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PLA Army Political Officer System Presents Vulnerabilities

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Army political officers play a significant role in the command and control (C2) of PLA Army units. Political work exists at every echelon of the PLA Army and is led by a political officer at the company and higher echelons. PLA Army political officers are responsible for ensuring unit adherence to the party, soldier morale, discipline, and well-being, as well as executing China's three warfares. PLA Army commanders and political officers share responsibility under the dual-leadership system, ensuring military operations are aligned with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) directives. This system varies greatly from the U.S. Army command structure, which places more focus on individual command responsibility. The PLA Army system provides it with ideological cohesion, unified purpose, accountability, and rapid responses to soldier issues. However, the PLA Army system also has weaknesses the U.S. Army could exploit by targeting its unity of command and C2.

POLITICAL STRUCTURE IN THE PLA ARMY

The CCP uses a dual-leadership system within its military forces to ensure ideological control and loyalty to the Party. Inspired by the Soviet Red Army's political commissar model, the dual-leadership system emphasizes the integration of political ideology into military operations. The PLA Army institutionalized this concept into the political work system, which is designed to ensure the military remains subordinate to the CCP and adheres to its principles, policies, and directives.¹ This reinforces the CCP principle that "the Party commands the gun," and it remains a cornerstone of the PLA Army's organizational framework.²

Every echelon of the PLA Army contains some type of political work presence, which is formalized into positions and organizations depending on the echelon. The political organization generally consists of a political officer who is the leader, an administrative organization, and a party committee. The political officer, either a commissar or an instructor, oversees the political work of the unit. At higher echelons, the political officer is likely to also have a deputy. The party committees are the primary decisionmaking organizations in a PLA Army unit, making all major decisions for that unit.³

Echelon	Political Officer	Administrative Organization	Party Committee
Group Army	Political Commissar	Political Department	Party Committee
Brigade			
Battalion	Political Instructor	No Political Administrative Organization	Grassroots Party Committee
Company			Party Branch
Platoon	No Political Officer		Party Small Group

Figure 1: PLA Army Political Organization at Echelon

ROLE OF THE PLA ARMY POLITICAL OFFICER

*The political officer is not merely an adviser but a coleader, wielding significant influence over both the operational and personnel management aspects of the unit. They are military officers, not civilians, and are considered essential in maintaining the ideological purity of the PLA Army and ensuring that military actions are justified in the context of the Party's objectives.*⁴ Their primary responsibilities include:

- **Political Work Execution.** Political officers oversee unit political work and implement political work tasks assigned by higher headquarters. This includes the PLA's "three warfares" of psychological, information, and legal warfare.⁵
- **Political Education.** Political officers conduct ideological training and ensure that soldiers and officers understand and adhere to the Party's policies and values.⁶
- **Party Leadership.** Political officers serve as the secretary of the unit's party committee and oversee its activities.⁷
- **Morale and Discipline.** Political officers promote unity, morale, and discipline among troops, often acting as a mediator in conflicts or grievances. This includes approving promotions, meting out discipline, and arranging mental health and soldier well-being events.^{8, 9}
- **Decisionmaking.** Political officers share command authority with the military commander to ensure alignment with Party directives, particularly in terms of public perception and propaganda.¹⁰
- **Oversight.** Political officers monitor the actions of unit members, including the commander, to prevent deviations from Party policies or corruption and manage personnel files.¹¹

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PLA ARMY COMMANDER AND POLITICAL OFFICER

*The relationship between the PLA Army commander and political officer is defined by the dual-leadership system, which ensures that military operations are conducted in alignment with CCP directives. The commander is responsible for the tactical and operational aspects of the unit, while the political officer oversees ideological and political matters. Both roles are considered equal in authority, and major decisions require consensus between the two.*¹²

“Now, it’s become the norm for the brigade’s Party Committee to lead the charge in tackling key problems and for battalion commanders to spearhead combat training. Even company commanders must lead by example, ensuring that the results of the in-depth political rectification campaign are implemented at the grassroots level.”

—79th Group Army Company Commander to a PLA Daily Reporter¹³

This relationship is formalized through a system of checks and balances, where the political officer has the authority to influence decisionmaking processes, especially concerning personnel and morale issues. This is done through the party committee, in which the political officer serves as the secretary and the commander as the deputy secretary.¹⁴ All major decisions come to the party committee for a vote, and the commander and political officer are supposed to accept the vote of the committee as final.¹⁵ The PLA Army does allow for independent decisions to be made in exigent circumstances, either by the commander or political officer. However, these decisions must later be referred to the party committee for review and inspection.¹⁶

In a situation where the commander cannot perform his duties, it is likely military operational responsibility falls to either the political officer or the deputy commander. The personality and experiences of each officer are likely the deciding factors influencing which officer assumes command. The PLA Army expects its political officers to execute the combat roles of the commander and generally requires political officers to serve in platoon or company operational leadership positions before assuming their political role.¹⁷

The PLA Army political officer’s chain of command does not flow through the commander. Instead, it moves upward through the next higher command’s political officer. The political officer does not provide specific input into the operational commander’s evaluation.¹⁸ However, the political officer does report on the commander’s loyalty and adherence to CCP policies.

