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Learning From National Security Education Day

by Arran Hope

National Security Education Day Poster (Source: Jincheng Government website)

Executive Summary:

- The Comprehensive National Security Concept has expanded over the last decade to cover areas the People's Republic of China (PRC) perceives to be its territory, which now includes the deep sea, space, and digital networks.
- Xi Jinping has pushed the totalizing conception of national security—explicitly linking it to economic development and traditional culture—giving the Ministry of State Security (MSS) a more public and influential role.
- The emphasis on national security reflects the leadership's perception of an increasingly complex security environment, and perhaps the leadership's awareness of problems internal to the Party.
- April 15, National Security Education Day, saw thousands of activities across the country, from school trips to drone performances to film and artistic productions. This indicates the extent to which national security now permeates all walks of life.

April 15 was National Security Education Day (全民国家安全教育日). It was also the tenth anniversary of the launch of the "comprehensive national security concept (总体国家安全观)" (hereafter, the Concept) (MCT, April 15). Over the last decade, national security has grown to become a totalizing concern for the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Not only has the Concept grown to encompass numerous domains and all walks of life, but the power of the security services—in particular the Ministry of State Security (MSS)—has risen dramatically. The rise of the MSS as national security concerns overseas increased predates Xi Jinping (see *China Brief*, January 14, 2011). Xi, however, has explicitly advanced national security prerogatives to an unprecedented degree. **[1]** The ways in which April 15 was celebrated across the PRC and the emphasis on incorporating national security into discussions of both economic development and traditional culture are indicative of the direction in which the country is heading. Namely, one that is more paranoid, but also more capable of cracking down when perceived threats appear.

The Rise and Rise of Comprehensive National Security

On April 15, 2014, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed the Concept at the first meeting of the Central National Security Committee (Aisixiang, April 17). This was closely followed by the adoption of the National Security Law that July (China Law Translate, July 1, 2015). The law stipulates, among other things, that the state will strengthen national security propaganda and public opinion guidance, carry out national security publicity and education activities in various forms, incorporate national security education into the national education system and the education and training system for civil servants, enhance the national security awareness of the entire population, and designate April 15 of each year as National Security Education Day (MCA, April 14).

In the intervening years, the meaning of comprehensive—sometimes translated as "holistic," perhaps better translated as "total"—national security has expanded. An informational piece published by the Ministry for Civil Affairs includes 16 posters about key areas of national security (MCA, April 14). These include political security, territorial security, military security, economic security, cultural security, social security, scientific and technological security, cyber security, ecological security, resource security, nuclear security, security of overseas interests, base security, space security, deep-sea security, and biological security. Other sources cite 20 such areas, supplementing the above with polar security, artificial intelligence (AI) security, financial security, and food security (Huanghe S&T University, April 11).

Cheng Lin (程琳), Convener of the National Security Discipline Review Group of the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council and former Secretary of the Party Committee and President of the People's Public Security University of China, echoes the 20 major areas of national security. He also acknowledges the expansion of the Concept. In the past, he writes, "the nation's territory mainly referred to land." Now, however, "with the international situation, the continuous development of science and technology, and the continuous enhancement of national strength, the nation's territory has been extended to the ocean and the deep sea, space, and digital networks, etc., and has formed a three-dimensional national territory and national sovereignty from real-world society to cyberspace" (Aisixiang, April 17). One interpretation suggests this does not just mean that as the PRC has gained in hard power, it has been able to claim more territory

(though *de facto* this has been the case). Rather—and more concerningly—it suggests that the PRC's rise entitles it to more expansive territorial claims. Chen goes on to argue that the PRC should rely on both traditional security and more recent forms of technology to ensure the security of these "new types of territorial boundaries." Minister for State Security Chen Yixin (陈一新) also referenced the expansive, even extraterritorial, demands of the Concept in an essay, published in the Party's theory journal for National Security Education Day (*Qiushi*, April 15). He argues that the principal task for the deep implementation of the Concept is "countering subversion (反颠覆)." This includes cracking down on infiltration, sabotage, subversion, and separatist activities *outside the country* (严厉打击境外渗透、破坏、颠覆、分裂活动)."

The MSS Pushes National Security Education Day

National Security concerns start at home, even if recent developments further afield merit attention. The centrality of the CCP lies at the heart of any discussion of national security. As Chen Yixin noted, "political security is the highest national security." The first of four "adheres (坚持)" cited by Nie Furu (聂福如), head of the political department of the Ministry of State Security, the people must "adhere to the Party's leadership and draw attention to its political attributes (坚持党的领导，彰显政治属性)" (Aisixiang, April 18). Another *Qiushi* article from this month references the "ten adheres" of the Concept, of which the first is "to adhere to the Party's absolute leadership of national security work" (*Qiushi*, April 8).

The Party's perceives the security situation as becoming more complex. As such, National Security Education Day has become an increasingly important vehicle for messaging about the Party's priorities. Nie Furu's essay mentions many techniques that various government bodies have used to promote national security awareness. This ranges from producing content for various media, including articles, audio and video, animation, to live events such as fireworks, drone and light shows, performances, and other interactive events (Aisixiang, April 18). A recent post on the MSS WeChat channel provides an extensive list of activities that also took place across the PRC this month, all organized by local national security organs (MSS Wechat, April 22). It highlights a series of "knowledge feasts," 370 million members of the Communist Youth League taking part in thematic activities, and a special program on CCTV looking at the rule of law and National Security. Schools in Fujian, Chongqing, Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Xinjiang are praised for their "innovative use of murder mystery games, cultural and artistic exhibitions, quizzes, mock trials, and art and ideology classes." Meanwhile, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Guangxi, Yunnan, Qinghai, and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps have produced multi-ethnic language versions of propaganda films and printed materials, and have conducted in-depth lectures in ethnic minority villages, "taking into account the folklore and cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities." The Handover Gifts Museum of Macau opened an exhibition on National Security (Xinhua, April 15). Other activities, such as national security-themed running races and dance performances are designed to "integrate elements of national security into people's daily lives and make it palpable."

The MSS has been at the forefront of many of these activities. In the summer of 2023, it launched its own WeChat channel (see *China Brief*, September 22, 2023). For April 15, the ministry released a video documentary on ten counterespionage cases (YouTube.com/"Led by Innovation, National Security Sharpens the Sword": April 14; April 15). This production, titled "Led by Innovation, National Security Sharpens the Sword (创新引领·国安砺剑)," provided details on alleged cases that the MSS had successfully exposed. The MSS notes that it "quickly became a breakthrough hit," being disseminated by all the central media outlets—the *People's Daily*, Xinhua, CCTV News, and over a thousand other media platforms. It estimates that it received more than a hundred million views (MSS Wechat, April 22).

Many of these activities seem trivial, and of little relevance to national security. Much of the messaging is clearly about shifting the mindset of the people and encouraging them to expect danger around every corner. The post containing the first part of the documentary details one by one "Ten Big Counter-espionage Cases (十大反间谍案例)" uncovered in the past decade. These include supposedly foreign spies, such as Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. Also included is the revelation that a PRC citizen was executed in 2016 for allegedly selling secrets to the United States. The aim of the film is to raise people's awareness, "so that spies have nowhere to hide" (MSS Wechat, April 13). PRC citizens are encouraged to notify the MSS if they see any telltale signs of espionage. Nie Furu also argues for "measures to reward citizens for reporting acts that endanger national security (公民举报危害国家安全行为奖励办法)" (Aisixiang, April 18).

National security, under the Concept, is intertwined with two other central preoccupations of Xi's tenure. One is the synergy between what is currently referred to as the new productive forces and the new quality combat forces, which builds on the Military-Civil Fusion development strategy (see *China Brief*, March 15). Chen Yixin references these early on in his *Qiushi* article, arguing for the promotion of "the efficient integration and two-way pull of the new productive forces and new quality combat forces, and to create growth poles for new productivity and new combat power (推动新质生产力同新质战斗力高效融合、双向拉动，打造新质生产力和新质战斗力增长极)" (*Qiushi*, April 15). Technology is crucial to Xi's aspirations for the PRC, but especially in terms of enhancing both economic development and national security. As many officials have stated: "security and development are the two wings of the same body (安全和发展是一体之两翼)" (*Qiushi*, April 16).

The other preoccupation is the harnessing of traditional Chinese culture for the Party's own ends (see *China Brief*, October 20). The Concept has thus received an academic sheen of historical prestige from researchers at the Xi Jinping Research Centre for Socialist Thought with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era at National Defense University (*Qiushi*, April 8). They argue that the concept has "deep civilizational underpinnings," is a "fundamental departure from the capitalist view of national security that pays lip service to human rights and security." To support their claims, they cite a phrase from the *Book of Changes* (周易) that Xi had quoted in 2014, comparing it favorably with a quote from Marx (12371.cn, March 26, 2019).

Conclusion

National Security Education Day and the activities and content generation that surround it are evidence of the pervasiveness of the concept of comprehensive national security in PRC society. It is difficult to assess the extent to which these efforts are successfully enhancing people's loyalty or preparing them for a potential conflict. At the very least these government initiatives are suggestive of a PRC society that is increasingly being forced to reflect the anxieties of a party that feels compelled to flex its impulse for control.

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Notes

[1] Tai Ming Cheung. *Innovate to Dominate: The Rise of the Chinese Techno-Security State*. Cornell University Press, 2022. Chapter 2.

