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SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE 20TH PARTY CONGRESS: THE XI ERA ENTERS ITS SECOND DECADE

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Are Cross-Strait Relations Dead?

By John S. Van Oudenaren

Kuomintang (KMT) Vice Chairman Andrew Hsia led a delegation to China in August, which occurred in the immediate aftermath of the extensive live-fire exercises that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted around Taiwan following U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit ([Focus Taiwan](#), August 28; [Republic of China, Ministry of National Defense](#), August 3). The trip by the number two figure in Taiwan's main opposition party elicited a torrent of domestic criticism, including from KMT politicians. The timing of the visit was doubly poor for the KMT as it not only coincided with China's escalation of military pressure but also came as the campaign season for Taiwan's November 26 local elections kicked off ([Newtalk](#), September 8; [Focus Taiwan](#), August

29). The local elections are a litmus test of current KMT chairman Eric Chu's efforts to remake the party's radioactive "pro-China" reputation among younger Taiwanese voters. Chu has made tentative but real headway in moving his party to a mainstream position on cross-strait relations premised on maintaining the status quo, defending Taiwan against the existential threat from the People's Republic of China's (PRC) and deepening ties with the U.S. ([United Daily News](#) [UDN], June 9). Chu has rhetorically burnished the party's anti-communist and pro-U.S. legacy but has also taken concrete steps to change course, most significantly orchestrating the reopening of the KMT's liaison office in Washington, D.C., which was shuttered shortly after President Ma Ying-jeou assumed office in 2008 ([UDN](#), June 9). In June, Chu visited the U.S. to personally preside over the re-opening of the office and made the rounds on the think tank circuit to tout the KMT's commitment to close ties with Washington ([Taipei Times](#), June 8). In contrast to members of the KMT's deep blue, pro-unification wing such as former chairwoman Hung Hsiu-chu, who appeared on PRC state television to parrot Beijing's charges that Pelosi's visit recklessly destabilized cross-strait relations, Chu welcomed Pelosi as an "international friend" and stated the KMT supports any moves that deepen U.S.-Taiwan relations ([Apple Daily](#), August 2; [CGTN](#), August 6).

Although the fallout from Hsia's visit threatens to undercut Chu's efforts to reorient his party to a more pro-US stance, the KMT remains deeply split with large cross-sections of its base committed to closer cultural, economic, and even political integration with the PRC. Pro-unification, deep-blue elements include gradualists such as former President Ma and pro-China ideologues such as former presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu, Hung Hsiu-chu and KMT Sun Yat-sen School president Chang Ya-chung remain influential within the party and have been sharply critical of Chu's pro-U.S. pivot ([Taiwan News](#), June 21). For example, former President Ma has characterized U.S.-Taiwan ties as a "master-servant relationship" and lambasted Chu's trip to the U.S. as "unworthy" and "kowtowing" to Washington ([Taiwan News](#), June 19). Consequently, failure in the upcoming midterms could cost Chu his chairmanship and reverse his efforts to shift the party to the mainstream on cross-strait relations, enabling the KMT's pro-China, pro-unification elements to regain control. At the national-level, this would likely mean an increasingly marginalized KMT that splits votes with, or even throws its support behind a probable 2024 presidential run by current Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je, who leads the rival Pan-Blue Taiwan People's Party (TPP) ([Taipei Times](#), February 21).



(Image: Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je waves to Shanghai Mayor Gong Zheng at this year's Taipei-Shanghai Forum, which was held via video link, **source:** CNA)

Troubled Trip

From the start, several factors combined to worsen the optics surrounding Andrew Hsia's visit to China and added to the political cost of the trip for the KMT. Firstly, the trip was in the public eye far longer than usual because Hsia had to quarantine for ten days upon his arrival in China ([Focus Taiwan](#), August 21). Before his departure, Hsia stressed that the trip was pre-planned, but refused to countenance canceling the delegation on account of China's military intimidation: "This trip had already been planned, and we cannot halt it because of the Chinese military exercise going on right now" ([Taipei Times](#), August 11). Nevertheless, he sought to reassure the public that the trip was not political in nature and that he had no intention of discussing political matters with Chinese government officials, but would instead focus on outreach to members of the Taiwanese business community in the PRC. However, during his visit, Hsia held discussions with a number of PRC officials, including Zhang Zhijun who heads the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS)-a semi-official organization established by the PRC to manage cross-strait relations, and current Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) Vice Minister Chen Yuanfeng ([Taipei Times](#), September 5).

Hsia's meetings with Chinese officials amidst the PRC's military pressure campaign against Taiwan were roundly condemned. President Tsai Ing-wen stated that the visit had not only let down the Taiwanese people, but could also send the wrong message to the international community ([Focus Taiwan](#), August 10). DPP lawmaker Lo Chih-cheng asserted the visit harms Taiwan's national interests and slammed Hsia's "secret" itinerary that included undisclosed meetings with Chinese officials ([Liberty Times](#), August 25). As the full itinerary of Hsia's trip emerged, domestic condemnation intensified. On August 27, the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), the government body responsible for cross-strait relations, issued a statement criticizing Hsia for repeatedly disregarding its guidance and insisting on traveling to China despite the PLA's military drills around Taiwan ([MAC](#), August 27). The MAC also charged Hsia with "echoing the melody" of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) United Front Work.

Many younger, more moderate KMT politicians were sharply critical of the political wisdom of Hsia's visit to China. Shortly after the trip was announced, a cohort of KMT city councilor candidates circulated a petition demanding that the trip be canceled due to the potential damage to the party's reputation, as well as the overall futility of undertaking cross-strait exchange when the PRC is threatening to attack ROC territory ([UDN](#), August 10). KMT member Lee Lai-hsi questioned Hsia's willingness to visit China in the current atmosphere of heightened tension and lamented that "it is no wonder the KMT is being painted as pro-CCP" ([Formosa News](#), August 11). On August 15, Hsia opted to resign as an advisor to the Taichung government after the city's KMT mayor criticized the trip's timing ([Taipei Times](#), August 15). The backlash has put Eric Chu in the difficult position of having to defend engagement with Beijing. In response to the heavy criticism of the trip, Chu praised Hsia and the other delegation members as "very brave and determined" for keeping lines of communication open to prevent conflict ([Taipei Times](#), August 29).

KMT 3.0?

Ever since DPP incumbent Tsai Ing-wen roundly defeated former Kaoshiung Mayor Han-Kuo Yu in the 2020 presidential elections, KMT leadership has sought to jettison the KMT's pro-China image. A major impediment to these efforts is the KMT's attachment to its long-standing formula for cross-straits relations —the 1992 consensus. In essence, the 1992 Consensus constitutes an understanding between KMT and CCP interlocutors, wherein both sides concurred there is one China, but each side has its own interpretation of what "one China" means ([Taipei Times](#), September 7, 2020). Although once popular, the 1992 Consensus has fallen out of favor with the general electorate. Nevertheless, the 1992 Consensus is still widely supported by KMT voters. This electoral Catch-22 was underscored last year, when Chu's "light blue" predecessor Johnny Chiang tried but failed to scrap the 1992 Consensus. At the time, polling indicated approximately four in five KMT voters supported the 1992 Consensus ([Taiwan News](#), June 23).

The current unpopularity of the 1992 Consensus is partially due to the overall recent deterioration of cross-strait relations but is also a consequence of the CCP's linking of the Consensus with the "One Country, Two Systems" framework through which Hong Kong was incorporated into China. PRC President Xi Jinping helped cement this perception in his January 2019 speech on the 40th anniversary of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan, wherein he deemed "One Country, Two Systems" the optimal pathway for unification ([Taiwan Affairs Office](#), April 12, 2019). Xi's remarks occurred months before Beijing cracked down hard on protests and forced through a series of "national security" measures in Hong Kong. As a result, most Taiwanese now see "One Country, Two Systems" as a trojan horse for PRC domination. In an interview last year, Foreign Minister Joseph Wu expressed this conviction: "Hong Kong's fate proves that the 'one country, two systems' framework promised by the Chinese government is actually a forced promotion of 'one country, one system'" ([FTV News](#), July 2, 2021).

Ballot Box Blues

Even before Hsia's China trip, the KMT faced an uphill battle in the upcoming local elections. In the last local elections in 2018, which were focused on local governance issues, the KMT won in a landslide. As a result, in order to break even, the party must successfully defend many seats ([Taiwan News](#), April 23). Furthermore, due to the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) emergence, the KMT faces several three-way races wherein it must compete with the TPP for Pan-Blue votes while also facing a Pan-Green coalition united behind the DPP ([Newtalk](#), September 7).

