

“PLA Weaknesses and Xi’s Concerns about PLA Capabilities”

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A large body of evidence in China's official military and party media indicates the nation's senior civilian and uniformed leaders recognize significant shortcomings in the warfighting and command capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The increasing scope and frequency of these self-critiques during the tenure of Xi Jinping as chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) casts doubt over the senior party and military leadership's confidence in the PLA's ability to prevail in battle against a modern enemy. The limitations illuminated by these internal assessments likely moderate China's near- and mid-term national security objectives and the manner by which they are pursued.

Since becoming CMC chairman in 2012, Xi has sought to raise the overall level of the PLA's combat readiness, embodied in the slogan "be able to fight and win" (能打仗、打胜仗).<sup>1</sup> By raising its warfighting capabilities and demonstrating them to the world, the PLA seeks to enhance a deterrence posture directed at an array of threats to China's national interests and achieve China's political objectives without fighting.<sup>2</sup> The current tranche of military reform aims to improve PLA warfighting capabilities by addressing command and control and structural shortfalls by 2020. Beyond that, Xi has set 2035 as the date to complete the modernization of military theory, organization, personnel, and weapons and "mid-century" (2049) to build the PLA into a "world-class military" (到本世纪中叶把人民军队全面建成世界一流军队), a phrase that has yet to be defined officially.<sup>3</sup>

Identifying and overcoming specific operational problems has been an essential component of the PLA's deliberate, long-term modernization process for the last four decades. As new technologies continue to enter the force and recently reorganized units train with advanced equipment, many more problems will be identified and additional efforts will be required to correct them. Much of this process will be reported by the Chinese media in a context that highlights progress made in specific areas or functions. But hidden within the glowing prose, readers may uncover nuggets of negativity that reveal insights into problems in the PLA's developing capabilities, mitigating to some extent the positive aspects found elsewhere.

Chinese-language articles containing internal self-assessments likely are shared within the force during mandatory unit political training sessions. However, only rarely is bad news publicized in English-language publications originating in China. Thus, while the PLA's new weapons, uniforms, parades, and firepower demonstrations attract (or distract) the world's attention, the party and military itself is well aware of the many persistent and evolving challenges facing the PLA.

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1 "努力建设一支听党指挥能打胜仗作风优良的人民军队" [Strive to Build a People's Army that Can "Obey the Party, Fight and Win, Have a Good Work Style"], *PLA Daily*, August 1, 2017, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-08/01/content\\_183732.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-08/01/content_183732.htm).

2 Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *The Science of Military Strategy*, Beijing, Military Science Publishing House, 2001 (Chinese edition), 2005 (English edition), pp. 213 – 229.

3 "决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利" [Decisive Victory, Build a Well-Off Society in an All-Round Way, Win the Great Victory of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era], *PLA Daily*, October 19, 2017, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-10/19/content\\_189964.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-10/19/content_189964.htm). Xi's objective to complete PLA modernization by 2035 moves forward by 14 years the previous date i.e., 2049, identified in the white paper "China's National Defense in 2008."

The practice of reporting both the good and bad is the PLA talking to itself, aimed at praising units for advances they have achieved, but also encouraging everyone to continue to work hard to raise PLA capabilities over the long term. In Hegelian terms, well-understood by PLA communists, successes represent the thesis, while the problems are the antithesis. When the two are merged, synthesis (progress) results and the process is repeated. The Chinese media's identification of these general and specific problems is a PLA method for "knowing itself," and is not a vast deception operation to hide its capabilities from inquiring eyes.

## Types of Self-Assessments

Based on analysis of Chinese military media reporting, PLA self-evaluations take two forms: 1) general assessments of capabilities and 2) specific critiques of discrete functions in individual units.<sup>4</sup> General assessments frequently are attributed to and referred to by CMC chairmen (going back to Deng Xiaoping), indicating knowledge of their content and approval by the highest level of the party and military. Some formulas have a lifespan of years, appearing scores or hundreds of times in various publications. The method by which these evaluations are developed is unclear, but probably includes consensus among senior leaders after staff work involving elements of at least the CMC, Joint Staff Department, and Political Work Department (or their predecessor organizations).

General self-assessments are abbreviated in slogans or formulas, such as the "Two Incompatibles" or "Five Incapables." Early in their "life," they are spelled out in full sentences, but later they appear most often in their short-form abbreviation, without full explanation. Readers not familiar with the terms may skip over them, consider them propaganda or boilerplate fluff, or may have to search previous reporting to determine their meaning. Since 2006, generalized appraisals have expressed skepticism about the PLA's ability to prevail in modern combat; more recently they have questioned the combat leadership ability of "some" leaders and the PLA's loyalty to the party. None of these assessments has been included in any of the white papers on national defense, whose target audience is external to China; only infrequently do English-language editions of Chinese publications include the text of some of these evaluations.

Specific critiques about particular capabilities and units often address problems in the abilities of commanders and staff, the execution of tactics and techniques discovered on the training field, and systemic organizational and equipment shortfalls. Training in every service and every unit, particularly during force-on-force confrontational exercises, constantly seeks to identify and resolve problems and thereby increase combat capabilities and readiness.<sup>5</sup> Following every major training event, units conduct after-action reviews (referred to as 复盘总结, 复盘推演, 反思检讨会) to highlight successes and to detect specific shortcomings and weaknesses (短板, 底板, 弱项

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<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, in addition to the problems publicized in the media, the PLA has a classified evaluation system to assess unit readiness and capabilities for individual units that is not available to the Chinese press or public in general.

<sup>5</sup> "我们到底需要什么样的假想敌" [What Kind of Imaginary Enemy Forces Do We Need], *PLA Daily*, January 8, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/theory/2019-01/08/content\\_9399595.htm](http://www.81.cn/theory/2019-01/08/content_9399595.htm).

).6 Based on these after-action reviews, units may conduct remedial training (复训补训) or program training for the coming training season to correct shortcomings.<sup>7</sup> These details serve as the basis for the larger generalizations found in slogans and formulas and contribute to the rationale behind changes in the PLA's organization, structure, doctrine, and training.

As might be expected in any results-oriented organization, once people understood that “discovering problems” was a command emphasis, “some” units attempted to game the system by finding problems for the sake of finding problems – often the same problems as identified in prior training – to “show off” to their superiors. This phenomenon, known as the “problem show” (问题秀), was identified in early 2015 and has resulted in a number of articles aimed at guarding against the phenomenon.<sup>8</sup>

## General Assessments

One of the most common general critiques about the PLA is its lack of recent combat experience. Current vice chairman of the CMC General Zhang Youxia identified this weakness in 2009 when he was Shenyang Military Region commander:

Today, the PLA hasn't been in actual combat for many years now, yet the fires of war are burning throughout the world. In this area, the gap between the PLA and foreign militaries is growing day by day. This is an actual problem.<sup>9</sup>

The problem persists and the PLA media frequently urges the troops to overcome the “peace disease” (和平病), “peacetime habits” (和平积习), and “peacetime practices [or problems]” (和平积弊).<sup>10</sup> If soldiers have a peacetime attitude (not expecting to go to war during their period of service), take shortcuts and develop bad habits, or just “go through the motions” during training,

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6 “联教联学促进联演联训” [Joint Education and Schooling Promotes Joint Training], *PLA Daily*, January 18, 2018,

[http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-01/18/content\\_197230.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-01/18/content_197230.htm); “对训练落实不力的要‘有个说法’” [“There’s a Saying” About the Ineffective Implementation of Training], *PLA Daily*, December 6, 2017, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2017-12/06/content\\_7856614.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2017-12/06/content_7856614.htm); “联勤保障部队，请收5封“用户来信”” [Joint Logistics Support Force, Please Accept Five Letters], *PLA Daily*, May 2, 2017, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2017-05/02/content\\_7583691.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2017-05/02/content_7583691.htm).

