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### **CMSI Note #7: PLA Navy Reserve: Out of the Shadows and into the Forefront?**

Tiffany A. Tat

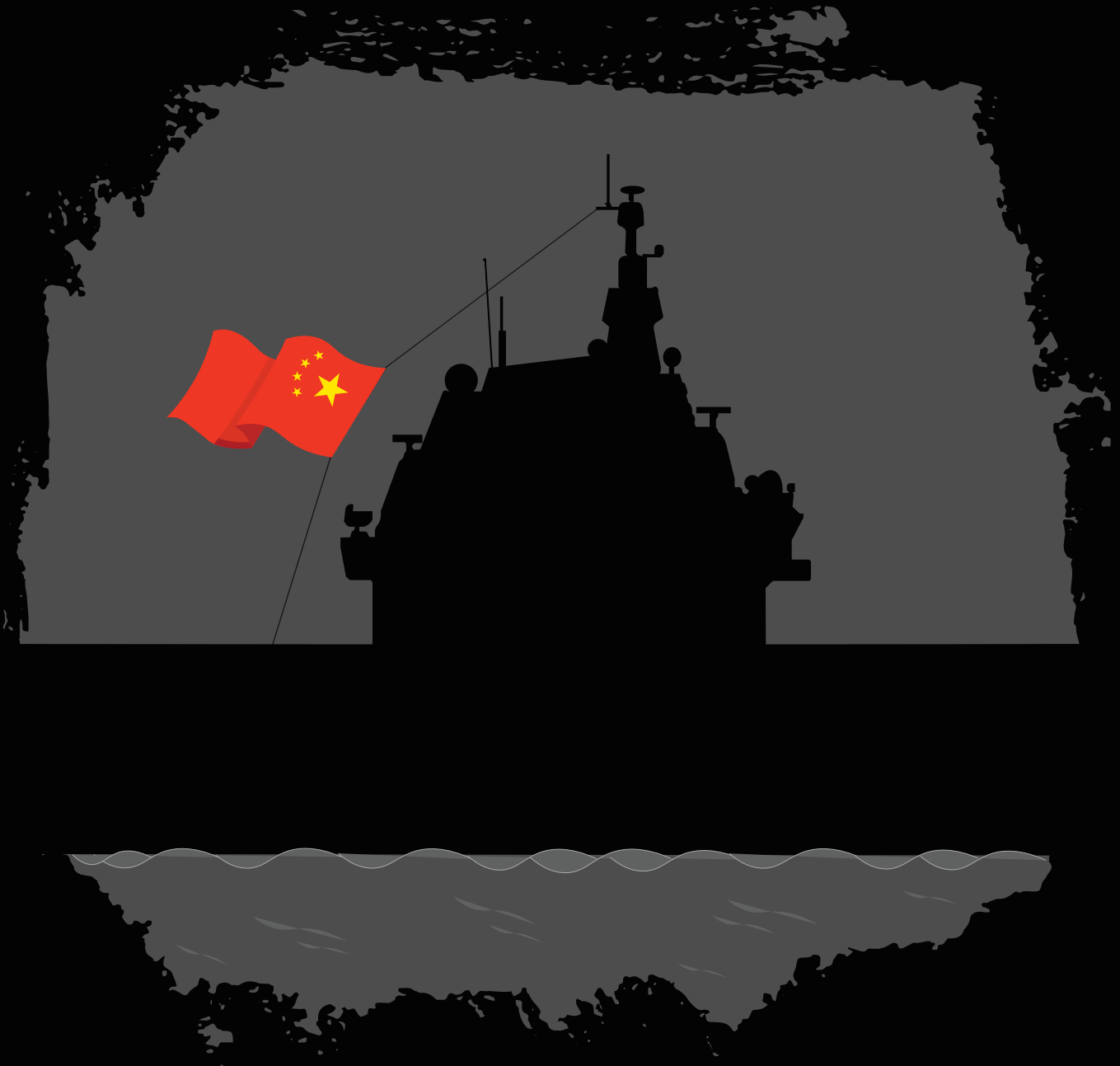
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中国海事研究所  
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# NOTES: 7



PLA Navy Reserve:

Out of the Shadows and into the Forefront?