The KMT remains fixated on its long-time nemesis, the DPP, but its ability to retain its position as one of Taiwan's two main political parties may ultimately boil down to whether it can retain an edge over Taipei Mayor Ko's TPP, which is considered an emerging "third force" in Taiwanese politics. During his successful 2014 mayoral run, Ko was seen as part of the Pan-Green camp. However, in the intervening years, Ko has gravitated to the right and is now firmly in the Pan-Blue camp ([New Bloom](#), December 23, 2019). Nevertheless, in contrast to the KMT, Ko's political calling card is his claim to transcend domestic divisions over China to focus on effective governance. In a clear sign that the TPP challenge to the KMT is real, recent polling revealed that while only about 55 percent of KMT voters expressed confidence in Chu as chairman, over 71 percent have confidence in Ko ([Taiwan News](#), July 10)

In seeking to explain the questionable timing of Hsia's visit to China, Taipei-based journalist Brian Hioe hypothesized that the purpose of the trip is to "engender the perception that the KMT is the only political party in Taiwan able to maintain stable cross-strait relations" and hence "should hold power" ([New Bloom](#), August 11). However, Mayor Ko has also sought to position himself as a responsible custodian of cross-strait relations, albeit while still striving to maintain his self-cultivated image as a nonideological pragmatist. A hallmark of Ko's tenure has been the twin-city Taipei-Shanghai forum. Although Ko has used the forum to express concern about the deterioration of relations across the Taiwan Strait, he has also sparked controversy in the past by saying that both sides of the Taiwan Strait are "one family" with a "common destiny," and by proposing a bridge between the Mainland and Taiwan's Jinmen island, which critics have called a CCP trojan horse ([Focus Taiwan](#), July 19; [Taipei Times](#), June 21).

Conclusion

Although pockets of knowledge exist, understanding of Taiwanese domestic politics and their influence on cross-strait relations is generally limited in Washington. There is a tendency to blur the various Pan-Blue factions with little understanding of the often substantial differences among them.

A third consecutive DPP-term would undergird stable U.S.-Taiwan ties, but Washington must understand that, as with any democracy, one party will not govern indefinitely. The current KMT leadership has displayed some questionable judgement in its poorly timed attempt at cross-strait dialogue. Nevertheless, under Eric Chu, the party is considerably more aligned with the U.S. and its allies on China than it has been in the recent past.

Perhaps the greatest unknown is where Taipei Mayor and TPP leader Ko Wen-Je, who has been notoriously difficult to pin down on China, ultimately lines up on cross-strait relations. All the more so because Ko's shade of blue may soon come to matter a great deal. After all, the road from Taipei City Hall to the Presidential Offices is both short and well-traveled.

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Will the Xi Jinping Leadership Take up Reformist Policies After the 20th Party Congress?

By Willy Wo-Lap Lam



(Image: A Bookstore in Beijing displays major works by Xi Jinping, source: RFA)

That President Xi Jinping and his faction will dominate the 20th Party Congress is apparent from the Politburo announcement that the week-long, five-yearly conclave will take place on October 16. The Politburo meeting, which was held on August 30, said that the guiding principle of the party and country would remain “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era” ([Gov.cn](http://gov.cn), October 16). The Politburo reasserted that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would follow principles laid down by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and above all, Xi Jinping. However, the dictums on reform and the open door – as well as the “lie low” foreign policy – promulgated by “Chief Architect of Reform” Deng in the 1980s and 1990s were conspicuously absent from the Party Congress announcement. Instead, the communique emphasized the so-called “three continuances” (三个继续, *san ge jixu*). This is a reference to Xi’s efforts to uphold Mao Zedong-style “common prosperity” (共同富裕, *gongtongfuyu*); to sustain “party construction” (党的建设, *dang de jianshe*) in order to ensure the loyalty of cadres; and to work toward the formation of a “community with a shared future for mankind” (人类命运共同体, *renlei mingyun gongtongti*) ([Xinhua](http://xinhua.com), August 30; [Ming Pao](http://mingpao.com), August 30).

The CCP’s commitment to promote the “party core’s” (党的核心, *dangdehexin*) as the locus of statecraft is an unmistakable indication that Xi will be granted an unprecedented one – or even two – more five-year terms as supreme leader. This has been followed by a resurgence of a Cultural Revolution-style personality cult

around Xi in CCP media. One officially sponsored video proclaimed “Chairman Xi, I love you, I think of you every day... You are the savior of the people” ([Youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...), August 31). Another article by the President of Xinhua News Agency, Fu Hua promulgated the so-called “three one-minutes theory,” which stipulates that “we must not even for one minute stray outside the party’s ranks; not even for one minute stray from the directions laid down by General Secretary Xi Jinping, not for a single minute be outside the scrutiny of General Secretary Xi Jinping and the central party leadership” ([HK01](https://www.hk01.com/), September 5).

Reform Versus Retrogression?

Xi undoubtedly remains in favor of a semi-Maoist, statist economy, which is under the comprehensive control of party-state authorities. Xi’s preference for tight state control over the economy was fully revealed during his visit to Liaoning Province immediately after the informal Beidaihe leadership conference concluded on August 16. In his speeches in Jinzhou and Shenyang in the northeast province, he played down market-oriented reforms and stressed the importance of “never changing the colors of the red heaven and earth” (不允许江山变色, *buyunxu jiangshanbianse*). The underlying logic is familiar: to give market forces and foreign investors a big play in the economy will amount to “changing the colors” of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which is a product of the protracted struggles waged during the successful Communist revolution ([Gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn), August 18; [Qstheory.cn](https://www.qstheory.cn), August 18).

The big question for China after the 20th Party Congress is: will Xi shift to a more pro-reform posture in order to save the faltering economy? The PRC is experiencing the most severe financial headwinds since the Era of Reform was launched by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s ([China Brief](https://www.chinabrief.com), July 18). Even though Xi will almost certainly be endorsed by the Party Congress, many Congress deputies and Central Committee members, particularly those from the provinces and cities, will be asking Beijing for a financial bail-out ([BBC Chinese](https://www.bbc.com/chinese), August 31; [Deutsche Welle Chinese](https://www.dw.com/en), April 25). Despite his well-known aversion to market economics and his preference for reviving Maoist norms in economic policy-making, Xi may be compelled to abide by at least the majority of the relatively pro-reformist policies rolled out by out-going premier Li Keqiang (who will remain in office until March 2023) over the past two to three months. These pragmatic measures have been integral to sustaining growth, providing help to the struggling real-estate and technology sectors, preventing unemployment from worsening, and persuading foreign investors not to withdraw from the China market ([Aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com), August 17; [Yazhou Zhoukan](https://www.yazhouzhoukan.com), June 12).

At a State Council meeting one day before the August 30 Politburo session, Premier Li called for “unremitting efforts to create a market-oriented, law-based and internationalized business environment.” Li added that market-oriented reforms had “contributed to eliminating impediments to development and stimulating market vitality as well as public creativity” ([Xinhua](https://www.xinhuanet.com), August 29). Much of Li’s efforts to relax the money supply and boost government investment, including the 19 measures unveiled by the State Council in late August to buttress output, are expected to be implemented for at least a year or two after the 20th Party Congress. ([Lianhe Zaobao](https://www.lianhezaobao.com), August 25; [Bloomberg](https://www.bloomberg.com), August 24). Recent measures to bail out heavily indebted real-estate firms and to maintain employment, which were announced by Premier Li when he met provincial leaders in Fuzhou in July and in Shenzhen in mid-August, will also likely continue into next year ([News.cn](http://news.cn), July 10; [People’s Daily](https://www.people.com.cn), August 17; [Gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn), August 16). Such efforts have assumed added urgency as most Western (and independent

Chinese) researchers have lowered their projections for China's yearly GDP growth to just around 3 percent. China's growth rate for 2023 is likely to be even lower, and could amount to a statistically insignificant increase ([SCMP](#), August 18; [CNBC.com](#), August 18).