7 “野外陌生地域补齐训练短板” [Remedying Training Defects in the Field in an Unfamiliar Area], *PLA Daily*, January 13, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/13/content\\_225138.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/13/content_225138.htm).

8 “纠正“问题秀”，问题清单不能只列不改” [Correct the “Problem Show,” The Problems List Cannot Only Be Listed and Not Change], *PLA Daily*, August 31, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2018-08/31/content\\_9268150.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2018-08/31/content_9268150.htm); “树立问题导向力戒“问题秀”” [Establish Problem-Oriented Guidance, Guard Against “Problem Show”], *PLA Daily*, February 27, 2015, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2015-02/27/content\\_103181.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2015-02/27/content_103181.htm).

9 “沈阳军区司令员张又侠解读新时期军事训练新革命” [Commander of the Shenyang Military Region Zhang Youxia Interprets the New Revolution in Military Training in the New Era], *China.com.cn*, November 20, 2009, [http://www.china.com.cn/military/txt/2009-11/20/content\\_18925256.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/military/txt/2009-11/20/content_18925256.htm).

10 Based on email correspondence with Dr. Alastair Iain Johnston, July 4, 2018, the term “peace disease” was first observed in the late 1980s. These three terms appeared roughly 565 times in the *PLA Daily* from 2012 to mid-2018. They continue apace in 2019, with a recent example found in “用聚焦中心消除“干扰源”” [Focus on the Center to Eliminate “Sources of Interference”], *PLA Daily*, January 13, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/13/content\\_225134.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/13/content_225134.htm).

then unit readiness is compromised. Rectifying this attitude is a leadership challenge at all levels and is an important reason behind Xi's emphasis on raising combat readiness.<sup>11</sup>

In early 2006, CMC chairman Hu Jintao was credited with formulating the “Two Incompatibles” (两个不相适应) or “principal contradiction” (主要矛盾) assessment of PLA capabilities: the PLA's “level of modernization 1) does not meet the requirements of winning local war under informatized conditions and 2) its military capability does not meet the requirements of carrying out its historic missions at the new stage of the new century.”<sup>12</sup> In short, this evaluation questions the PLA's capabilities to fight and win wars and perform the many other missions it may be assigned, such as military operations other than war (MOOTW). Though this assessment uses terminology from Hu's tenure as CMC chairman, such as “local war under informatized conditions” and the “historic missions,” it continues to be seen, though less frequently, after Xi took over as CMC chairman.<sup>13</sup> The formula also has been modified to describe specific problems, such as Navy training and logistics.<sup>14</sup> More recently, in July 2018, a member of the Army Staff wrote that the size of the Army Aviation air assault force was incompatible with its missions and tasks and that its overall operational capabilities were incompatible with the requirements for victory.<sup>15</sup>

After Xi began his term as CMC chairman, several new formulas reflecting assessments of PLA capabilities have been used to augment and expand on the “Two Incompatibles” problem. Like the “Two Incompatibles” they question the PLA's current ability to fight and win a modern war, but, perhaps more importantly, also emphasize leadership shortcomings among “some” combat officers and question the PLA's loyalty to the party.

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11 A few examples of these terms' usage includes: “强化政治自觉，下决心根治“和平病”——一谈纠治和平积弊、聚力备战打仗,” [Strengthen Political Consciousness, Be Determined to Cure the “Peace Disease,” A Talk About Rectifying Peacetime Practices, Concentrate on Preparing for Battle], *PLA Daily*, July 2, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-07/02/content\\_209857.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-07/02/content_209857.htm); “战场险情处置嵌入日常训练” [Deal With Battlefield Dangers through Daily Training], *PLA Daily*, June 20, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-06/20/content\\_208948.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-06/20/content_208948.htm); and “聚焦主战主业 强化使命担当” [Focus on the Main Business of Fighting, Strengthen Mission Responsibility], *PLA Daily*, February 9, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-02/09/content\\_199258.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-02/09/content_199258.htm).

12 “我军加紧战争准备 当务之急是造“撒手锏”武器” [The PLA Steps Up Preparation for War, the Most Urgent Task is to Build “Assassin's Mace” Weapons], *China.com*, March 22, 2006, [http://news.china.com/zh\\_cn/domestic/photo/11026066/20060322/13186012.html](http://news.china.com/zh_cn/domestic/photo/11026066/20060322/13186012.html), which states “对于着力解决我军现代化水平与打赢信息化条件下局部战争的要求还不相适应，军事能力与履行新世纪新阶段我军历史使命的要求还不相适应这一主要矛盾，具有极其重要的指导作用。” Except for the “Two Incompatibles,” the author is not aware of other generalized assessments during the Hu era. If any others can be identified, I will incorporate them into this analysis.

13 “惟改革创新者胜” [For Reform and Innovation to Win], *PLA Daily*, March 14, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-03/14/content\\_201556.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-03/14/content_201556.htm); “大力推进新时代军事管理革命” [Vigorously Promote the Revolution in Military Management in the New Era], *PLA Daily*, September 26, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-09/26/content\\_216670.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-09/26/content_216670.htm).

14 “海军贯彻十八大精神勇闯大洋苦练硬功” [The Navy implements the spirit of the 18th National Party Congress], *China Navy*, December 12, 2012, [http://navy.81.cn/content/2012-12/12/content\\_5137665.htm](http://navy.81.cn/content/2012-12/12/content_5137665.htm); “Liao Xilong Stresses at Enlarged Conference of Party Committee of General Logistics Department Making Efforts To Open Up New Situation of Comprehensive Development of Modern Logistics,” *PLA Daily*, January 12, 2008.

15 “从空中打赢地面战争” [Winning Ground Wars From the Air], *PLA Daily*, July 12, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-07/12/content\\_210771.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-07/12/content_210771.htm).

