



A monthly newsletter focused on the internal and external affairs of the PLA

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Welcome to the February 2024 edition of *PLA UPDATE*, CNA’s newsletter on the internal and external affairs of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). This issue begins with a look at several efforts in the PLA Navy (PLAN) and Air Force (PLAAF) to strengthen capabilities for strategic airlift and aerial refueling. Next, we review a new civil-military organization focused on the study of foreign armed forces. We then discuss a couple of recent articles in the PLA’s official newspaper on problems with the force’s civilian hires. We conclude with a summary of a recent report from a major People’s Republic of China (PRC) think tank on global security risks and challenges in China’s external environment.

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POWER PROJECTION

This section summarizes recent PRC media reporting on efforts within the PLAN and PLAAF to develop airlift capabilities. Although the PLAAF's power projection capacity has likely improved in recent years as it has received more Y-20 heavy transport aircraft, the size of that fleet remains modest (50 Y-20s and eight YY-20A tankers are currently in service).¹ In future operations with high potential attrition to PLAAF aircraft, such as a Taiwan contingency, PLAN contributions to airlift missions could be especially important. The PLAAF's ability to project power could be further increased as it integrates new tanker aircraft into real-world operations and activities and as aviators train to fly in various adverse weather conditions.

PLAN UNIVERSITY CONDUCTS HEAVY-EQUIPMENT AIRDROP TRAINING

The expansion of airdrop education and training is a response to PLAN requirements for airlift. On January 20, *PLA Daily* [reported](#) that a regiment of the PLA Naval Aviation University recently conducted heavy-equipment airdrop training.² This training was described as a milestone because it demonstrated that all of the regiment's transport aircraft were now capable of airdropping heavy equipment. A [video](#) of the training uploaded by an official PLAN social media account indicated that at least two types of aircraft were involved: the Y-8 and Y-9. The weight of the heavy equipment airdropped was described as "several tons."³

A leader of the regiment said that in recent years the unit had introduced and expanded airdrop education and training at the university in response to new requirements for airlift. These requirements, the leader said, were driven by the expansion of unspecified PLAN missions and progress in the service's reforms and modernization. In addition to heavy-equipment airdrop—which the leader described as the most difficult and risky task undertaken by the unit's transport aircraft—the regiment previously trained to conduct gravity airdrops and medium-size cargo airdrops.⁴

The PLAN's development of heavy airdrop capability could help support and sustain future PLA joint operations in various regional contingencies. However, it should be emphasized that PLAN Y-8s and Y-9s—both medium-lift aircraft—have significantly less carrying capacity than PLAAF Y-20s have.⁵



Heavy-equipment airdrop training

Sources: [PLA Daily](#); [PLA Navy WeChat account](#).

YY-20 REFUELS J-10S ON FLIGHTS TO AND FROM SAUDI ARABIA

The tanker variant of the Y-20 heavy transport aircraft helped reduce reliance on ground support outside China's borders. From February 4 to 8, seven J-10 fighters of the PLAAF's Bayi Aerobatic Team participated in the World Defense Show in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The fighters were accompanied on their outgoing and return journeys by a PLAAF YY-20 tanker aircraft, which provided aerial refueling support.⁶ The fighters and tanker departed an unspecified air base in northwestern China on January 29 and returned on February 10. According to a *PLA Daily* [report](#), the use of the YY-20 to conduct aerial refueling for the J-10s allowed the PLAAF to reduce its need for support from foreign countries' ground facilities.⁷



YY-20 refuels J-10s en route to Riyadh on January 29
Source: [The Paper](#).

Y-20 TRANSPORT AIRCRAFT CONDUCT SUBZERO FLIGHT TRAINING

At least four of the PLAAF's heavy-lift transport aircraft participated in the training exercise. On January 27, the CCTV-7 program *Military Report* featured a [segment](#) on recent formation flight training conducted by Y-20 transport aircraft from an air division subordinate to the PLA's Central Theater Command Air Force.⁸ The training was described as particularly difficult because of the temperature when it was carried out: nearly -10 degrees Celsius (14 degrees Fahrenheit). The segment featured commentary from multiple members of the air division, including Liu Lu, one of the first female pilots of the Y-20.⁹ Liu remarked that the PLAAF carefully considers the likely impacts that various kinds of complex meteorological conditions will have on mobilizing aircraft for routine training. She asserted that related training activities were conducted strictly according to actual combat standards. Similarly, another member of the air division, Zhang Lu, claimed that in recent years the unit had held to the belief that training should always be carried out under conditions more difficult than those in actual operations.