COMPARISON TO U.S. ARMY COMMAND MODEL

The PLA Army political officer system is fundamentally different than the U.S. Army's command structure, which gives commanders sole authority over their units. U.S. Army commanders operate within a “mission command” framework that emphasizes decentralized execution, with a focus on operational effectiveness, leadership, and trust in subordinates.¹⁹ While most Army commanders have senior noncommissioned officers, chaplains, legal advisers, and public affairs officers providing functional support, these roles do not share command authority.



	 U.S. Command Model	 PLA Army Command Model
Responsibility	Commander-centric	Dual-leadership commander-political officer
Rating Chain	Commander to commander	Commander to commander Political officer to political officer
Role	Commander is responsible for everything	Commander: tactics/operations Political officer: political work, morale, training, education, discipline
Plans	Staff developed, commander approved	Staff developed, party committee reviewed, party approval by political officer, final approval by commander
Promotions	SGT/1LT and below: commander SSG/CPT and above: Army central selection	Commander recommends, political officer and party committee approve

Figure 2: Comparison of U.S. and PLA Army Command Models

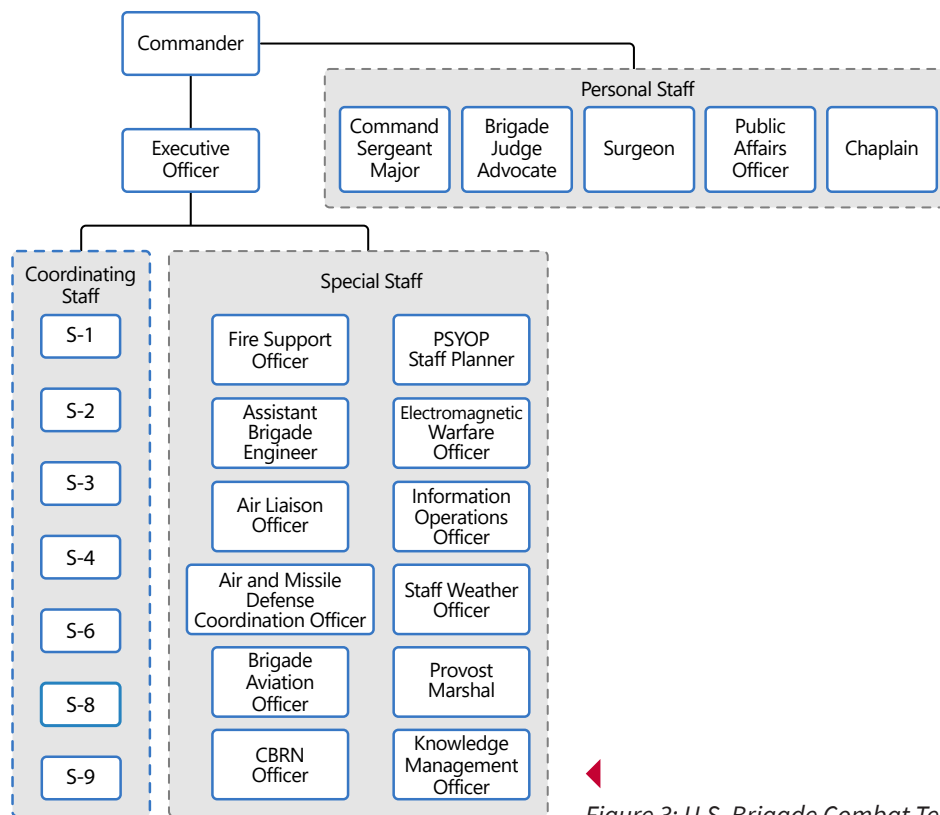
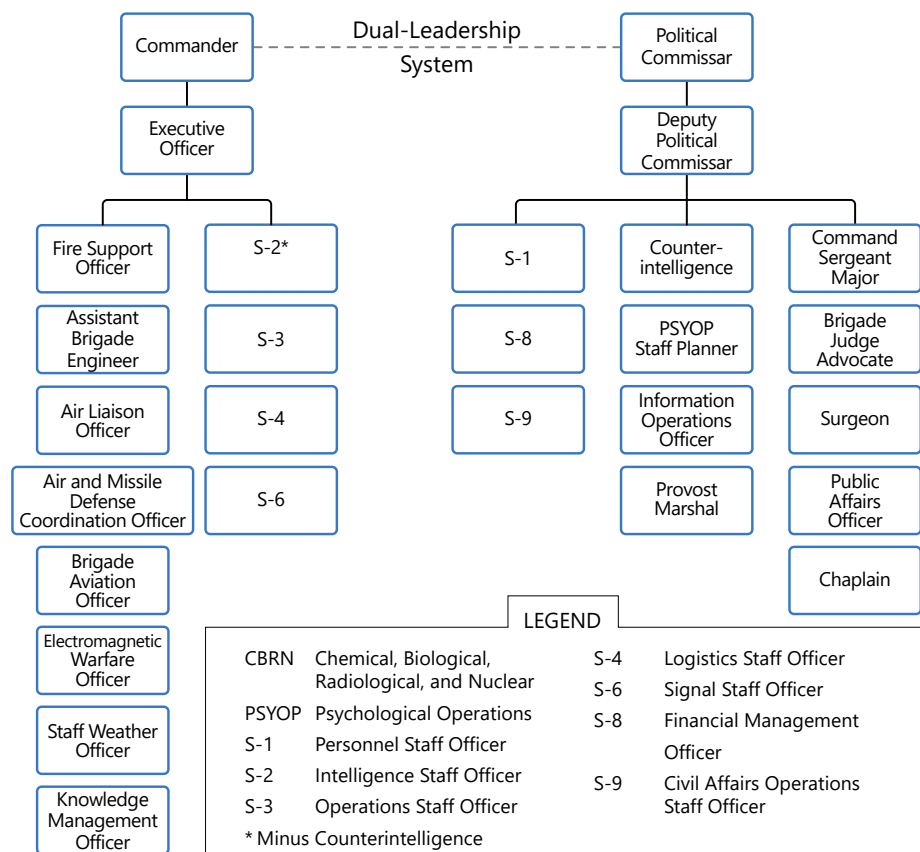