Planned Obsolescence: The Strategic Support Force In Memoriam (2015–2024)

by Joe McReynolds and John Costello

The shoulder emblem of the now-disbanded Strategic Support Force. (Source: Wikipedia)

Executive Summary:

- The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Strategic Support Force likely was designed principally as a transitional structure meant to provide a home for disparate space, cyber, and informatization forces until their force structure could be developed enough to stand as independent branches.
- The successor branches of the SSF, the new Space Force, Cyber Force, and Information Support Force, likely maintain the units, capabilities, and mission areas previously held under the SSF.
- These branches can be best understood as rough PLA equivalents to US functional combatant commands, non-geographically defined joint-force structures intended to support services and military theaters by providing critical capabilities and operations in strategic domains of warfare.
- The creation of the branches also has the benefit of bringing critical resources and capabilities under the direct oversight of the Central Military Commission. This design feature is likely motivated by a desire to have greater control and more closely shape broader PLA modernization. It is in part also a response to controversies and international incidents associated with the SSF's current leadership.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is evolving toward a "triple matrix" structure of four domain-focused services, four strategic/functional forces, and five regionally-focused theater commands ([163](#), April 20). The SSF was designed with the possibility that it could be a transitional rather than permanent force structure, serving a practical purpose for launching and shaping broader military reforms, even if it failed to enable enduring synergies between the different forms of information support and warfare and their respective forces. As a holding entity, the way that the SSF consolidated key strategic capabilities and removed them from the former General Staff and General Armament Departments served a dual purpose. On one hand, it reduced the relative influence of the PLA Army within the broader national security state. On the other, it facilitated the eventual incorporation of their joint-force functions into an expanded Central Military Commission (CMC) structure. The SSF provided a place to house military elements critical for joint operations and modern warfighting at a time when no other obvious home or cohesive, pre-existing organizational structure existed. It also functioned as an "incubator" to mature and build up the aerospace, cyber, and information forces ([163](#), April 20).

The Transitional Structure of the SSF

Peculiarities evident at the SSF's creation indicated that it was intended to be a transitional structure. These include a compressed grade structure, the SSF's unique status among services and theaters, and the largely independent nature of the aerospace and cyber forces.

Compressed Grade Structure

From the start, the SSF's grade structure exhibited irregularities that were never resolved. Its staff department, ostensibly responsible for operations, existed at the same grade as the Space Systems Department (SSD; 航天系统部) and the Network Systems Department (NSD; 网络系统部), the respective headquarters for the aerospace and cyber forces. This limited the degree of operational control the SSF's staff department could exert over the two main subordinate branches of the SSF. At the time, it was reasoned that the grade status of the SSF itself (Military Theater-grade) and its highest grade units, the former General Armament Department space bases (Corps Leader-grade) necessitated that the SSD must have a Deputy Military Theater-grade—thus making it equivalent with the SSF's staff department. An equivalent headquarters for the NSD was therefore later created for the sake of parity, but the lack of any organization that could serve in Corps Leader-grade left a "gap" in its initial organizational structure. (See the chart below for grade analysis of the SSF in its 2015-2017 incarnation).

Unique Status Among Services and Theaters

The SSF maintained a unique status among services and the newly created Military Theaters when it was created in 2015, one it would share with the Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF; 中国人民解放军联勤保障部队) upon the latter's establishment in September 2016. The military reforms were guided by the new command and organizational logic of "the CMC leads, theaters fight, and services build (军委管总, 战区主战, 军种主建)" ([PLA Daily](#), February 26, 2019). This established a dual-command structure not dissimilar

to that of the United States, where services are tasked to "man, train, and equip" while combatant commands conduct operations. Neither the SSF or the JLSF ever clearly fit into this paradigm, both resembling (or being described as, in the former case) military services and integrating joint personnel within their units. The SSF also appeared to maintain responsibility for operations similar to theater commands. These outliers ran counter to the clear division the CMC intended to make. Joint personnel notwithstanding, the SSF seemed to straddle the line between operations and force construction in a way that resembled the responsibilities assigned to services prior to the reforms.

Largely Independent Aerospace and Cyber Forces

The expected synergies between the aerospace force and cyber force failed to materialize. Although operational interactions between the forces remain opaque and thus difficult to characterize with certainty, each force remained largely independent organizationally. Though a mid-level Corps and Deputy Corps Leader-grade structure for the Cyber Force materialized in time (filling the "gap" mentioned above), the SSF does not appear to have ever created subordinate bases or mid-level structures at the actual grade where aerospace and cyber forces were intended to work together operationally—something one would expect if operational synergies were to be seriously attempted. The lack of cohesion between the two branches of the SSF during this era appeared to be a missed opportunity to fulfill the PLA's stated goals of defending the interests of the People's Republic of China (PRC) across a cohesive "strategic frontier" of space, cyberspace, and the far seas ([PLA Daily](#), January 15, 2023). Instead, the SSF reconstituted these forces in a siloed fashion, a choice that is being maintained and further emphasized under their new arrangement.

These issues were exacerbated over time, raising the likelihood that they were intended as "features" rather than "bugs" of the SSF's purpose and organizational design. The PLA's "below the neck (脖子以下)" reforms from 2017 would have been an opportune moment to shift or change grade structures to alleviate the "compressed" nature of the SSF as an organization ([NewsChina](#), February 24, 2017). Instead, the SSF underwent a second "mini reorganization," which largely built out and further matured the force structure of the SSF's aerospace and cyber branches by creating or designating a number of new joint-force units under its Military Unit Cover Designator range (32001-32099). **[1]** At this time, units belonging to the former General Staff Department's Informatization Department (through the Information Support Base and its subordinate units) were incorporated into the SSF, **[2]** and later apparently reorganized into an "Information Technology Force (信息技术部队)" ([Sina News](#), June 21, 2018). This latter organization continued to operate as recently as March 2024 per civilian recruitment drives at major Chinese universities ([Weixin](#), March 5, 2023). Despite clear potential synergies and overlap between the aerospace and cyber forces, this information technology support force was kept as a largely independent, quasi "third branch" of the SSF ([MOD](#), April 20).

The CMC's original intent may have been to use the SSF as a temporary "holding company." In this way, it would consolidate disparate aerospace, cyber, and informatization support units, each within their respective silos, in order to expand and mature their force structure over time. The expectation would have been that they could later operate as standalone independent "branches," akin to the JLSF. In this regard, more painful

possible reform paths that would have resolved grade issues, grade imbalances between branches, and synergy between forces were likely judged to be irrelevant since they would be overcome in time ([163](#), October 19, 2023). The approach the PLA took also had the advantage of letting the CMC maintain a degree of oversight and control over critical elements underpinning joint operations and force modernization. This enabled the CMC to better wield its institutional power as a cudgel for control, reform, and force-shaping.
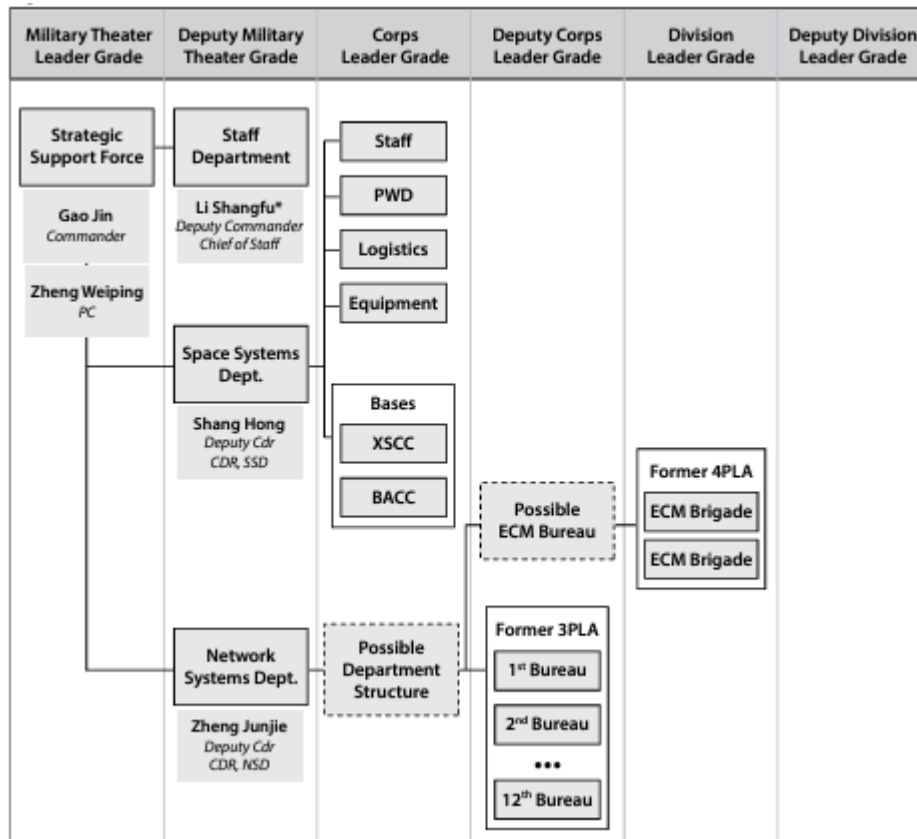

Figure 1: A grade analysis of the SSF in its 2015-2017 organizational structure.