Left: PLAAF Y-20s fly in formation. Right: Y-20 pilot Liu Lu speaks to CCTV-7
Source: [CCTV-7](#).

MAJOR CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

NEW ASSOCIATION ESTABLISHED FOR STUDY OF FOREIGN MILITARIES

A new civil-military organization seeks to increase research collaboration on strategic and operational issues. On January 27, the Joint Operations College of PLA National Defense University hosted the inaugural annual meeting of the Foreign Military Research Association (外军研究联席会).

According to a [report](#) from China Radio International, over 100 military and civilian experts and scholars from unspecified organizations attended the meeting.¹⁰ The meeting reportedly focused on topics such as “strategic competition, development trends, and operational issues of foreign militaries,” as well as hotspots in global security. Attendees of the meeting expressed the desire to continue strengthening joint civil-military academic exchanges and cooperation with an eye toward topics including changes in the forms of war (战争形态) and combat readiness and warfighting.¹¹



Attendees at the association's inaugural annual meeting
Source: [China Radio International](#).

ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

PLA NEWSPAPER DISCUSSES PROBLEMS WITH CIVILIAN PERSONNEL

PLA Daily highlights concerns about civilian hires' onboarding training and handling of classified information. The PLA has undertaken a number of efforts in recent years to better recruit and retain civilian personnel to serve in non-combat billets such as office administrators, professors, engineers, and medical professionals.¹² Although PRC media routinely highlights examples of civilians excelling in their military careers, a couple of recent articles published in the PLA's official newspaper noted problems evident among some civilian hires, including the following:

Insufficient training. A January 18 *PLA Daily* [opinion piece](#) claimed that civilian hires with advanced degrees were struggling to transition to their military roles because of onboarding that was insufficient in both length and rigor. The article implied that at least some civilian personnel received one or two months of training, which was “by no means enough.” The author called for greater investments in classroom education and job shadowing so that civilian hires could become more familiar with military affairs and the day-to-day work life at PLA units and commands. The article also recommended that PLA organizations designate senior staff to meet one-on-one with civilian personnel and serve as their mentors.¹³

Operations Security (OPSEC) concerns. A separate *PLA Daily* [article](#) published on January 17 contended that OPSEC was becoming an increasingly prominent issue as the PLA hired greater numbers of civilian personnel tasked with handling classified information. The article claimed that a small percentage of civilian hires were guilty of such offenses as not knowing which work-related information was secret, skipping over classified information handling guidelines to make their jobs easier, and divulging military secrets to outsiders to appear impressive. The article called on the PLA's civilian personnel to more earnestly study and apply laws and regulations for protecting classified information, warning that even a few seemingly unconnected words or expressions in the hands of a nefarious actor could be used to uncover secrets.¹⁴

PRC VIEWS OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

PRC THINK TANK PUBLISHES NEW GLOBAL TRENDS REPORT

The latest global trends report by the Ministry of State Security-affiliated China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) highlights global security risks and challenges in China's external environment in 2024. CICIR published *Global Trends and Security Risks* on January 9 in both [English](#) and [Chinese](#). According to CICIR's report, the world will continue to face risks and challenges to global development and security during 2024 in five areas, as follows.

1. Weak global economic recovery. CICIR's report asserts that the gradual recovery of the world economy risks "losing momentum" because of several factors. The 2024 monetary policies of "developed economies" like the US may make it more difficult for developing economies like Brazil and Chile to secure external credit, which may lead to "debt crises and social unrest." CICIR's report also alleges that "US-led Western forces" are proliferating "multiple parallel trade and technology circles," seeking "absolute security and competitive advantage" in response to "major power dynamics, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Ukraine crisis." These circles stress and disrupt established global "production and supply chains for key minerals, consumer electronics, semiconductors, new energy, automobiles, and more. The report claims that "many countries" will hold national elections this year, continuing and prolonging the spread of "delayed or even flawed macroeconomic policy adjustments."