The “Two Inabilities” (两个能力不够) was revived in 2013 and states that 1) the PLA’s ability to fight a modern war is not sufficient and 2) the ability of cadres (officers) at all levels to command modern war is insufficient.<sup>16</sup> The intention of the first half of the formula is similar to the first part of the “Two Incompatibles,” but the second portion is a general criticism of PLA combat leadership capabilities. A prominent flaw reported in some commanders is that they “do not dare” or are “not willing” or “not able” to use the “new-type combat forces” (新型作战力量) that they have been assigned.<sup>17</sup> Though leadership training has been emphasized for many years using the formula, “train generals/officers first [before training troops]” (练兵先练将/练兵先练官), the “Two Inabilities” suggests that efforts to date have not been as effective as necessary.<sup>18</sup> The “Two Inabilities” was cited specifically as a reason to improve realistic training when the updated Military Training Outline was issued in 2018.<sup>19</sup> Last December, *PLA Daily* reported that after three years of reforms (many of which were reiterated in the article), Xi pointed out multiple reasons that the “Two Inabilities” remain prominent: the leadership management system is not scientific enough, the joint operations command system is not sound enough, the force structure is not rational enough, and policy system reform still lags relatively behind.<sup>20</sup>

Also from 2013 the “Two Big Gaps” (两个差距很大) acknowledges there are big gaps between the PLA’s military modernization level and 1) the requirements for national security and 2) compared to the level of the world’s advanced militaries.<sup>21</sup> The “Two Big Gaps” reiterates a lack of confidence in PLA fighting abilities in general, but also specifies that a *relative* capability gap in exists between the PLA and other advanced militaries. Previously senior PLA leaders had publicly acknowledged such a gap in general terms. For example, in a January 2011 meeting with the U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Defense Minister General Liang Guanglie stated that though the PLA has demonstrated certain advanced weapons, “I also firmly believe that in terms of the level of modernization of the PLA, we can by no means call ourselves an advanced military

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16 “学习习近平总书记关于强军目标的重要论述” [Study General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Exposition on the Goal of Strengthening the Military] *People’s Daily*, July 22, 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0722/c40531-22275029.html>, which states “军队打现代化战争能力不够,各级干部指挥现代战争能力不够.” The “Two Inabilities” is attributed to Deng Xiaoping and was seen a few times during the CMC chairmanship of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. There may be other general self-criticisms in the Xi era in addition to the four identified here.

17 “推进新型作战力量融入联合作战” [Promote the Integration of New-Type Combat Forces into Joint Operations], *PLA Daily*, July 31, 2015, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-07/31/content\\_152147.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-07/31/content_152147.htm).

18 “强军先强将 练兵先练官” [For a Strong Army First Train Generals, In Training Soldiers First Train Officers], *PLA Daily*, January 17, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-01/17/content\\_135485.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-01/17/content_135485.htm); “紧盯打胜仗练兵先练将” [Concentrate on Winning Battles Training Soldiers First Train Generals], *PLA Daily*, June 30, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-06/30/content\\_209742.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-06/30/content_209742.htm).

19 “新军事训练大纲来了，我们该怎么办？” [The New Military Training Outline Has Arrived, What Should We Do?], *PLA Daily*, January 1, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2018-01/30/content\\_7926395.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2018-01/30/content_7926395.htm).

20 “体系重塑，波澜壮阔开新局” [Remodeling the System, Waves Open a New Bureau], *PLA Daily*, December 18, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-12/18/content\\_223416.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-12/18/content_223416.htm).

21 “学习习近平总书记关于强军目标的重要论述” [Study General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Exposition on the Goal of Strengthening the Military], *People’s Daily*, July 22, 2013, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0722/c40531-22275029.html>, which states, “目前,我军现代化水平与国家安全需求相比差距还很大,与世界先进军事水平相比差距还很大.”

force. The gap between us and that of advanced countries is at least two to three decades.”<sup>22</sup> Xi has since tasked the PLA to close this gap by establishing the goal to build a “world-class military” by mid-century.

One of the few instances of a Chinese-origin, English-language reference to the “Two Big Gaps” and “Two Inabilities” was published in 2016. However, it does not include the two slogans themselves and casual readers could miss the larger context and history behind this passage:

Improving the army’s combat strength has become a major focus. But the modernization level of the Chinese army is inadequate to safeguard national security, and it lags far behind advanced global peers. The Chinese army is not capable enough of waging modern warfare, and officers lack command skills for modern warfare.<sup>23</sup>

The “Three Whethers” (三个能不能) is a less-frequently noted assessment first seen in 2014. It repeats misgivings about the PLA’s fighting and leadership capabilities, but begins by raising doubts about the PLA’s loyalty to the party: 1) Whether our armed forces can constantly maintain the party’s absolute leadership, 2) whether they can fight victoriously when needed by the party and the people, and 3) whether commanders at all levels are competent to lead forces and command in war.<sup>24</sup> The question of PLA loyalty to the party is of utmost importance to China’s senior civilian leaders and for it to be acknowledged in this slogan indicates adds a political dimension to concerns about the military’s operational leadership abilities.<sup>25</sup>

The “Five Incapables [Cannots]” (五个不会) from 2015 highlights the problems “some” individual officers have in making battlefield judgments and decisions necessary to succeed in combat: Some commanders cannot 1) judge the situation, 2) understand the intention of higher authorities, 3) make operational decisions, 4) deploy troops, and 5) deal with unexpected situations.<sup>26</sup> These five tasks are the fundamentals of combat leadership, required at all levels of command. Though no percentage of leaders is defined in the “some” (一些指挥员) who cannot perform these functions, the prevalence of this critique suggests that “some” is “too many” and the

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22 “Joint Press Conference with Secretary Gates and General Liang from Beijing, China,” U.S. Department of Defense, January 10, 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4750>.

23 “Xi brings strength, integrity to Chinese armed forces,” English-language *PLA Daily*, July 30, 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-07/30/content\\_7182049.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-07/30/content_7182049.htm).

24 “破解一支军队所向披靡的脉动密码” [Crack an Army’s Password], *PLA Daily*, July 28, 2014, [http://www.81.cn/2014-content\\_18620/2014-07/28/content\\_6173099.htm](http://www.81.cn/2014-content_18620/2014-07/28/content_6173099.htm), which states “在党和人民需要的时候，军队能不能始终坚持党的绝对领导，能不能拉得上去、打胜仗，各级指挥员能不能带兵打仗、指挥打仗？”

25 Several other formulas, such as the “Five Excesses” (五多) and “Four Winds [or Four Bad Styles]” (四风) address ideological, discipline, corruption, and political problems and will not be examined in this testimony. For a few examples, see “用聚焦中心消除“干扰源”” [Focus on the Center to Eliminate “Sources of Interference”], *PLA Daily*, January 13, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/13/content\\_225134.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/13/content_225134.htm); “中部战区陆军出实招纠治作风积弊” [CTC Army Move to Rectify Evil Trends], *PLA Daily*, January 17, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-01/17/content\\_197142.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-01/17/content_197142.htm).

