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PLA Leverages Anniversary To Prioritize Anticorruption and Rapid Modernization

By Peter Wood

The 99th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) occurred on 1 August 2026. Each year, the PLA issues authoritative pronouncements in the form of editorials, presaging major policy directions for the subsequent year.[1] This year, two editorials emphasized three themes significant to U.S. audiences—combating corruption, rapid modernization, and greater efficiency.

> ***"We must firmly grasp the 'key' of technological innovation, strengthen the military application of unmanned intelligent technologies, deepen the construction and application of network information systems, and gradually build an intelligent military system. System-of-systems warfare is the main form of future warfare."***

The first excerpted editorial from the PLA's own newspaper, *PLA Daily*, assesses that the persistence of corruption will prolong Xi Jinping's anticorruption campaign, which has negatively impacted the PLA. The second excerpted editorial, also written by the *PLA Daily* and published on the Chinese military news web portal *81.cn*, highlighted a recent senior leader meeting on PLA modernization that focused on the importance of keeping pace with technology shifts and the PLA's need to incorporate uncrewed systems into China's envisioned "intelligent military system." Both editorials stressed the development of China's integrated national strategic system—an updated, whole of government successor to military-civil fusion—along with calls for "high-quality development" and greater efficiency. Overall, the PLA appears to be consolidating: continuing anticorruption efforts while redirecting resources to sustain rapid modernization and meet Xi's timeline for improving the PLA's readiness.



Flag of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Republic of China (PRC) *(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_the_People%27s_Liberation_Army.svg)*

STRATEGY FOR MODERNIZATION OF THE ARMED FORCES IN THE NEW ERA	
2020	Achieve substantial progress by 2020 in improving the quality and efficiency of the military services and upgrading their combat capabilities
2027	Accelerate the integrated development of mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization by 2027
2035	Complete basic modernization of China's national defense and military services by 2035 through modernizing military theory, organizational structure, service personnel, and weaponry
2049 to 2050	Transformation of China's military into a world-class military by the mid-21st century

Source: "在革命性锻造中铸牢政治忠诚 全力以赴打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战——热烈庆祝中国人民解放军建军九十八周年 (Forging Unwavering Political Loyalty Through Revolutionary Tempering, Going All Out to Win the Decisive Battle for the Centennial Goal of the PLA – Warmly Celebrating the 90th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Liberation Army)," *PLA Daily* (official newspaper of the People's Liberation Army), 1 August 2025. http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/jmsd/16400104.html

A strong nation must have a strong military; only a strong military can ensure national security. The Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee recently held its 27th collective study session on high-quality advancement of national defense and military modernization. General Secretary Xi Jinping presided over the study session and delivered an important speech, summarizing the great practical experience of our Party in strengthening the military and revitalizing the armed forces.[2] He put forward clear requirements and made important deployments for strengthening political guidance, deepening innovative development, and high-quality advancement of national defense and military modernization during the 15th Five-Year Plan period, pointing out the direction and providing fundamental guidance for achieving the centenary goal of the People's Liberation Army on schedule and promoting decisive progress in the basic realization of national defense and military modernization.

High-quality advancement of national defense and military modernization is an inherent requirement for advancing Chinese-style modernization. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core has coordinated the overall strategic situation of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the unprecedented changes in the world, placing the strengthening of the military in a prominent position in the cause of the Party and the country. It has unswervingly upheld and strengthened the Party's absolute leadership over the military, clearly put forward the Party's goal of building a strong military in the new era, planned and implemented a new three-step strategy for the modernization of national defense and the armed forces, and comprehensively promoted political building, reform-driven military strengthening, science and technology-driven military strengthening, talent-driven military strengthening, and law-based military governance.[3] While fighting, preparing for war, and building, the modernization level and combat capabilities of our military have been significantly improved, and the cause of building a strong military has achieved historic achievements and undergone historic changes.