Some analysts have interpreted the different areas of emphasis between Premier Li and supreme leader Xi as “a struggle between two lines.” However, it is the supreme leader who is likely to have the last laugh on the eve of his “coronation” as the official “party core for life.” According to this line of argument, Xi does not necessarily think highly of policies favored by pro-reform cadres such as Premier Li. For example, a key clause in Li's Shenzhen speech that “the waters of the Yellow River and Yangtze River will not flow backwards” (黄河长江水不会倒流, *huanghe changjiang shui bu hui daoliu*) has been banned in the official press and social media ([Radio French International](#), August 21; [Radio Free Asia](#), August 18). This censorship has occurred despite suggestions by the party media that Li's emphasis on economic development and Xi's sticking to strict socialist edicts can somehow be reconciled – albeit with priority given to ideological discipline over free-market liberalization. After this year's Beidaihe leadership conclave, state media ran articles avowing that the harsh zero-COVID policy – which has become a kind of political campaign to test cadres' compliance with Xi's orders – will coexist with market reforms ([VOAChinese](#), July 4; [Radio Free Asia](#), April 13). For example, a commentary in the August 24 edition of *People's Daily* was entitled: “We must grasp both hands and both hands must be [equally] tough – economic development as well as prevention and control of the pandemic” ([People's Daily](#), August 24). The article claimed that promoting people's health was a prerequisite for economic advancement.

In the past fortnight, COVID-19 epidemic prevention lockdowns, which are similar to those that were imposed in Shanghai and Wuhan in the past year, have reappeared, partly as a demonstration of local cadres' fealty to Xi. On September 1, public health authorities in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, which has over 20 million residents, announced the imposition of a Shanghai-style lockdown. This resulted in residents dropping everything to flock to supermarkets, where chaotic scenes of desperate people fighting to grab foodstuffs from live chickens to vegetables unfolded. As of August 20, some 74 cities with a total population of 313 million have been placed in at least partial lockdowns ([CNN](#), September 5; [VOAChinese](#), September 4; [BBC Chinese](#), September 2).

The American Problem

Another issue of ideology versus practicality that the Xi leadership must grapple with is reduced access to the international economy, which is an impediment that China never faced during the Reform Era. Over the past half-decade, the partial “decoupling” of the Chinese and American economies has gained momentum. Increasing geopolitical competition has also prompted the U.S. and its allies to impose a de facto boycott in the key area of the supply of micro-chips and other advanced components necessary for China's advanced technology sector. Last year, China spent \$350 billion importing high-end chips, mainly from Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and the U.S. In 2015, the State Council set aside \$1.4 trillion to support research and development of the technology sector through 2025. Since the mid-2010s, Beijing has poured in \$50 billion to subsidize China's chip-making industry, but the results have been disappointing ([RICS.org](#), July 8; [Radio Free Asia](#), January 28). The country's most advanced chipmaker, the Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corp (SMIC), lags behind the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. by at least one generation of

technological attainment. Several huge microchip firms, including Tsinghua Unigroup – as well as 50-odd companies in the same sector set up by IT giant Huawei Corp – have either amassed huge debts or declared bankruptcy. This prompted Beijing's anti-corruption agencies to arrest several top managers of chip factories, including the former president of Tsinghua Unigroup Zhao Weiguo on graft-related charges beginning early this year ([Technologyreview.com](https://www.technologyreview.com), August 5; [SCMP](https://www.scmp.com), August 2).

Other measures adopted by the Biden presidency to “choke off” China include prohibiting more Chinese firms, including superficially “private” companies that are allegedly linked to the PLA from doing business with American entities. Limits have also been placed on American funds investing in Chinese markets ([Guangming Daily](https://www.guangmingdaily.com), August 18; [Netease](https://www.netease.com), August 17). After studying the sanctions that the U.S., European countries and others imposed on Russia in the wake of the February 24 invasion of Ukraine, the Xi leadership has prepared his country and the PRC economy to guard against the “conspiracies” of the U.S.-led “anti-China coalition.” In late 2020, Beijing initiated a policy of “dual circulation ” (双循环, *Shuang xunhuan*) ([Gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn), November 25, 2020). The game plan calls for facilitating “internal circulation” (国内循环, *guoneixunhuan*) — a reference to the fact that while the country is still eager to absorb Western investment and engage in the context of “international circulation” (国际循环, *guojixunhuan*) — the economy is also ready to rely primarily on internal resources, especially its 1.4 billion person market in order to sustain itself ([Xinhua](https://www.xinhua.com), April 25; [People's Daily](https://www.peoplesdaily.com), November 29, 2021). Last month, various official media outlets, including *Historical Research*, which is published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, ran articles defending the “close-door policy” (闭关锁国, *biguansuogu*) of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). These articles asserted that the imperial courts did the right thing to prevent foreign countries from subjugating China through “unequal” trade arrangements ([Chinadigitaltimes.com](https://www.chinadigitaltimes.com), September 1; [VOAChinese.com](https://www.voachinese.com), September 1).

Conclusion

Despite the PRC's current emphasis on self-sufficiency, after the 20th Party Congress, it is possible that Xi may seek some kind of compromise with the Biden administration in order to ameliorate the unprecedented difficulties facing China's domestic economy. For example, the two countries reached an agreement in late August to establish an auditing protocol for Chinese firms seeking to list on the New York Stock Exchange and Nasdaq ([NYTimes Chinese](https://www.nytimes.com), August 29). Further temporary arrangements to improve China-U.S. economic and geopolitical ties could be made during the expected face-to-face talks between Xi and President Biden on the sidelines of the November 2022 G20 summit in Jakarta. In the longer term, however, due to the likely exacerbation of the intensifying geopolitical contest between the PRC-Russia authoritarian axis on the one hand, and the U.S.-led coalition on the other, there are definite limits on the resumption of meaningful cooperation between the world's two largest economies. Despite reservations expressed by senior cadres from anti-Xi CCP factions, Xi is unlikely to abandon either his strong support for Vladimir Putin's Russia, or his determination to “liberate” Taiwan, perhaps during his third term (2022-2027). While a military adventure such as a “hot war” against Taiwan might bring forth devastating anti-China sanctions from the U.S. and its allies, such muscle-flexing might also allow the party leadership to impose martial law in China and to silence all opposition to massive socio-economic injustices. In the final analysis, much depends on whether the “Mao Zedong of the 21st century” is genuinely convinced that “the East is rising and the West is declining” ([Radio](https://www.radio.com)

[French International](#), August 27; [SCMP](#), October 22, 2021). A key element influencing Xi's calculus will be whether the Washington-led coalition can disabuse him of his apparently unrealistic assessments of both China's strengths and the perceived weaknesses of the West.

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The PLA's Military Diplomacy in Advance of the 20th Party Congress

Kenneth W. Allen



(Image: PRC Defense Minister Wei Fenghe meets with Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedov in Ashgabat, capital of Turkmenistan this April, Source: [CMO](http://www.mod.gov.cn))

Editor's Note: This article is the first in a two-part series examining the People's Liberation Army's military diplomacy in advance of the 20th Party Congress next month. This article focuses on high-level developments and the military diplomacy activities of top PLA leaders. The second article will examine specific areas of military diplomacy in practice since mid-2021.

Introduction

As the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Chinese Communist Party (CCP) approaches its 20th Party Congress, which begins on October 16, General Secretary Xi Jinping is set to continue his run as core leader ([People's Daily](http://www.peoplesdaily.com.cn), August 31). Throughout his tenure, Xi, who is also Chairman of the Party and State Central Military Commission (CMC) and PRC President, has prioritized military diplomacy as a key element of Chinese

foreign policy. Consequently, since 2013, the frequency, intensity and scale of China's military diplomacy has generally increased. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted or limited some areas of engagement, under Xi, the overall trend of military diplomacy assuming a growing role in China's international engagement is bound to persist.

This two-part article series provides updated information concerning the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) military diplomacy since the *China Brief* article "The PLA's Military Diplomacy Under COVID-19" was published last June ([China Brief](#), June 21, 2021). [1] This article examines potential forthcoming changes to PLA Leadership and their implications for the PRC's military diplomacy; provides a general overview of key developments in Chinese military diplomacy since 2021; and catalogues senior-level visits abroad and hosted visits. The forthcoming second article in this series, examines specific areas of military diplomacy: bilateral and multilateral Joint Military Exercises, non-traditional Security Operations, and international Academic Exchanges and Cooperation. It also examines how military diplomacy is playing out in two regions: Africa and Latin America. [2]

Upcoming Changes in the PLA Leadership

Xi Jinping will remain the Chairman of the CMC, but there will be major changes to the rest of the CMC in the forthcoming leadership turnover. Although it appears that both CMC vice chairmen and all four members are scheduled to retire based on their age; one or two current members could possibly remain on, and become a vice chairman. In addition, the new Defense Minister, which is a state position, will not be selected until the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) in early 2023. Unless the current Defense Minister Wei Fenghe is promoted to vice chairman, all of the members of the incoming CMC will most likely be Army officers. However, Admiral Miao Hua, who was a career Army officer until he became the PLA Navy (PLAN) political commissar in December 2014 and then the director of the CMC Political Work Department in October 2017, may also become a vice chairman and retain his Navy uniform. Moreover, during the 19th Party Congress in 2017, the PLA did not add the Commanders of the PLAN, Air Force (PLAAF), or Rocket Force (PLARF; former Second Artillery Force/PLASAF) who were added as CMC members in 2004. Nor did it add the Commander of the PLA Army (PLAA)—a position created in 2016.