26 “破解“五个不会”难题要从源头入手” [To Crack the “Five Incapables” Problem Start with the Source], *PLA Daily*, October 13, 2015, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2015-10/13/content\\_125880.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2015-10/13/content_125880.htm), which states “一些指挥员离开了机关就不会判断形势、不会理解上级意图、不会定下作战决心、不会摆兵布阵、不会处置突发情况。”

problem is widespread. This appraisal, along with the “Two Inabilities,” which also mentions leadership, is now one of the most frequently repeated slogans in the Chinese military media. As could be expected, at about the same time as the appearance of this scathing indictment, units began emphasizing “Five Abilities” (五会) leadership training to correct the problem.<sup>27</sup>

In its short existence the “Five Incapables” has been utilized to justify many training activities. For example, in 2016 the Army stated that the 17 Stride and Firepower-series trans-regional exercises for the year to were aimed at resolving the commanders’ “Five Incapables” problem.<sup>28</sup> Following Xi Jinping’s 2017 visit to the CMC Joint Operations Center, a *PLA Daily* staff commentator article began by stressing the need to solve the two problems of the “Two Inabilities” and “Five Incapables.”<sup>29</sup> *PLA Daily* staff commentator articles to promote the annual training mobilization orders for 2018 and 2019 both reference the “Five Incapables.”<sup>30</sup> In the summer of 2018 all four services held training for senior officers on overcoming the “Five Incapables”:

- The Army held six and a half days of training for commanders and staff of the five TC Armies and 13 group armies focused on the “Five Incapables.”<sup>31</sup>
- During four rounds of preparatory training sessions for senior officers of the Navy headquarters and the Theater Command Navies, Commander Shen Jinlong, his deputy, and chief of staff addressed the “Five Incapables” and set training guidance that “officer training takes priority over crew training.”<sup>32</sup>
- During a group training session for Air Force commanders and staff of all levels, Commander Ding Laihang and Political Commissar Yu Zhongfu began the meeting by discussing the “Five Incapables.”<sup>33</sup>
- Over 200 Rocket Force generals and field grade officers examined the problem that the Rocket Force has never fought a war along with Xi’s emphasis on resolving the “Five Incapables” and “Three Whethers.”<sup>34</sup>

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27 “From Here to Actual Combat, From Here to Victory,” *Zhanshi Bao*, August 28, 2015. This report specifically links the “Five Incapables” and “Five Abilities” in a review of the exercise “Joint Action 2015C.”

28 “陆军7至9月组织17场跨区演习 7条新规推动真打实抗” [The Army Organizes 17 Trans-Regional Exercises from July to September, 7 New Regulations to Promote Realistic Combat], *PLA Daily*, August 4, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/sydbt/2016-08/04/content\\_7189782.htm](http://www.81.cn/sydbt/2016-08/04/content_7189782.htm)

29 “军报评论：领导干部要做备战打仗带头人” [JFJB Commentary: Leading Cadre Must Prepare Leaders to Win], *PLA Daily*, November 11, 2017, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2017-11/06/content\\_7813078.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2017-11/06/content_7813078.htm).

30 “在解决突出短板弱项中提高备战打仗能力” [Solve Shortcomings and Weaknesses to Improve Combat Readiness Capabilities], *PLA Daily*, January 8, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/08/content\\_224764.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/08/content_224764.htm); “坚定不移把军事训练摆在战略位置” [“Firmly Place Military Training in a Strategic Position”], *PLA Daily*, January 4, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/theory/2018-01/04/content\\_7894870.htm](http://www.81.cn/theory/2018-01/04/content_7894870.htm).

31 “新时代强军战歌：着力打造中军帐‘最强大脑’” [Strive to Build the “Strongest Brains” in Command Posts], *Xinhua*, July 15, 2018, [http://m.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-07/15/c\\_129913697.htm](http://m.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-07/15/c_129913697.htm).

32 “ Closely Centering on Ability to Fight and Win, Navy Organizes Preparatory Training Ahead of Operational Assembly Training; Focusing on Studying and Resolving ‘Five Incapables,’ Establishing ‘Officer Training Before Crew Training’ Guidance,” *Renmin Haijun*, June 25, 2018.

33 “Air Force Group Training in Combat Operations and Combat Readiness Thoroughly Implements Xi Jinping’s Strong Armed Forces Ideology,” *Kongjun Bao*, July 4, 2018.

34 “砥砺大国长剑锋芒” [Sharpening the Blade of the Long Sword of a Major Power], *PLA Daily*, July 18, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-07/18/content\\_211178.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-07/18/content_211178.htm).



Since 2006 when the “Two Incompatibles” was first promulgated, these five assessments have appeared in over 500 articles in the *PLA Daily* alone. Table 1 summarizes the content of these five assessments. In Charts 1 and 2, Harvard Professor Alastair Iain Johnston graphs the number of articles in which one or more of these terms each has been observed annually in *PLA Daily*, tallied by their individual usage through 2018:<sup>35</sup>

- “Two Incompatibles”: 120 articles
- “Two Inabilities”: 169
- “Two Big Gaps”: 78
- “Three Whethers”: 27
- “Five Incapables”: 163
- Total: 557

The “Five Incapables” leads with highest average per annum occurrence of articles (40.75) followed by the “Two Inabilities” (28.17). Both of these formulas highlight problems in PLA operational leadership and the frequency of their usage indicates the CMC underscores this as a major unsolved problem. The appearance of the “Three Whethers” has grown annually over the past four years, perhaps suggesting that in addition to fighting and leadership shortcomings, the senior party and military officials are increasingly concerned about the PLA’s loyalty.

Recognizing that leaders will make mistakes during the course of reform and in training, on January 1, 2019, the CMC issued an opinion on motivating cadre to assume new responsibilities. The opinion differentiates between those who commit *intentional* violations of regulations and those who make *unintentional* errors, especially grassroots cadre serving in operational units or in remote areas. In the latter case, the opinion suggests that promotions and assignments should not be affected for those who were granted amnesty or served punishment for unintentional mistakes made while taking the initiative and trying to solve problems.<sup>36</sup> This opinion seeks to encourage leaders to take risks in the pursuit of raising PLA capabilities. If implemented fairly, such a policy could hasten the growth of a competent officer corps.

### Specific Problems

The body of open source Chinese-language evidence enumerating the various types of specific problems that support the general assessments above is overwhelming, dating back over decades. Only a small sample is included below, selected only from the past three years of reform. Examples in the Chinese-origin, English-language occur much less frequently, but one insightful observation by an unidentified researcher in the Human Resources Department at the then-Xi’an Political Academy covers multiple problems:

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<sup>35</sup> Email correspondence with Dr. Johnston, January 15, 2019. In many cases, multiple slogans appear in the same article, so the total number of articles will be less. These numbers do not include the instances when the assessments are spelled out in full without mentioning their abbreviated slogan format.

<sup>36</sup> “中央军委办公厅印发《关于进一步激励全军广大干部新时代新担当新作为的实施意见》” [General Office of the Central Military Commission Releases the “Implementing Opinion on Further Motivating All-Military Cadres to Assume New Responsibilities and Attain New Achievements in the New Era”], *PLA Daily*, January 2, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2019-01/02/content\\_9393126.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2019-01/02/content_9393126.htm).

