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## China Expanding Joint Forces Training Centers and OPFOR

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a learning adversary rapidly improving its lethality, flexibility, and command and control (C2) through high-intensity realistic training against a dedicated opposing force (OPFOR) across multiple domains. China's expansion of training centers and the use of dedicated OPFOR training units offer important insights into the speed and direction of this modernization. While China's largest training base at Zhurihe in Inner Mongolia has received the vast majority of attention due to its role as a direct analogue to the U.S. Army's National Training Center (NTC), its armed forces have a large and rapidly modernizing ecosystem of training centers and OPFOR units that are providing increasingly realistic, challenging training opportunities across a range of missions and environments. U.S. Forces facing Chinese formations would likely face a joint, multidomain force operating in a complex information and electromagnetic environment. Effective threat replication at U.S. Army combat training centers entails incorporating an understanding of the Chinese approach to conflict into exercises and other training.

### PLA MODERNIZING ITS TRAINING TO WIN

***The PLA is advancing its broader military modernization by engaging in a campaign of learning, of which large-scale joint exercises are a critical part.*** In December 2025, the PLA launched a large-scale joint exercise near Taiwan, code-named JUSTICE MISSION, which focused on sea-air combat readiness patrols, achieving multidomain superiority, blockading of key ports and areas, and deterrence in all dimensions beyond the First Island Chain.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Much as the United States tested key concepts for World War II during the Louisiana Maneuvers, the PLA has used large-scale joint exercises to reshape itself, including the VANGUARD 2011 exercises at Queshan, which helped refine the target-centric, systems destruction approach to conflict that predominates today.<sup>4,5</sup>

***The increasing use of OPFOR is another key element of China's campaign of learning, and each of the PLA's services has dedicated training centers with dedicated OPFOR units and specialized infrastructure.*** While the PLA has used OPFOR in some form since 1975, it formed new dedicated units in 2014 and significantly expanded their use; OPFOR units are now present at many echelons, including reportedly down to the platoon level in some cases.<sup>6,7,8</sup> While these centers and the training they host broadly resemble their counterparts in the United States, China does not use the term OPFOR and instead refers to "force-on-force" or "confrontation" training and exercises.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, China's designated enemy force is referred to as 'Blue'—due to the legacy of the Red Army as the PLA's predecessor—making Chinese OPFOR the 'Blue Force' rather than 'Red Force.'

**Modernized training standards highlight how the PLA is updating concepts and improving the rigor of its training.** Like the United States, China has an interconnected set of strategies that inform national policy and shape military doctrine and modernization priorities, which ultimately inform campaign-level tasks and tactics with outlines of military training and evaluation (OMTEs). OMTEs describe “course subjects,” or core skills or tasks, that each echelon or formation must be capable of executing, similar to U.S. Army mission essential task lists (METLs).



 <b>Chinese Armed Forces</b>	 <b>U.S. Military</b>
<p><b>OMTEs [军事训练和考核大纲]</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only described in passing in Chinese media</li> <li>• Appear to offer much broader and more comprehensive sets of evaluative standards</li> <li>• Appear to be set by task and functions (e.g., aviation, air defense, etc.)</li> <li>• Probably used to evaluate brigade and below</li> </ul>	<p><b>METLs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compile key skills that a unit must be able to perform in order to accomplish its mission</li> <li>• Essential to the unit's success and are used as a basis for training and evaluation</li> <li>• Typically used to evaluate corps to company levels</li> </ul>
<p><b>Course Subjects [科目]</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May refer to foundational skills or tasks that soldiers or units train on, such as marksmanship, first aid, or combat tactics</li> <li>• Also can refer to theoretical knowledge</li> <li>• Possibly used to evaluate individual and low-level units</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mission Essential Tasks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standardized description of conditions and standards to which a unit must perform a specific task</li> <li>• Mission-driven with priority set by commander</li> </ul>

Figure 1: Comparison of Chinese and U.S. Military Training Assessments (Source: T2COM G-2)