Table 1: CMC from 2017-2022

Person	Billet	Birth	Age in 2022	2022 Status
General Xu Qiliang (Air Force)	VC	1950	72	Retire
General Zhang Youxia (Army)	VC	1950	72	Retire
General Wei Fenghe (Rocket Force)	MBR; DefMin	1954	68	Retire or become a vice chairman (VC)?
General Li Zuocheng (Army)	MBR; Chief of Joint Staff	1953	69	Retire or become a VC?
Admiral Miao Hua (Navy but career Army)	MBR; Director, PWD	1955	67	Retire or become a VC?
General Zhang Shengmin (Army)	MBR; Secretary, DIC	1958	64	Retire or become a VC?

Personnel turnover in the top PLA leadership positions is important for military diplomacy, since each meeting at home or abroad will involve first-time meetings with foreign leaders. As a general rule, the PLA rarely meets with the same leader in China more than once and rarely travels to the same country twice except for conference-type meetings, such as the Association of East Asian Nations (ASEAN)-plus forums. In addition, PLA leaders rarely meet with a new leader during the first or last year that the foreign officer assumes their billets. [3]

Big Picture Military Diplomacy in 2021

On December 23, 2021, the PRC's Ministry of National Defense (MND) published a very detailed article concerning military diplomacy across the board for 2021 ([China Military Online](#) [CMO], December 23, 2021). Most likely, the PLA will publish a similar article at the end of 2022. The article organized the recent developments in the PLA's military diplomacy into the following seven groups:

1. 2021 marked the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP: Leaders of defense departments and the armed forces of many countries expressed their warm congratulations to China through letters, telephone calls, and articles. The CMC's Office for International Military Cooperation organized military attachés in China from nearly 70 countries to visit the Museum of the CPC in Beijing, and held interviews with military attachés and international military students from 14 countries.

2. High-level China-Russia military exchanges and cooperation: Leaders of China's CMC have met with Russian Defense Minister and Chief of the General Staff on the spot, made video calls and exchanged letters. The Russian military came to China for the first time to participate in the exercise Zapad/Interaction-2021, and the two defense ministers observed the exercise onsite. The two navies have also held the Joint Sea-2021 military exercise and the first joint maritime patrol. The two air forces organized the implementation of the third joint aerial strategic patrol in the Asia-Pacific region. Public opinion reflects that the relationship between the Chinese and Russian armed forces is getting better and better.

3. Donation of COVID-19 vaccines to countries in need: Since the beginning of 2021, the PLA provided COVID-19 vaccine assistance to the armed forces of over 30 countries, including Pakistan, Cambodia, Philippines, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Tunisia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Laos, Lebanon, Hungary, Gabon, Ethiopia, Northern Macedonia, Zimbabwe, Serbia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mozambique, Bolivia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Egypt and Nepal.

4. Consolidation of multilateralism with strengthened China voice: State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe participated in the 12th China-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting via VTC in June, the 8th ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus held online in June, the 18th meeting of the Council of Ministers of Defense of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Member States held in person in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in July, and the 4th UN Peacekeeping Ministerial Conference hosted in Seoul, South Korea, by VTC ([CMO](#), June 15; [MND](#), June 16; [MND](#), July 29; [UN](#), December 8, 2021). The PLA and Pakistan's military held the first-ever Shared Destiny-2021 international peacekeeping exercise, which was held in Queshan (Henan Province), China ([CMO](#), September 17, 2021). The PLA and Russian armed forces participated in the Peace Mission-2021 joint counterterrorism military exercise, which was held at the Donguz training range in Russia's Orenburg Region from September 11 to 25 ([CMO](#), October 9, 2021). Armed forces from SCO member states, including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Pakistan and Uzbekistan participated in the drill. China sent 558 troops to the exercise.

In October, the PLA held its 10th annual Beijing Xiangshan Forum in person and via videoconference ([CMO](#), October 25, 2021). [4] The theme of the 2021 conference was "Pursue Win-Win Cooperation, Advance Global Security Governance" ([Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#), November 12, 2021). The 2021 Xiangshan Forum featured a video seminar entitled "Strategic Stability: Impasse and Way Out", in which the recent establishment of the trilateral AUKUS security partnership among the US, Britain and Australia- including cooperation on building an Australian nuclear attack submarine program, was discussed at length ([CMO](#), October 28).

5. Bilateral Exchanges and cooperation to promote regional security and stability: In 2021, Wei Fenghe visited Vietnam, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan and other neighboring countries, and held video calls with the defense ministers of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. In addition, in December, China and Vietnam held the sixth border defense friendship exchange and organized the Peace Rescue 2021 joint medical exercise in China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region ([CMO](#), December 13, 2021). The Chinese navy assisted in the salvaging of the Indonesian submarine KRI Nanggala that sunk north of Bali in April, as the first international rescue practice of China's submarine rescue force ([Xinhuanet](#), June 3, 2021).

6. Participation in International Army Games 2021: The International Army Games 2021 were held from August 23 to September 4 ([China Daily](#) September 6, 2021). The PLA hosted three competitions in Xinjiang involving infantry combat vehicle maneuvers, anti-aircraft drills, and testing radiation, chemical and biological defenses; and participated in 17 competitions in four countries. The Chinese team won three group first places, eight group second places, seven group third places, 21 individual first places, 15 individual second places, and 12 individual third places. This was the first time that the PLA hosted a competition at home and participated abroad on a large-scale under the conditions of the pandemic. PLA media touted the games as deepening friendship and mutual trust with friendly countries, and generating positive responses at home and abroad ([PLA Daily](#), September 5, 2021).

7. China-Africa Peace and Security Forum on Military Medicine Video Conference: The China-Africa Peace and Security Forum Video Conference on Military Medicine was held in early November ([CMO](#), November 5, 2021). The conference was organized on the theme of “strengthening medical cooperation to fight the pandemic together.” Representatives from the PLA and the militaries of 19 African countries discussed a range of topics including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the regional security situation, China-Africa military anti-pandemic efforts and military medical cooperation, vaccine research and development, and virus traceability, achieving important results.

Senior-level Visits Abroad and Hosted Visits

This section provides information since June 2021 about visits abroad and visits hosted by the CMC Vice Chairmen, Defense Minister, Chief of the Joint Staff Department, and the Deputy Chief of the Joint Staff Department whose portfolio includes military diplomacy. No information was found for the other two CMC members. Of note, some of the meetings that would have been held in person were conducted by video teleconference (VTC).

CMC Vice Chairmen

Due to COVID restrictions and the lead up to the 20th Party Congress, neither vice chairman (General Xu Qiliang or General Zhang Youxia) traveled abroad or hosted any foreign leaders during 2021. In 2022, travel by the vice chairmen was limited to Xu Qiliang hosting the Cambodian Defense Chief in Guangzhou in August, and Zhang Youxia meeting the Pakistan Chief of the Army Staff in Qingdao in June (CMO, [June 12](#); [August 15](#)). Neither of them traveled abroad.



(Image: PRC Defense Minister Wei walks with his Vietnamese counterpart on the Chinese side of the border, source: [CMO](#))

State Councilor and Defense Minister

Since June 2021, State Councilor and Defense Minister, General Wei Fenghe, participated in several interactions with foreign leaders both in-person and by videoconference as detailed below:

- **Visits abroad:** Oman, Iran, and Turkmenistan (April 2022); Singapore to attend the 19th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue (June 2022), where he met with U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin as well as separate meetings with Singapore's Prime Minister and Defense Minister (CMO, [April 26](#); [April 27](#); [April 29](#); [June 10](#))
- **Special Event:** The 7th China-Vietnam Border Defense Friendship Exchange was held on April 23 in Longzhou County of China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Quang Hoa County of Vietnam's Cao Bang Province, and relevant port areas ([CMO](#), April 23). Wei and Vietnamese Defense Minister General Phan Van Giang led their respective delegations to the event. Both Defense Ministers crossed the border with one another to visit facilities on the opposite side of the boundary.
- **Video / phone talks with foreign counterparts:** Malaysian Senior Minister and Defense Minister (September 2021); Indonesian Minister of Defense (November 2021); Russian Defense Minister (November 2021); Saudi Arabia's Deputy Defense Minister (January 2022); U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin (April 2022); and the Tanzanian Minister for Defense and National Service (May 2022) (CMO, [September 27, 2021](#); [November 23, 2021](#); [November 30, 2021](#); [January 26](#); [April 20](#); June 1).