[The PLA] must address the shortage of officers who have a deep knowledge of joint combat operations and advanced equipment. We have developed and deployed many cutting-edge weapons, including some that are the best in the world, but there are not enough soldiers to use many of those advanced weapons. In some cases, soldiers lack knowledge and expertise to make the best use of their equipment.<sup>37</sup>

A major component of the PLA's effort to increase its joint warfighting capabilities was the creation of the five Theater Command (TC) headquarters in 2016. However, when these organizations were established, there was a shortage of qualified "joint officers" and many personnel assigned to the TC headquarters were uncomfortable in their new positions, necessitating on-the-job training for them to become proficient in their new tasks. One staff officer in the Northern TC headquarters complained that he and his comrades had been topnotch officers in the former Shenyang Military Region, but in their new positions they were elementary students of joint operations. Accordingly, the headquarters set up a "Three-Year Program for Building Joint Operation Command Personnel" (联合作战指挥人才建设3年规划), which requires personnel to be tested before they receive job certification.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, over two years later shortly after Xi visited the Southern TC headquarters, an October 2018 *PLA Daily* staff commentator article recommended that Theater Commands must improve their warfighting command capabilities as soon as possible and increase efforts to resolve the problems of the "Two Inabilities" and "Five Incapables."<sup>39</sup>

Similar troubles have been reported in the Army at brigade and battalion levels for both commanders and staff. Recently, in a summary of unit training conducted after several units had relocated to barracks at higher elevations, a leader from the Western TC Army stated that though a new foundation had been laid, "our practice is still in the preliminary stage; we must strive for a long time before we can reap maximum dividends of reform to build combat effectiveness."<sup>40</sup> The commander of the 81st Group Army Artillery Brigade observed, "We commanders still work with traditional methods and we have not changed training methods and concepts for informatized and digitized equipment."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, a battalion commander, whose unit was equipped with the

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37 "PLA restructuring changes focus at military schools," English-language *PLA Daily*, April 28, 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-04/28/content\\_7028544.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-04/28/content_7028544.htm). The Xi'an Political Academy is now the National Defense University's Political Institute Xi'an Campus.

38 "联战联训，千军万马看指挥" [Joint Operations and Training, A Strong Force is Led by Commanders], *PLA Daily*, May 5, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-05/05/content\\_143593.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-05/05/content_143593.htm). Similar training programs have been reported in the Southern and Central TCs and operational units. See "组织强则军队强，这个旅政委狠抓基层党建工作" [Strong Organization then Strong Unit, This Brigade Political Commissar Effectively Directs Grassroots Party Building Work] *PLA Daily*, October 29, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/2018jddjgzdx/2018-10/29/content\\_9325677.htm](http://www.81.cn/2018jddjgzdx/2018-10/29/content_9325677.htm); 陆战新锐乘风起航 [The Cutting Edge of Ground Combat Takes Off], *PLA Daily*, October 2, 2017, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-10/02/content\\_189166.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-10/02/content_189166.htm).

39 "加快把指挥能力搞过硬" 本报评论员 [Speed Up Solid Command Capabilities], *PLA Daily*, October 27, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-10/27/content\\_219136.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-10/27/content_219136.htm).

40 "从"上山训练"到"山上训练"" [From "Mountain Climbing Training" to "Training on the Mountain"], *PLA Daily*, January 18, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/lj/2019-01/18/content\\_9408195\\_2.htm](http://www.81.cn/lj/2019-01/18/content_9408195_2.htm).

41 Military Report CCTV-7, December 9, 2018, <http://tv.cctv.com/2018/12/09/VIDEVRWt0EDOb4UaWQAYhVwcI81209.shtml>.

newest Type 99A tanks, but was defeated in a 2018 training exercise, explained “We only studied the capabilities of older tanks, but have not completely understood new ones.”<sup>42</sup>

With the creation of permanent combined arms battalions, which command companies and platoons from up to 10 different branches (such as infantry, armor, artillery, air defense, etc), many new battalion and company commanders have not received formal training in the capabilities and requirements of each branch and how to effectively train and employ them.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, training for these officers must be conducted within the brigade, with some brigades issuing qualification certificates for commanders.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the newly formed combined arms battalions have been augmented with several staff officers and noncommissioned officers (NCO) to assist the commander; however, most battalion staff officers/NCOs have had no experience in their new jobs and also must receive on-the-job training.<sup>45</sup> In many cases, battalion commanders are unfamiliar with how their staff can support them and try to be a “one-man show” (独角戏) as they were prior to reforms, finding it difficult to adjust to the new organization.<sup>46</sup> It appears that individual brigades are establishing their own internal guidelines on the degree of authority given to battalion staff officers, to include delegating authority to deploy and direct certain battlefield functions.<sup>47</sup> Though the Army has been experimenting with battalion-level combined arms operations for the past decade, it likely will take several more annual training cycles to troubleshoot the new structures and tactics and procedures to standardize command and control functions throughout the force.

Though the Navy has not undergone the same amount of organizational turmoil as the Army, it confronts similar problems in some areas and unique ones in others. At the beginning of the recent reforms, the deputy political commissar of the South Sea Fleet stated (in an article translated into English), “Despite the fact that the Navy’s strength, weapons and equipment continue to improve, we have weaknesses at the technological level. Our researchers have made breakthroughs in many fields, and what we need now is the government’s determination and investment, otherwise the Navy will lag behind others.”<sup>48</sup> In late 2018, Eastern TC Navy leaders identified multiple

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42 “PLA moves to integrate techniques, tactics with new weapons systems,” English-language *PLA Daily*, January 21, 2019, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-01/21/content\\_9409397.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-01/21/content_9409397.htm).

43 “一名合成营营长的新年“台账”” [A Combined Arms Battalion Commander’s New Year’s “Ledger”], *PLA Daily*, January 8, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/08/content\\_224806.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/08/content_224806.htm); “Making Up for ‘Capabilities Deficiency’ in Combined Arms Battalion Commanders: a Brigade of the 83rd Group Army Steps Up the Building of Its Corps of Combined Arms Battalion Command Talent,” *Renmin Lujun*, July, 18, 2017. This situation is particularly vexing for artillery officers who are assigned to command combined arms battalions.

44 “合成营营长上岗先考“资格证”” [Before Taking up Post Combined Arms Battalion Commander Must Obtain ‘Certificate of Qualification’], *PLA Daily*, September 27, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-09/27/content\\_157597.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-09/27/content_157597.htm). It does not appear that there are centralized standards for battalion command.

45 “合成营参谋纳入首长机关集训” [Combined Arms Battalion Staff Included in Headquarters Training], *PLA Daily*, June 3, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-06/03/content\\_207669.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-06/03/content_207669.htm); “找准新时代练兵备战发力点” [Identify Points for New Era War Preparedness Training], *PLA Daily*, January 12, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-01/12/content\\_196789.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-01/12/content_196789.htm); “士官参谋之问：上士吴坚的喜与忧” [On Non-Commissioned Staff Officers: The Joys and Pains of Staff Sergeant Wu Jian], *PLA Daily*, January 1, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2018-01/03/content\\_7893231.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2018-01/03/content_7893231.htm).

46 “一场对抗演习“打痛”指挥机构” [“Pain” Strikes a Command Organization in a Confrontation Exercise], *PLA Daily*, April 20, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-04/20/content\\_204240.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-04/20/content_204240.htm).

47 “Reduce Command Levels, Enhance Command Flexibility,” *Renmin Lujun*, March 20, 2018.