Figure 3: U.S. Brigade Combat Team (BCT) Doctrinal Staff Organization (Top) Compared to Notional U.S. BCT Organized According to the PLA Army Dual-Leadership System (Bottom)



STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE POLITICAL OFFICER SYSTEM

The PLA Army's dual-leadership system provides specific advantages in cohesion, unification, accountability, and soldier care to their C2 approach.

- **Ideological Cohesion.** The dual-leadership system ensures that the military remains loyal to the CCP and aligned with its policies, reducing the risk of insubordination or political dissent within the armed forces.
- **Unified Purpose.** By integrating political ideology into military operations, the system fosters a sense of unity and shared purpose among troops, which can enhance unit cohesion and morale.
- **Accountability.** The presence of a political officer provides an additional layer of oversight, reducing the likelihood of corruption or abuse of power by members of the unit.
- **Rapid Response to Soldier Issues.** Political officers can quickly identify and address morale or ideological issues among soldiers, allowing for timely interventions that can prevent dissent or unrest.

Despite its strengths, the dual-leadership system suffers from weaknesses centered on the relationship between the commander and political officer and loyalty to the CCP.

- **Operational Inefficiency.** The need for consensus between the commander and political officer, as well as approval from the party committee, can delay decisionmaking, particularly in fast-paced or high-stakes situations. The PLA Army does, however, have regulations in place to attempt to mitigate this weakness. It is also examining the use of artificial intelligence to streamline decisionmaking and improve C2.
- **Conflict of Authority.** Disagreements between the commander and political officer can lead to internal conflicts, undermining the effectiveness of the unit.
- **Overemphasis on Ideology.** The prioritization of political loyalty over professional military expertise can hinder the development of innovative strategies and tactics.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMY

The PLA Army's dual-leadership system reflects the CCP's emphasis on maintaining control over the military through ideological integration, fostering loyalty and cohesion but also presenting vulnerabilities in terms of its unity of command and C2.

- **Unit Cohesion.** Successfully attacking the PLA Army's unity of command would likely generate outsized results. A well-resourced, -planned, and -coordinated information and psychological operations campaign designed to target the weaknesses in the political work messages could greatly undercut PLA Army units' cohesion and esprit de corps.
- **C2.** U.S. Army commanders at echelon can expect PLA Army political officers to conduct psychological warfare against U.S. units and personnel aimed at diminishing their unity of command. This could be mitigated by an expansion of protection plans to incorporate information operations, senior noncommissioned officer leadership, and chaplain support to counter PLA Army messaging and maintain Soldier morale.

- **Counter-C2.** Aggressive U.S. counter-C2 efforts may yield significant effects if they can exacerbate or exploit tensions between a political officer and a commander. Additionally, successful U.S. Army efforts to create confusion or insert latency into the PLA Army party committee decisionmaking process will likely work to deny information dominance, which is a key PLA Army success criterion in combat.
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