



The PLA Army Tests Its Special Forces Capabilities

OE Watch Commentary: The PLA Army has conducted its first comprehensive assessment of its special forces capabilities. The exercise “Ingenious Special Operations Soldier-2018” [“特战奇兵—2018”], reported on in the accompanying excerpted article from *Xinhua*, tested all levels of command, including brigade, battalion, company, element and squad levels. While media coverage of the exercise emphasized tests of special forces skills, such as fast-roping from helicopters, night operations and sniper attacks, the underlying point of the exercise is likely to be the test of command capabilities.

As the PLA has undergone major reorganization since 2015, the upper echelon in charge of the PLA Army Special Forces (ground forces; 陆军) appears to have shifted as well. An interview in 2011 during a China-Pakistan joint counter-terror training exercise featured Senior Colonel Sun Congjun [孙从军], whose position was listed as head of the Special Forces Bureau [特种作战局] under the General Staff Department’s Operations Department [参谋部作战部]. This organization, which previously used the PLA Army structure as the basis for the rest of the PLA, was restructured in 2015 to make it a joint command. At the time of writing it is unclear if the Special Forces Bureau has been shifted to the new joint structure. However, the comprehensive operations and command assessment appears to be a test of a new system.

China’s first army special forces units were first set up in the 1990s. Additional units have continued to be stood up, with the other services of the PLA establishing SOF units with specialized skills sets throughout the 2000s. Each of China’s PLA Group Armies [集团军]—the largest formation below the five Theater Commands—appear to have an associated SOF brigade or regiment. Increasing realism in training, and particularly the creation of PLA Aviation Brigades that provide SOF brigades with organic vertical lift, are important steps in creating an operationally useful force. As assessments of the exercise “Ingenious Special Operations Soldier-2018” are published or future iterations of the exercise take place, the PLA’s progress in implementing the new command structure should become more clear. **End OE Watch Commentary (Wood)**



People's Liberation Army Special Forces Insignia.
Source: By Peter Wood.

“The assessment and competition emphasized real combat training, included all active special forces brigades, all battalion and company commanders, and all operational elements [分队].”

Source: “陆军首次组织特种作战部队考核比武 (PLA Army conducts first assessment of its special operations forces), *Xinhua*, 16 July, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-07/16/c_129914444.htm

The contest focused on testing the commanding headquarters’ ability to plan and use special operations forces effectively, SOF elements [分队] commanders’ ability to command special operations, SOF squads’ ability to conduct operations, and individuals’ stamina, skills, and intelligence.

Organized by the PLA Army, the test is the first of its kind for the PLA Army’s special operations forces since the PLA’s reorganization in 2015. The assessment is meant to select and train the best SOF soldiers and discover problems with China’s Special Forces during its development.