train different numbers of recruits based on region. The other PLA services have their own theater training bases, but less is known about the numbers of recruits that graduate after each training cycle.¹¹⁹ Their number indicates the other services would not be able to train the same number of conscripts as their army brethren in the same amount of time. As training conscripts takes up to three months, the People's Liberation Army will have to rely on its reserve force to cover the immediate gaps from casualties until adequate replacements begin to arrive from each service's comprehensive training bases.

The regional PAFD offices' continued role in informing PLA reservists of their selection and activation for training events indicates the offices will remain the primary notification method for calling up personnel during periods of mobilization. The PAFD offices maintain records and awareness of reservists and reserve-eligible personnel within their areas of responsibility, ensuring timely call-up capacity when necessary. Although notifications of activation for annual training were delivered one month before reservists were ordered to report to the reserve base for initial processing before moving to their original units, the timeline could likely be greatly compressed. For reservists residing in smaller towns and villages, the PAFD office could probably have them mobilized and dispatched to the reserve base within one week. Though the Central Military Commission's mobilization timeline requirements for PLA reservists will likely remain unknown, the sudden mobilization and transportation of reservists throughout the country or within specific theaters could then serve as a key indication and warning of impending crises.

Conclusion

Although the People's Republic of China has not used reservists in combat since the creation of the modern PLA reserve force in 1983, the expectation has always existed the reservists would play a role in future conflicts. The People's Liberation Army's 2006 *Science of Campaigns*, though acknowledging the existence of PLA reserve forces in campaigns, never actually expands on how best to use them.¹²⁰ The People's Liberation Army's 2009 *Science of Army Operations* combines the responsibilities of the reserve force with those of the militia, determining both be used for various combat support roles and defensive measures while noting reserve forces could also be used for firepower support, protection of flanks, and conducting feint maneuver actions.¹²¹ This relegation of reserve units to missions also carried out by the militia is likely one of many reasons the PLA reserve force became an obsolete entity by the end of the 2010s.

Yet, in less than four years, the People's Liberation Army has turned the corner on improving the quality and capacity of reserve forces. Although the reforms are still in their infancy, the potential is there for the People's Liberation Army to be capable of fully integrating well-trained reservists into the joint force. These servicemembers will certainly have much higher morale than previous reservists due to their new status in society and receipt of benefits that used to exist only

for their active-duty counterparts. With PAFD officials' awareness of reserve personnel in their area of responsibility, and a clear relationship between PLA units and PAFDs, timelines for mobilization should significantly decrease as well.

All these changes will instill greater confidence in People's Republic of China political and military leadership, and thus increase willingness to use the People's Liberation Army to secure Chinese Communist Party objectives. If PLA units are forced to deploy abroad or begin preparations for war, concerns about empty billets in tactical units harming combat readiness will be fewer when it only takes a week to notify and activate reservists. Although these timelines have not yet been tested in a time of war, the People's Republic of China will develop the process as reservist training phases occur multiple times a year. The ability to supplement its joint force quickly with potentially hundreds of thousands of well-trained ready reservists in the next few years will greatly improve the People's Liberation Army's preparedness for protracted war.

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