**China’s reforms to PLA training over the past decade have led to major improvements in its ability to conduct combined arms and joint operations.** PLA-affiliated media reports suggest that PLA units struggled to conduct effective combined arms and joint operations through the mid-2010s. After taking office in late 2012, President Xi Jinping quickly refocused the PLA on preparations for realistic combat. In 2014, the Central Military Commission issued new guidance to improve realism in training, followed in 2016 by additional provisional rules. Chinese news reporting on the new sets of guidance noted that they drove a “sense of mission and urgency in conducting practical training.”<sup>10</sup> The new guidance set the stage for the rollout of a new body of OMTEs, which began to be issued in 2018 and has helped drive transformative change in the PLA. Additionally, reorganizations of the PLA’s staff as well as corps and lower-echelon units appear to have improved China’s broader training enterprise.

## KEY PLA ARMY TRAINING CENTERS AND OPFOR

***The PLA Army has reorganized its training ecosystem to improve readiness, with approximately 14 numbered division-level comprehensive training bases.*** This ecosystem of bases builds on the PLA Army-aligned combined arms tactical training bases (CATTBs), which predated the 2016 reforms that created China's joint theater commands. Some offer a combination of entry-level and technical training, while others, if not all, appear to offer training involving other services and components, including the People's Armed Police, China's paramilitary internal security force.<sup>11</sup> For the PLA Army, the STRIDE and FIREPOWER series exercises act as the capstone combined arms and live-fire exercises, usually featuring activities at one or more CATTBs and, increasingly joint and military-civil integration.<sup>12</sup>



1. **Zhurihe, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region:** Joint; heavy combined arms brigade maneuver and live fire; dedicated OPFOR; simulation of plains and urban terrain
2. **Sanjie, Anhui Province:** Large-scale maneuver and live fire; simulation of urban terrain and key terrain in Taiwan
3. **Queshan, Henan Province:** PLA Army; joint and multinational; large-scale maneuver; simulation of urban terrain
4. **Korla, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region:** PLA Rocket Force and PLA Aerospace Force; multinational; large-scale maneuver; simulation of urban terrain
5. **Qingtongxia, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region:** PLA Army; maneuver; simulation of mountainous and urban terrain
6. **Dacheng Bay, Fujian Province:** PLA Army and PLA Navy Marine Corps; amphibious combined arms brigade maneuver and live fire
7. **Dongshan Island, Fujian Province:** PLA Army; amphibious battalion maneuver and live fire
8. **Shanwei, Guangdong Province:** PLA Army; amphibious battalion maneuver and live fire
9. **Taonan, Jilin Province:** Multinational; combined arms maneuver; simulation of urban terrain
10. **Dingxin, Gansu Province:** PLA Air Force; combined arms tactics, large-scale aerial maneuver, and systems testing
11. **Cangzhou, Hebei Province:** PLA Air Force; dedicated OPFOR
12. **Jingyu, Jilin Province:** Primary location for PLA Rocket Force OPFOR

Figure 2: Examples of Key PLA Army Training Sites and Other Services' Joint Training Bases (Source: T2COM G-2)

## Zhurihe Joint Training Base

***The PLA's premier training facility at Zhurihe is a joint and combined arms tactical training base conceptually like the U.S. Army's NTC.*** Zhurihe has a dedicated OPFOR—colloquially called the “Wolves of Zhurihe”—that is structured to resemble a U.S. combined arms brigade. Its size enables a wide range of training environments, with some deliberate replication of priority areas, such as a mockup of Taiwan’s Presidential Office Building and some unique buildings, including a one-third scale replica of the Eiffel Tower.<sup>13</sup> Exercises at Zhurihe involve brigade staff and battalion-level maneuvers.

## Korla Training Center

The Korla Combined Arms Tactical Training Base in western China is another large-scale training area. Korla is likely a joint base or shared training area, judging from news reporting and public satellite imagery. It features large maneuver areas with helipads, likely for special forces or airborne training. Large dedicated bivouac areas for rotating units are present, with parking areas for tanks and engineering vehicles observed at multiple periods.<sup>14</sup> Korla is also home to the Korla Missile Test Complex, which is involved in PLA Rocket Force missile testing and PLA Aerospace Force space applications.<sup>15</sup> Other portions of the base appear dedicated to counterterrorism training and similar operations and are likely in use by the People’s Armed Police.