CHINA MARITIME STUDIES INSTITUTE  
CENTER FOR NAVAL WARFARE STUDIES  
U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
686 CUSHING ROAD (3C)  
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND 02841



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## **PLA Navy Reserve: Out of the Shadows and into the Forefront?**

**Tiffany A. Tat<sup>1</sup>**

As a part China's goal to build a fully modernized military by 2035, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is improving its reserve forces through increased defense spending, critical policy changes, and organizational restructuring. Reserve forces (后备力量) encompass the PLA Reserve (预备役部队) and paramilitary forces, such as the militia, which fall under the leadership of the Central Military Commission and can be mobilized by the National Defense Mobilization Department to support combat.<sup>2</sup> The many components that make up China's fighting force such as active-duty PLA forces, China Coast Guard, and the militia have been studied in depth; however, the PLA Reserve remains an understudied and underreported topic. While the PLA Reserve represents a fraction of the force structure of their active-duty counterparts, recent changes in military reform specific to the PLA Reserve highlight the importance of this relatively small force and the evolving role reservists (预备役人员) may play within the PLA.<sup>3</sup>

### **CMSI Perspectives and Key Takeaways:**

- A focus on reforming the PLA Reserve signals ongoing efforts at military readiness and may be an indicator China is preparing for a scenario in which additional resources are required to replace active-duty casualties.
- The PLA seeks to shrink the Army Reserve and grow the Reserves of the PLA Navy (PLAN), PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) which may indicate the PLA is preparing to engage more in these non-ground force domains.
- New reforms affecting the PLA Reserve seek to attract civilian talent in addition to retaining former active-duty veterans. The widening of eligibility and recruitment to civilians with no prior active-duty service is another form of attempted military-civilian fusion as the PLA aims to capitalize on specific technical skills from the civilian sector.
- Reserve forces, and more specifically the PLAN Reserve, can be mobilized in a cross-Strait invasion scenario, giving the PLAN a source of strategic depth in manpower capabilities.



*Graphic 1: PLA Navy Reservists conducting training.<sup>4</sup>*

## **Discussion:**

Initial research efforts have identified at least five distinct PLAN Reserve units, but the exact size of the PLAN Reserve and number of units is not currently publicly available.<sup>5</sup> Three of these units are Mobile Radar and Observation Battalions located in Qingdao, Xiamen, and Shenzhen. A Reconnaissance Ship Squadron is based in Yantai and a Minesweeper Squadron is based in Ningbo.<sup>6</sup> The primary mission set of the PLAN Reserve varies depending on time, place, situation, and unit capabilities. Of the five units identified, their duties may include but are not limited to performing tasking related to maritime reconnaissance, countermining warfare, service support for other vessels, electronic warfare, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), search and rescue, or local level security. PLAN Reserve units operate either independently or in coordination with active-duty PLAN forces. Notably, PLAN Reserve units have been observed participating in several active-duty PLAN exercises, which is a testament to this force's ability to mobilize and integrate with their active-duty counterparts in increasingly realistic scenarios.<sup>7</sup>

PLAN reservists are distinct in appearance, capabilities, and purpose; and therefore, should not be confused or conflated with the China Coast Guard, the Maritime Militia, active-duty PLA, or any other reserve force. As depicted in Graphic 2, PLAN reservists wear the PLAN uniform while on duty and a 'Y' insignia on their uniform distinguishes reservists from their active-duty counterparts.<sup>8</sup> The PLAN Reserve has historically drawn primarily from prior service active-duty veterans and their experience

operating heavy weaponry and specialized military equipment makes this force uniquely positioned to support, augment, and even replace active-duty PLAN forces. When not in duty status, PLAN reservists are able to maintain civilian employment and are excused from their civilian duties when called to military service.<sup>9</sup>

At present, there are three major reforms affecting the evolution of PLAN Reserve. The first is a commitment to decrease PLAA Reserve and increase PLAN, PLAAF, and PLARF Reserves. The second reform is to optimize the PLA Reserve organizational structure to adapt to future combat needs and integrate with the active-duty component.<sup>10</sup> The third reform, codified in the 2023 Reservist Law, widens the net of eligibility to include, notably, non-prior service individuals with special technical or professional skills from the civilian sector.<sup>11</sup> These reforms are being implemented through a series of changes in military legislation and new policies governing the PLA Reserve specifically.