2. Overwhelmed global governance. According to CICIR's report, international security and economic trends are undermining longstanding global governance mechanisms and fragmenting the consensus of the international community among other, newer multilateral governance institutions. CICIR's report identifies the following trends as contributing to the erosion of global governance:

- Accelerating worldwide impacts of climate change
- Increasing risks of "nuclear leakage and proliferation"
- Increasing terrorism and extremism worldwide and especially in Africa
- Expanding "geopolitical competition among major countries" in key technologies, such as semiconductors, data, quantum computing, and 6G
- Worsening food shortages driven by disruptions to food production and transportation
- Growing refugee flows and humanitarian crises driven by conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza

3. "Impasse" in conflicts in Europe and the Middle East. According to CICIR's report, the "Russia-Ukraine conflict" wears on and the "Gaza conflict" has emerged, and these crises "have the potential to strain relations among major countries, instigate deep adjustments in the international and regional landscape, and escalate global instability and uncertainty." The Russia-Ukraine conflict, CICIR writes, threatens regional European security concerns, confrontation between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, global supply chains, and European domestic politics. The Gaza conflict shows signs of "prolongation," "brews new flashpoints" throughout the Middle East, is likely to increasingly affect global trade and energy markets, and challenges global governance, particularly global security governance institutions. CICIR's report also assesses that, combined with the other trends highlighted in this report, both conflicts will likely serve as "triggers for long frozen regional conflicts and geopolitical contradictions."

4. Risks related to artificial intelligence (AI). CICIR's global trends report claims that 2024 is expected to be a critical year for the development of global governance of AI. US efforts to leverage its advances in AI for strategic competition among major countries by restricting exports could lead to new "conflicts and crises among major powers in the future." Efforts to develop "lethal autonomous weapons systems" in

recent years by the US and its allies and partners could create “killer robots.” US efforts to integrate AI into military and strategic decision-making could “challenge the basic logic of strategic stability” and increase potential adversaries’ willingness to “consider firing the first shot in conflicts during times of crisis.”

5. US politics’ global influence. Finally, CICIR’s report claims that US domestic politics is increasingly uncertain ahead of national elections in 2024 and has a “tendency to spillover and affect the world.” According to CICIR, US domestic political uncertainty will “impact the stability of the US economy,” increasing the likelihood of “economic and financial crisis caused by political strife in 2024.” “Partisan strife” also “impacts decision-making in US foreign policy, subsequently impacting global stability.”

CICIR ends its report with a plug for China as the “key actor” to maintain stability and promote global peace and development. According to CICIR, China is “seeking benefits while avoiding harm, eliminating vice while exalting virtue” and will “inject more stability, certainty and constructive factors into a world filled with unpredictable events and release greater positive energy.”¹⁵

NOTES

¹ “Chapter Five: Asia,” *Military Balance*, 124:1, 2024, p. 260. According to Janes’ equipment profiles on the Y-20 heavy transport and the YY-20 tanker variant (accessed online on Feb. 19, 2024), the PLAAF’s Y-20s are distributed among two regiments: (1) the 37th Air Regiment based in Kaifeng, Henan Province and (2) the 12th Air Regiment based in Chengdu, Sichuan Province. The PLAAF’s YY-20s belong to the 38th Air Regiment in Wuhan, Hubei Province. The 12th Air Regiment is subordinate to the 4th Transport Division of the Western Theater Command Air Force, while the 37th and 38th Air Regiments are subordinate to the 13th Transport Division of the Central Theater Command Air Force.

² Qi Chengrong (齐呈荣) and Xiong Tianxia (熊天霞), “Unidentified Regiment of Naval Aviation University Strengthens Airlift Capability Training” (海军航空大学某团加强空中输送能力训练), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Jan. 20, 2024, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfb&paperDate=2024-01-20&paperNumber=02&articleid=923806.

³ “Navy’s ‘High-Altitude Express,’ Mission Accomplished!” (海军 “高空快递”，使命必达！), PLA Navy WeChat Account (人民海军微信公号), Jan. 19, 2024, <https://wap.peopleapp.com/article/7319546/7156355>.

⁴ “Unidentified Regiment of Naval Aviation University Strengthens Airlift Capability Training.”