General Secretary Xi Jinping profoundly pointed out: "The military is meant to be prepared for war, and all work must adhere to the standard of combat effectiveness, focusing on the ability to fight and win wars." The fundamental direction and standard for high-quality advancement of national defense and military modernization is always combat effectiveness. We must closely monitor changes in technology, warfare, and adversaries, creating new growth poles for new-quality productivity and combat capabilities. We must firmly grasp the "key" of technological innovation, strengthen the military application of unmanned intelligent technologies, deepen the construction and application of network information systems, and gradually build an intelligent military system. System-of-systems warfare is the main form of future warfare. We must strengthen the integration of combat capability systems, accelerate the improvement of system-of-systems combat capabilities with high quality, conduct realistic combat testing and evaluation, solidly advance training and preparedness, and effectively safeguard national sovereignty, security, and development interests.

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Source: "解放军报评论员 : 推动基本实现国防和军队现代化取得决定性进展——学习贯彻习主席在中共中央政治局第二十七次集体学习时的重要讲话 (PLA Daily Commentator: Decisive Progress Made in Advancing the Basic Realization of National Defense and Military Modernization—Studying and Implementing President Xi Jinping's Important Speech at the 27th Collective Study Session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee)," *81.cn* (Chinese web aggregator with military focus), 1 August 2026. http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16477126.html

[P]resident Xi Jinping's important speech, delivered from the perspective of the times and the overall strategic situation, profoundly expounded the great significance of promoting high-quality modernization of national defense and the armed forces, comprehensively summarized the great achievements made in the modernization of national defense and the armed forces since the new era, and scientifically answered a series of major directional, fundamental, and overall questions concerning the high-quality advancement of national defense and military modernization…

A strong nation must have a strong military; only a strong military can ensure national security. Promoting high-quality modernization of national defense and the armed forces is an inherent requirement for advancing Chinese-style modernization and a goal that our Party has been tirelessly pursuing. Military affairs are a matter of paramount importance to the nation. The modernization of national defense and the armed forces is a modernization that provides strategic support for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, a modernization that integrates mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization, and a modernization that forever maintains the nature, purpose, and true colors of the people's army. …Only by implementing the new development philosophy, fulfilling the requirements of high-quality development, and adhering to a path of high efficiency, low cost, and sustainable development, can we further liberate and develop combat capabilities and enhance the vitality of the armed forces. This will drive a quality transformation, an efficiency transformation, and a power transformation in the development of our military, shifting from quantitative growth to qualitative improvement, and creating a new landscape for the modernization of national defense and the armed forces…

We must be clearly aware that the modernization of national defense and the armed forces is a systematic project, involving numerous aspects and a wide range of issues. We must identify strategic priorities and use breakthroughs in key areas to drive overall improvement. In this important speech, President Xi emphasized that "political building of the army is the foundation of the People's Army, concerning the direction and fundamental nature of national defense and military modernization," "the fundamental direction and standard for high-quality advancement of national defense and military modernization is always combat effectiveness," and "consolidating and improving the integrated national strategic system and capabilities is the only way to achieve high-quality advancement of national defense and military modernization." These three aspects are closely linked and interconnected, representing the strategic focus and fundamental principles for high-quality modernization of national defense and the armed forces.

We must accelerate the effective supply of advanced combat capabilities, strengthen the military application of unmanned intelligent technologies, deepen the construction and application of network information systems, and gradually build an intelligent military system. We must strengthen the integration of combat capability systems, conduct realistic combat testing and evaluation, and solidly advance military training and preparedness to effectively safeguard national sovereignty, security, and development interests.

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We must strengthen military governance, optimize systems and mechanisms, and improve policies and regulations in conjunction with the implementation of cross-military-civilian reform tasks, forming a cross-military-civilian working pattern where each department performs its duties, collaborates closely, and operates in a standardized and orderly manner.

