



## “New Type” PLA Units Emphasize Mobility, Joint Operations

**OE Watch Commentary:** Since 2016 the PLA has undertaken significant reforms that changed both top-level command “Neck and Above” [脖子以上] and “Below the Neck” [脖子以下]. While the higher-level reforms have fundamentally changed how the PLA operates by transferring many functions to a new joint command structure, the “Below the Neck Reforms” are similarly radical. Most division-level infantry units have been changed to combined arms brigades. Army aviation has also seen significant changes with regiments set up to support each group army and expanded to brigades. For units like the one mentioned in the accompanying excerpted article from *China Daily*, another major shift has been the shift from traditional motorized role to mechanized warfare.

Units in the Northern Theater Command have responsibility for guarding the borders with Mongolia, Russia and North Korea. The four provinces that make up the Northern Theater Command together have a population of roughly 130 million. For much of China’s modern history, PLA units were arrayed in such a way that they would fall back toward Beijing against the then-expected Soviet advance from the Northeast and North. While the politics on its borders have changed, the geography of this vast frontier has not, and in this space, modern concepts of firepower and maneuver are taking shape. The PLA has embraced a concept of networked, mobile warfare. The entire PLA has been instructed to “basically complete” mechanization [机械化] by 2020. This has included the rapid introduction of new equipment, which has caused problems as personnel are forced to get up to speed and develop tactical maintenance procedures.

Another unit, also based in Northeast China, under the 78th Group Army (formerly 16th Group Army based in Changchun, Jilin) was the first in the PLA to be reorganized as a combined arms battalion. The battalion has undertaken much more extensive joint training than in the past, particularly with the air force, integrating information from reconnaissance and calling on fire missions. Another new element of training is rapid deployment of their infantry fighting vehicles from transport aircraft. The PLA hopes to use these fast response elements in conjunction with heavier mechanized units to give it greater firepower and maneuverability than ever before. **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**

*“The new troop is compact, nimble and fast, meeting the demands of modern warfare... Compared with the commonplace motorized infantry that’s strong in defense, with heavy-duty weapons, the new battalion is capable of slashing the opponents’ weak spot like a sharp sword and tearing apart their defense.”*

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ZBD-04A步兵战车” (ZBD-04A Infantry Fighting Vehicle).

Source: By Tyg728, CC-BY-SA-4.0 7 16 July 2017. [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/ZBD-04A\\_IFV\\_20170716.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/ZBD-04A_IFV_20170716.jpg).

**Source:** “PLA battalion transforms into nimble fighting force,” *China Daily*, 15 August, 2018. [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-08/15/content\\_9253242.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-08/15/content_9253242.htm)

*An infantry battalion of the People’s Liberation Army Ground Force has been honing its ability to move quickly and efficiently for about four years in northeastern China to forge a new fighting force that is highly mobile and lightly armored. On July 27, during a military exercise simulating rapid deployment, the battalion dispersed into smaller groups, on full combat alert and under camouflage, in just a few minutes...The battalion, based in the northeast, was designated on Aug 1, 2014, as a new type of unit dedicated to experimenting with command structures and a suite of brand-new infantry fighting equipment including assault vehicles, drones and electronic reconnaissance devices. Officers from the battalion said that over the past four years it has greatly improved its combat capability compared with conventional infantry units. It has also added to its arsenal of precision attack weapons and strengthened its counter-strike capability, they said. The soldiers are now improving their skills in live-fire combat drills.*