

Chinese Military Exercises Highlight Improvements in Joint Operations

By Peter Wood
OE Watch Commentary

China continues to improve the realism of its training through extensive use of Opposition Force (OPFOR) training.¹ The following excerpted articles describe the recent integration of PLA Airforce (PLAAF) opposition forces into PLA Army (PLAA) brigade training. In the first excerpt from the Chinese military news outlet *PLA Daily*, PLAAF advisers helped a PLA ground forces brigade improve its air defense training. The unnamed brigade leader notes that, for over a year, his unit has dispatched air defense personnel to PLAAF academies and technical schools to better absorb tactics and skills. In the full article, the reporter also noted the presence of PLAAF pilots and electronic countermeasures teams from an unnamed unit. This appears to be occurring across multiple theater commands. The second excerpted *PLA Daily* article describes joint training between other PLAAF and PLAA units in the Southern Theater Command that occurred in January 2023. More broadly, the PLA has also

Since the end of last year, the brigade selected target drone operators to study at PLAAF academies and training institutions, and also invited PLAAF pilots to explain flight modes and attack methods of various aircraft types to the air defenders to help them improve their combat skills.

embraced OPFOR training as a means to rapidly improve home station training at lower levels. A separate report in *PLA Daily* from March 2020, for example, indicated that at least some brigades in the Eastern Theater command were establishing dedicated OPFOR platoons in each battalion to enhance realism in training as well as the tempo with which they could conduct training.²



J-10B

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/92/19.08.21_J10B_1200_7.jpg Attribution: Mil.ru, CC BY 4.0

Continued: Chinese Military Exercises Highlight Improvements in Joint Operations

Source: Tong Zujing (童祖静), Sheng Yangdi (盛洋迪), Jiangwu Jingwen (江吴靖文吴靖文); “陆军演兵场迎来空中‘联合蓝军’ (PLAA Exercise Area Welcomes ‘Joint OPFOR’),” *PLA Daily* [解放军报] (Official Newspaper of the Chinese military), 9 February 2023. <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2023/02-09/9950203.shtml>

A brigade of the 72nd Group Army and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) cooperated to innovate, adopting a new approach to confrontation training, improve joint interoperability training and preparation for war...The brigade leader explained that since the end of last year, they selected target drone operators to study at PLAAF academies and training institutions, and also invited PLAAF pilots to explain flight modes and attack methods of various aircraft types to the air defenders to help them improve their combat skills.

The addition of a “Joint OPFOR” to the training area introduced essential elements of Air Force penetration and assault operations into the brigade’s target drone flight training.³ The new training included different regions, mission profiles, and opponents using optimized flight routes and altitudes, along with operations in new domains and jamming helped force the brigades’ air defense units to improve their tactics.

Nie Dongfang, the acting squad leader of the brigade's target support squad, together with several Air Force pilots, focused on conducting flight effectiveness tests and demonstrations on the operational use of target drones in different scenarios and under different target conditions. The reporter also learned that they have carried out strenuous flight training many times in complex conditions such as the Gobi Desert, jungle covered mountain areas, etc...The brigade’s leader said that they will coordinate and absorb more joint elements into training, planning and design, and explore the creation of a regular confrontation drill mechanism. This will improve military training help shift attitudes toward training against a powerful opponent.

Source: Chen Dianhong (陈典宏), Ye Xingguo (叶星国), Feng Dengya (冯邓亚); “陆空对抗锤炼实战本领 (Land-Air confrontation tempers actual combat skills China Military Online),” *China Military Online/PLA Daily* (PRC official military media outlets), 28 January 2023. <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0128/c1011-32613112.html>

In the middle of the night, the air defense sirens sounded suddenly, and an unnamed Air Force unit playing the role of the “Blue Army” (OPFOR) took advantage of the night to launch a surprise attack on the brigade’s air defense position. In the command vehicle, battalion commander Li Chuan [李川] responded calmly and quickly deployed his force. Personnel immediately rushed to positions to build an emergency communications and command network, sending commands through the integrated command platform in real time. The surface-to-air missile group, anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) group, and MANPAD group quickly formed up and waited for the “enemy” aircraft.

“A knife doesn’t sharpen quickly, a soldier doesn’t practice well alone, and an opponent is the best whetstone” Li Chuan told reporters, pointing at the radar screen. We should continue carrying out exchanges, setting up difficult tasks for each other to sharpen skills, make up for gaps in each other’s abilities and establishing set up growth strategies for each other’s difficulties, accelerate the transformation and upgrading of military training, and improve the level of actual combat training.

The radar screen showed that multiple groups of “enemy” planes were rapidly approaching, attempting to attack important targets of the “Red force.” Xin Chengcheng, a radar technician, calmly operated the system, firmly locking onto the target. Suddenly, the simulated enemy aircraft disappeared from the screen. Analyzing the situation on the battlefield, Li Chuan judged that the “enemy” aircraft was penetrating at an ultra-low altitude,

continue on 5

Continued: Chinese Military Exercises Highlight Improvements in Joint Operations

Source Continued: Chen Dianhong (陈典宏), Ye Xingguo (叶星国), Feng Dengya (冯邓亚); “陆空对抗锤炼实战本领 (Land-Air confrontation tempers actual combat skills China Military Online),” *China Military Online/PLA Daily* (PRC official military media outlets), 28 January 2023. <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0128/c1011-32613112.html>

and then ordered adjustments to the systems' search range.

Soon, the close-air blind-filling radar identified the low-flying target, leaving only five seconds to engage. Li Chuan decisively gave the command to shoot. Seconds later the point on the screen disappeared with the targets successfully destroyed.

“Get ready for the ‘Blue Army’ to attack again!” called Li Chuan as he issued a new order. He told reporters that in recent years, the amount and intensity of real combat training for troops has increased, including during poor weather conditions. Extended training under extreme conditions and through the night are now carried out on a regular basis.

....

After several hours the land-air confrontation exercise, came to an end as dawn's light crept up from the east. There was no time to rest, and the red and blue teams conducted an after action review of problems revealed by the drill.

Notes:

[1] In PLA parlance, the Red Team represents Chinese forces while the Blue Team is the opposing force.

[2] “Setting up ‘OPFOR’ platoons in each combined arms battalion to enhance confrontation exercises (在各合成营组建“蓝军”排, 增强演练对抗性),” *PLA Daily*, 9 March 2020. http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-03/09/content_9763188.htm

[3] The term used here, 极限飞行训练, which might also be translated as “flight training testing limits,” appears to refer to extended training covering long periods or multiple days, including day and night operations and during poor weather conditions.