48 “PLA officer: Navy needs more punch,” English-language *PLA Daily*, March 21, 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2016-03/21/content\\_6968724.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2016-03/21/content_6968724.htm). This, of course, is a blatant call for greater funding for the Navy.

weaknesses (“peacetime practices”) constraining training and combat readiness, such as too much redundant low-quality training, more assessments of single platform capabilities than systems-of-systems assessments, unrealistic training plans, infrequent research and analysis of the enemy threat, and out-of-date information on the enemy.<sup>49</sup> As the Army seeks to give more authority for independent operations to brigade and battalion commanders, there are rumblings in the Navy to allow ship captains greater independence from instructor captains (教练舰长) – senior officers assigned to ships to guide the captain and staff. Last April, in response to a recommendation to discard this “baby-sitting” model (“保姆”模式), a destroyer flotilla (支队) commander stated, “we must allow captains to independently take command, but steps should be taken prudently, and it is also necessary to thrash out a feasible evaluation program and a set of detailed rules for practice.”<sup>50</sup> If the Navy decides to take this important step, many preparatory actions will be necessary and the transition will take time.

The Air Force faces its own set of challenges. In 2017, the commandant of the Air Force Command Academy opened a training session for division, brigade, and regiment commanders with the observation that substantial differences exist in the thought and knowledge between personnel from combat units and those from non-combat units, between personnel from units using new equipment and those from units using obsolete equipment, and between personnel engaged in operations training and those from support units. The Academy must, therefore, “update its thought” to bring new concepts, ideas, methods, and experiences into the curriculum and classroom as soon as possible.<sup>51</sup> A *Kongjun Bao* commentator article shortly followed stating the “Five Incapables” exist to varying degrees in units, noting particularly “the gap between us and the air forces of the strong powers of the world.” In order to build “a first-rate strategic air force,” leaders must develop “first-rate work habits.”<sup>52</sup>

The Rocket Force commander and political commissar acknowledged that its units share the “Five Incapables” problem in their 2017 training mobilization order.<sup>53</sup> Leadership training at brigade level is a priority as demonstrated in 2018 reporting that notes, “To strengthen the force, it is essential to first strengthen commanders and staff officers,” as one brigade sought methods to overcome training weaknesses.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, a Rocket Force base pointed out a series of problems, embarrassing brigade and regiment staff officers, during an on-line training session.<sup>55</sup>

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49 “纠治和平积弊，来一场向自己开刀的“手术”” [Correcting Peacetime Practices, Performing “Surgery” on Yourself], *PLA Daily*, November 1, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2018-11/01/content\\_9328247.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2018-11/01/content_9328247.htm).

50 “舰长“放单”，前路是鲜花还是荆棘” [With Ship Captains Being Allowed to Independently Exercise Command, Will the Road Ahead Be Flowers or Thorn Bushes], *PLA Daily*, April 9, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-04/09/content\\_203379.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-04/09/content_203379.htm).

51 “Improve the Training System, Enhance the Personnel Qualities,” *Kongjun Bao*, June 2, 2017.

52 “Adapting to the New Structure and Building a First-Rate World-Class Strategic Air Force -- A Complete Discussion on Studying the Spirit of Implementing Assembly Training for Air Force Division, Brigade, and Regiment Commanders,” *Kongjun Bao*, June 6, 2017.

53 “Rocket Force Military Training Mobilization Order for 2017,” *Huojianbing Bao*, January 1, 2017.

54 “Rocket Force Brigade Firmly Adheres to the Actual Combat Orientation, Enhancing the Capabilities of the Command and Staff Organ,” *Huojianbing Bao*, August 4, 2018.

55 “Rocket Force Base Drives Command Organs to Enhance Capabilities of Studying and Planning Military Operations Through Exposing and Settling Problems,” *Huojianbing Bao*, March 14, 2018.

Many articles refer to longstanding troubles with training, logistics, and equipment, especially when compared to advanced militaries. In November, 2016, the director of the CMC Training and Administration Department identified multiple systemic contradictions and problems with the PLA's training regime, including a lack of emphasis on the centrality of training, the divergence between training and operations, insufficient officer training, insufficient training innovation, and lack of compatibility between training and support.<sup>56</sup> More recently an officer from the National Defense University Military Culture College wrote "There is a gap in aspects of our military's management of joint logistics support compared to the armed forces of developed nations. Our system of big data management is not yet good enough."<sup>57</sup> Despite the large amounts of new equipment entering the force, *Xinhua* and *PLA Daily* jointly published an article that stated, "In many respects there clearly are gaps in the level of the PLA's weapons and equipment to protect our country's security and developmental interests compared and the requirements to fight and win informatized wars compared to the world's strong military powers."<sup>58</sup> A factor exacerbating this problem is that new equipment sometimes arrives at units unexpectedly with no training manuals and no personnel able to operate and maintain the new gear.<sup>59</sup> The Rocket Force's first DF-26 brigade was established before it was issued missiles and with no manuals to guide the troops in preparation for their arrival. Consequently, the unit itself had to write its own teaching material to satisfy these basic requirements.<sup>60</sup>

The items described above only scratch the surface of the specific problems identified in the official Chinese media that can be found in every service and in every battlefield operation. Despite (or because of) structural reorganization and the introduction of new equipment and technologies, commanders, staff, and enlisted personnel constantly are in the process of adjusting existing tactics, techniques, and procedures. Nearly all of the PLA is in a state of experimentation and will be for several years into the future.

## Analysis and Recommendation

Analysis: It is absolutely certain that Xi Jinping and his predecessors understand the meaning and implications of the self-evaluations of PLA capabilities memorialized in multiple slogans and

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56 “锲而不舍破解实战化训练现实难题” [Unflagging Efforts to Solve Real Difficulties With Combat-Realistic Training], *PLA Daily*, November 29, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-11/29/content\\_162839.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-11/29/content_162839.htm).

57 “用大数据补齐管理短板” [Use Big Data to Make Up for Management Shortfalls], *PLA Daily*, December 25, 2018, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-12/25/content\\_223960.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2018-12/25/content_223960.htm).

58 “新华社、解放军报推出长篇综述：《科技创新，迈向世界一流军队的强大引擎》” [Xinhua and JFJB Release the Long Overview: Scientific and Technological Innovation is the Mighty Engine to Advance Toward a World-Class Military], *PLA Daily*, September 14, 2017, [http://www.81.cn/sydbt/2017-09/14/content\\_7757090.htm](http://www.81.cn/sydbt/2017-09/14/content_7757090.htm).

59 “陆军某旅：十余万发弹药“打”出新质作战力量” [Army Brigade: Fires More Than a Hundred Thousand Rounds to Generate New-Type Operational Force], *Xinhua*, January 31, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-01/31/c\\_129802957.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-01/31/c_129802957.htm); “Deng Jiangtao: Missile Expert in His Thirties,” *Huojianbing Bao*, March 3, 2017; “短短4年从连长到营长“三级跳”，他如何做到的” [“Three Level Jump” from Company Commander to Battalion Commander in Just Four Years, How Did He Do It], *PLA Daily*, June 29, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/lj/2016-06/29/content\\_7125210\\_2.htm](http://www.81.cn/lj/2016-06/29/content_7125210_2.htm). The lesson taught in articles like these is that unit leaders have devised methods to overcome these systemic problems. The lack of training material in units can be traced back for nearly two decades in official reporting.