Notes:

1 Army Day editorials serve a similar function to other pseudonymous editorials used to communicate key ideas in People's Daily and highlight CCP and PLA leadership priorities. Analysis of these can provide insights into the direction of modernization or senior leader concerns. For previous examples of Army Day editorials, see: Dr. Michael S. Chase (RAND researcher and former DASD for China), "Army Day Coverage Stresses PLA's Contributions and Party Control," China Brief, 17 August 2012. https://jamestown.org/program/army-day-coverage-stresses-plas-contributions-and-party-control. For more on pseudonymous editorials, see, for example: Tsai, Wen-Hsuan, and Peng-Hsiang Kao. "Secret Codes of Political Propaganda: The Unknown System of Writing Teams." The China Quarterly, no. 214 (2013): 394–410. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23509604; or Howard Wang, Political Discourse, Debate and Decisionmaking in the Chinese Communist Party, RAND, 2025. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA3800/RRA3821-1/RAND_RRA3821-1.pdf

2 Collective study sessions are a regular part of meetings of the Central Committee and are held on diverse topics from history to technology with a SME guest speaker. They have led to significant policy shifts in the past.

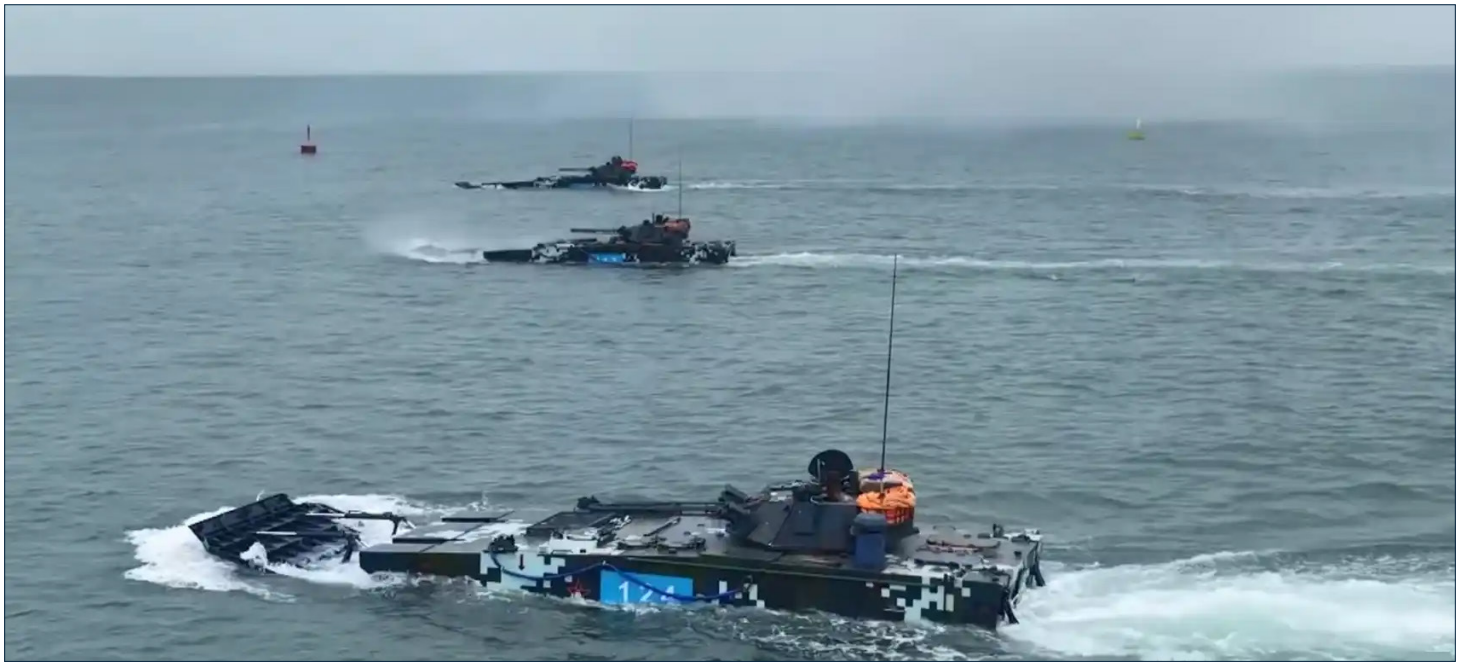
3 These three steps have been described as "[first] aims to achieve substantial progress by 2020 in improving the quality and efficiency of the military services and upgrading their combat capabilities—this in response to new global military technology trends and new national security needs—especially through the expanded use of mechanization and informationization solutions. The second step calls for basic modernization of China's national defense and military services by 2035 through modernizing military theory, organizational structure, service personnel, and weaponry. The third step will be the transformation of China's military into a world-class military by the mid-21st century." This was slightly modified in 2020, adding a new milestone for modernization in addition to goals previously set for 2035 and 2049, specifically "Accelerate the integrated development of mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization" while boosting the speed of modernization in military theories, organizations, personnel, and weapons and equipment.

