DETAILED REPORTS

Tracking the People's Liberation Army (PLA): 16th - 22nd August, 2026

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

Dear Reader,The week ending 22 Aug 2026, was a busy one with US-South Korean annual military exercise truncated on orders of President Trump. In Japan, four cabinet ministers visited Yasukuni Shrine, drawing protests from China and South Korea.Internally, PLA-Party relations reached a new low with atleast 11 PLA personnel absent during the Sixth Plenum of the 20th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.Some of the interesting theories discussed were military AI agents and Counter-Unmanned Systems. The PLA is also improving its functioning at the unit level which would progressively translate into improved operational readiness.In exercises, PLAAF participated in three major exercises - one, with Thailand concluding on 20 Aug, an airborne exercises with Belarus in progress and another with Egypt commencing on 22 Aug 2026, showcasing the PLAAF's growing capabilities. Interestingly, Egypt is the strategic partner of US while Thailand is an ally, which suggests that China has been able to make inroads into US alliances and partners.Read on.

Neighbourhood

Korean Peninsula

US-South Korea Annual Military Exercise held

US and South Korea conducted Exercise Ulchi Freedom Shield 2026 from 17 to 21 Aug 2026. The exercise was **intended** to incorporate lessons learnt from recent conflicts and strengthen US-Korean readiness through combined, joint, all-domain operations. Following US President **Trump's** instructions to scale down the exercise on grounds of sending an inappropriate signal to North Korea, the scale and scope were **truncated**. North Korea **called** the exercise as a serious threat to its security and that it will defend its national interests. (KCNA 13 Aug 2026. Press Statement of Spokesperson for DPRK Foreign Ministry. 19 Aug 2026. We Will Exercise Our Right to Self-defence for Neutralizing Military Threat from Hostile Forces through More Transparent Action: KCNA Commentary)

North Korea fires Missiles towards Sea of Japan

North Korea **fired** ten short range ballistic missiles from the area of Pyeongyang towards the Sea of Japan on 20 Aug 2026. The missiles had a range of 320 kilometres. **US Forces in Korea** said that the missiles did not pose a threat to the US or its allies in the region and that it remained committed to its allies in the region.

The abrupt scaling down of the exercise comes at a time when US credibility about defending its allies in the region is low. The missile firing came a day after President Trump's instructions to scale down the scope of US-South Korea annual military exercise and a few hours after Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Pyeongyang.

Japan

Japan's PM offerings to Yasukuni Shrine

The Japanese PM Sanae Takaichi **gave ritual offerings to Yasukuni Shrine** on 15 Aug 2026, the 81st Anniversary of Japan's Surrender after World War II. Four Cabinet Ministers visited the shrine in their personal capacity. China protested the visit with the **MFA Spokesperson** called it as "an affront to historical justice…and a provocation against the postwar international order". South Korea's MFA Spokesperson **deplored** the visit and called on Japan to demonstrate its "sincere remorse for the past". (NHK World. 15 Aug 2026. Japan PM Takaichi passes on Yasukuni Shrine visit. China MFA. 15 Aug 2026. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on Japanese Politicians Paying Respects to the Yasukuni War Shrine Which Honors Class-A War Criminals)

*The **Yasukuni Shrine** commemorates those who died in service of Japan since the Meiji Era. In 1978, 14 Class A war criminals were enshrined, resulting in severe protests from China, Korea and US, against visits of Japanese officials to the shrine. Past Japanese PMs Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe visited the shrine in their personal capacity. The decision to visit in their personal capacity while keeping in mind the prevailing circumstances, seems to have arisen from a **policy decision** taken on the 40th Anniversary of Japan's Surrender after World War II.*

PLA aircraft in East China Sea

Japan's Joint Staff **reported** one Y-9 ELINT aircraft and one TB-001 armed recce drone of PLA, flew in from the mainland, then along the coast of Okinawa to Danjo islands in the East China Sea and then returned to the mainland on 18 Aug 2026. Another Y-9 ELINT aircraft flew in from the mainland and then along the coast of Okinawa to South of

Danjo islands in the East China Sea on 19 Aug 2026. In response the Japanese Air Self Defense Forces scrambled fighter aircraft. (Source: https://x.com/JapanJointStaff?s=20)

Taiwan

PLA sorties along Taiwan Straits. PLA aircraft flew 36 sorties during the week. This included 20 sorties on a single day i.e. 18 Aug 2026, of which 12 crossed the median line. There were a total of eight helicopter and 02 UAV sorties. In addition 6-8 PLAN ships and 7 to 8 official ships operated in the waters around Taiwan. (Data Source: https://x.com/MoNDefense?s=20)