60 “雷霆方阵驭剑人” [Swordsman Commands a Thunder Square], *PLA Daily*, January 21, 2019, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/21/content\\_225738.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2019-01/21/content_225738.htm).

formulas.<sup>61</sup> Despite the new weapons, equipment, and technologies entering the PLA and the most massive structural reforms since the 1950s, if anything, these general assessments have become more acute during Xi's tenure, particularly concerning the state of leadership at the operational level. The totality of these criticisms implies a persistent lack of confidence in PLA capabilities and a failure of the PLA's educational and training systems to prepare commanders and staff officers for future war. Therefore, the senior Chinese military leadership demonstrates little or no appetite to immerse the PLA into the cauldron of actual combat, preferring to achieve China's national objectives through deterrence and actions short of war conducted by a combination of civilian, government, paramilitary, and military forces.

Based on their own timeline, the PLA leadership would prefer to continue experimentation and systems trouble-shooting until 2035 when modernization is scheduled to be completed. It will then use the following decade to perfect its skills to become a world-class military. However, as predicted by the action-reaction cycle inherent in the PLA's active defense guideline, should deterrence fail and the PLA is compelled to fight, its leadership will respond with the capabilities at hand, combining the old with the new, high-technology with low-technology, and integrating military and civilian assets, to defend China's sovereignty, territorial claims, and national interests.

In or around the year 2020, Xi likely will announce "success" or "substantial completion" of the recent reforms and force reduction. Nonetheless, in the decade that follows more changes will be necessary as the PLA discovers unforeseen problems in the new organizational structure and as new technologies move from the drawing board and testing into the force. For example, the Army may find that its new group armies, combined arms brigades, and combined arms battalions have been assigned too many organic units, resulting in a span of control problem for their headquarters. In response, these units may quietly adjust their structures, as occurred throughout the first decade of this century after the PLA completed 500,000 and 200,000-man reductions. At the same time, as advanced weapons and technologies are added to the force, doctrine and fighting methods will have to be adapted to take advantage of these new capabilities, requiring further experimentation on the training field.<sup>62</sup>

The shortcomings in today's PLA commanders and staffs represent multiple systemic failures to execute Jiang Zemin's guidance from two decades ago that "we must train qualified personnel first, for we would rather let qualified personnel wait for equipment than equipment wait for qualified personnel" (宁肯让人才等装备,也不能让装备等人才).<sup>63</sup> Xi Jinping's "Five Incapables" highlight this specific problem and target it in the long-term through changes in recruitment policies, officer and NCO education, and unit training, with the near-term objective of raising overall combat readiness. As the commandant of the Air Force Command Academy stressed, it will be necessary for other PLA universities, academies, and institutes to update their curriculum as soon as possible and not simply focus on reorganizing the administrative structure of the military education system.

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61 Conclusion based on the manner in which many formulations are attributed directly to the CMC chairman or are prefaced by words like Xi "has incisively pointed out."

62 Traditionally the PLA describes the interaction between technology and doctrine as "technology determines tactics" (技术决定战术), but is trying to increase the role of doctrine on developing technologies.

63 "Studying Jiang Zemin's 'On Science and Technology,'" *Yangcheng Wanbao*, February 13, 2001.

The PLA training regimen is likely to undergo additional reforms in the annual training cycle and how new soldiers are trained. Even with recruitment concentrating on attracting more college students and graduates to join the force voluntarily, the current method by which two-year conscripts and volunteers are trained and enter units limits the level of readiness and combat capabilities manpower-heavy units, like the infantry, artillery, airborne, and marines, can attain in a single training cycle. Many small unit commanders probably can relate to the experiences in the 1993 movie “Groundhog Day.”

Currently, though the services conduct some amount of joint and large-scale combined arms training, based on analysis of media (especially television) reporting, most training is focused on developing individual skills (in headquarters and units) and small unit (up to battalion-level) proficiency training. Foreign attention to this low-level training has been distracted by the PLA’s participation in numerous international and internal military skills competitions and training with foreign militaries in recent years, which, despite the hoopla, also emphasize individual and small unit tasks.<sup>64</sup> As the building blocks of larger operations, small units must be technically and tactically competent before the new joint and service headquarters can plan, execute, synchronize, and sustain larger, extended, more complex joint and combined arms operations. In this period through 2020, the PLA’s focus on building individual and small unit skills is both necessary and rational, reflecting its long-term, deliberate approach to modernization. This is applicable particularly to both reorganized units and recently created units, like the Air Force’s H-6K regiments.

There is no doubt that the PLA of 2019 has made tremendous *absolute* progress in its own capabilities and readiness from two decades ago. However, when Chinese leaders state there is a gap of “at least two to three decades” between their capabilities and those of advanced militaries, they over-simplify the actual situation. *Relatively speaking*, in certain areas, such as some categories of ballistic and cruise missiles, air defense, electronic warfare, and cyber capabilities, the PLA ranks among the world’s leaders. However, in many other battlefield functions, the PLA trails advanced militaries by one to multiple decades of experience. These include battalion-level combined arms, close air support, air assault (helicopter), and large-scale joint operations; aircraft carrier, long-range sea-based air defense, and advanced anti-submarine warfare operations; stealth, armed unmanned aerial vehicle, long-distance over-water air, and large-scale dissimilar aircraft operations. In all (or nearly all) of these functions and technologies, the PLA is in the experimental stage of developing the organizational structure, doctrine, and training to integrate these capabilities into systems-of-systems operations. Barring the party’s leadership decision that an imminent threat to China’s national interest requires a major military response, and given the PLA’s publicly announced timeline for modernization, completing the various operational experiments underway is intended to be a multi-decade, generational process.

Recommendations: Though the PLA’s self-assessments of its own shortcomings are subjective in nature, they need to be incorporated into objective foreign analyses of China’s military capabilities

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<sup>64</sup> The most significant exception to this trend was “Vostok-2018,” in which approximately 3,200 Chinese personnel (about half the manpower of a single combined arms brigade) were dispatched to Russia. This joint PLA contingent was comprised of elements of three brigades from two group armies and six fighter-bombers from the Air Force. Most PLA exercises with foreign militaries involve about a dozen to a few hundred personnel.

and intentions.<sup>65</sup> Doing so necessitates examining both the PLA's absolute progress in capabilities over the years and its relative progress when measured against the ever-changing capabilities of China's potential enemies. If the PLA's own evaluations of its capabilities are balanced against the impact of new weapons entering the force, the timeframe estimated for when the PLA is to become a peer competitor with the United States military may change. Based on publicly-available Chinese assessments, it is extremely difficult to support the U.S. National Defense Strategy's assertion that China is conducting a "a military modernization program that seeks *Indo-Pacific* regional hegemony *in the near-term*."<sup>66</sup> (Emphasis added) If that perceived intention is incorrect, it is possible the United States government has not accurately judged some of China's other regional and global intentions.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, given the long-term strategy for PLA modernization, the United States and its friends in Asia should undertake comprehensive, inter-agency decision-making analyses, potentially including international consultation, before implementing policies or actions that cause the Chinese leadership to increase the pace of military modernization or justify its use lethal military force. Without actual combat experience proving (or disproving) the effectiveness of the PLA's new weapons systems and force structure, some degree of uncertainty in the senior Chinese leadership's collective mind likely will exist for many years and may serve as a brake to moving from "assertiveness" to overt military aggression.