Force Composition and Mission Focus of the New Military Branches

It remains to be seen how the overarching missions of the SSF will be distributed across the three branches that have taken its place. Despite their relative independence, the aerospace, cyber, and information support forces under the SSF did have meaningful overlap between their respective missions, particularly with respect to intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and space-based information support. The units and capabilities they have each inherited can guide an initial assessment of their respective missions in their new status as "forces," but that approach is a stopgap at best. If the SSF was always intended as a transitional structure and the three new joint forces were always the intended result, however, one would expect that their force structure and existing mission parameters would remain largely the same.

- **PLA Aerospace Force (军事航天部队):** The aerospace force will likely maintain its existing missions, units, and capabilities. These include ground-based space surveillance; satellite telemetry, tracking, and

control; space launches; manned spaceflight; space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and ground and space-based kinetic anti-satellite capabilities. This branch also likely inherited the survey, mapping, and navigation stations of the former General Staff Department, newly reorganized since the 2017–2019 "mini reorganization" into the former space system department's structure.

- **PLA Cyberspace Force (网络空间部队):** The cyber force is likely to continue its principal mission of information warfare. This includes cyber reconnaissance, cyber espionage, offensive cyber operations and operational preparation of the battlespace, and strategic electronic warfare (including non-kinetic anti-satellite measures). An open question is whether it will continue to maintain the psychological warfare mission under the 311 Base, which is focused on psychological warfare measures against Taiwan. The 311 Base has always been an outlier in analysis of SSF structure and mission organization, sharing neither obvious mission synergy with its cyber and electronic warfare counterparts nor their common origin under the former General Staff Department Third and Fourth Departments. **[3]** Furthermore, the Base's public visibility relative to the PLA's other psychological warfare assets has made it difficult to judge whether it is reflective of the arrangement of the PLA's broader capabilities in this domain, or an outlier.

- **PLA Information Support Force (信息支援部队):** The information support force is composed of the former General Staff Department Informatization Department—reorganized into the SSF in the 2017-2019 "mini reorganization"—that was largely integrated wholesale under the Information Support Base and its subordinate units. These units and capabilities include the Information Support Base and its subordinate units. This force likely focuses exclusively on "informatization" and "information support" (i.e. communications facilitation) rather than the more offensive and intelligence-related capabilities associated with information warfare. Its mission likely includes the maintenance of military networks, strategic communications and backbone infrastructure, management of communication satellites, cyber defense, cybersecurity, and information security for military communications, and strategic spectrum allocation and management.

Rationale and Organizational Logics of the New Military Forces

From an organizational management perspective, the CMC has further flattened out the overall structure of the PLA. It now directly oversees four services, five joint-force military theaters, and four joint-force forces/branches. This creates a complex matrix structure that expands the previous maxim of "CMC leads, services build, theaters fight" (ChinaNews, November 26, 2015). It may now be more appropriate to say that "CMC leads, theaters fight, services build, and forces/branches support." This is a new paradigm whereby services are responsible for force construction, theaters are responsible for joint-force operations in geographic areas of responsibility, and forces/branches are responsible for strategic-level support through both the provisioning of vital services and capabilities and by conducting operations in critical domains of warfare.

The new branches may be understood as the PLA's answer to the functional combatant commands of the US military. Unlike geographic combatant commands (e.g. US Indo-Pacific Command or Central Command) which operate in delineated geographic areas of responsibility, functional combatant commands (COCOMs)

operate across geographic or regional boundaries and provide unique capabilities to both the geographic combatant commands and the military services.

Political and organizational factors could also be at play in the creation of the new forces/branches. This is on top of the strictly military and operational advantages the new reorganization promises. Flattening the whole of the PLA into a triple-matrix, more horizontal structure of services, forces/branches, and theaters has the advantage of creating barriers to the formation of power centers within the force. Furthermore, the subordination of logistics, aerospace capabilities, cyber and electronic warfare capabilities, and communications and networking directly under the CMC means it will directly control the most fundamental resources for any service and military theater. Practically speaking, this is a useful measure for ensuring that the allocation of those resources is driven by operational need (from the CMC's point of view) rather than parochialism or favoritism (PLA Daily, November 10, 2021). It will therefore be in line with the PLA's long-term strategic objectives of force modernization, development, and joint operations. Many of these functions underpin and encourage the type of joint-force environment (via communications, networking, intelligence sharing, etc.) that the CMC is more broadly looking to create (MOD, January 5, 2023). As with the SSF, these forces/branches can be used as an effective force-shaping tool by the central leadership in the long-term development and modernization of the PLA.

Timing of Dissolution and Reorganization

It is unclear why the reorganization is happening now if it has been on the cards since the SSF's creation. It is true that the CMC would have faced significant difficulties if it had attempted to establish these branches in 2015. The dispersed units that the SSF consolidated under the SSD and NSD had no preexisting cohesive structure that would resemble a "force" or "branch" as such. In the case of cyber and electronic warfare, the major gaps in its command and grade structure could not have been resolved easily.

The "mini reorganization" undertaken by the SSF from 2017 to 2019 is in retrospect a benchmark date. It was during that period that what would become the new Information Support Force was first integrated (or at least first acknowledged as being integrated from our outside perspective) into the SSF. The intervening five to seven years may have been necessary for this new force to reach the necessary maturity, and for the establishment of mid-level joint-force units (overseeing the previously inherited units from GAD and GSD) to be routinized and normalized across the force.

Another possibility is that a series of internal controversies and international incidents caused the CMC and Xi Jinping to lose faith and trust in the SSF's leadership. This is not mutually exclusive with the organizationally focused explanation. In 2023 alone, the SSF Commander Lt. General Ju Gansheng (巨乾生) and Minister of Defense Li Shangfu (李尚福), the former SSF Chief of Staff, reportedly came under investigation for "corrupt procurement" by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (see *China Brief*, September 20, 2023); the US Air Force was forced to shoot down a PRC spy balloon erroneously entering US airspace, and Microsoft revealed widespread PRC intrusions into US critical infrastructure that are suspected to originate from the PLA (Microsoft Threat Intelligence, September 2023). Whatever plans may

have already been underway for the SSF's dissolution, these incidents from the last year likely served to accelerate them, if not prompt them.

Conclusion

It is too soon to say what the latest developments entail for the PLA's ability to fight and win wars. It is clear, however, that the PLA will place a heavier emphasis on direct control of strategic forces from now on. Whether this makes the PLA more effective in the long run will depend on one's assessment of its current problems. If, as the CMC seems to think, the primary current challenge the PLA faces is an excess of bureaucracy and layers of command preventing decisive action by leadership, this new change is likely to be a net positive for combat effectiveness. Alternatively, if the PLA's effectiveness hinges on a cultivation of bottom-up initiative and dynamic action, as espoused by the US military, the increased ease of "skip echelon" command from the top down that the PLA is pursuing (both through reorganization, and through technological innovations like the Integrated Command Platform) may paradoxically be at cross purposes with maximizing combat effectiveness. We are still in the early days of this new era of the PLA's force structure. The outcome remains an open question.

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Notes

[1] Elsa B. Kania and John Costello, "Seizing the Commanding Heights: The PLA Strategic Support Force in Chinese Military Power," Journal of Strategic Studies, 44, no. 2 (2021): p. 253, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1747444.

[2] J. Michael Dahm, Testimony to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, p. 14-15, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2024-03/J.Michael_Dahm_Testimony.pdf.

[3] John Costello and Joe McReynolds, China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era, (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2018), p. 17 https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/china-perspectives_13.pdf.

A Disturbance in the Force: The Reorganization of People's Liberation Army Command and Elimination of China's Strategic Support Force

by J. Michael Dahm

Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony of the ISF (Source: Youtube.com/Yuqilin)

Executive Summary:

- Consolidation and refinement of military information power capabilities within the new Information Support Force (ISF) continues to reflect the PLA's outsized emphasis on battlespace information control in multi-domain integrated joint operations.

- The April 2024 reorganization eliminated the Strategic Support Force and subordinated the Space Systems Department and Network Systems Department—now designated the Military Aerospace Force and Cyberspace Force, respectively—to the Central Military Commission.

- Additional changes to PLA organization and a clarification of roles and responsibilities in the new structure may be forthcoming.

- The ISF could be the PLA's answer to information network competition as the US military advances network capabilities associated with Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2).

On April 19, 2024, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) eliminated its Strategic Support Force (SSF; 战略支援部队) and created a new military force, the Information Support Force (ISF; 信息支援部队). The ISF did not replace the SSF, which had overarching responsibility for all PLA space- and information-related capabilities. The mid-April reorganization elevated the SSF's former communications organization, the Information Communication Base (ICB), to a higher grade, making it equivalent to the other two SSF departments. The three SSF functional components, what are now called the Military Aerospace Force (ASF; 军事航天部队), the Cyberspace Force (CSF; 网络空间部队), and the Information Support Force (ISF), have been organized under the Central Military Commission (CMC). They join the Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF; 联勤保障部队) as four "arms" (兵种) that are directly subordinate to the CMC.

The implications and impacts of this development are not entirely clear in the wake of the SSF's demise. The move by CMC Chairman Xi Jinping may be related to factors ranging from ongoing corruption scandals within PLA ranks to bureaucratic infighting to organizational efforts to increase operational effectiveness. In the final analysis, the SSF may have fallen victim to a combination of all those factors. The ISF, for its part, may be the PLA's answer to information network competition as the US military advances network capabilities associated with Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2).

