

# Comments on the Implementation of the PLA's "New Soldier System"

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Topic: PLA

## 1. News Highlights

The recently implemented reform of the PLA soldier system has been publicized by the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in a Q&A with reporters in the April 25, 2022, issue of the *PLA Daily*.<sup>1</sup> The laws and regulations amended in the reform of the soldier system announced by the CCP are mainly the "Provisional Regulations for Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs)" and the "Provisional Regulations for Compulsory Soldiers," complemented by the "Provisional Regulations for the

Management of the Career Development of NCOs," the "Provisional Regulations for the Retirement of Soldiers," the "Notice on Issues Related to the Transition of the Reform of the Soldier System," the "Provisional Regulations for the Recruitment of NCOs," the "Regulations on Conscription Work," and the "Regulations on the Resettlement of Retired Soldiers." These regulations include the assured improvement of compensation, retirement system, classification of NCOs, military training, service tenures, the transition from conscripts to NCOs, and the amendment of the military ranking system.<sup>2</sup> Despite the limited information released by the

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1. "Strive to Create a New Soldier Team for the New Era," *PLA Daily*, April 25, 2022, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-04/25/content\\_314349.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-04/25/content_314349.htm).

2. The voluntary military service of the PLA was formerly known as sergeants but was renamed to NCOs, with the lowest rank of corporal, after this amendment. In this article, they are generally referred to as NCOs.



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PLA, the reform of the soldier system may have an impact on the PLA's recruitment, the status of its soldiers, and even the quality of the troops and their ability to fight. Therefore, it is worth discussing further.

### 2. Security Implications

#### 2-1. System reform aims to improve quality and quantity of voluntary soldiers

The CCP has its own set of official words about the meaning of this reform.<sup>3</sup> At the structural level, the CCP's amended Military Service Law in 2021, changed from "a military service system

that combines compulsory and voluntary service as well as militia and reserve service" to "a military service system that combines voluntary service with compulsory service, with voluntary service as the backbone."<sup>4</sup> In practice, due to a large number of draftees available in China, even for compulsory service, conscripts can first apply for voluntary enlisting after military service registration; the rest will be notified later if there are some unfilled positions. With the adjustment of the military service law, China has switched to a system consisting mainly of volunteers; as such, how to effectively improve the quality and quantity of volunteers has become the major concern of the soldier system

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3. The CCP believes that the primary significance of the soldier system reform is: 1. to carry out Xi Jinping's remarks on talents, such as encouraging college students to enlist and enhancing the professionalism of the PLA; 2. to accelerate the recruitment of talents and cultivate skilled military personnel for enhanced combat effectiveness; 3. to carry out the system design of recruitment, training, assessment, promotion, transfer, discharge, and benefits for the modernization of military personnel; 4. to change the management concept and methodologies that emphasize on fairness, justice, and optimism to enhance the quality of development and management. As Miao Hua, Director of the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission, said of "the great significance of the new soldier system," "... Enhancing the capability and quality of combat-ready soldiers, building an army of skilled artisanal talents, and strengthening the professional reliability of NCOs... To promote quality development of the troops." For more details, see "New Soldier System is Implemented for Mobilization Deployment in Beijing, Miao Hua Attends and Speaks," *PLA Daily*, April 27, 2022, [http://www.81.cn/jw/2022-04/27/content\\_10151947.htm](http://www.81.cn/jw/2022-04/27/content_10151947.htm).

4. The CCP military service system has evolved from a conscription system under the 1955 "Military Service Law" to a mixed system dominated by compulsory service in 1984. Later, it became a system combining compulsory and voluntary service in addition to a combined militia and reserve service under the 1998 amended "Military Service Law" (the section was not changed in the 2009 amendment). Over the years, there was a gradual transition from conscription to a primarily volunteer-based system.

