

PLA Logistics and Sustainment: PLA Conference 2022

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The US Army War College People's Liberation Army Conference (PLA) Conference was held from March 31 to April 2, 2022, at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. The Strategic Studies Institute has been organizing and hosting the event since 1999. This year, the Strategic Studies Institute was excited to have the National Ground Intelligence Center as a cosponsor, enabling the conference to involve more members from the intelligence community.

The focus of the conference was PLA logistics and sustainment. As the PLA continues to build and modernize its combat forces, it is important to examine if the capabilities meant to support combat operations are also being developed. A state can build great combat power, but if it cannot sustain or move it to where it must be, then that combat power will not survive long.

The conference had several great papers and presentations on a variety of topics such as China's national-level logistics, including how China mobilizes national resources for the military and provides joint logistics support to the PLA Theater Commands. Other papers and presentations looked at the logistics capabilities of the different PLA services, especially the Army, Navy, and Air Force. The conference also considered PLA logistics in China's remote regions, looking specifically at air-power projection in the Western Theater Command along the Indian border, and examined the PLA's ability to sustain overseas operations using the PLA base in Djibouti as a case example. The conference revealed several very relevant points:

- There are real questions about the command relationships between the PLA theater commanders and the Joint Logistics Support

Force that could lead to an inefficient transition to a wartime logistics structure.

- At the national level, there are different views within China about the chain of command of the defense mobilization system. If these divergent views are serious enough, they could undermine China's ability to sustain a large-scale operation over the longer-term.
- There seem to be shortfalls in logistics support elements for the PLA combat battalions. Additionally, the PLA makes little use of containerized goods at brigade and lower levels. This observation casts doubt on how long the PLA can keep operating at the tactical unit level.
- The PLA Navy has a low number of replenishment ships given the size of the combatant fleet. Also, PLA Air Force facilities often seem to lack enough apron space for maintenance operations.

The conference did not judge the PLA incapable of sustaining large-scale military operations. Despite notable potential shortfalls and points of friction, the PLA has successfully sustained counterpiracy maritime operations for many years and conducted noncombatant evacuation operations well-distant from China. They are also increasingly able to move forces across the vast distances of China and conduct large training exercises. Far more must be known about PLA sustainment and logistics before the hard questions about PLA operational reach and endurance can be answered.

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