Evolution of the Strategic Support Force

The Strategic Support Force was created in 2015 as part of so called "above-the-neck" reforms that reorganized the upper echelons of the PLA (see *China Brief*, February 8, 2016). These reforms created operationally focused military theater commands and scoped military service responsibilities to "man, train, and equip" similar to command relationships in the US military between combatant commands and military services. The newly created SSF was a military service unique to the PLA that focused on space, counter-space, and information warfare capabilities.

Prior to the SSF's dissolution, the SSF may have totaled between 200,000 and 250,000 personnel. Given the two million PLA troops on active duty, the SSF only represented between 10-12 percent of the force. Still, if those numbers are accurate, the SSF alone was larger than almost every NATO military and had almost as many personnel as the entire Japan Self Defense Force (Dahm, 2024, p.12). In the PLA organizational hierarchy, every command organization has a "grade," akin to a unit rank. The SSF was a theater grade organization, commanded by a full general, organizationally on par with the other military services and the PLA's five operational theater commands.

In 2015, the newly created SSF brought together information-related organizations from the PLA's former General Staff Department (GSD). The GSD 3rd Department (3PLA), responsible for electronic intelligence and cyber reconnaissance, GSD 4th Department (4PLA), responsible for electronic warfare and cyber-attack, and some intelligence elements from the GSD 2nd Department (2PLA) were grouped under the Network Systems Department (NSD) (网络系统部). The NSD was a deputy theater grade organization under the SSF commanded by a lieutenant general. The NSD also reportedly inherited the PLA's 311 Base, which has

a mission narrowly focused on psychological operations against Taiwan, generating propaganda, and influencing public opinion on the island to support PLA objectives. **[1]**

The reforms also consolidated space-related organizations from the PLA's former General Armaments Department (GAD) in the SSF's Space Systems Department (SSD; 航天系统部). The SSD was also a deputy theater grade organization under the SSF. It was responsible for virtually all PLA space operations including space launches; telemetry, tracking, and control (TT&C) of satellites and other space vehicles; management and control of PLA space-based communications and reconnaissance; and select counter-space capabilities, especially on-orbit counter-space capabilities.

A second round of PLA reforms, the 2017–2019 "below-the-neck" reforms, made significant changes within the military services and theaters. One move in these reforms shifted the PLA organization with overall responsibility for national and joint military communication networks to SSF control. In 2015, the CMC Joint Staff Department controlled what was known as the Information Assurance Base (IAB; 信息保障基地) also called the Information Support Base (信息支援基地). **[2]** As part of the below-the-neck reforms, the IAB, designated the 61001 Unit (61001 部队), was moved to the SSF and renamed the "Information Communication Base (ICB; 信息通信基地)." The ICB commanded a number of geographically distributed information communication brigades (信息通信旅) assigned to support PLA theater commands. **[3]**

The "base" in "Information Communication Base" refers to a high-level military organization and not necessarily a basing facility (e.g., a naval base). According to PLA organizational convention, a "base (基地)," is normally a corps grade or deputy corps grade command, one or two steps down from a deputy theater grade. Therefore, within the SSF, the ICB was likely an independent corps grade organization directly under SSF command alongside the two deputy theater grade departments, the NSD and SSD. Figure 1 depicts PLA organization with detail of SSF elements prior to the April 2024 reforms (Dahm, 2024, p.15).
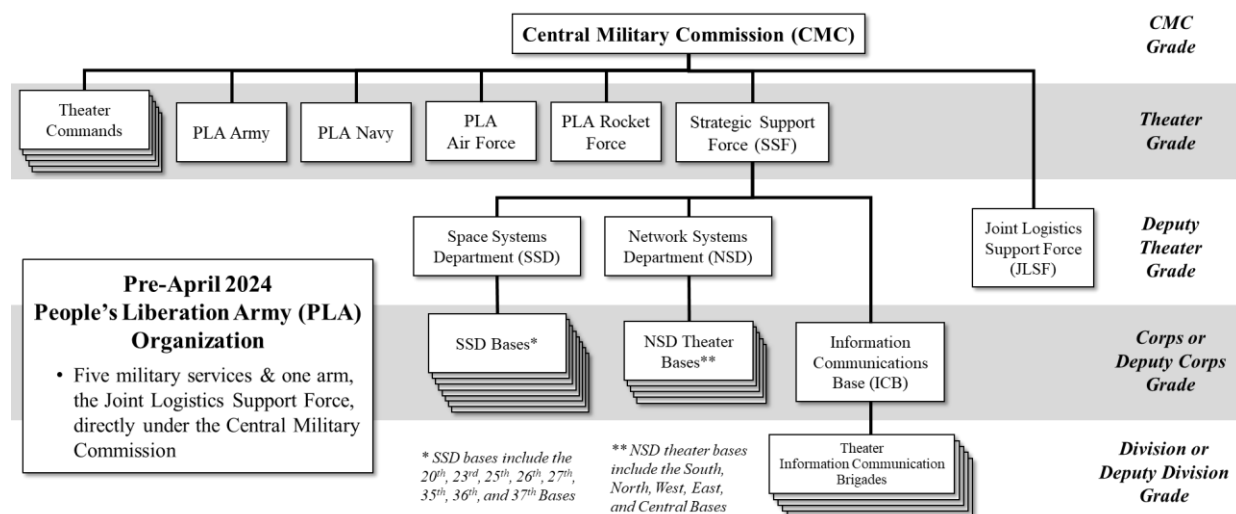

Figure 1: Pre-April 2024 People's Liberation Army (PLA) Organization.

The New Reforms and Expectations for the Information Support Force

Eight years after its creation, the April 2024 reorganization eliminated the Strategic Support Force and subordinated the SSD and NSD—now designated the Military Aerospace Force (ASF) and Cyberspace Force (CSF), respectively—to the CMC. The Information Communication Base (ICB) was elevated from a corps grade organization to a deputy theater grade organization and renamed the Information Support Force (ISF). A former deputy commander of the SSF, Lieutenant General Bi Yi, assumed command of the new ISF. PLA spokesperson Senior Colonel Wu Qian stated, "With the latest reform, the PLA now has a new system of services and arms under the leadership and command of the CMC. There are four services, namely the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Rocket Force; and four arms, including the Aerospace Force, the Cyberspace Force, the Information Support Force, and the Joint Logistic Support Force" (*Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, April 20). Figure 2 depicts PLA organization with detail of former SSF elements following the April 2024 reforms.

The ISF will likely retain all the ICB's responsibilities and capabilities. Whether theater information communication brigades are elevated to theater information communication bases remains to be seen. The new ISF probably has overarching responsibility for the PLA's enterprise-level computer architecture, the integrated command platform (一体化指挥平台). The ISF may also coordinate cyber defense and information security of PLA networks through the Network Security and Defense Center (NSDC; 网络安防中心). [4] Former ICB units that are likely now part of the ISF also appear to be responsible for maintaining and repairing the National Defense Communication Network (NDCN; 国防通讯网) built on the PRC's defense fiber-optic cable (国防光缆) backbone network (MOD, December 3, 2018).

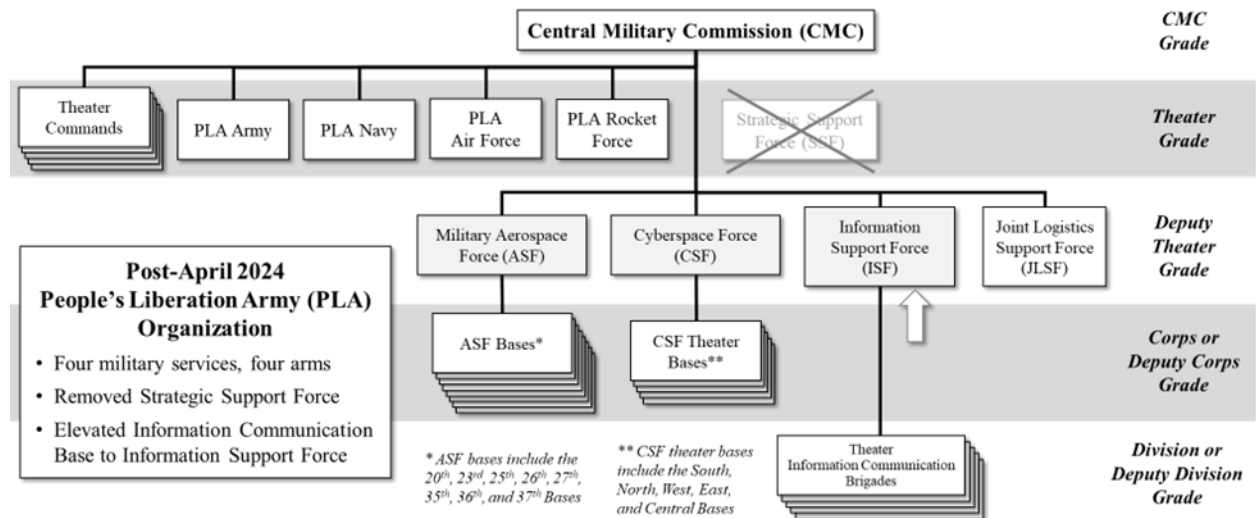Figure 2: Post-April 2024 People's Liberation Army (PLA) Organization

Rationale Unclear, Further Restructuring Possible

It is not entirely clear why the PLA decided to eliminate the Strategic Support Force. With the benefit of hindsight, the US Department of Defense (DoD) may have anticipated the reorganization for some time. DoD first included the new terms for the SSF's Aerospace Force and Cyberspace Force in its 2023 "China Military Power Report" (DoD, 2023, p.70). In January 2024, Chinese language media began to speculate about an imminent breakup of the SSF into its component elements (*Ming Pao Canada*, January 11). Palace intrigue surrounded the potential elimination of the SSF since its commander, General Ju Qiansheng, had been missing from public appearances since summer 2023. Ju was rumored to be caught up in ongoing corruption scandals involving the PLA Rocket Force and Equipment Development Department. As of this writing, Ju's future is unclear.