- **Video conferences:** In June, Wei co-chaired the 13th China-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting with the Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister General via video link (CMO, June 22). Last month, Wei addressed the 10th Moscow Conference on International Security via video link ([MND](#), August 16).
- **Hosted visits:** Russian Defense Minister (December 2021); none in 2022.

Chief of the Joint Staff Department

Historically, the Chief of CMC's Joint Staff Department (former General Staff Department) was allowed to travel abroad once per year, but they have not always take advantage of that opportunity. For example, over the last five years, the current Chief of the Joint Staff Department General Li Zuocheng has visited Russia in August 2018 and New Zealand in November 2019, where he co-chaired the 10th Strategic Dialogue between the Chinese and New Zealand militaries, but he has not traveled abroad since that time ([CMO](#), August 31, 2018; [November 11](#), 2019). He also hosted the Chief of the South African National Defense Force in August 2018 and the U.S. Navy's Chief of Naval Operations in January 2019 (CMO, August 24, 2018; [MND](#), January 15, 2019). Li has not hosted any in-person visitors since January 2019, but has held video talks with New Zealand's Secretary of Defence and Chief Executive of the Ministry of Defence in January, and with the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff this July 2022 (CMO, [January 19](#); [July 8](#)).

Deputy Chief of the Joint Staff Department

The PLA has always assigned the portfolio of military diplomacy to one of the Deputy Chiefs of the former General Staff Department or current Joint Staff Department. Since August 2017, current Deputy Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Shao Yuanming has been responsible for military diplomacy. The below list provides information on the bilateral meetings meeting that Shao has chaired, and engagements with foreign counterparts in which he has led the PLA:

- January 2018: China and Myanmar Diplomacy and Defense Consultations in Naypyidaw, Myanmar ([CMO](#), January 17, 2018).
- May 2018: China and Russia 20th round of strategic consultation in Beijing ([CMO](#), May 30, 2018).
- September 2018: China and Russia "Vostok-2018" strategic joint military exercise at the Tsugol training range in Russia's Trans-Baikal, where Shao was the PLA exercise director ([CMO](#), September 14, 2018).
- April 2021: China and Vietnam 10th Defense and Security Consultation in Dongxing, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region ([MND](#), April 23, 2021).
- September 2021: China and Singapore 8th Defense Policy Dialogue via video conference (MND, September 15, 2021).
- January 2022: China and France 16th China-France Defense Strategy Consultation via video link ([MND](#), January 13).
- January 2022: China and United Kingdom 8th Defense Strategy Consultation via video link ([MND](#), January 12).

Other PLA Leaders

Other PLA leaders, including the service and Theater Command commanders, rarely travel abroad or interact with any foreign military leaders who visit China. However, the MND reported last month that the PLAAF Commander, General Chang Dingqiu held a video discussion with the Royal Thai Air Force's Air Chief Marshal ([CMO](#), August 9). Per the MND's meeting readout, both sides held an in-depth exchange of views on communication and cooperation between the air forces of the two countries.

One other example involves discussions between senior PLA and Indian military leaders concerning the boundary standoff in Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh in early 2020 ([MND](#), July 19; [Deccan Herald](#), June 22, 2020). Since the standoff began in early 2020, a total of 16 "corps commander level meetings" every couple of months. During the 2nd meeting in June 2020, the PLA delegation's leader was Major General Liu Lin, who was the Commander of the Xinjiang Military District's Nanjiang Military District, and the Indian leader was Lieutenant General Harinder Singh, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Leh-based 14th Corps. It is not clear if the same two officers have continued to lead the discussions since then.

On November 30, 2021, the China-Cambodia military joint working group held its 5th meeting via video link ([CMO](#), November 30, 2021). The two sides exchanged in-depth views on military-to-military exchanges and cooperation and other areas of common interest. It is unclear which PLA organization or personnel participated in this meeting.

In February, PLA leaders from the CMC's Office for International Military Cooperation and the Common Security and Defence Policy and Crisis Response department under the European External Action Service (EEAS) co-chaired the 12th China-EU dialogue on defense and security policy, which was held via video link ([CMO](#), February 25).

Conclusion

A major change in the PLA's leadership in the CMC will take place during the 20th Party Congress in October, but it is not clear who the vice chairmen and members will be yet, or who will become the next Defense Minister at the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) in early 2023. Although the PLA virtually stopped its military diplomacy after COVID-19 began in December 2019, it got underway again in early 2021 to include having both in-person meetings at home and abroad at lower numbers, and conducting video discussions individually with foreign military leaders and during scheduled conferences, as well as participating in bilateral and multilateral exercises at home and abroad. Since early 2021, the PLA has also provided COVID-19 vaccines and supplies to over 50 countries. Normally, it takes a few months for the new CMC leadership to begin hosting counterparts and traveling abroad after a Party Congress concludes, so the same pattern can be expected to continue in 2023.

Kenneth W. Allen is a retired U.S. Air Force officer, whose extensive service abroad includes a tour in China as the Assistant Air Attaché. He was the former research director of U.S. Air Force's China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI) from 2017 through 2019.

Notes

[1] For more on the PLA's military diplomacy see Kenneth W. Allen and Eric A. McVadon, *China's Foreign Military Relations*, (Washington, D.C.: The Henry L. Stimson Center, October 1999); Kenneth W. Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016*, (Washington, D.C.: National Defense

University, Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), China Strategic Perspectives 11, July 2017); and Heidi Holz and Kenneth W. Allen, “Military Exchanges with Chinese Characteristics: The People’s Liberation Army Experience with Military Relations” in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell, eds., *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China’s Military*, (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, June 2010). Roger Cliff and Roy D. Kamphausen, Editors, *Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA*, (Carlisle: PA, US Army War College Press, July 2022).

[2] The primary Chinese sources for the PLA’s military diplomacy are <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/node_48461.htm, <http://english.chinamil.com.cn/>, and http://english.chinamil.com.cn/china-military/node_83135.htm.

[3] This conclusion is based on analysis of PLA diplomacy data and the author’s interviews with PLA officers over several years.

[4] In 2006, the China Association of Military Science (CAMS / 中国军事科学学会), which is subordinate to the PLA Academy of Military Science, held the first Xiangshan Forum (香山论坛) in Beijing.

The Russia-India-China Trilateral After Ukraine: Will Beijing Take the Lead?

Jagannath Panda and Wooyeal Paik



(Image: *Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meet during the G20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, June 28, 2019., source:* China Daily)

Introduction

At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) foreign ministers' meeting in late July, which included China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, People's Republic of China (PRC) State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi exhorted member states to uphold the "Shanghai Spirit" (上海精神, *Shanghai Jingshen*) of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, diverse civilizations, and the pursuit of common development ([Gov.cn](#), July 29). He then presented a "five-point proposal" for building an SCO community "with a shared future" ([CGTN](#), July 30). In doing so, Wang echoed President Xi Jinping's call in his four-point proposal at the BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) summit in June —albeit via a rather elemental poetic allegory of fire, wind, and water—to embark on a "righteous course" toward a shared global future premised on inclusive, comprehensive and close win-win cooperation ([Qiushi](#), June 24). BRICS already has a "Plus" mechanism and is mulling an expansion to include "like-minded" partners.

The PRC's claim to be advancing a more inclusive model of international relations through SCO, BRICS and other multilateral groupings in which it plays a leading or central role accords with Beijing's stringent criticism of the West in general, and the U.S. in particular, for unilaterally targeting or isolating states on normative ground (i.e. the "universal values" of liberal democracies). Under Xi, the PRC has promoted its own networks of multilateral and bilateral strategic partnerships as positive-sum correctives to U.S.-led formal alliances, which Beijing consistently asserts drive world politics toward zero-sum competition ([China Brief](#), July 15). This narrative has become even more prominent of late with Beijing's sharp reaction to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) identification of China as a "systemic challenge" for the first time at the Madrid summit this June, where Indo-Pacific states were invited as observers. As a result, the PRC's fears of NATO spreading its tentacles in Asia (or a similarly modeled "Asian NATO") have intensified. Beijing has responded with a series of tirades against NATO referring to the Western security bloc as a "gangster," a "war machine," and a "butcher" ([Global Times](#), March 16). Concurrently, however, the language of Xi, Wang and other leaders invokes the Communist Party's "Chinese characteristics" while ironically addressing diversity in forums that are decidedly multipolar. The key question is: how far will emerging and developing nations with a distaste for the West favor China as an international leader?