PLA Develops Autonomous Systems To Spearhead Amphibious Operations

By Dodge Billingsley

The evolution of autonomous systems could help solve a problem for Chinese efforts to assert control over disputed territories in the East and South China Seas, including its core strategic interest, Taiwan.[1] According to the excerpted article from the People's Liberation Army's official newspaper, *PLA Daily*, amphibious landings remain "one of the most difficult and risky forms of warfare."[2] The article notes that lessons from testing and real-world applications from multiple countries, specifically the United States, Japan, Turkey, Ukraine, and Russia, highlight the feasibility of using uncrewed systems in such operations.[3] In addition to "machines replacing humans"—thus saving lives, which can impact both force sustainability and political sensitivities associated with high-casualty operations—uncrewed amphibious platforms provide "tactical versatility and multidirectional assault capabilities" capable of wearing down beach defenders before the primary force puts boots on the ground.[4] The article acknowledges that additional testing and real-world application are required, noting a myriad of technical difficulties for uncrewed systems to transition from water to land including the doctrinal and technological complexities of weaving together manned forces with uncrewed systems. Still, the article concludes that autonomous amphibious systems will likely lead to the development of "new tactics for amphibious landings that can significantly reduce casualties."

> ***"The value of amphibious uncrewed equipment goes beyond simply 'machines replacing humans.' Compared to traditional amphibious operations, the most prominent advantage of unmanned platforms lies in their tactical versatility and multidirectional assault capabilities."***



Future uncrewed amphibious systems could augment or even replace current-generation manned ZBD-05s like these, taking part in amphibious exercises, 25 April 2026. *(Source: 中国新闻社 (China News Service, CNS), https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/da/ZBD05_at_sea.png?utm_source=commons.wikimedia.org&utmcampaign=index&utm_content=original)*

Source: "两栖无人装备 : 抢滩登陆的 '机甲先锋' (Amphibious unmanned equipment: 'Mech vanguard' for beach landings)," *PLA Daily* (official newspaper of the People's Liberation Army), 2 September 2026. http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16482936.html

Amphibious landing operations have always been considered one of the most difficult and risky forms of warfare. Therefore, developing amphibious combat capabilities and reducing the huge casualties in "do-or-die" amphibious assaults has always been a goal pursued by militaries around the world.

The arrival of unmanned equipment has brought new tactics to amphibious landings that can significantly reduce casualties. Unmanned surface vessels (USVs) can conduct reconnaissance beforehand, while unmanned vehicles can lead the way and clear the beach, entrusting the most dangerous tasks to machines. According to foreign media reports, during the "Shoulder to Shoulder 2026" exercise, the U.S. military successfully deployed the "Rampage" unmanned surface vessel on an unfortified sandy coastline, verifying the feasibility of unmanned platforms conducting amphibious assaults in complex coastal environments.

The value of amphibious unmanned equipment goes beyond simply "machines replacing humans." Compared to traditional amphibious operations, the most prominent advantage of unmanned platforms lies in their tactical versatility and multi-directional assault capabilities. A large number of small unmanned boats arrive simultaneously on the beach in a "swarm" formation from multiple directions and points, continuously dispersing the limited firepower of coastal defense forces. After the land-based robot "swarm" lands, it can quickly deploy combat units, establish temporary fire support points on the beachhead, and continuously suppress coastal fortifications, observation posts, and lightly armored targets. Before the main force arrives, it can clear obstacles on the beachhead and suppress remaining fire points, opening a relatively safe landing channel for subsequent echelons. Faced with this distributed assault of "multi-point concurrency and multi-pronged approach," the defending forces inevitably become overwhelmed and trapped in a predicament of "not knowing where the enemy is coming from."