***Graphic 2: PLAN Reserve vessel with reservists aboard. Reservists wear the PLAN uniform with a “Y” insignia indicating they are a member of the PLAN Reserve.<sup>12</sup>***

### **Analysis:**

The widening of recruitment efforts to include non-prior service civilians with special technical or professional skills reflects an attempt to capitalize on military-civilian fusion as the PLA Reserve seeks to benefit from and incorporate civilian professional and technical skills for military purposes.<sup>13</sup> These new recruiting efforts may yield advanced professional and technical expertise while traditional recruiting of veterans maintains institutional knowledge and skills. Training gaps exist for both new and old reservist recruits. For non-prior service civilian recruits, how to train them to adapt to the military as an institution with unique concepts such as chain of command and how to respond in military environments that can be austere, high-stress, and isolating remain important questions. The skills and

experience reservists bring to the table from previous civilian and veteran experiences and those they pick up from training exercises as reservists may be transferable to conflict scenarios; yet, for both types of reservists, a lack of prior combat experience presents a significant weakness. While recruitment reforms aim to attract a more diverse pool of reservists that the PLA hopes to capitalize on, training gaps caused by changing the composition of reserve recruitment will affect current and future man, train, and equip needs and, ultimately, the PLAN's performance and capabilities in a conflict scenario.

Studying the PLA Reserve could present a vital source of early warning indicators. The push for reform could mean that the PLA sees the current force structure and capacity of its Reserve as a critical vulnerability to military readiness that it seeks to change. Ministry of Defense officials state the PLA seeks to shrink the Army Reserve and grow the Reserves of the PLAN, PLARF, and PLAAF which could indicate China is preparing to engage more in these other domains.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, China's continued commitment to strengthening reserve forces and reforming the Reserve could indicate that China is preparing for a scenario in which additional trained resources are required to replace active-duty casualties.

While most research has focused on active-duty forces, China has been quietly building up a potentially combat ready and technically competent Reserve, which is part of the PLA fighting force in its own right. The PLAN Reserve could be mobilized in a cross-Strait invasion or other maritime conflict scenario, thereby giving the PLAN a source of strategic depth in manpower capabilities that is heretofore an understudied and underreported topic. The Reserve represents a force multiplier hiding in plain sight; it would be prudent to continue to study it closely to understand how reservists train, how this force might be utilized, and better yet, how they might be countered.

<sup>1</sup> Tiffany Tat is an Assistant Professor at the China Maritime Studies Institute. The views expressed here are the author's alone and do not necessarily represent the views, policies, or positions of the U.S. Department of Defense or its components, to include the Department of the Navy or the U.S. Naval War College.

<sup>2</sup> The *PLA Dictionary of Military Terms* defines reserve forces (后备力量) as "armed organizations and personnel other than the national standing army that can participate in war and directly support combat through mobilization. Mainly including the Reserve, militia, and other reserve personnel, as well as trained university and middle school students." ("国家常备军以外、经过动员后可以参战和直接支援作战的武装组织和人员。主要包括预备役部队、民兵和其他预备役人员，以及经过训练的大、中学校学生。") This definition can be found on page 31.

The *PLA Dictionary of Military Terms* defines the Reserve (预备役部队) as "a force in the armed forces composed mainly of reserve personnel with active soldiers as the backbone. They can be quickly converted to active forces through mobilization." ("军队中以预备役人员为主体、现役军人为骨干编成的部队。经动员可快速转为现役部队。") This definition is on page 333.