PLA-Party Relations

Sixth Plenum of 20th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) held

The **Sixth Plenum of 20th CCDI** was held 22 Aug 2026. 116 members attended the Plenum, including 9 members from the PLA. Apart from in-depth study and discussing the implementation of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, the plenum reviewed the discipline inspection and supervision work for first half of 2026 and set the requirements of the work ahead. The plenum elected Zhao Shiyong and Zhang Zhong as Deputy Secretaries of CCDI. (PLA Daily. 23 Aug 2026. Page 1. Communique of Sixth Plenum of 20th CCDI (中国共产党第二十届中央纪律检查委员会第六次全体会议公报)

*What is of importance is the number of PLA personnel absent from the plenum. At its commencement in 2022, the 20th CCDI had **133 members** including 22 from the PLA. Ten PLA personnel did not attend the fifth plenum held from 12 to 14 Jan 2026. Apart from Major General Liu Jun who attended this Plenum, the remaining nine did not attend this conference, suggesting that they are under investigation. Four additional personnel including Zhang Shengmin did not attend this plenum. While absence of Zhang Shengmin would be due to other commitments, absence of others needs to be monitored. Considering that all PLA personnel elected to CCDI are political commissars, political cadre is amongst those severely affected in the anti-corruption campaign in the PLA. For the PLA, it would mean a loss of power in internal politics of CPC.*(Data Source: https://x.com/cnpoliwatch?s=20)

Combat Theory

Understanding Principles of developing Military AI Agents

Kong Rui, Chen Xiaoqian and Sun Penghao argue that development of **military AI agents** (军事智能体) is crucial to reshape combat systems and generate new combat capabilities. They define military intelligent agent as an aggregate of AI hardware, software and mechanisms within the military domain, including hardware, algorithms and rules for interacting with AI. To innovate employment models, the authors call for building man-machine collaborative combat system with clear division of roles, development of distributed swarm combat modes and accelerating the integration of multi-domain forces. Finally, they call for proactively addressing risks associated with military AI agents by establishing technical mechanisms, refining ethical framework and maintaining the primacy of human beings. (PLA Daily. 19 Aug 2026. Page 7. Understanding the principles of developing military AI Agents (把握军事智能体建设规律))

‘Intelligentised’ Killweb

Zhao Qingbin and Xu Tao talk about the **emergence** of intelligent killwebs(智能化杀伤网) in warfare. They highlight it as a deep integration of IT, AI algorithms and cross-domain combat forces. Identifying critical nodes which integrate killweb as a vulnerability, whose destruction can collapse of the entire system, the authors call for a distributed, intelligent command system where planning is centralised to unify operational intent and coordination rules while autonomous decisions are taken at lower levels. The result is the emergence of network-domain where multiple kill chains, capable of adapting to high-intensity, high-tempo and difficult environments, operate concurrently, ensuring optimal, redundant kill web which transcends traditional kill chains. (PLA Daily. 16 Aug 2026. Page 8. A Scientific Understanding of Intelligentized Kill Webs (科学认识智能化杀伤网)

*DARPA first **proposed** Adapting Cross-Domain Kill webs in 2018. The programme has since evolved into **Advanced Battle Management System** and become a part of Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control (CJADC2). While the PLA has achieved a reasonable level of jointness between the three traditional domains of land, sea and air, there are voids in integrating with cyber, electronic and space domains. Over the past two years, there have been discussions towards developing Cross-domain Killwebs suggesting that PLA is still in the process of developing them.*

Prioritising Development Counter-Unmanned System Capabilities

Chen Yonggen calls for an integrated approach for **development of counter-unmanned capabilities**. Towards this, he calls for long term and centralised planning which will integrate military-civilian resources across multiple domains while validating force structures and equipment integration. He argues that adopting common standards will remove bottlenecks such as military-civil inter-service barriers and system fragmentation at the point of origin. The author calls for focusing on R&D in multi-modal sensing, upgrading early warning systems and use of AI & distributed sensing, and integrating operations and training to ensure continuous development of counter-unmanned system capabilities. (PLA Daily. 16 Aug 2026. Page 8. Focus on developement of Counter-Unmanned Systems (把准反无人作战力量建设着力点))

Comprehensive EW Solutions

A ST Daily article **covered** the progress made by 63rd Institute (第六十三研究所) of National University of Defense Technology. The Institute established a National Laboratory for Electromagnetic Space Security Testing and Evaluation(电磁空间安全试验评估全国重点) and a laboratory for Electromagnetic Technology at Jiangsu. The reorganisation has helped to synergise research efforts across diverse fields such as jamming resistant communication, monitoring radio spectrum, and satellite communication and create comprehensive solutions. (ST Daily. 21 Aug 2026. Page 6. 63rd Institute of National University of Defense Technology: Building a “Joint Fleet” for Electromagnetic Space Security (国防科技大学第六十三研究所：打造电磁空间安全“联合舰队”))