Despite the corruption speculation, the PLA may have eliminated the SSF simply because it had become irrelevant. Reports indicated that the aerospace, cyberspace, and communications network elements pursued their disparate functions relatively independent of the SSF staff (*Ming Pao Canada*, January 11). The elimination of the SSF should not necessarily be viewed as a failed PLA experiment. The consolidation and refinement of military information power capabilities continues to reflect the PLA's outsized emphasis on battlespace information control in multi-domain integrated joint operations.

Official coverage of the ISF creation ceremony observed, "Xi Jinping emphasized that the Information Support Force is a newly created strategic force and a key element for coordinating the construction and application of network information systems" (MOD, April 19). A subsequent *PLA Daily* newspaper commentary connected the creation of the ISF to Xi's 2022 report to the 20th Party Congress that emphasized network information systems as the "largest variable (最大变量)" for improving the combat effectiveness of the military (MOD, April 20). At the core of the PLA's informationized warfare concept is the idea that modern warfare is a confrontation between systems-of-systems. Empowering the new deputy theater grade Information Support Force to strengthen and harden information network capabilities may be the PLA's response to similar US DoD efforts to consolidate and align US military information networks under the umbrella of Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2).

Additional changes to PLA organization and clarification of roles and responsibilities in the new structure may be forthcoming. In the April 19, 2024, ISF rollout, the PLA spokesperson foreshadowed, "As circumstances and tasks evolve, we will continue to refine the modern military force structure with Chinese characteristics" (Chinamil, April 22). Monitoring future development related to PLA information organizations will provide much needed insights into the PRC's military capabilities, strategy, and intent.

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Notes

[1] Western assessments probably overstate the SSF's leading role in PLA psychological operations. As part of the 2015 reforms, the SSF reportedly inherited the 311 Base (61716 部队) from the former General Political Department (GPD). Limited open-source intelligence indicates the 311 Base is focused exclusively on psychological warfare and propaganda that targets public opinion on Taiwan. Very little evidence has emerged that the SSF has control over psychological or propaganda operations against other targets such as the US and its allies, regionally or globally. Broader SSF cyber capabilities may certainly play a role in collecting intelligence and spreading disinformation as part of a broader malign influence campaign, but there is scant evidence that the SSF has overall responsibility for political warfare in the PLA or PRC government. See, Mark Stokes and Russel Hsiao, *The People's Liberation Army General Political Department* (Washington, DC: 2049 Institute, 2013), 29, https://project2049.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/P2049_Stokes_Hsiao_PLA_General_Political_Department_Liaison_101413.pdf, also, John Costello and Joe McReynolds, *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2018), p. 17, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/china-perspectives_13.pdf.

[2] Elsa B. Kania and John Costello, "Seizing the Commanding Heights: The PLA Strategic Support Force in Chinese Military Power," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 44, no. 2 (2021): p. 253, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1747444. The Information Communication Base (ICB) should not be confused with the CMC Joint Staff Department Information and Communications Bureau (信息通信局) (JSD ICB).

[3] Zhang Xiaohan, "学思践悟, 重点突破备战保通" [Study, Think and Practice, Focus on Breakthroughs & Prepare for Success], *解放军报 [PLA Daily]*, April 2, 2023, http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/wzll/yw_214068/16213872.html. There is conflicting information about the organization and subordination of PLA information communication forces. On the one hand, it seems clear that the top-level Information Communication Base (61001 Unit), headquartered in southwest Beijing, commands several SSF ICB brigades throughout China. However, PLA media makes numerous references to apparently remote "information communication bases." This may be an informal term that simply describes where IC brigades and other ICB units are physically located. See, for example, "情注一缆通滇藏 – 记某信息通信基地四营五连连长翁春芳" [A Cable Connects Yunan and Tibet – A Record of Weng Chunfang, Commander of the Fourth Battalion Fifth Company of an Information Communications Base], *新华网 [XinhuaNet]*, December 3, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-12/03/c_1123801663.htm. Attempts to sort out inconsistencies in terminology are further exacerbated by the fact that other PLA services maintain their own information communication brigades and information communication units. See, "正赛 (通信兵专业比武邀请赛)" [Main Match (The Signal Corps Professional Competition Invitational Tournament)], *永不消逝的电波 [The Eternal Wave]*, June 27, 2023, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_23645590.

[4] Kania and Costello, 253, see also, Zhang Dapeng, Kang Zizhan, Wang Lingshuo, and Zhang Shaobo, "淬炼新域新质'新锋刃'" [Tempering the New Domain, New Quality, 'New Forward Edge'], *解放军报 [PLA Daily]*, December 21, 2022, http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/wzll/yw_214068/4928766.html.

People's Armed Forces Departments: Developments Under Xi Jinping

by Cindy Zheng and Timothy R. Heath

A PAFD unit performing exercises in Anhui province. (Source: [PRC Ministry of National Defense](#))

Executive Summary:

- People's Armed Police Forces Departments (PAFD), or People's militias, have grown under Xi Jinping. This reflects apprehension about domestic security rather than any serious effort at wartime preparedness.
- PAFD units are staffed by military and civilian employees from local governments. They are responsible for recruiting personnel for all the armed forces, as well as overseeing the recruitment, organizing, and management of militia forces.
- The Party aims to create a heightened sense of corporate responsibility toward the PRC's national development goals through efforts to build militia units within companies.
- PAFD also contributes to military modernization through training and recruitment efforts. Xi has also directed all elements of the armed forces, including the PAFD, to support the strengthening of the military-civil fusion development strategy.

On April 19, the Qinghai Branch of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, a major state-owned commercial bank, held an opening ceremony for its new People's Armed Forces Department (PAFD; 中国民兵). This department will be run by the Xining garrison of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) ([Xining TV](#), April 23).

Under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping, the PAFD has experienced a resurgence in activity. Reflecting broader apprehension about domestic security, the PAFD has increased its involvement in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and bolstered its political control. It has also stepped up efforts to support the military's modernization through enhanced training and recruitment. While these measures could marginally improve the readiness of the People's Republic of China (PRC) for war, they are principally driven by the CCP's focus on maintaining social stability in a period of economic deceleration and popular unrest. The reappearance of people's militias under the PAFD during a period of economic difficulty could underscore the legitimacy challenges that Xi Jinping is concerned about, highlighting the close interplay between security concerns and societal stability under his leadership.

The PAFD's Background

The PAFD's history dates to the founding of the PRC. Under Mao Zedong, these units focused primarily on the recruitment and management of militia at the county and village level. During the Cultural Revolution, these militias reached their peak at more than 30 million members, all mobilized to support Mao's political campaigns. However, in the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping oversaw a significant reduction in PAFD activities. By 2011, the number of militia members dwindled to an all-time low of 8 million ([CNN](#), February 21).

The PAFD is one of the CCP's three main People's Armed Force groups (人民武装部; 人武部), along with the PLA and People's Armed Police (PAP). The PAFD is primarily responsible for ensuring domestic public security and social stability. PAFD units are staffed by military and civilian employees from local governments. They are responsible for recruiting personnel for all the armed forces, as well as overseeing the recruitment, organizing, and management of militia forces. PAFD units and the militia they oversee also serve in an auxiliary capacity to help local officials cope with disasters and other crises, and aid political control through propaganda and defense education activities. **[1]**

Militia cadres are expected to retain their regular jobs and are embedded in the population. Militia members thus maintain a presence in all areas of society, including the government, companies, and universities. This arrangement allows them to keep a lower profile than active-duty officers and develop a closer relationship with the populace, affording them a greater ability to acquire intelligence, including about citizens in all walks of life and their opinions. This in turn facilitates efforts by police forces to identify and suppress potential opposition to the CCP.

The PRC's military service law establishes that male militia members should be between 18 to 35 years old. Women are also eligible to join, but specific age requirements are not listed in the law. **[2]** The flexibility and low-profile nature of PRC militia allows them to carry out a wide range of missions, making them a valuable

asset for achieving the leadership's goals of tightening control over society during periods of social and economic turmoil. PRC government officials, such as defense ministry spokesperson Wu Qian (吴谦), have highlighted the militias' versatility, stating that they are capable of everything from large-scale mobilization to responding to natural disasters (MND, November 13, 2023). However, their greatest utility to the Party lies in their ability to direct popular political activity at the grassroots level, and to engage in patriotic propaganda and pro-CCP educational activities in various settings such as schools and factories.

Developments under Xi Jinping

In recent years, the PRC leadership has faced various socio-economic challenges, prompting a tighter grip over society. The economy continues to struggle with high youth unemployment, a real estate slump, crackdowns on private firms in the tech and education sectors, major shadow banks defaulting on their investment products, and significant layoffs by SOEs (see *China Brief*, March 15, October 6, 2023). As a result, the population has been expressing greater discontent with the government through an increase in protests and demonstrations, threatening the political legitimacy of the Party. According to data from the China Labor Bulletin, a non-profit organization that tracks workers' protests, the number of labor strikes and demonstrations more than doubled in 2023 to 1,794, compared to only 1,386 cases recorded in 2019 (China Labor Bulletin, January 13).