While achieving beachhead fire suppression, these "mech vanguards" also push the physiological limits of manned combat forces. They require no rotation or rest, allowing them to remain infiltrated, patrol, and monitor around the clock, maintaining a continuous presence on key coastal sections. This ability for "persistent forward presence" is particularly suitable for long-term blockades of key coastal sections or sustained disruptions to supply lines. More importantly, they offer the architectural advantages of a multi-domain unmanned system—the US Navy's "Rampage" unmanned surface vessel can deploy small drones to extend its perception range, and the "Stalker" unmanned surface vessel also has the capability to carry hovering drones. One platform deployed brings back comprehensive situational awareness.

Looking at the development trajectory of amphibious unmanned equipment, from "fighting alone" to "land-sea coordination," from "experimental verification" to "real combat testing," it is breaking down the military challenge of "beach landing" into a series of tactical maneuvers that can be performed by machines. However, when amphibious unmanned equipment storms the beachhead, what it truly tests may not just be an algorithm or a machine, but how humanity can draw a clear boundary between efficiency and ethical limits.

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Notes:

1 In perhaps one of the most significant exchanges between Chinese and U.S. officials regarding Beijing's priorities in recent years, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Qin Gang told U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in person that "Taiwan is the core of China's core interests." See: "秦刚同美国国务卿布林肯举行会谈 (Qin Gang Holds Talks with US Secretary of State Blinken)," Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 June 2023. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjbzhd/202306/t20230619_11099462.shtml

2 See: "China's Quad-Tracked Amphibious Unmanned Vehicle is Fascinating," *The War Zone*, 14 November 2022. https://www.twz.com/chinas-quad-tracked-amphibious-unmanned-vehicle-is-fascinating

3 There is no shortage of reporting on China's push into unmanned systems across all branches of the PLA. Regarding carrier-based drones, see: "Clearest Images Yet Reveal China's Naval CCA and UCAVs as Type 076 Drone Carrier Signals New Era of Maritime Warfare," *Defense Security Asia*, 29 December 2025. https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/china-naval-cca-ucav-type-076-drone-carrier-images/

4 Using entirely man-free amphibious systems to infiltrate, attack, and/or occupy contested littoral areas could also be considered on the extreme edge of China's preference to win without fighting. Even damaged or destroyed amphibious autonomous systems would be casualty-free and provide China with a potentially easier path to de-escalate—no blood, no bodies. Consider attacks on Philippine forces over contested shoals and small engagements with Indian border forces on the shared China-India border. Although force was used, i.e., water cannons in the South China Sea and clubs and bats against Indian soldiers, the clashes were governed by the necessity of keeping the actions non-lethal. Under unique circumstances, full autonomous systems could provide the same cover.

PLA Mandates Realistic Training To Mitigate Battlefield Fog of War

By Dodge Billingsley

Under the slogan, "'Ten Thousand' to Prepare for 'One Hundred Thousand' Mishaps," the PLA is working to reduce the fog and friction of combat. Following President Xi Jinping's guidance, the excerpted editorial from the Chinese People's Liberation Army newspaper, *PLA Daily*, notes that "war is a kingdom of uncertainty; there are no 'standard answers' on the battlefield." Although there can be no "perfect score," small variables can "rewrite the entire course of battle." To overcome these variables and unknown conditions of warfare, the article focuses on continuous preparation and training against diverse contingencies: severe weather, weapon system failure, disabled command and control nodes, unexpected enemy actions, and breaks in supply chains.

This initiative is significant for China, given that its military has not engaged a major adversary since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War. The Chinese military performed poorly in that conflict and has since focused on shaping its military for the future. At the same time, the rigid party-control of the PLA Army constrains independent battlefield decisionmaking by junior officer ranks and NCOs.[1] It is unclear whether rigorous training can offset a system that rewards political conformity and absolute obedience over independent thought and decision-making.[2] As a result, Chinese efforts to overcome the fog and friction of combat will likely continue to face challenges.