Training

Integrated Defence of Rocket Force

A PLA Rocket Force exercise **highlights** some of the passive and active counter measures techniques employed by defence and counter-action troop when faced with enemy reconnaissance, strikes and electronic warfare. These include camouflage, electronic support measures, smoke screens electro optical jamming, high energy lasers to disrupt incoming weapons, navigation counter measures and defence against enemy ground raids. (ST Daily. 21 Aug 2026.

Page 6. A Rocket Force Unit Forges an “Iron Shield” for Integrated Defense and Counter-Action(火箭军某部铸就综合防抗钢铁利盾))

Naval Aviation Exercise

An unidentified Naval Aviation unit carried out an **exercise** recently. The helicopters used onboard radars along with real time data to discern the enemy from the surrounding clutter, carried out the strike and evaded enemy counter-measures successfully. The exercise was conducted under difficult conditions such as high temperature, high humidity, and strong winds to test instrument-flying skills of pilots and their ability to handle contingencies. (PLA Daily. 16 Aug 2026. Page 2. Forging a Sharp Sword between the Sea and Sky: Spanning Day and Night (海空淬利剑，横跨昼与夜))

Administration

Award of Meritorious Service Medal to Shenzhou-21 Crew

The Central Committee, State Council and CMC decided to **award** the Meritorious Service Medal for Spaceflight Class II to Mission Commander Zhang Lu and Meritorious Service Medal for Spaceflight Class III to flight engineer Wu Fei and payload specialist Zhang Hongzhang for their performance during Shenzhou-21 mission. (PLA Daily. 21 Aug 2026. Page 1. “Meritorious Service Medal for Spaceflight (Class II)” awarded to Zhang Lu and Honorary Title of “Heroic Astronaut” conferred and “Meritorious Service Medal for Spaceflight (Class III)” awarded to Wu Fei and Zhang Hongzhang (关于给张陆颁发“二级航天功勋奖章”授予武飞、张洪章“英雄航天员”荣誉称号并颁发“三级航天功勋奖章”的决定))

PLAN NCOs as Captains

A PLA Daily article highlights that **senior NCOs are now being appointed as captains of auxiliary vessels** such as tugboats. With the reduction in number of officers and increase in number of boats, the flotilla explored the possibility of training NCOs as captains of tugboats. Applicants are selected based on preliminary exam followed by assessment of ‘long-term potential. Subsequently, selected NCOs were provided formal training in essential areas such as navigation, ship handling and plotting charts followed by one on one mentoring. Currently, all tugboat captains in the detachment are NCOs with more than 40 percent from non-navigation specialties. (PLA Daily. 18 Aug 2026. Page 4. Deck Ratings Step into Command Roles (帆缆兵走上指挥席)

Logistics

Joint Projection Combat Experiment System

A **Movement Control platform** which coordinates movement of large bodies of troops across theatres, services and multiple modes of transportation, has won the first prize at the PLA-wide Innovation and Training Competition. The platform developed by a team from Joint Logistics Support Force Engineering University, factors transportation capacity limits, time slots, and coordination across rail, road, water, and air and generates plans. it also detects anomalies due to changes in situation and triggers alerts. The system has been integrated with the command platform. (ST Daily. 21 Aug 2026. Page 6. Joint Projection Combat Command Gains a “Super Brain” (联合投送作战指挥有了“最强大脑”))

Digitalising Fuel Support

A PLAN airbase in Northern China has adopted an '**integrated smart fuel management platform**' to manage fuel supply efficiently. The platform has five modules - refuelling operations, fuel storage management, smart inspections, safety alerts and electronic logging - integrates smart data collection terminals, high precision liquid level sensors and integrated security systems at the base's fuel station, fuel bowsers and dispatch control room through seamless data connectivity. The new system reduces workload, provides better accountability and can enables high tempo of operations in a reduced time frame. (PLA Daily. 19 Aug 2026. Page 8. Commanding the "Fuel Dragon" from a Control Room (身在斗室，可驭"油龙"))

Restructuring Medical Procurement

The Logistics Support Department has **streamlined** procurement of medical supplies. The new measures includes centralised procurement of drugs and consumables at the Joint Logistic region level, reducing ad hoc procurements, strengthening supervision and leveraging technology, across the complete chain of procurement. The system follows the "three nots" (三不腐) of ensuring that procurement officers "dare not, cannot, and do not want to be" corrupt.(PLA Daily. 16 Aug 2026. Page 1. Military-wide Medical and Health System Implements Multiple Measures to Deepen Integrity Building (全军医疗卫生系统多措并举深化行业廉政建设))