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reform. In particular, the CCP recognizes the current problems of "career instability, insufficient professional expertise, and lack of a sense of professionalism" among low-rank soldiers.<sup>5</sup> In response to the situation, the reform addresses the amendment of the military ranking system (see Table 1) and subjects such as distinguishing NCOs and those assigned to management duties, the extension of the service tenure, enlisting channel optimization, promotion, examination, guaranteed compensation, and resettlement after retirement have also been taken care of. These solutions all focus on increasing the incentives for talents with professional expertise to join the military and providing complete career planning and protection (shown in Table 2) to ease the above concerns.

## 2-2. CCP relaxed rules to alleviate shortage of professional soldiers

Although the PLA has long since

moved away from merely replenishing the troops, the "precision conscription" of the past few years may have been less effective than expected or still insufficient, leading the CCP to make adjustments to address the shortage of professional soldiers.<sup>6</sup> For example, the regulation once stipulated that only university graduates joining the voluntary service could be promoted in advance, such as starting as a sergeant, according to their professional skills. In this reform, re-enlisted soldiers are also allowed to be promoted in advance according to their expertise.<sup>7</sup> Also, a compulsory conscript can usually switch to voluntary after the two-year service. This reform especially relaxes the length allowed for compulsories turned volunteers. Conscripts with outstanding service records can be early promoted to sergeants within two years to increase the incentive for compulsory soldiers to switch to voluntary. In addition, the reform relaxes the standard of service

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5. "Strive to Create a New Soldier Team for the New Era," *PLA Daily*, April 25, 2022, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-04/25/content\\_314349.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-04/25/content_314349.htm).

6. For the connotation of "precision conscription," see Tzu-Chieh Hung, "Recent Changes in the PLA's Recruitment Methods from the 'Shandong Model'," *National Defense and Security Weekly*, No. 18 (October 2018), pp. 1-4.

7. The PLA has a set of standards for soldiers' professionalism. For example, junior, intermediate, and senior NCOs are required to possess entry-level, intermediate, and higher technician levels, respectively. The certificate of the relevant skill level is combined with the Chinese National Vocational Qualification Certificate.

extension for highly professional middle and senior NCOs (Staff Sergeant Second Class or above). It abolishes the "promotion or retirement" rule after four years of service in the rank. This change allows the middle and senior NCOs to continue service until the maximum number of years in the rank and still have the opportunity of promotion in the future. While this is ostensibly aimed at retaining soldiers with professional skills, in reality, such adjustments may be related to the impact of the CCP's implementation of the newly revised "Regulations on the Identification of Vocational Skills of Active-Duty Soldiers in the PLA" in 2017. The regulation combines the levels of professional certifications with promotion, resulting in the NCOs who cannot obtain a higher level of such certifications in time being excluded from promotions or even forced to discharge.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Trend Observation

#### 3-1. Hidden dangers in new soldier system

The CCP's "combining voluntary service with compulsory service, with voluntary service as the backbone" military system has the advantage of cultivating experienced, highly professional soldiers through voluntary service while increasing the personnel renewal rate and the number of reservists through the two-year compulsory service.<sup>9</sup> Due to CCP's emphasis on voluntary service, the number of NCOs has continued to increase over the years. For example, the 2009 "Reform Plan for Deepening the Non-Commissioned Officer System" objective was to increase the number of NCOs from 800,000 to 900,000. As the proportion of PLA NCOs has long exceeded 50%, the junior NCOs have become the mainstay of combats.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, for the volunteers in the PLA, the establishment of mid-level NCOs is relatively small, and it is difficult for junior NCOs to be promoted to mid-

8. "Authority Interview: All NCO Professions are Included in the Scope of Vocational Skill Certifications," *People's Daily Online*, April 14, 2017, <http://military.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2017/0414/c1011-29210456.html>.

9. Heming Wang, "Analysis of the Trend and Benefits of the Transformation of China's Military Service System," *Law and Society*, Vol. 13, June 2021, pp. 103-104.