<sup>3</sup> The *PLA Dictionary of Military Terms* defines reservists (预备役人员) as "personnel who perform military service outside of active service in accordance with the law. This includes those who have been registered and pre-assigned to active forces, assigned to the Reserve, assigned to militia organizations for reserve service, or those who perform reserve service in other forms. They are divided into reserve officers and reserve soldiers." ("按照法律规定在现役外服兵役的人员。包括经过登记，预编到现役部队、编入预备役部队、编入民兵组织服预备役的人员或以其他形式服预备役的人员。分为预备役军官和预备役士兵。") This definition can be found on page 35.

<sup>4</sup> 若有战，召必回！刚刚，这群退伍老兵“恢复”军人身份 [“If There is a War, We Will Return if Called! Just Now, This Group of Veterans ‘Restored’ Their Military Status”], 微信 [WeChat], 2 November 2018, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> There is evidence that there are other PLAN Reserve units, but the author does not have sufficient information to identify and distinguish them with certainty at this time.

<sup>6</sup> 海军预备役部队概况 [“Naval Reserve Overview”], 中国军网综合 [China Military Online], 12 March 2015, [http://www.81.cn/jmbl/2015-03/12/content\\_63907642.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmbl/2015-03/12/content_63907642.htm).

The names of the five identified PLAN Reserve units are as follows: 烟台海军预备役侦察船大队 [Reserve Reconnaissance Ship Squadron in Yantai], 宁波海军预备役扫雷船大队 [Reserve Minesweeping Squadron in Ningbo], 青岛海军预备役机动雷达观通营 [Reserve Mobile Radar and Observation Battalion in Qingdao], 厦门海军预备役机动雷达观通营 [Reserve Mobile Radar and Observation Battalion in Xiamen], and 深圳海军预备役机动雷达观通营 [Reserve Mobile Radar and Observation Battalion in Shenzhen].

<sup>7</sup> PLAN reservists are reported to have participated in more than ten PLAN exercises between 2005–15.

走进 中国人民解放军海军预备役部队 [“About the People’s Liberation Army Navy Reserve”], 中国军网综合 [China Military Online], 12 March 2015, [http://www.81.cn/jmbl/2015-03/12/content\\_6390764\\_47.htm](http://www.81.cn/jmbl/2015-03/12/content_6390764_47.htm).

<sup>8</sup> The “Y” stands for 预备役 (Yùbèiyì), which means “reservist.”

中华人民共和国兵役法 [“Military Service Law of the PRC”], 中国人大 [National People’s Congress], Revised 2021, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-08/21/content\\_5632513.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-08/21/content_5632513.htm); 中华人民共和国预备役人员法 [“Reservist Law of the PRC”], 中国人大 [National People’s Congress], Revised 2023, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/fgrwx/flfg/4929602.html>; 贺跃进、王凌硕 [He Yueshen, Wang Lingshuo], 海军后备力量人才队伍蓬勃发展 [“The Ranks of the Navy’s Reserve Forces are Thriving”], 解放军报 [Jiefangjun Bao (PLA Daily)], No. 12-27, 27 December 2012.

<sup>9</sup> “Military Service Law of the PRC.”

“Reservist Law of the PRC.”

“The Ranks of the Navy’s Reserve Forces are Thriving.”

<sup>10</sup> 国防部新闻发言人吴谦就预备役部队领导体制调整答记者问 [“Ministry of National Defense Spokesperson Wu Qian Answered Reporters’ Questions on the Adjustment of the Reserve Force’s Leadership System”], 和国国防部 [Ministry of National Defense], 1 July 2020, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/xwfyf/fyrth/4867464.html>.

<sup>11</sup> “Reservist Law of the PRC.”

<sup>12</sup> “About the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Naval Reserve Force.”

<sup>13</sup> “Reservist Law of the PRC.”

<sup>14</sup> “Ministry of National Defense Spokesperson Wu Qian.”