It is in this context that China's recent relentless pursuit of India to join its ranks against what it calls the exclusive cliques, zero-sum games, and "new Cold War" thinking of the U.S. becomes all the more significant ([CGTN](#), November 26, 2021). A rather unexpected consequence of the Ukraine war, wherein China and India maintained a strategic silence toward Russia when the war initially began, is that each state's respectively cordial relations with Moscow has become a point of concord. What no one would have predicted was that this unwitting support would lead to the point of China enticing India to coalesce forces. What does this mean for the Russia, India, and China (RIC) trilateral? Will the cooperation flounder or proceed under the aegis of the China-led multilateral organizations like the SCO and BRICS?

Changing Global Contours: The RIC Conundrum

The RIC has long been touted as one of the most influential high-level (foreign minister level) trilaterals in Eurasia. It was dubbed "Primakov's strategic triangle" in deference to the former Russian prime minister who envisioned the concept as an anti-US triad in the late 90s. However, by the time the grouping came into being in the early 2000s (China and India were initially hesitant because of the anti-West connotation), its buzzwords were cooperation, trade, economic expansion, and stability ([China Daily](#), June 2, 2005; [Pravda](#), December 2, 2002).

Over the years, RIC has been continuously showcased as a significant non-Western platform for dialogue and cooperation that was set to shape a new multipolar order ([Valdai club](#), May 14, 2012; [China Daily](#), June 29, 2019). However, the potential was never utilized, although the optics continued to generate attention, as the grouping was bogged down by a range of issues: differing political systems; increasing China-Russia convergence; limited India-Russia economic engagement; growing India-China hostility following Xi's ascent to power in 2012, which culminated in two significant recent stand-offs along the disputed China-India land border and rising rivalry in the maritime domain; and perhaps the most significant reason, which is India's

embrace of the US-led Indo-Pacific construct that both Russia and China abhor. These factors have certainly combined to limit prospects for trilateral engagement and by extension the development of the RIC format.

Even the Chinese state media narrative around the RIC has only indulged in standard platitudes of strengthening cooperation and jointly facing issues, calling the 2018 and 2019 leaders' summit meetings "informal"; CGTN's "2018 in Review" does not even include the 2018 RIC summit, which was held after a gap of 12 years ([CGTN](#), 2018). An interview in the *Global Times* with Liu Zongyi, a senior fellow of Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, indicates the likely cause of such indifference is India's strategic partnership with the U.S. and bonhomie with the "Indo-Pacific allies," as well as residual tensions from the 2017 Doklam faceoff ([Global Times](#), June 26, 2019).

Nevertheless, following the 2020 Galwan border clash and crisis, there was a consistent thread in the Chinese media suggesting that the trilateral had improved India's "status" in the global arena through association with the "giants" China and Russia, casually appeasing India while also threatening to terminate the trilateral ([Global Times](#), August 27, 2020). In 2020, the three foreign ministers met virtually in June, when the conflict was at its peak, and then gathered in Moscow in September at the behest of Russia, which refused to take side in the fracas and did to an extent, act as a "multilateral balancer" for the two sparring sides ([South China Morning Post](#), January 9). Although these discussions helped calm tensions, the meetings ended without any concrete action plan ([Ministry of External Affairs \[MEA\]](#), September 10, 2020; [FMPRC](#), June 23, 2020; [ISPI](#), March 26). Interestingly, although the Russian side declined to playing any further role as an intermediary, former *Global Times* Editor-in Chief Hu Xijin, in justifying Russia's continuing weapon sales to India as not a betrayal of China, claimed that "Russia is actually serving as a mediator in this China-India border conflict" ([Business Standard](#), June 23, 2020; [Global Times](#), September 15, 2020).

For China, the RIC is a means to advance its Eurasian strategy with Russia as a partner, especially as both authoritarian powers are aligned on criticisms of the Quad as an elitist grouping and oppose the "free and open Indo-Pacific" construct ([The Strategist](#), July 1, 2021; [The Hindu](#), November 26, 2021). While this emerges as an area of convergence for Russia-China, it equally becomes a major medium of contact for the Russia-India partnership ([The Interpreter](#), March 3, 2021).

China has sought to build its importance in the RIC over that of India. This will serve two purposes in the present climate: firstly, it would allow China to wield greater power over India vis-à-vis discussions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Importantly, by strengthening the Russia-China connection, it may seek to check or limit Moscow's arms exports to Delhi, thereby limiting India's defense capabilities, particularly around the LAC. Secondly, it would allow China to market its own Central Asia strategy over that of India's by using the RIC as a stepping stone to exert greater influence in other forums such as the SCO, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and BRICS. For this purpose, China will present itself as the more reliable and important partner for Russia, as well as its lifeline against US sanctions ([Xinhua](#), June 17; [Business Standard](#), June 21).

Keeping such a goal in mind, China's strategic balancing has been delicate. For instance, the AIIB suspended financial activities with Moscow and Belarus in March due to Western sanctions, citing spillover effects (e.g., economic and financial risks to businesses) on its members while extending solidarity

with the victims of the Ukraine war without any castigation of Russia ([AIIB](#), March 3). At the same time, strengthening speculations of Yuan (RMB) use in international settlements, Chinese experts have slammed the Western narrative on AIIB as a “smear” campaign, highlighting that the bank is a credible institution whose actions have followed a “market mechanism” that is not intended to “punish” Russia but reduce the risk impact ([Global Times](#), March 4). In this context, China’s balancing strategy may be – at least to some extent – a limiting factor in China-Russia relations and impact their interactions within the RIC strategic triangle.

China’s New Game Plan

Even as the date of the next RIC leaders’ summit remains undecided, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has reiterated Moscow’s belief that the dialogue is essential to building trust between China and India ([Tribune](#), January 15). Although mutual illiberal values have been a viable source for developing ties for years, the Sino-Russian pseudo-coalition is a recent phenomenon that has coalesced as both powers are increasingly enmeshed in intensifying strategic rivalries with the U.S. Such a “friendship of convenience” between strongmen-Putin and Xi has led to a delicate diplomacy on sensitive bilateral issues. For instance, Moscow has wholeheartedly supported China on Huawei’s 5G rollout, Hong Kong, and the COVID-19 pandemic; China while taking a seemingly neutral stand on Ukraine, has repeatedly asserted Russia’s “legitimate concerns,” rallied against NATO, rejected “unilateral sanctions,” and included Moscow in all its multilateral forums ([China Daily](#), July 3, 2020; [Moscow Times](#), June 6, 2019; [CGTN](#), February 23).

Beijing and Moscow do not agree on all international issues. For instance, China does not consider Crimea a legitimate part of Russia, and Moscow maintains neutrality on Beijing’s South China Sea claims ([Global Times](#), March 22, 2014; [TASS](#), June 10, 2016). Hence, in the context of the RIC, China attempts to ensure that such divergences do not impede the otherwise growing Sino-Russian partnership. Owing to Russia’s consistent belief and portrayal that RIC remains viable as it maintains stability between India and China, Beijing has downplayed tensions with India as “low-key” issues, stressing that “common interests far outweigh differences” ([China Daily](#), June 24).

Ultimately, even as China seeks to check the rise of India by asserting economic and military strength, it is taking care to ensure that its efforts to reshape regional and global security architecture are not impacted as a result ([Stimson](#), May 4). For example, China and India have reached a “four point consensus” after 16 rounds of commander-level talks that have recently taken on a more amicable tone that coincides with China’s outreach to India at the SCO and BRICS meetings ([People’s Daily](#), June 29). Thus, by gaining traction in the RIC, China hopes to not only strengthen its relationship with Russia on other platforms, but also to demonstrate to emerging and developing countries that it is a responsible power that, unlike the United States, cooperates effectively even with a traditionally antagonistic strategic competitor like India. Marginalizing or demonizing the US in global affairs and dwarfing the West as a whole is the ultimate ambition.

Will RIC Fade or Come Full Circle?

Until Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, it appeared as if Russia was more invested in the RIC than the other two partners. For India, the RIC has limited attraction as an avenue to increase its linkages to Central Asia, as a tool to manage China, and as a way to responsibly engage with states that are out of favor with much of the international community.