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<sup>65</sup> Both Roger Cliff's *China's Military Power: Assessing Current and Future Capabilities* and RAND's Michael Chase, *et al*, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation* should be commended for including the subjective factors of doctrine, equipment, personnel, and training into their analysis.

<sup>66</sup> "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America," <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Heer, "Rethinking U.S. Primacy in East Asia," National Interest, January 8, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/rethinking-us-primacy-east-asia-40972>, states the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy currently mischaracterize China's strategic intentions in the region.



**Table 1. Summary of Problems Identified by General Assessments**

	Lack of Warfighting Capabilities	Problems with Combat Leadership	Questions the PLA's Political Reliability
Two Incompatibles	X		
Two Inabilities	X	X	
Two Big Gaps	X		
Three Whethers	X	X	X
Five Incapables		X	

Two Incompatibles: The PLA's level of modernization 1) does not meet the requirements of winning local war under informatized conditions and 2) its military capability does not meet the requirements of carrying out its historic missions at the new stage of the new century.

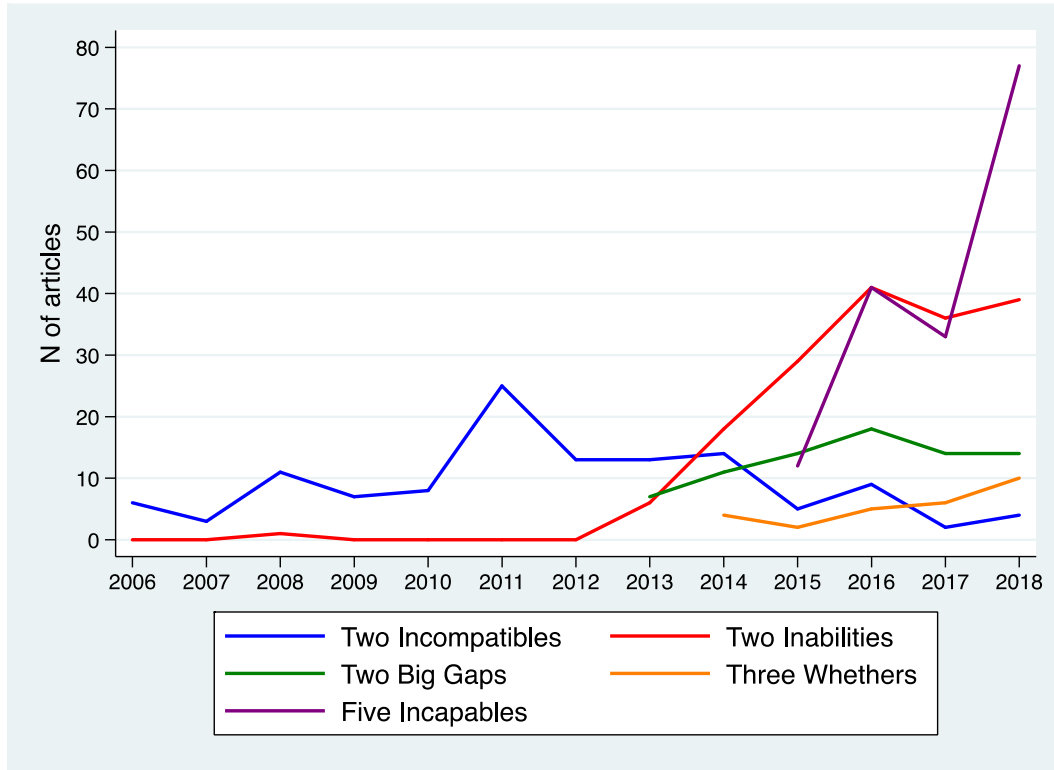
Two Inabilities: The PLA's ability 1) to fight a modern war is not sufficient and 2) the ability of cadres (officers) at all levels to command modern war is insufficient.

Two Big Gaps: There are big gaps between the PLA's military modernization level and 1) the requirements for national security and 2) compared to the level of the world's advanced militaries.

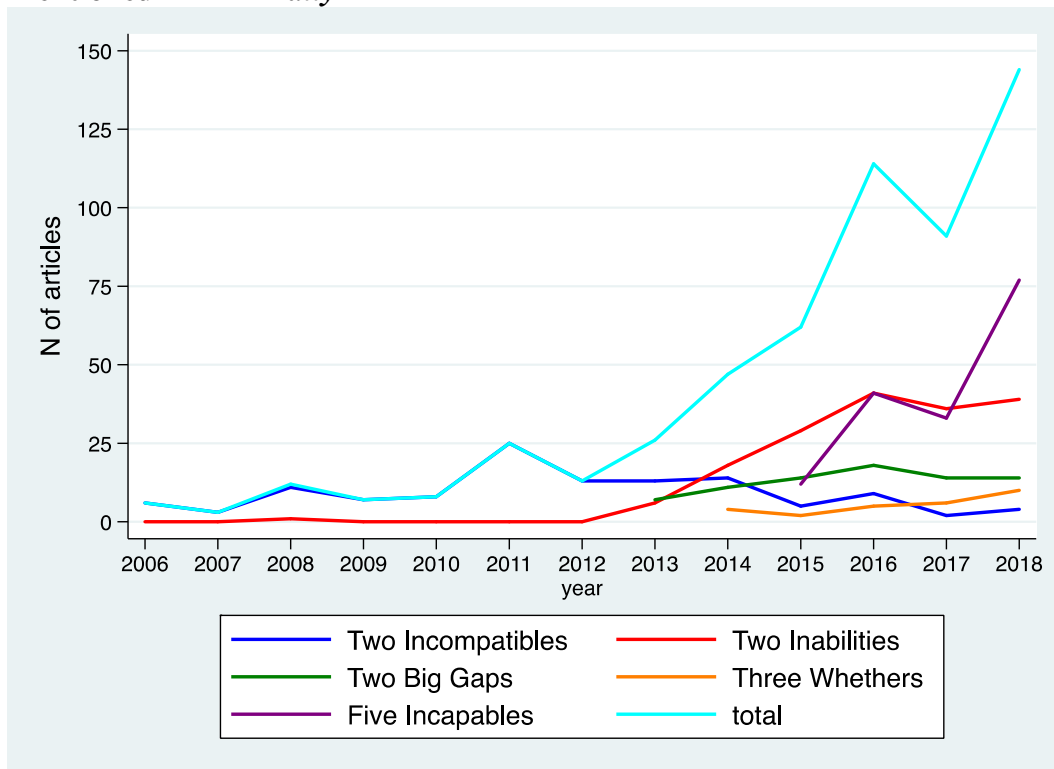
Three Whethers: 1) Whether our armed forces can constantly maintain the party's absolute leadership, 2) whether they can fight victoriously when needed by the party and the people, and 3) whether commanders at all levels are competent to lead forces and command in war.

Five Incapables: Some commanders cannot 1) judge the situation, 2) understand the intention of higher authorities, 3) make operational decisions, 4) deploy troops, and 5) deal with unexpected situations.

**Chart 1. Number of Articles in which Individual Self-Assessments Mentioned in *PLA Daily***



**Chart 2. Total Added to Number of Articles in which Individual Self-Assessments Mentioned in *PLA Daily***



Dr. Alastair Iain Johnston conducted this research and prepared the graphics above.