⁵ The Y-8 and Y-9 are both rated to carry a maximum of 13,200 kg (29,101 pounds) of airdroppable cargo, while the Y-20 is estimated to have a maximum payload of 66,000 kg (145,505 pounds). See “SAC Y-8,” *All the World’s Aircraft: In Service*, Janes.com, Oct. 3, 2023; “SAC Y-9,” *All the World’s Aircraft: Development & Production*, Jul. 27, 2023; “Y-20,” Janes.com, accessed on Feb. 14, 2024.

⁶ Liu Jimei (刘济美) and Gao Sifeng (高思峰), “Bayi Aerobatic Team Arrives in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia” (空军八一飞行表演队飞抵沙特阿拉伯利雅得), *Xinhua* (新华社), Jan. 30, 2024, <http://www.news.cn/world/20240130/ce3696143318432bbcf00ce2b3ef648a/c.html>.

⁷ Gao Sifeng (高思峰) and Li Jianwen (李建文), “Bayi Aerobatic Team Successfully Completes Mission and Returns Home, Wishes Happy New Year to All the Country’s People in Special Manner” (八一飞行表演队圆满完成任务归国以特有礼仪向全国人民拜年), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Feb. 11, 2024, http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16286418.html.

⁸ *Military Report* (军事报道), CCTV-7, Jan. 27, 2024, <https://tv.cctv.com/2024/01/27/VIDExbkrkrQOVu2VFi3q4Wf7240127.shtml?spm=C52346.PiumOrYLNUM.E0VXtwLj8YU7.16>.

⁹ *Military Documentary* (军事纪实), CCTV-7, Aug. 25, 2022, <https://tv.cctv.com/2022/08/25/VIDENn0MR0b0fb5OG6ajWJ9i220825.shtml?spm=C52346.PeUOF9ADoC7X.ESxtMkph5mnM.1534>.

¹⁰ Yang Huanhuan (杨欢欢) and Liu Dongchu (刘东矗), “The Foreign Military Research Association’s Annual Academic Was Held at the NDU Joint Operations College” (外军研究联席会学术年会在国防大学联合作战学院举行), *China Radio International* (中央广播电视总台), Jan. 29, 2024, http://military.cnr.cn/jq/20240129/t20240129_526575572.shtml.

¹¹ Yang Huanhuan (杨欢欢) and Liu Dongchu (刘东矗), “The Foreign Military Research Association Held Its First Annual Academic Meeting” (外军研究联席会首届学术年会举行), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Jan. 30, 2024, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-01-30&paperNumber=04&articleid=924485.

¹² See, for example, “New Regulations Aimed at Growth in PLA’s Civilian Workforce,” *PLA UPDATE*, Issue 7, Feb. 16, 2023, <https://www.cna.org/Newsletters/PLA%20Update/Issue-07/PLA-Update-Issue-7-February-16-2023.pdf>; “New Physical Exam Standards for Select Officers, Civilians,” *PLA UPDATE*, Issue 9, Apr. 19, 2023, <https://www.cna.org/Newsletters/PLA%20Update/Issue%209/PLA-Update-Issue-9-April-19-2023.pdf>; “PLA Issues Provisional Regulations on Civilian Hires’ Benefits,” *PLA UPDATE*, Issue 15, Oct. 23, 2023, <https://www.cna.org/Newsletters/PLA%20Update/Issue-15/PLA-Update-Issue-15-October-23-2023.pdf>.

¹³ Zhou Hongwei (周宏伟), “Accelerate the Transition of Civilian Personnel with Advanced Degrees” (加快高学历文职人员转型), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Jan. 18, 2024, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-01-18&paperNumber=07&articleid=923683.

¹⁴ Zhou Yanhu (周燕虎) and Zhang Chengming (张成名), “Issue Focus: Strengthen Secrecy-Protection Education for Civilian Personnel” (本期关注 加强文职人员保密教育), *PLA Daily* (解放军报), Jan. 17, 2024, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfjb&paperDate=2024-01-17&paperNumber=11&articleid=923599.

¹⁵ *Global Trends and Security Risks*, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, Jan. 9, 2024, <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/UpFiles/file/20240109/6384043315104109137128781.pdf>; *Global Trends and Security Risks* (全球战略与安全风险), China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (中国现代国际关系研究院), Jan. 9, 2024, <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/UpFiles/file/20240109/6384042948730876441603280.pdf>.

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