To address these problems, the leadership has revitalized PAFDs and assigned them greater responsibilities. These include detecting domestic threats, instilling greater political spirit and support for the Party, and ensuring compliance with party directives. For example, a press release by Zou Jinsong (邹劲松), Secretary of the Armed Forces for Beijing's Fangshan District, urged PAFD cadres to boost national defense education and create a greater sense of responsibility and loyalty to the party atmosphere in society. **[3]**

Xi Jinping has strategically established PAFD militia units within the corporate sector. These are primarily within companies where the central or regional government has some level of ownership. The Yili Group (伊利集团), headquartered in Hohhot and ranked as the world's fifth-largest dairy producer, stands as a prominent example of this initiative, as the first major non-public enterprise in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region to form PAFD militia units (North News, December 30). These units within Yili operate under the governance of the region in which they are based, supervised by the PLA garrison in Inner Mongolia. According to Yili's executive vice-chairman for the Inner Mongolia region, these national forces are designed to bolster the Party's role in businesses and to help with the construction of other PAFD units, as well as to promote the brand of the companies themselves (Baijiahao, January 2). This incorporation of armed force groups within businesses enables the Party to directly influence and monitor employee activities, data flows, and communications, ensuring adherence to government regulations while also extending influence over strategic sectors at the grassroots level.

PAFD units within companies differ from Party committees. The latter are key decision-making bodies within these various entities tasked with ensuring effective operations while aligning with party policies, values, and regulations. PAFD units, on the other hand, comprise individuals with responsibilities for security and defense, including the recruitment for the armed forces and militia management. Alongside these duties, PAFD personnel conduct surveillance and assist in emergency and crisis responses as part of their security role (Xinhua, October 24, 2017).

Other important sectors of the economy have also set up armed forces units. These include property market enterprises, such as the Shanghai Municipal Investment Group, a government-owned property developer and construction firm. The company's militia unit is overseen by the Shanghai garrison of the PLA (The Paper, September 28, 2023). The force has a role in providing jobs to demobilized veterans or recruiting soldiers for the military. Similar actions have been taken by Hai'an Urban Construction Investment and Development Group (海安市城建开发投资集团) in Nantong city, Jiangsu province; three companies involved in property construction, transportation, and water services in Huizhou city, Guangdong province; and nine firms located in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province (CNN, February 21).

The Party aims to create a heightened sense of corporate responsibility toward the PRC's national development goals through these efforts. Under Xi, the CCP's traditional view of security, which pertains primarily to hard power and protection from foreign threats and aggressors, has evolved. The behavior of the majority of the PRC's population suggests an overriding concern for economic security. This has prompted Xi to strengthen comprehensive security, seeking closer interrelations between the economy and national security. This includes a focus on internal threats such as poor corporate governance, low confidence in investments, market volatility, and limited job prospects causing wage stagnation. The reemergence of PAFD militia units contributes to efforts to improve the comprehensive national security.

PAFD Support for Military Modernization

Under Xi, the PAFD has stepped up its contributions to military modernization through training and recruitment efforts. Xi has also directed all elements of the armed forces, including the PAFD, to support the strengthening of the military-civil fusion development strategy (cf. *China Brief*, April 14, 2023). Militia forces have also stepped up their professional military training. For instance, a notice published by Jiangda County, authored by the county's People's Armed Force unit, stated that PLA personnel had been invited to PAFD training sessions to provide on-site guidance and follow-up training. The PLA personnel taught classes on "hand to hand combat, enemy capture skills, baton shield skills, and the use of explosion-proof equipment" (Tibet Daily, January 24). New militia units have appeared with capabilities in electronic warfare, drones, network communications, and helicopter rescue. They have also increased joint training with active duty personnel, further enhancing their combat readiness (CASI, November 14, 2022).

The PAFD's militia plays a crucial role in identifying promising young people with the potential to become "high-quality (高素质)" recruits for the armed forces. **[4]** For example, a written summary from Yangpu County's People's Armed Force meeting highlighted the militia units' efforts to bolster the "sense of

responsibility and mission" for conscription and grassroots armed work. This includes aligning thinking, improving positions, strengthening leadership, clarifying tasks, consolidating responsibilities, and carefully selecting politically reliable personnel and outstanding young individuals with attributes such as good ideas, strong physical fitness, excellent professional skills, and a diligent work ethic (Yangpu District Government, February 27).

Conclusion

The increasing militarization of PAFD could marginally improve the PRC's wartime readiness. PAFD cadres receive military training to enhance their response to national emergencies, which could facilitate efforts to carry out defense mobilization during wartime. With militia expanding into private companies, the PRC might be slightly better positioned to mobilize private sector resources to support a war effort. However, the impact of the changes to the PAFD for military operations should not be overstated. These units receive a modest amount of fairly basic military training and appear to train with active-duty forces on an infrequent and inconsistent basis. More importantly, the changes to PAFD activities do nothing to address the more fundamental problems with the PRC's defense mobilization system, such as a lack of standardized data management, understaffed and misaligned bureaucracies, inconsistent authorities, and unresolved compensation policies. **[5]**

For now, at least, trends in the PAFD's development reflect concerns about social stability and security far more than they do any serious effort at wartime preparedness. The expansion of PAFD militia units into the corporate sector is primarily a result of fears about rising social instability due to the slowing economy. People's frustrations and growing social unrest are an increasing concern for the Party and its ability to maintain political stability. While social stability is an important condition for any country's economic development, the inverse is also true. The Party has long tethered its political legitimacy in large part to its ability to maintain economic growth and improve the people's material conditions. This interconnectedness between economic development and national defense goals has received greater emphasis under Xi. As the PRC government grapples with increasingly severe economic challenges, it is likely to rely more heavily on all available security forces to maintain stability and increase control over companies.

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Notes

[1] Dennis Blasko, "PLA Conscript and Noncommissioned Officer Individual Training," The People in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China's Military by Roy Kamphausen (ed), SSI, 2008.

[2] "Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China," The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/13/content_1383961.htm.

[3] "In 2024, the plenary (enlarged) meeting of the Party Committee of the Ministry of Human Resources and Armed Forces in Fangshan District and the Party-controlled armed forces debriefing meeting were held," Fangshan District People's Government of Beijing Municipality, https://www.bjfsh.gov.cn/zhxw/fsdt/202402/t20240202_40072202.shtml.

[4] M. Taylor Fravel (2020) China's "World-Class Military" Ambitions: Origins and Implications, The Washington Quarterly, 43:1, 85-99. https://taylorfravel.com/documents/research/fravel.2020.TWQ.china.world.class.military.pdf.

[5] 刘瑞强 [Liu Ruiqiang], 《国防动员法》实施以来的成就、问题与展望 ["Achievements, Problems and Prospects of National Defense Mobilization Law Since its Implementation"], 北京理工大学报告 [*Journal of Beijing Institute of Technology*], Vol. 24, No. 1, 2022, pp. 130-137.

Updated ILO Forced Labor Guidelines Directly Target Uyghur Forced Labor

by Adrian Zenz

The flag of the International Labor Organisation (Source: Wikipedia)

Executive Summary:

- For first time since establishing its forced labor taskforce in 2001, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has issued authoritative and comprehensive guidance on operationalizing the research and measurement of forced labor, updating its more provisional guidelines from 2012.
- The new ILO Handbook adds a substantial new section on state-imposed forced labor, squarely targeting Beijing's forced labor in Xinjiang and Tibet and specifically referring to "labor transfers" of ethnic minorities.
- The Handbook adopts the author's category of "non-internment state-imposed forms of forced labor" in its research guidelines, significantly enhancing the ability to detect the forced labor of Uyghurs.
- The Handbook notes that forced labor may be implemented by states for political reasons, including for reasons of "altering the population composition in particular areas." This language points directly to labor transfers targeting Uyghurs.
- The Handbook's statement that non-internment forced labor mobilization is best assessed as a risk rather than a specific instance, which it adopts from the author's recent research, provides strong support for arguments that related legislation should reverse the burden of proof, shifting it from enforcement authorities to companies. This could have implications for the European Union's upcoming forced labor legislation.

In 2001, the International Labor Organization (ILO) established its Special Action Program to combat Forced Labour (SAP-FL) to develop survey guidelines and indicators for assessing forced labor worldwide. In 2012, this resulted in the first systematic attempt to establish a forced labor measurement framework, a set of Survey Guidelines titled "Hard to see, harder to count" (ILO, 2012). The 2012 Guidelines had several limitations, however. Their technical nature was designed to inform national forced labor surveys, making them largely inaccessible to non-experts. It also came with conceptual limitations, having been primarily designed to counter private forced labor. Finally, the Survey Guidelines were a work in progress, given that the ILO's efforts were still in their infancy, and therefore did not claim to be authoritative (Journal of Human Trafficking, 2023).

This led to the European Commission using a much more widely known ILO framework, the set of 11 forced labor indicators, in September 2022 draft legislation prohibiting the import of products involving forced labor, widely understood to target forced Uyghur labor in the People's Republic of China (PRC) (European Commission, September 14, 2022). These indicators were however designed not for formal measurement but to help frontline inspectors recognize potential signs of forced labor at workplaces (ILO, 2012). In conversations with the author, the ILO noted that they had "a communication problem" about the roles of their various indicator frameworks.