## Sanjie Combined Tactical Training Base

Sanjie serves as a key training area for China’s Eastern Theater Command, which is aligned toward Taiwan and Japan, and is particularly notable for the large size of its built-up urban warfare training and maneuver areas compared to similar facilities at the U.S. Army’s NTC.<sup>16</sup> Many PLA training centers have urban warfare training infrastructure and several of them reproduce aspects of target areas of interest, including parts of downtown Taipei and key facilities on Taiwan-administered islands. Work commenced at Sanjie around 2021 on the expansion of a new western sector featuring multistory buildings, judging from a review of commercial satellite imagery. While they are configured differently, measuring the maneuver area, roads, and building areas indicates that the Sanjie area is larger and has taller, fully constructed buildings, rather than the large number of CONEX containers used as ad hoc stand-ins for buildings at the NTC. This is likely to lead to differences in training outcomes given that each additional story of buildings pose additional complications and dangers for maneuvering forces in urban combat.



Sanjie, February 2026



Razish, February 2026



Sanjie Combined Arms Tactical Training Base, Anhui Province	Razish, National Training Center, Ft. Irwin, California
.8 km <sup>2</sup>	.5 km <sup>2</sup>
Large-scale fire and maneuver areas with several multistory buildings (more than six stories)	Some multistory buildings, a singular dense urban area representing a town center; urban canalizing effects simulated through CONEX boxes

Note: Measured area does not include empty spaces in the immediate vicinity of roads

Figure 3: Comparison of U.S. and Chinese Military Urban Operation Training Areas  
(Source: Sanjie, Image © 2026 Airbus (top); Razish, Image © 2025 Airbus (bottom), Google Earth and T2COM G-2)

## AMPHIBIOUS TRAINING AREAS

**China has developed a large contingent of PLA amphibious forces, which along with Xi's expectations for the capability to take Taiwan by 2027, has led to the regular use of multiple training locations.** The PLA has six dedicated amphibious brigades under the PLA Army and a further eight maneuver brigades under the PLA Navy Marine Corps. These units practice annually on a roughly July-September schedule.<sup>17, 18</sup> News reporting and public data suggest that dual-use civilian roll-on, roll-off ships are regularly integrated into these exercises.<sup>19</sup>

## PLA AIR FORCE TRAINING AREAS AND OPFOR

**The PLA Air Force—Asia's largest—is transitioning from scripted scenarios to free air combat against dissimilar aircraft in varied environmental conditions and against multiple OPFOR groups.**<sup>20</sup> This is part of a generational, transformative shift that has included significant reorganization, incorporation of new generations of aircraft, and taking on new missions. The PLA Air Force's OPFOR formations, along with their supporting training areas and infrastructure, are intended to help the PLA think and fly like the enemy.<sup>21</sup> These test centers and units also support the PLA Air Force's series of annual large-scale exercises, which encompass key skills including air-to-air combat, C2 and airborne electronic warfare. Recent exercises, such as the JOINT SWORD and STRAIT THUNDER series (2022-2025), have at times included more than 150 PLA Air Force aircraft operating in the Taiwan Strait. These exercises likely give the PLA Air Force and PLA Naval Aviation, which includes carrier and some special mission aircraft, a near-real-world simulation of key tasks during blockade, strike, and landing support operations against Taiwan. The PLA Air Force has expanded and upgraded dedicated OPFOR units at Cangzhou and Dingxin, as well as gained meaningful real-world experience flying through dissimilar air engagements with Pakistan, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, and other nations.<sup>22</sup>

Exercise	Focus
<b>GOLDEN HELMET</b>	Pilot skills and air-to-air combat
<b>GOLDEN DART</b>	Suppression of enemy air defenses
<b>BLUE SHIELD</b>	Integrated air defense
<b>RED SWORD</b>	C2 of large-scale air operations
<b>QUNGDIAN</b>	Aerial electronic attack and defense <sup>23, 24</sup>

