

# China Leadership Monitor

## CLM Insights Interview:

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**Authors of *70 Years of the PLA Air Force***

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Kenneth W. Allen and Cristina L. Garafola, *70 Years of the PLA Air Force* (The China Aerospace Studies Institute, April 12, 2021)  
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**What are the primary objectives you hoped to achieve in writing *70 Years of the PLA Air Force*? What are the two or three prevailing misunderstandings or misperceptions about the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) outside of China?**

Our main objective was to provide an overview of the PLAAF's strategy and doctrine; organizational structure; personnel, education, and training systems; and military diplomacy. We wanted to do this for diverse audiences, including United States Air Force (USAF) personnel, other analysts, and students. Ken feels strongly that he would have benefited from this type of research as a young sergeant and major in the Air Force. For Cristina, who is newer to this field, changes within the PLAAF even over the past decade or so have been striking. Understanding both the PLAAF's history and its recent trajectory are important for assessing its future roles.

One element we've tried to weave into the book includes key PLAAF terms and concepts so that readers will not necessarily be looking at the PLAAF through a U.S. military lens. Even terms like "squadron" have very different connotations in the USAF versus in the PLAAF, not to mention broader topics like the "strategic" role of a modern air force, the political organizations and personnel that filter down to the grassroots level, or the PLAAF's unique political history during the Cultural Revolution as compared to the other services.

One area we do not focus on as much is weapon systems – specific aircraft, missiles, or other equipment. Because many writings about the PLAAF tend to focus on hardware issues and they rarely discuss key issues such as personnel and maintenance, one misperception about the PLAAF is that equipment modernization and overall operational capability have improved in lock-step, such as the ability to sustain operations indefinitely. But we find in the book that maintenance issues, flying hours, and lingering organizational reforms likely continue to impact PLAAF operations today.

**What are the most important differences in terms of command structure and organization between the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and its Western counterparts, in particular the U.S.? How do these differences affect the PLAAF's potential combat effectiveness?**

Although the book does not focus on making explicit comparisons with the U.S. or other counterparts, there are clear distinctions between the PLAAF and the USAF. Whereas the USAF is organized into major commands that are a combination of geographic and functional

commands and that span the globe, since 2016, the PLAAF has been organized into five Theater Commands (TC) within China and the PLAAF does not station any forces abroad. Reflecting China's relative paucity of robust security partnerships with other countries as well as its limited inventory of some high-demand aircraft in the past, few PLAAF aircraft have flown overseas for [combined exercises or other operations](#). PLAAF activities abroad have increased in recent years, and it would not be surprising if the PLA secures overseas military bases or access where the PLAAF could operate in the future. Still, even were the PLAAF to begin operating from multiple new overseas bases, this would represent a vastly different scale and scope of global operations compared to the USAF.

When it comes to organizational leadership and command within the service, the USAF has both a civilian leadership and a military leadership structure, with the Secretary of the Air Force exerting civilian control. The PLAAF, in contrast, is part of the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party, so party control permeates throughout the service via CCP-led organizational structures and party memberships held by uniformed PLAAF leaders. The PLAAF does not have a separate civilian leadership structure, but every headquarters has a co-equal commander and a political commissar/officer down to the company level.

The implications are that for most of its history, the PLAAF's focus of operations has been almost entirely within China or in China's near-periphery, and for much of that period the PLAAF was focused on territorial air defense. As the armed wing of the CCP, the PLAAF also plays a significant role in supporting the regime's legitimacy, such as by participating in the initial COVID response efforts in Wuhan in early 2020 as well as by delivering COVID supplies abroad. Both dynamics have heavily influenced the PLAAF's development over time. Stepping back and looking at the PLAAF as a roughly 70-year-old organization and culture, it is only in roughly the past 15 years that the PLAAF has been adopting a more outward-oriented strategic approach similar to that in other capable and sophisticated air forces.

**The first Gulf War and then the 1995-96 Taiwan crisis spurred the modernization of the PLAAF over the last three decades. Besides acquiring better equipment, where do you believe the PLAAF has made significant improvement in its “software” – organization, training, strategic thinking, career paths, and so on? How has the reform under Xi Jinping affected the PLAAF, particularly the adoption of the Theater Command model?**

The major development shaping recent PLAAF modernization is the air force obtaining senior leadership approval in 2004 to develop a more independent and capable force, which the PLA calls a “strategic air force.” This concept is significant in two major ways. First, PLA leaders acknowledged that the traditional dominance of the ground forces within the PLA was insufficient for fighting and winning modern wars, which require air forces to operate decisively in both independent and joint contexts. Second, receiving this endorsement required that the air force improve its offensive capabilities, which broadened its scope of responsibilities beyond its historical role of territorial defense.

When it comes to joint training and activities, the USAF has a long history of conducting joint operations, but the PLAAF is still only at the rudimentary stage. Still, we see the PLAAF conducting more training with other services in recent years as well as carrying out more

exercises involving different branches of PLAAF forces and conducting training involving more sophisticated tactics with less scripting.