International Cooperation

China-Thailand Joint Air Exercise concludes

The PLAAF-Royal Thailand Air Force (RTAF) joint exercise Falcon Strike-2026 **concluded** at the Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand on 20 Aug 2026. PLAAF had deployed J-10C and J-11 fighters, KJ-200 and KJ-500 AEW&C aircraft, Y-20 transport aircraft and H-6U tanker alond with ground air defence equipment. RTAF had deployed JAS-39 Gripen fighters and Alphajet light trainer/attack aircraft. The exercise focused on joint air defence and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief. (PLA Daily. 21 Aug 2026. Page 4. Sino-Thailand Joint Air Exercise "Falcon Strike-2026" concludes (中泰"鹰击-2026"空军联合训练圆满结束))

PLAAF Contingent arrives in Egypt for Joint Exercise Eagle of Civilisation-2026

The PLAAF contingent comprising of J-10C and J-16 fighters, YY-20A refuellers, KJ-500 AEW&C aircraft and Z-20 helicopters **reached Egypt** on 22 Aug 2026 after a 6,000 kilometre journey involving more than 9 hours of flying. The exercise will focus on air combat tactics, air superiority operations, combat search and rescue and deployment drills and will be conducted over multiple Egyptian air bases. The Egyptian Air Force is expected to field Dassault Rafales and MiG-29s. (PLA Daily. 22 Aug 2026. Page 4. Multiple types of aircraft arrived in Egypt to participate in Joint Exercise "Eagle of Civilization-2026" (空军多型战机抵达埃及参加"文明之鹰-2026"联合训练))

This is the second edition of the exercise and showcases the PLAAF's outreach. What is more keenly watched is the performance of PLAAF aircraft against Egyptian Rafales.

PLAN Task Group 83 returns

The PLAN's Task Group 83 comprising of Training Ship *Qi Jiguang* and the Type 71 Amphibious Landing Dock Ship *Kunlunshan* (Hull No 998) **returned** to Dalian after visiting four countries including Russia, Vietnam, Brunei and Indonesia. The Task Group which set out from Dalian on 15 June 2026, carried more than 900 personnel including cadets from Naval University of Engineering, PLAN Submarine Academy and Dalian Naval Academy for on the job training and visits to foreign countries. (PLA Daily. 18 Aug 2026. Page 3. PLAN's Task Group 8 successfully completed open-sea training and goodwill visits (我海军83舰编队圆满完成远海综合实习访问任务))

Space



(Landing of First Stage of Zhuque-3 rocket at an undisclosed location. Image Source: People's Daily)

Successful Recovery of First Stage Rocket

On 19 Aug 2026, Zhuque-3 rocket **launched** from the Dongfeng Commercial Aerospace Innovation Test Zone successfully placed Honghu-3 satellite into its designated orbit. Hours later, the first stage of the rocket landed at designated recovery site after **executing** a series of manoeuvres including powered deceleration and gliding. The rocket was developed by Landspace, a private sector company, which has **filed** plans for a 10,000 satellite constellation in LEO. (ST Daily. 20 Aug 2026. Page 1. China achieves first land based recovery of Rocket (我国火箭首次完成陆地回收)Advancing Reusable Rocket Technology Along Multiple Paths (复用火箭技术多线并举))

The Honghu constellation will be the third Chinese satellite internet service provider after guowang and qianfan constellations. Landsat claims to be the only company which has end-to-end solutions from rockets to satellites.

Arctic Exploration

Fourth China-Russia Joint Arctic Expedition launched. China and Russia launched the **Fourth Joint Arctic Expedition** from Vladivostok on 20 Aug 2026. The team from the First Ocean Research Institute of China, Shandong University of S&T and the Pacific Ocean Research Institute of Russian Academy of Sciences will conduct scientific experiments in

Chukochi Sea, East Siberian Sea, Lomonosov Ridge, Makarov Basin and Amundsen Basin amongst others over the next 62 days. (PLA Daily. 21 Aug 2026. Page 4. China and Russia launch 4th joint Arctic expedition (中俄开启第四次北极联合科考))

China considers itself as a near-Arctic power and the PLA considers the polar regions as a new frontier. Currently, China's 16th Arctic expedition is in progress with the xuelong-2 icebreaker conducting research in the central Arctic Ocean.

Hope you enjoyed this week's newsletter. Looking forward to your comments.