Figure 4: Major PLA Air Force Annual Exercises (Source: T2COM G-2)



Figure 5: Patch for PLA Rocket Force's Dedicated OPFOR Unit<sup>30</sup>

## PLA ROCKET FORCE TRAINING CENTERS AND OPFOR

The PLA Rocket Force, which is the pillar of China's nuclear and conventional deterrent as well as an integral component of China's approach to warfare, is developing OPFOR as part of its broader expansion and modernization. With an estimated 40 launch brigades, the PLA Rocket Force's expanded use of OPFOR complements its fielding of new systems, modernized C2, and significantly expanded missile production capacity.<sup>25, 26, 27</sup> To improve the realism of exercises, the PLA Rocket Force established a dedicated OPFOR unit, first as a battalion in 2004 and later expanded to a full regiment in 2018, to provide mobile and ad hoc support for exercises.<sup>28</sup> PLA Rocket Force operations are further supported by a newly reorganized testing and training system with at least two additional OPFOR units, including a unit dedicated to creating complex electromagnetic environment training conditions.<sup>29</sup>



## PLA NAVY TRAINING CENTERS AND OPFOR

***Like the other services, the PLA Navy appears to be in the process of establishing a more formal maritime OPFOR.***<sup>31</sup> Already the world's largest navy in terms of surface combatants and submarines, the PLA Navy has gained experience from regular long-distance deployments to the Gulf of Aden since 2008, to the Baltic Sea for port calls at Kaliningrad in 2017, and circumnavigation of Australia and related live-fire exercises in 2025.<sup>32</sup> Since 2016, the PLA Navy has conducted annual DEEP BLUE far seas training exercises that test specific skills or tasks and are used to evaluate tactics and procedures. While these involve live-fire exercises and sometimes simulated countersubmarine exercises, there has been less evidence of dedicated OPFOR or similar actions until the recent establishment of the OPFOR in Liaoning.<sup>33</sup> This new training, reinforced by the PLA Navy's high operational tempo, is likely to help improve TTPs, joint operations, and other key skills.

## CYBER TRAINING CENTERS AND DIGITAL OPFOR

***China's development of capable cyber forces also likely owes a debt to an OPFOR mindset.***

According to the U.S. Intelligence Community's 2025 Annual Threat Assessment, "China remains the most active and persistent cyber threat to U.S. Government, private-sector, and critical infrastructure networks."<sup>34</sup> China's cyberattack and cyber defense forces' substantial capabilities are likely based in part on the fact that, beyond so-called "dirt" training centers for conventional forces, China is also clearly investing in training infrastructure for operations in the cyber domain. China's cyber forces appear to feature the same emphasis on OPFOR and near-real-world training seen in other services.<sup>35</sup> To provide training for these forces, China has built several national- and provincial-level cyber ranges and has the world's most comprehensive ecosystem for capture-the-flag competitions, which the PLA's cyber forces and militias are likely using to practice attacking and defending electrical grids and other critical infrastructure.<sup>36, 37</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMY AND JOINT FORCE

***China's expansion of its training centers and its major investment in OPFOR units very likely enhance all three elements of the PLA's so-called "iron triangle" of military modernization: doctrine and concepts, personnel recruitment and retention, and systems and capabilities.*** China's self-assessments of readiness for operations against Taiwan or other scenarios will likely be based on how well PLA units meet its new standards for training. In the event of a conflict, U.S. Forces facing Chinese formations would likely face a joint, multidomain force operating in a complex information and electromagnetic environment.

***Effective threat replication at U.S. Army combat training centers entails incorporating an understanding of the Chinese approach to conflict into exercises and other training to mitigate risk—not directly adopting China's approach to conflict and training.*** The strides the PLA has made in joint operations—particularly fires—underscores the importance of mastering physical and multispectral concealment, denial, deception, and emissions control. Similarly, PLA efforts to practice maneuver and integrate new technologies in urban environments highlights the continued relevance of training in these environments and the challenges they pose to maneuver forces.

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