10. Zhiming Deng, Minghe Wang, and Chenxiao He, "A Study of Methods to Enhance the Innovative Quality of NCOs Based on Orientation Training," *Military-to-civilian Conversion in China*, Vol. 15, August 2021, pp. 51-53.

level ones. Due to the excessive turnover of NCOs from the high elimination rate, the 2009 "Reform Plan for Deepening the Non-Commissioned Officer System" changed the NCO ratio in the military structure to prevent unnecessary elimination. The reform changed the "promotion or retirement" rule for senior and mid-level NCOs and added the incentive for mid-level NCOs to receive monthly pensions. It will thus become more difficult for NCOs to be promoted to Staff Sergeant Second Class and high-level NCOs if the number of positions remains the same or is slightly increased.<sup>11</sup>

The insufficient supply of NCO positions and the new system that allows "the establishment of priority promotion, early promotion and over-promotion system for NCOs" are causing difficulties in the promotions. There could be even dissatisfaction and personnel competition among the lower-rank NCOs if the promotion standard or implementation is less than fair and impartial. In addition, although the CCP has abolished the "promotion or retirement" rule for senior and middle-ranking NCOs and increased

the monthly pension for middle-ranking NCOs, the reform has only regulated the guaranteed compensation for soldiers in principle. That means the actual number of wages, allowances, medical treatment, and orphans' pensions are yet to be confirmed until the subsequent regulations are finalized. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the increase in compensation can attract professionals to join the PLA for improved competitiveness.

### **3-2. Transition period before implementation of new system**

The reform specifically mentions "general considerations for the transition of the reformed soldier system," which emphasizes the importance of: "maintaining a smooth transition through considerations of the changes in the old and new policies and systems, analyses of potential contradictions and policy risks, identification of the right balance in the transition, formulation of reasonable qualifications and conditions for job posts, setting adjustment policies for recognition of training history and service management, and shortening the

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<sup>11</sup> There is currently no information on the overall increase in the number of middle and senior NCOs, but only a few additions have been made.

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transition period as much as possible" along with "principally not to be carried out a soldier's transfer and handover before the completion of the transition."<sup>12</sup> In other words, the PLA's such planning is not yet complete. For example, the reform specifically mentions the distinction of NCOs into "management NCOs" and "skilled NCOs" concerning the compatibility of duties and their specialties. The meaning is to define in detail what professional skills are required for each rank and post and that no one can occupy the position without

obtaining a certificate of such professional skills. Except for some NCOs in certain positions who may not already have possessed the relevant certificates due to the new system, the adjustments are substantially connected with the NCOs' benefits, such as the salary associated with the ranks of duties (professional skills). As the compensation details are yet to be completely established, although the new system has become effective as of March 31, 2022, it would still take some time before full implementation.

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12. "Strive to Create a New Soldier Team for the New Era," *PLA Daily*, April 25, 2022, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-04/25/content\\_314349.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-04/25/content_314349.htm).



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**Table 1. Comparison of the PLA soldier ranks before and after the amendment**

New System		Old System	
Compulsory Soldiers	Private	Compulsory Soldiers	Private
	Private First Class		Private First Class
Junior Sergeant	Corporal	Junior NCO	Corporal
	Sergeant		Sergeant
Mid-class NCO	Staff Sergeant Second Class	Mid-class NCO	Staff Sergeant
	Staff Sergeant First Class		Sergeant Major Fourth Class
Senior NCO	Sergeant Major Third Class	Senior NCO	Sergeant Major Third Class
	Sergeant Major Second Class		Sergeant Major Second Class
	Sergeant Major First Class		Sergeant Major Second Class

Source: compiled by Tzu-Chieh Hung from "Strive to Create a New Soldier Team for the New Era," *PLA Daily*, April 25, 2022, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-04/25/content\\_314349.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-04/25/content_314349.htm).