For China, too, the trilateral has limited appeal, particularly as India is unlikely to accept a subordinate role. However, stable relations between India and China—a requisite for the broader Chinese aims for BRICS and the SCO beyond the obvious reasons—serve all three partners.

The Ukraine crisis, however, has renewed interest in revitalizing RIC. A defiant China – which is in the midst of a trade war and growing military rivalry with the U.S.– in concert with a sanctions-ridden Russia is looking to expand their autocratic circle as a consequence of mutual isolation at the hands of the West. A strategic but non-committal India, as an emerging power and a bridge to the West, is essential to this calculus.

Whether this will mean a revival of the RIC remains in question. Earlier this year, Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova reportedly put the onus for organizing the next RIC leaders' summit on China ([Wion](#), February 28). The Chinese government and the media have been oddly silent on RIC even while stressing the “momentum of recovery” on cooperation with India ([China Daily](#), July 15).

Nonetheless, based on the RIC's track record of achievements alone, the future of the grouping (even when the original intent is back in play) may have lost its urgency and relevance. The complementarity that the trilateral provides for each of its partners is not unique and can be fulfilled, perhaps more effectively, via organizations like BRICS and the SCO. Beijing has certainly inferred this, and is seeking to build connections with West-ward (as well as West-weary) states and strengthen the aforementioned platforms, rather than expend unnecessary resources on an outdated trilateral. However, the RIC is unlikely to be scrapped altogether, and will continue to hold regular foreign ministers' briefings as before with perhaps a smattering of occasional leader-level summits.

Therefore, despite its imperfections and limitations, both India and China are likely to persist with the RIC. Both states have a mutual desire to promote a more multipolar world order and the RIC is a mechanism to coordinate their actions in this regard. While China is intent on preventing India from finding greater synergy with the U.S. (and the Western bloc in general), and India is keen to ensure that the Russia-China partnership does not escalate to greater heights, the RIC is a forum through which both can continue their interactions and look to achieve their goals. Importantly, for India, withdrawing from the RIC would not be a strategically sound move even in the absence of tangible results, for either Russia-India ties, nor its efforts to achieve power-parity with China. India's participation in the current Vostok exercise is a part of this strategic calculus. Moreover, the RIC trilateral allows both states to leverage their shared friendship with Russia in a bid to manage their border differences. For Russia, the RIC provides an opportunity to engage with two of its closest partners at a time when relations with the West are at a nadir, ensuring that India does not fully embrace entry into the pro-US camp. Hence, the RIC is set to continue; however, whether it is able to reassert its importance remains to be seen.

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Make the Green Serve China: PRC Influence Operations Target International Environmentalism

By Filip Jirouš



(Image: The China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED) meets in Beijing this June, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

As the world embraces green initiatives on an unprecedented scale, so has the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) — perhaps surprisingly — embraced the green movement, but has done so primarily to support its own political objectives. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has attempted to build an image as an environmentally responsible global player, a task made easier by former President Trump's withdrawal of the U.S. from international climate change cooperation frameworks, and China has trumpeted its efforts to develop its renewable energy and green technologies sectors ([Xinhuanet](https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020/09/22/c_139388888.htm), September 22, 2020). In addition, however, in the spirit of “do not destroy, repurpose,” PRC influence agencies, as well as the Ministry of State Security (MSS, 国家安全部, *Guojia Anquan Bu*), the PRC's main civilian intelligence agency, have been cultivating ties with the world's largest green non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as government environmental officials from the West. [1] These efforts and NGO-regulations led to the current state when environmental foundations praise China and almost never criticize it, while the country remains one of the top world polluters. Thus, possibly with the best intentions, these institutions serve PRC's propaganda and help legitimize the CCP in an area that had been Beijing's weak point both domestically and internationally, while also giving funds to the PRC. [2]

In contrast, Greenpeace, which has no apparent institutional ties with PRC influence organs, continues to systematically criticize China's environmental policies, strengthening the argument that such ties at least correlate with benevolence towards PRC green efforts ([Greenpeace East Asia](#), July 13, 2016; [Greenpeace](#), August 8, 2016; [Greenpeace East Asia](#), January 18; [Greenpeace East Asia](#), July 20).

These activities are somewhat reminiscent of the USSR's exploitation of the world peace movement during the Cold War, through which Moscow sought to demilitarize its enemies by encouraging them to pursue a generally, worthy goal. While their methods are similar, the focus of the CCP's "green cooption" efforts appear to be mainly to support its propaganda and political goals.

Institutional Ties

The China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation (CBCGDF, 中国生物多样性保护与绿色发展基金会, *Zhongguo Shengwu Duoyangxing Baohu yu Lüse Fazhan Jijinhui*), which cooperates with several Western environmental NGOs and the UN, includes several united front cadre in its leadership ([CBCGDF](#)). While the foundation's secretary-general is a former representative to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中国人民政治协商会议, *Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi*), the top-level united front body, a former deputy head of the United Front Work Department (UWFD, 统一战线工作部, *Tongyi Zhanxian Gongzuo Bu*) presides over its council, which also includes a current UWFD cadre ([CBCGDF](#), November 24, 2016; [CBCGDF](#), June 1, 2016). The U.S.-based Natural Resources Defense Foundation has collaborated with CBCGD (and with some of the united front umbrella organizations described below), and was criticized by the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources in 2018 for its ties to the CCP and alleged double standards in environmental status reporting ([U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources](#), June 5, 2018).

Another key issue that complicates international environmental organizations' engagement with Chinese counterparts is NGO governance in the PRC, which has become more politicized and hostile toward Western organizations in recent years. In late 2016, the PRC enacted a new law on the governance of overseas NGOs under which they can be expelled from the country for overt criticism of CCP policies, or any other actions that "endanger China's national unity, security, or ethnic unity" or damage "China's national or public interests" ([Fuzhou Foreign Affairs Office](#), February 23). Furthermore, this system is managed by the Ministry of Public Security (公安部, *Gong'an Bu*), a security organ engaged in intelligence and counter-intelligence operations that is often misrepresented as the PRC "police ministry" ([Synopsis](#), February 21). This oversight by the security services alone puts the integrity of the NGOs that remain in the country in question.

The global green C40 alliance of mayors has also been targeted by PRC influence efforts. In September 2021, the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会, *Zhongguo Renmin Duiwai Youhao Xiehui*), a people's diplomacy organ in charge — among other responsibilities — of city-to-city relations management, co-organized a video-conference with C40 representatives where the CPAFFC president gave the opening speech ([Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries](#), September 11, 2021).

Personnel links

Other than direct links to influence organs, the local staff of Western green NGOs are also sometimes ensnared in conflicts of interest that involve the PRC.

The CEO of Energy Foundation China, which is a U.S.-registered organization, Zou Ji (邹骥) concurrently works at Tsinghua University center — whose director said that its activities must “firmly serve the party, government and people’s political orientation” — alongside a retired PLA military scholar (and senior PLA officer), and a former deputy director of a department of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR, 中国现代国际关系研究院, Zhongguo Xiandai Guoji Guanxi Yanjiuyuan), which is part of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) ([Tsinghua University](#); [Tsinghua University](#), April 2019).

Fang Li (方莉), who is the director of the World Resources Institute (WRI) China, previously served as a deputy director general of a Ministry of Ecology and Environment’s unit mainly tasked with promoting the BRI ([World Resources Institute](#)). In 2020, Fang attended — on behalf of the WRI—a conference organized by the Center for China and Globalisation (CCG, 全球化智库, *quanqiu hua zhiku*)—a think tank affiliated with the UFWD as well as the International Liaison Department (ILD, 中央对外联络部, *Zhongyang Duiwai Lianluo Bu*), a central influence organ previously described by the Czech counter-intelligence as a special party intelligence agency, that recently signed an open letter urging the UN to stop the publication of a Xinjiang situation report ([Education and Sustainable Development Think Tank](#), November 25, 2020; [BIS](#), October 11, 2020; [China Daily](#), July 26). [2]

As of 2021 (no current data is available), the World Resources Institute (WRI) China advisory board included a former member of the National People’s Congress (NPC) Standing Committee and a researcher from the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (中国人民外交学会, *Zhongguo Renmin Waijiao Xuehui*), a people’s diplomacy organ affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([WRI](#); [International Ecological Economy Promotion Association](#); [China Institute for Innovation & Development Strategy](#); [Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs](#)).