The People's Liberation Army is the military wing of the Chinese Communist Party, where traditionally political loyalty is more important than merit. *(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Z-8_with_the_flag_of_CPC_at_PRC70_(20191001104359).jpg)*

> ***"War is a kingdom of uncertainty; there are no 'standard answers' on the battlefield, and military preparedness will not have an absolute 'perfect score.'"***

Source: "强军论坛 | 练好"一万"防"万一" (Military Strengthening Forum | Practice 'Ten Thousand' to Prepare for 'One Hundred Thousand' Mishaps)," *PLA Daily* (official newspaper of the People's Liberation Army), 6 September 2026. http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16483871.html

President Xi Jinping emphasized: "We must be adept at using the 'bottom-line thinking' approach, preparing for the worst while striving for the best outcome. Only in this way can we be prepared for any eventuality, remain calm in the face of adversity, and firmly grasp the initiative." War is a kingdom of uncertainty; there are no "standard answers" on the battlefield, and military preparedness will not have an absolute "perfect score." Seemingly small variables can rewrite the entire course

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of battle. The bottom-line thinking of military preparedness lies precisely in being fearful of the "what if" rather than the "what if"; only by mastering the "what if" can we prevent the "what if."

"What if" refers to the unpredictable risks and hidden dangers on the battlefield, the biggest blind spot and the weakest link in war preparedness. It could be sudden severe weather, weapons and ammunition failing to fire in the heat of battle, unexpected tactical actions by the enemy, misjudgments or oversights in intelligence, a sudden collapse of the command and control system, or an unexpected break in the supply chain….

To prevent any unforeseen circumstances, the most basic method is to cultivate the ability to handle all possibilities. This "all possibilities" refers to comprehensive, multi-dimensional, and all-encompassing training and preparation; it represents the ultimate standard refined through rigorous practice and exhaustive preparation for every possible scenario. In daily training, many risks are easily overlooked due to their extremely low probability and infrequent occurrence. The "all possibilities" in training and preparation cannot be judged solely by whether all training subjects have been completed or the training duration sufficient. Instead, it requires repeated reflection, refinement, and tempering of every item and every step stipulated in the syllabus, every special situation in actual combat, and every weakness in preparation. The goal is to identify and resolve all potential risks and hidden dangers on the future battlefield in advance on the training field.

A philosopher once said that the world is nothing more than an orderly arrangement of countless chance and unexpected events. Modern warfare, with its multidimensional expansion of battlefield space, drastically accelerated pace of combat, and rapidly changing adversarial situations, means that the impact and destructive power of any unforeseen event will far exceed those of the past. If training aims only for passability, and preparation is based on wishful thinking, believing that accidents and dangers will not occur, it easily breeds complacency and a relaxed mindset. Training with such an attitude inevitably leads to lowered standards and relaxed requirements, and if unexpected events occur on the real battlefield, one may suffer the bitter consequences of defeat.

Notes:

1 For a discussion regarding Russian and Chinese attitudes to the concept of giving NCOs decision-making power on the battlefield, see: "NCOs: America Has Them, China Wants Them, Russia is Struggling Without Them," *Defense One*, 5 May 2022. https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2022/05/ncos-america-has-them-china-wants-them-russia-struggling-without-them/366586/

2 See: The Human Dimension of the PLA: Personnel, Morale, and Command Culture," *Air University Research*, Air University, 20 June 2026. https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Office-of-Sponsored-Programs/Research/Article-Display/Article/2753207/the-human-dimension-of-the-pla-personnel-morale-and-command-culture/; see also: "The PLA and Mission Command: Is the Party Control System Too Rigid for Its Adaptation By China?," Association of the United States Army, 14 March 2024. https://www.ausa.org/publications/pla-and-mission-command-party-control-system-too-rigid-its-adaptation-china