**Table 2. Highlights of the new soldier system adjustments**

Items	Description
<p>NCO Classification and Management System</p>	<p>First, according to the duties and responsibilities of the post and the nature of the work, NCOs are divided into two categories: management NCOs and skilled NCOs. Second, to improve the post establishment ranking system. The ranking of each post is differentiated, and the size and structure of the NCO staff are reasonably adjusted. Third, to establish a qualification system for assigning positions. Clarify the criteria for assignment based on the classification and management of NCOs and soldiers and achieve flexible unity between the needs of the positions and the selection of candidates.</p>
<p>Sources of new NCOs</p>	<p>The new selection system allows outstanding compulsory soldiers to be selected for early promotion to NCOs. In terms of local recruitment, there are three types of recruitment for NCOs: direct recruitment, targeted cultivation, and special recruitment through the set recruitment criteria. On the other hand, the military academies are exploring new ways of selecting and recruiting NCO cadets from high school graduates to expand the talent source and optimize the personnel quality.</p>
<p>Mechanism to discover outstanding NCO candidates</p>	<p>First, the new mechanism replaces the current model of training NCO cadets at a fixed pace and time. Continuing the existing practice that university graduate soldiers and enlisted NCOs can be assigned a higher rank, re-enlisted soldiers are also included. Second, the service tenure is extended for middle and senior NCOs. The new system appropriately extends the length of service of middle and senior NCOs with the flexible "4+X" service structure. Third, the promotion opportunities are increased. With the original "promotion or retirement" principle, the middle and senior NCOs have only one chance of promotion after four years of service; in the new system, they will be given promotion chances every year before reaching the maximum service tenure of their ranks. Fourth, a system for priority promotion, early promotion, and over-promotion of NCOs is established. NCOs who had combat experience, carried out major missions, received citations and commendations, and have excellent assessment results will be given higher priority for promotion.</p>





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<p>NCO Training System</p>	<p>The training of NCOs has been adjusted and optimized into three types: pre-selection training, promotion training, and in-service training. In the training of NCOs, a “dual certification” model is implemented, in which NCOs are required to obtain not only an academic diploma but also a vocational qualification certificate or a vocational skill level certificate. The training channels are broadened as well. NCO training is carried out in local colleges and universities, scientific research institutions, equipment production units, and other businesses to form a training model of in-depth military and civilian integration and complementary resources.</p>
<p>NCO Assessment System</p>	<p>First, the form of organizing assessments is optimized. The new system establishes an appraisal procedure with regular appraisals as the basis, annual appraisals as the focus, and selection appraisals as important supplements. Second, adjustment of the assessment criteria setting. The assessment content and evaluation criteria are refined and improved to form a measurable and well-controlled implementation specification. Third, the application of assessment results is emphasized. The appraisal is closely linked to the selection and promotion of NCOs, their training and assignment, rewards and punishments, as well as their retirement and placement.</p>
<p>Adjustment of the Compulsory System</p>	<p>The new system is updated with the conscript status definition, conditions of priority supplement, and mechanisms for early promotion to NCOs. The systems of early promotion, assignment, training and assessment, and retirement from active service have also been optimized. Soldiers with verifiable higher academic diplomas or technical skills qualifications will be given priority for assignment to enhance the personnel quality at the source. In terms of assignments, a two-way selection system has been established to assign new recruits to certain posts. For selection for promotion, the new system specifies the conditions for early promotion to the private rank.</p>



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<p>System of Guaranteed Compensation for Soldiers</p>	<p>The two Regulations make it clear that soldiers are entitled to certain political, work, and living privileges in accordance with the law; and they also regulate, in principle, the wages and benefits, housing security, and medical insurance of NCOs in addition to allowances, healthcare, and pensions for conscripts. The specific privileges and security standards will be refined in the respective regulations.</p>
<p>Soldier Retirement and Placement System</p>	<p>The types of retirement are divided into expiring, regulated, and compulsory retirement. Based on expiring retirement, those not fit for further military service can retire in the year or at any time. A new way for NCOs to receive their monthly pension has been added. In addition to the four existing placement methods of job seeking, government-arranged work, retirement, and government support, a monthly retirement pension is added to the new system. Discharged junior NCOs can find jobs for themselves, middle-rank NCOs can opt for government-arranged employment and receive monthly benefits, while most senior NCOs just retire.</p>

Source: compiled by Tzu-Chieh Hung from “Strive to Create a New Soldier Team for the New Era,” *PLA Daily*, April 25, 2022, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-04/25/content\\_314349.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-04/25/content_314349.htm).

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