The ILO's 11 indicators are ill-suited to identify what the author has referred to as "non-internment state-imposed forced labor mobilization." This form of forced labor mobilization, which characterizes forced labor transfers in Xinjiang and Tibet, is a dynamic process whereby states identify a target population for forced work, and then coercively mobilize, recruit, and train them, before transferring them to designated workplaces (Central Asian Survey, 2023; China Brief, September 22, 2020). Workplaces are not necessarily heavily secured, and the process does not involve prisons or labor camps, rendering this type of forced labor less visible and harder to measure. The ILO encountered this challenge when attempting to measure forced labor mobilization for cotton harvesting in Uzbekistan (ILO, 2022). It tried to interview workers in the cotton fields (i.e. at their place of work), but struggled to find specific signs of coercion, besides the fact that workers gave highly standardized answers, suggesting that they had been coached by the state to mislead ILO evaluators (Journal of Human Trafficking, 2023).

In 2023, the author interviewed several senior ILO officials (Journal of Human Trafficking, 2023). The author challenged them about the facts that:

1. their 2012 Survey Guidelines were not designed to capture state-imposed forced labor in the PRC and elsewhere;
2. these Guidelines contained indicators that were only partially suited to capture Uyghur forced labor;
3. these Guidelines were little-known compared to the widely known set of 11 indicators;
4. the ILO's overall approach to forced labor measurement was unequipped to capture non-internment (i.e., non-prison) forms of forced labor mobilization, which are harder to conceptualize and measure; and

5. the ILO's global reports on forced labor have been far too optimistic concerning claims of a decline of state-imposed forced labor worldwide.

As a result of this engagement, the ILO told the author in 2023 that they would update their Guidelines. This update was published in late February this year. The results are highly impressive. The ILO appears to have carefully considered all feedback, as well as input by advocacy organizations such as Anti-Slavery International, and adopted improvements on all five points.

The New Guidelines

In February 2024, the ILO published a "Handbook," updating its 2012 Guidelines "Hard to see, harder to count" ([ILO](#), 2024). Here is a rundown of the key changes from a PRC-focused perspective, each of which is then discussed in greater detail:

1. The new guidelines are now presented in the form of an authoritative "Handbook."
2. This Handbook contains four mentions of "labor transfers" that target minorities for forced relocation. This particular expression is only commonly used in PRC contexts and the way it is defined in the Handbook points directly to forced labor in Xinjiang and Tibet.
3. The Handbook contains an expanded indicator framework, with dedicated sections for indicators of state-imposed forced labor.
4. The most important change from a China perspective is the addition of a dedicated section on measuring state-imposed forced labor (section 9).
5. This new section 9 contains an important subsection titled "General research considerations," which outlines the challenges of assessing "non-internment state-imposed forms of forced labor." This subsection draws from and builds on the conceptual work of the author ([Journal of Human Trafficking](#), 2023).
6. Section 9 states that forced labor mobilization may be implemented by states for political or national security (and not just economic) reasons, making it even more diagnostic of Uyghur and Tibetan forced labor.
7. Section 9 also discusses forced labor linked to administrative detention and "re-education" without legal conviction, language that targets Xinjiang's camps (and similar situations worldwide).
8. The Handbook strengthens the role of desk research, explicitly referring to academic research and NGO reports.

The new Handbook is more authoritative than the previous Guidelines. In the introduction, it presents itself as an integrated, authoritative, and "updated measurement framework and set of tools for the design, implementation and analysis of surveys of forced labor" (p.ix). It highlights the fact that it contains "a new unified set of core indicators of involuntary work and coercion," representing the new ILO office-level standard for forced labor measurement. The Handbook is a unified update of both the previous Survey Guidelines and the Guidelines Concerning the Measurement of Forced Labor endorsed by the 20th

International Conference of Labor Statisticians (ICLS) in 2018, further underscoring its authority (ICLS, 2018).

Previously, it was not clear which ILO document constituted the "standard" for measuring forced labor as defined by ILO Conventions 29 and 105. The adoption of the 2018 ICLS document was an important step in standardizing the ILO's approach to measuring forced labor. But it rendered the 2012 Survey Guidelines somewhat outdated, further adding to the numbers of documents that evaluators and researchers had to account for. While the new Handbook is an "office document" that has not been formally approved by the ILO governing body, it still constitutes an important development as it represents the world's most authoritative framework for operationalizing the measurement of forced labor.

Specific References to "Labor Transfers"

The Handbook uses the phrase "labor transfers" four times. While describing a global phenomenon, this particular expression is essentially only used in PRC contexts (Central Asian Survey, 2023). The Handbook's definition therefore points unambiguously to forced labor in Xinjiang and Tibet. Two uses occur in section 1.3 that outline the updated indicator framework when discussing indicators for coercive recruitment in the context of state-imposed forced labor for economic development (ILO, 2024, p.11):

> *Other violations involve large-scale labor transfer schemes, where workers belonging to certain ethnic or religious minority groups must—under menace of penalty—relocate to another geographical area to work in a State or private enterprise, sometimes under guise of vocational training or regional economic development.*

This phrasing links labor transfers specifically to (1) ethno-religious groups, (2) geographical relocation, and (3) work in enterprises. The advantage of this framing is that it specifically points to forced Uyghur labor. However, there are several disadvantages. First, PRC coercive labor transfers could also target impoverished Han Chinese. Second, transfers also occur through satellite factories in rural villages, in which case they do not involve geographic relocation (see Journal of Political Risk, 2019). Third, labor transfers can involve non-enterprise work destinations (China Brief, February 14). It is a common misconception that transfers must "transfer" people across space, whereas the term "transfer" refers to a sectoral transfer—from farming or herding to wage labor in the industrial sector, the service sector, or wage labor within agricultural processing or seasonal harvesting (CPCS, 2023). A third disadvantage is that labor transfers can involve non-enterprise work destinations.

All ILO forced labor measurement guidelines and documents explicitly state that measurement categories and related indicators must be adjusted to local contexts, meaning that the wording is not a straitjacket. In addition, the Handbook clearly distinguishes labor transfers from forced labor linked to re-education camps (Handbook sections 9.3 and 9.4; both systems of forced labor are discussed in detail in Central Asian Survey, 2023).

The two other instances of "labor transfer" are found in section 9.4, which discusses state-imposed forced labor for the purpose of economic development:

> *Such [labor transfer] schemes can result from the combination of various methods of compulsion to work: measures of general nature involving compulsion in the recruitment, assignment and transfer of labor, used in conjunction with other restrictions on freedom of employment, such as preventing workers from terminating their employment contracts or compulsorily extending contracts, penal sanctions for breaches of contract or as a means of maintaining labor discipline, restrictions on freedom of movement or on the possession and use of land, or abusive application of vagrancy laws (ILO 2007, para 107).* (p.168)

This links labor transfers not only to coercive mobilization but also to retention mechanisms designed to maintain employment, such as Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning and other poverty-fallback prevention systems. These have become increasingly important in recent years as the region has transitioned from the campaign-style approach of Xinjiang's former CCP Party Secretary Chen Quanguo (陈全国) to a focus on institutionalizing coercive transfer policies by his successor Ma Xingrui (马兴瑞) (see *China Brief*, June 5, 2022). In addition, the reference to restrictions on the "use of land" (taken from a 2007 International Labor Conference report) is highly significant for assessing PRC coercive labor transfers, which frequently enforce transfers of land-use rights from targeted ethnic groups to large operators or government cooperatives, subjecting the now landless Uyghurs more readily to labor transfers (China Brief, March, 2021; CPCS, 2023).

The New Indicator Framework

The Handbook provides an updated indicator framework. The previous indicator framework consisted of a six-field matrix: two columns for the two dimensions of forced labor per definition in ILO Convention 29, and three rows for the three employment cycle phases: recruitment, work conditions, and ability to leave work (see Journal of Human Trafficking, 2023). The 2024 Handbook simplifies the framework to a four-field matrix, eliminating the phase distinctions for the coercive dimension.

The 2012 version of the framework was only designed for private (company-based) forced labor. The Handbook now adds sections and indicators for state-imposed forced labor (SIFL) for each of the three employment cycle phases both for involuntariness and for the menace of penalty (coercion) dimension. This addition is crucial. However, the new framework imposes an unnecessary limitation by restricting SIFL indicators to particular forms of state-imposed forced labor, forms that differ for each phase. For example, indicators linked to prison labor are relegated to the second phase ("employment"), while those linked to forced labor mobilization for economic development—the type of forced labor affecting Uyghurs and Tibetans—are limited to the first phase ("recruitment"). While forced labor transfers are best measured at the recruitment stage, Xinjiang is now enforcing Uyghur work quotas by preventing them from leaving work, using mechanisms such as the new Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning system (see *China Brief*,

June 5, 2022). The association of employment cycle phases to particular forms of state-imposed forced labor therefore imposes an unnecessary restriction.

The coercive dimension adds indicators that are essential for capturing forced labor from coercive labor transfers in Xinjiang and Tibet, namely the imposition of punishments such as detention or imprisonment for refusing state-assigned work.