Ma Jun (马骏), the PRC chair of the UK-China Green Finance Centre (launched by the City of London Corporation and China Green Finance Committee) concurrently serves as a deputy head of an expert committee at the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (中华全国归国华侨联合会, *Zhongguo Quanguo Guiguo Huaqiao Lianhehui*), a key united front organ targeting the Overseas Chinese, which is not mentioned in his bio on the Centre’s website ([UK-China Green Finance Centre](#); [Green Finance Expert Committee of the China Financial Forum](#)).

The Children’s Investment Fund Foundation employs NPC Standing Committee member Wang Yi (王毅) [not to be confused with the current foreign minister of the same name], a Vice President and Researcher of the

Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Science and Technology Strategic Consulting, as an “independent advisor” as of 2020 ([Beautiful China Forum 100](#)).

United Front Umbrella Organizations

As is typical of united-front-like methods and the BRI, the PRC has established a number of umbrella organizations for its activities in the environmental sphere. [4] The main body, encompassing a significant number of large Green NGOs as well as environmental state officials, is the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED, 中国环境与发展国际合作委员会, *Zhongguo Huanjing yu Fazhan Guoji Hezuo Weiyuanhui*). While the PRC vice premier and politburo standing committee member Han Zheng (韩正) chairs the council, the minister of ecology and environment Huang Runqiu (黄润秋) serves as his deputy, many of its advisors and council members have backgrounds in influence operations. The CCICED's chief advisor used to serve as deputy director of the State Council Development Research Center (国务院发展研究中心, *Guowuyuan Fazhan Yanjiu Zhongxin*), an organ involved in BRI influence operations targeting politicians and think tankers alongside the ILD ([CCICED](#); [Synopsis](#), August 12, 2019). As of September 2021, one of the council members was a former president of the CPAFFC ([CCICED](#)). One of the special advisors is an ex-deputy head of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (中国国际贸易促进会, *Zhongguo Guoji Maoyi Cujin Hui*), a “people's diplomacy” organ from the PRC's financial system ([CCICED](#); [Synopsis](#), November 20, 2021). The presence of these individuals suggests that CCICED also serves influence purposes, exploiting foreign government officials and NGO heads (including the Canadian minister of environment) — who are given what appear to be mere token positions on the council — for green-washing propaganda while receiving money (CCICED's total budget amounts to roughly \$20,000,000) from the foreign states and organizations that the councilors represent ([CCICED](#), April 7, 2021).

Another, more recent, China-centric international body also involves influence work cadres, but additionally a PRC intelligence agency is the Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition (BRIIGDC, “一带一路”绿色发展国际联盟, “Yi Dai Yi Lu” Lüse Fazhan Guoji Lianmeng). The BRIIGDC was established in 2019 as a grouping for the Green BRI at the PRC Ministry of Ecology and Environment (中国生态环境部, *Zhongguo Shengtai Huanjing Bu*) during the BRI summit, and is also co-chaired by Huang alongside three foreign state and NGO representatives ([Green Belt and Road Initiative Center](#); [BRIIGDC](#)). The Coalition's partner list includes several foreign environmental ministries, even from countries that are not part of the BRI such as Finland ([BRIIGDC](#)). PRC partners comprise *China Daily*, the party external propaganda outlet, as well as CICIR, the 11th bureau of the Ministry of State Security ([BRIIGDC](#)). [5] CICIR is also part of the BRIIGDC's green big data platform project ([Green BRI](#)). As with CCICED, the Coalition's activities are financially sponsored by Western green foundations ([CCICED](#)).

Ecological Security

Environmentalism is a priority for the PRC in part because CCP leadership perceives it as a security issue with overarching political security implications discussed in party theory. Efforts to counter negative ecological effects (and possibly criticism of the government to mitigate them) are labeled as ecological security (生态安全, *Shengtai Anquan*), one of the several non-traditional security issues integrated into the “Overall National Security Outlook” (总体国家安全观, *Zongti Guojia Anquan Guan*), Xi’s security paradigm enshrined in CCP theory ([Sinopsis](#), June 16, 2020). The overall goal of Xi’s focus on security is to consolidate power of the CCP at home and promote its model abroad in order to alter the global governance system. Ecological security is embedded within the 2020 CCICED-produced policy document-Green BRI and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and is generally part of the Green BRI’s concepts and ideas ([CCICED](#), September 2020; [CPC News](#), May 11, 2017; [China.org](#), February 26, 2021). According to an article published in the CCP’s theoretical magazine, *Qiushi*, ecological security is on par with political and military security, saying that “if the environment lacks security, it must affect social stability and endanger state security” ([Qiushi](#), December 18, 2015). A PRC united front media article postulates that environmental pollution “can pose severe challenges for social stability and political security” ([China News Service](#), May 25, 2021).



(Image: Securities considered core by the Ministry of State Security's propaganda office are laid out in a poster for National Security Education Day on April 15. This includes ecological security (right-most bubble), source: Ministry of State Security Propaganda Office via Nanning News)

This thinking led even the CICIR's Research Center for Overall National Security Outlook (总体国家安全观研究中心, *Zongti Guojia Anquan Guan Yanjiu Zhongxin*) to publish on ecological security ([Research Center for Overall National Security Outlook](#)). Moreover, in June 2021, one of its leading cadres attended a conference on the building of Ecological Civilization (生态文明, *Shengtai Wenming*) and the Community of Common Destiny (人类命运共同体, *Renlei Mingyun Gongtongti*), both CCP ideological touchstones, organized by the Foreign Environmental Cooperation Center of the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment ([Foreign Environmental Cooperation Center of the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment](#), June 21, 2021). [6] Staff from the BRIGDC Secretariat, the CCICED, and external propaganda organs also participated in the meeting and all present unanimously agreed that the PRC's Ecological Civilization building is important not only for the Chinese people, but that it also "brings more development opportunities to the world and contributes to the [appeal] of the China Model", and so this concept "should be actively promoted to the international community" ([Foreign Environmental Cooperation Center of the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment; China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration](#)).

Conclusion

The institutional and personnel ties that link green NGOs and environmental government officials to PRC influence organs undermine these entities' legitimacy and independence as important actors in the global effort to combat the effects of climate change. Refraining from open criticism of the PRC's environmental track record, possibly to avoid expulsion from the country, helps green-wash the regime's activities that now include a significant increase in its use of coal energy. Furthermore, Beijing's sincerity in fighting climate change is rather questionable, as it did not shy from taking these global efforts hostage during outreach by the U.S. government in 2021. The PRC then gave the U.S. climate change envoy John Kerry two lists of political demands (including easing restrictions on CCP members' access to the U.S., as well as Confucius Institutes operations in the country) that need to be taken before Beijing agrees to work with the U.S. on the climate ([Xinhua](#), July 26, 2021). U.S.-China talks on climate change were also one of the eight areas of dialogue and cooperation suspended by Beijing in retaliation for U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan last month ([FMPRC](#), August 5). The PRC's willingness to use environmental cooperation as a geopolitical bargaining chip in the U.S.-China competition makes the whole green outreach by the international community to China look rather naive.

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Author's note: the title of this article is inspired by Anne-Marie Brady's 2003 book, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic*.

Notes

[1] On repurposing, see [Sinopsis](#), November 26, 2019.

[2] The author provided Chinese-language research that informed the article by David Rose published with the British media outlet UnHerd that described this phenomenon ([UnHerd](#), December 15, 2021).

[3] Alex Joske and Jeffrey Stoff, “The United Front and Technology Transfer” in William C. Hannas and Didi Kirsten Tatlow (eds.), *China’s Quest for Foreign Technology: Beyond Espionage*, Routledge, 2020.

[4] For BRI umbrella organizations involving many of the influence organs discussed in this article see [Sinopsis](#), August 12, 2019.

[5] On CICIR’s activities targeting Eastern European think tanks and scholars see [China Brief](#), July 1, and [China Brief](#), December 3, 2021.

[6] Ecological Civilisation building is a term upgraded by Xi Jinping and incorporated into Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想, *Xi Jinping Xin Shidai Zhongguo Tese Shehuizhuyi Sixiang*) ([Qiushi](#), January 7, 2020). According to discussion of its meaning in a CCP political theory magazine, it is Marxist and scientific by nature, stresses development and is important for the “China Model” (中国模式, *Zhongguo Moshi*), a term originally stressing the uniqueness of PRC development, but recently turned into an export article. For more on Community of Common Destiny and other relevant foreign policy ideological concepts, see [The National Bureau of Asian Research](#), January 2020.