Joint leadership is also a work in progress following the PLA-wide reforms of the Xi Jinping era. Although the commanders of the Navy, Air Force, and the now-Rocket Force had been members of China's military high command since 2004, all service commanders were removed from the Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2017. The only current PLAAF officer on the CMC is Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang, who is slated to retire in late 2022. Likewise, the leaders of all 15 organizations subordinate to the CMC (these organizations and this structure are new since 2016) have been Army officers. For the operations-focused five Theater Commands (TC), one Navy and one PLAAF officer became commanders in 2017, but they were replaced by Army officers in 2021. Today, all five theater commanders are from the Army. We do see the TC Joint Operations Command Centers (JOCC) being staffed by personnel from all services, but the pipeline for joint leaders is still under construction. For example, PLA officers do not receive joint education until they reach the corps level and attend the National Defense University, except for a short course provided to JOCC officers. A truly joint force will certainly take time to develop; so far the picture is still mixed in terms of the PLA's progress in elevating non-ground force officers within key postings.

**What are the main missions the Chinese leadership has assigned to the PLAAF in the era of great power competition? What are the favorable factors in turning the PLAAF into a truly modern and effective combat force? What reforms are needed?**

The PLAAF's five "strategic tasks" build on the 2004 strategic air force concept, for which the full slogan is "integrated air and space capabilities and coordinated offensive and defensive operations." The PLAAF is expected to: 1.) participate in the primary "strategic direction," which in the modern era many analysts take to refer to Taiwan; 2.) conduct the PLAAF's historical mission of homeland air defense; 3.) safeguard China's border and maritime "rights and interests," including carrying out [gray zone operations](#) vis-à-vis China's neighbors; 4.) conduct emergency and disaster relief operations and assist in maintaining domestic stability at home; and 5.) participate in foreign exchanges that support China's broader foreign diplomacy efforts.

Key efforts to improve some of these capabilities include developing what the PLAAF calls its key training brands and increasing the rigor of that training. Particularly over the past decade or so, PLAAF competitions and exercises, such as the Golden Helmet series, have been focused on helping pilots prepare for and compete against each other, including by emphasizing "pilot autonomy" and "free air combat." However, some units still train explicitly for these high-profile activities and, as such, do not meet their annual training requirements based on the Outline of Military Training and Evaluation. Beyond continuing to improve training rigor within the PLAAF and with other services, one of the most needed reforms is for the PLA to begin assigning Air Force officers to serve as TC commanders, chiefs of staff, and deputy chiefs of staff, as well as selecting them to lead CMC organizations or to fill deputy leader slots. Increasing joint education for all officers in every service starting down at the field-grade level (i.e., majors through senior colonels) would also begin to build the joint officer pipeline we mentioned earlier. Achieving a joint operations capability is important because jointness is the

foundational principle of China's military strategy – key guidance known as the military strategic guidelines.

**Your book highlights two serious problems that have dogged the PLAAF. One is politicization (in terms of its command structure and relations with the party leadership). The other is its lack of combat experience. Do you see China taking serious steps to address these critical deficiencies?**

The PLAAF had undergone significant political rehabilitation by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Based on CCP leaders' decisions to charge the PLAAF with becoming a "strategic" service, there seem to be fewer concerns regarding its political reliability in recent decades. Some evidence to support this line of reasoning may be not only reassigning the PLAAF a nuclear mission but also developing a likely nuclear air-launched ballistic missile. Once both are fielded, China will have obtained a triad of land, sea, and air-based nuclear capability for the first time in its history. Current PLAAF modernization efforts also emphasize a long-range precision strike, including conventional strike capability – indicating the CCP is comfortable with the PLAAF wielding significant combat power.

At the same time, PLAAF aviators have not fought in a major conflict since 1958 – they did not participate in air-to-air combat during the PLA's short invasion of Vietnam in 1979. How the PLA may expect the PLAAF to perform in a modern war is an area in need of further research, as is an understanding of the associated operational stresses and strains PLAAF air crews, maintenance, logistics, and other elements of the air force may face during combat operations. Certainly, we know that the PLAAF and other parts of the PLA will continue to carefully observe and learn from modern conflicts, such as [Russia's invasion of Ukraine](#). The PLA and PLAAF will also refine existing systems and processes to improve overall readiness and combat capability. One area of reforms has been the PLA's annual training cycle, which prior to the recent reforms revolved around bringing in roughly 350,000 to 400,000 new conscripts at the same time each year along with any noncommissioned officers (NCOs) not promoted to the next rank. The cycle led to a significant degradation of PLA combat capability during the intake period for new recruits, which is when experienced conscripts and demobilized NCOs simultaneously left the force. In 2021, the PLA implemented a two-cycle per year system in part to address this challenge.

**Your research draws on an immense range of official and publicly available sources covering a huge span of time. Can you share with us your research methods, in particular how you were able to locate the sources, evaluate their reliability, and organize the materials? At a time when access to Chinese materials is becoming more restricted, how would you advise analysts to pursue open-source research on a subject shrouded in secrecy in China?**

The primary sources for the book are official PLA and PLAAF publications, including books and journals, articles from *Air Force News* and *China Air Force* magazine, official PLA websites, and interviews with PLA officers. Like other fields of China analysis, academic researchers and practitioners [have developed approaches](#) for locating and assessing authoritative and semi-authoritative sources and have compiled other [valuable research resources](#). Though many PLA

sources have clear propaganda value within the Chinese system, as a general rule sources have been candid about PLAAF strengths and weaknesses. However, some topics like the PLAAF's emerging nuclear role seem too sensitive to discuss; the PLA and PLAAF could certainly be more open in articulating their future vision for the PLAAF.