The New Section on State-Imposed Forced Labor

The Handbook's most important improvement is the addition of a 23-page section on state-imposed forced labor (section 9). After defining the aspects of state-imposed forced labor following ILO Convention 105, section 9 presents a crucial innovation—a section titled "General research considerations." This section notes that:

> *In contrast to most forms of forced labor, state-imposed forced labor operates through a pervasively coercive wider social context marked by a general lack of civic freedoms and a state apparatus that generates powerful coercive pressures through an extensive grassroots apparatus consisting of state and non-state institutions. Non-cooperation entails a systemic risk that is often more implicit than overt* (p.149).

This conceptual framing of state-imposed forced labor, adopted from the author's recent research, encapsulates why forced labor is difficult to conceptualize and even harder to measure ([Journal of Human Trafficking](#), 2023, p.21-22). By making this a research consideration for all forms of state-imposed forced labor, the ILO ensures that the elusive character of this unique form of forced labor—ubiquitous in Poverty Alleviation through Labor Transfer policies in Xinjiang and Tibet—receives due attention ([Central Asian Survey](#), 2023).

The section then continues to list several considerations for research on what it refers to as "non-internment state-imposed forms of forced labor," a phrase based on one coined by the author to capture the nature of Xinjiang's forced labor transfers ([Journal of Human Trafficking](#), 2023). Perhaps the most important of these considerations is that this form of forced labor may be measured by assessing "evidence of a state policy" linked to coerced work (p.150; [Journal of Human Trafficking](#), 2023, p.22). In the absence of direct witness testimony or the ability to conduct on-site research in regions such as Xinjiang or Tibet, policy analysis is the only way to demonstrate the existence of coercive labor practices and is how the first systematic research demonstrating the existence of Uyghur forced labor was conducted ([Journal of Political Risk](#), 2019). In addition, the Handbook agrees with the author's conclusion that non-internment state-imposed forced labor is best assessed during mobilization, given that coercion may be much less visible at workplaces (p.150; [Journal of Human Trafficking](#), 2023, p.22).

The Handbook notes that political aims may motivate forced labor policies, as is primarily the case in Xinjiang and Tibet. When reviewing the 2012 Survey Guidelines, the author had noted that the ILO's measurement frameworks were mainly geared toward capturing forced labor motivated by economic exploitation, which is

the most common motivation for coerced work. The Handbook takes this critique into account, which the author had also voiced in encounters with ILO officials. It now states that state-imposed forced labor may be assessed through:

> *evidence of a state policy that instrumentalizes employment or work for political objectives such as aligning political views with those of the established political, social or economic system, altering the population composition in particular areas or enhancing national security.*

Especially noteworthy is the reference to "altering the population composition." This refers to state policies to "optimize" ethnic population ratios, especially in southern Xinjiang's Uyghur heartland by ending the "dominance" of Uyghur population groups and increasing numbers of Han Chinese settlers ([Central Asian Survey](#), 2021). In 2017, the central government mandated an increase in southern Xinjiang's settler population by 300,000 by 2022, a strategy that largely relied on attracting Han Chinese from other parts of the PRC through promises of free land, housing, education, and government jobs (see *[China Brief](#)*, March, 2021). PRC scholar-officials have confirmed that labor transfers to other regions in Xinjiang or to other PRC provinces serve to reduce the density of concentrated Uyghur populations (see *[China Brief](#)*, March, 2021). Recent research has found that transfers to other provinces were set to increase by 38 percent in 2023 (see *[China Brief](#)*, February 14). In conversations, ILO officials had cited the author's article in Central Asian Survey ([2021](#)) as an example of how labor transfers directly relate to other aspects of the atrocity. The inclusion of this observation in the Handbook is very significant, as it points to major non-economic reasons for Xinjiang's forced labor systems, and to ways in which state-imposed forced labor can reinforce other oppressive policies.

The new section 9 discusses four forms of state-imposed forced labor, each of which is complemented by a section discussing related research considerations:

1. Abuse of military conscription (section 9.1)
2. Exaction of work beyond normal civic obligations (section 9.2)
3. Abuse of compulsory prison labor (section 9.3)
4. Compulsory labor for the purpose of economic development (section 9.4)

Section 9.3 of the Handbook contains language that points directly toward forced labor associated with Xinjiang's re-education camps ([The China Journal](#), 2023):

> *Compulsory labor cannot be imposed on people in administrative detention. […] A common violation is the imposition of compulsory labor on those detained by law enforcement authorities but never meant to be tried by an independent judiciary because they have committed "minor offences"—those that are not serious enough to be subject to criminal prosecution but deemed errant enough to qualify for "re-education"* (p.160).

The Role of Desk Research and NGO Reports

The strengthening of the role of desk research and an increase in the list of recommended sources to assess forced labor is another important change in the Handbook for identifying Uyghur forced labor. In its "desk review" section, the 2012 Survey Guidelines referred to preparing forced labor research based on a "review of court cases, law enforcement data and other relevant sources" (ILO, 2012, p.45). In contrast, the 2024 Handbook advises consulting "academic articles, reports from prior national or sectoral surveys, program evaluations, qualitative studies by NGOs or civil society groups, and investigative journalism reportage" (p.25). These additions strengthen the contribution made by non-official sources, which in the case of Uyghur forced labor have played an essential role.

The section "General research considerations" for state-imposed forced labor is of further significance. It specifically points out how information collection in such settings can be a major challenge: "As the State itself imposes this category of forced labor, States may have little incentive to collaborate with or facilitate the work of researchers wishing to shed light on it. Information access can be problematic" (p.151).

Implications for the Proposed EU Forced Labor Ban

Non-internment state-imposed forced labor mobilization is especially challenging to conceptualize and evaluate. The 2024 Handbook accounts for these difficulties in the "General research considerations" for assessing this type of forced labor, which provide crucial context in line with the unique properties of coercive labor transfers. Of particular significance is the statement that "non-internment state-imposed forms of forced labor … [are] more readily assessed as a systemic risk than a specific instance, given that this form of forced labor creates an environment that renders its victims much less likely to speak freely" (p.150; compare Journal of Human Trafficking, 2023, p.21).

This research guidance directly suggests that this form of coerced work creates a society-wide systemic risk. This framing, which the ILO adopted from the author's work, effectively means that the burden of proof of forced labor rests on those who participate in the affected economic system or are connected to it through their supply chains.

This could have interesting implications for the European Union's forced labor regulation. The version of this regulation proposed by the European Parliament contained a crucial provision to reverse the burden of proof of the existence of forced labor, shifting it from the authorities to the importing entities, akin to the US Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act or UFLPA (European Parliament, 2023). This reversal is essential for capturing goods made in the context of state-imposed forced labor, as without it, any legislation would result in severe underenforcement (Journal of Human Trafficking, 2023). However, during the negotiations between the Parliament and the Council, this crucial provision was removed, in line with the version adopted by the Council which privileged the economic interests of member states (European Council, March 5, March 13). **[1]** As a result, it is unlikely that the new measure can effectively counter Uyghur forced labor (UCANews, March 6).

The 2024 Handbook could play a major role here. To trigger new investigations into suspected forced labor cases, the proposed legislation already suggests a so-called "risk-based approach." This is centered around a database of known cases of forced labor, or in the case of state-imposed forced labor, of affected regions or sectors. It uses "substantiated concern" as the evidentiary threshold (European Council, March 13; Crowell, March 26). However, in the course of such investigations the burden of proof remains on the investigating "competent authority," in contrast to the UFLPA (European Council, accessed April 17).

Under section 47, the agreed version of the legislation text states:

> *Where in response to a request for information from a lead competent authority, an economic operator or a public authority refuses or fails, without a valid justification, to provide information requested, provides incomplete or incorrect information with the objective of blocking the investigation, provides misleading information or otherwise impedes the investigation, including when a risk of forced labor imposed by state authorities is identified, the lead competent authority should be able to establish that the prohibition has been violated on the basis of any other relevant and verifiable information gathered during the preliminary phase of the investigation and the investigation* (European Council, March 13, p.25).

Without free and unfettered access to Xinjiang's factories and affected Uyghur workers, the Commission's ability to demonstrate forced labor is severely limited. This is where the new ILO Handbook becomes relevant. By arguing that specific instances of forced labor in state-imposed contexts cannot be reliably measured because of the very nature of this type of coerced work, the Handbook's "General research considerations" provide further authoritative guidance for the interpretation of this crucial section of the legislation, which has tied itself to ILO standards that the Handbook operationalizes. Specifically, the EU's investigating authority could easily interpret section 47 in tandem with the new ILO Handbook to argue that the presence of forced labor is established by the existence of a relevant state policy, its enforcement on the ground, and the general inability to assess specific instances of forced labor, as outlined in the Handbook's "General research considerations." Even though this would not reverse the burden of proof, the investigating authority could then determine the presence of forced labor simply based on (1) a relevant database entry that documents the prevalence of forced labor in Xinjiang based on existing research reports, and (2) a demonstrated connection of an imported good with supply chains linked to Xinjiang.

In so doing, the EU forced labor ban could operate in a more similar fashion to the UFLPA in regard to Xinjiang (although in contrast to the UFLPA, it lacks a preventive detention mechanism). Europe could then potentially avoid its current fate of being a dumping ground for goods made with forced labor from Xinjiang (SCMP, March 21).

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Notes

[1] After the Council approved the new text in March, the Parliament is scheduled to vote on it on April 22 ([European Parliament](#), April 11).