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The downfall of former security czar Zhou Yongkang is likely the product a deal reached before Xi Jinping took office.

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In a Fortnight

ZHOU'S FALL ABOUT INSTITUTIONS, NOT PERSONALITIES

By David Cohen

On Tuesday, Chinese official media confirmed the long-anticipated arrest of Zhou Yongkang ([Xinhua](#), July 29). Zhou, a former member of the Politburo Standing Committee and head of China's state security apparatus, is the first member of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) highest echelon to fall from power since and the 1989 Tiananmen Square crisis, and the first ever to be charged with corruption (Zhao Ziyang, CCP General Secretary at the time of the crisis, was placed under informal house arrest). The following day, the Politburo confirmed rumors that the fourth plenary session of the Central Committee in October will focus on "governing the country according to law," strongly suggesting that China's top leaders aim to reform legal institutions to consolidate the effects of the ongoing anti-corruption campaign ([People's Daily](#), July 30).

Zhou's arrest has been definitively interpreted in Chinese state media as proof that "no matter how high their post or how long their service, all cadres must answer to party discipline and the law," as a front-page editorial in *People's Daily* put it ([People's Daily](#), July 30). So far, every story longer than Xinhua's two-line announcement of the arrest has emphasized this point (see also People's Net, [July 29](#) and [July 30](#);

[Caixin](#), July 30).

Who Targeted Zhou?

Meanwhile, many foreign analysts have interpreted the bagging of China's largest "tiger" yet as evidence of Xi's personal power, attributing it either to factional conflict or a determination to reform the party. While Xi's anti-corruption campaign played a major role in the lead-up to Zhou's arrest, there is also evidence that a consensus against him emerged among Party leaders and elders before Xi took office in 2012, highlighting an important determinant of Xi's power that has not been sufficiently examined: the striking unity of China's top leaders behind Xi's reform agenda.

Xi appears to have had support to pursue Zhou in the first months of his term, targeting officials linked to the former security czar at the outset of his anti-corruption campaign and before assuming the office of President ([NTD TV](#), February 11, 2013). Furthermore, at the time he became General Secretary of the CCP, the Party reduced the membership of the Standing Committee from seven to nine—placing Zhou's successor on a lower rung of the CCP hierarchy and placing an official perceived as an un-ambitious administrator at the head of the Ministry of Public Security ([China Brief](#), February 1, 2013). These moves—decided by a broad but poorly understood group of Party elders and retiring leaders—sought to weaken the office as well as the man, strongly suggesting a consensus that the security czar had accumulated too much power. This explanation of Zhou's downfall suggests that we should look past Xi when explaining the dramatic move—that the source of this and other high-profile reform drives lies not only in the personal power of China's President, but in agreements made among China's top leaders.

Helping Cadres Interpret Zhou's Arrest

While speculation about Zhou has been censored for the past year, Chinese information authorities have permitted guided discussion of the announcement, and People's Net has created a landing page for stories about the arrest ([People's Net](#), "Zhou Yongkang Under Investigation for Grave Disciplinary Violations"; [Wall Street Journal](#), July 29). The *People's Daily* editorial used the opportunity both to explain the reach of the anti-corruption campaign

and to remind readers of the reasons for it, linking the campaign to internal and external threats to party rule ([People's Daily](#), July 30).

The first section of the editorial covers what it is by now familiar ground, using Zhou as an example to demonstrate that no one is above the law. But the third, and longest, paragraph reminds readers that "To rule the nation we must rule the party; to rule the party we must be severe," arguing that the party's survival depends on widespread cooperation with a campaign that asks officials to give up many of the privileges of office and to tolerate the danger of arrest. The editorial argues that "the party is confronted by acute tests and dangers," citing the "new situation"—a recent interpretation of international affairs that emphasizes the need for transformation in response to external threats and opportunities (see "A 'New Situation': China's Evolving Assessment of its Security Environment," in this issue of [China Brief](#)). Except for discussions of corruption, the "new situation" phrase is used exclusively for discussion of international affairs, continuing a pattern of tying corruption to external threats to build a "sense of crisis" (see [China Brief](#), [August 23, 2013](#), [May 23, 2013](#)).

Putting Cadres on Their Best Behavior—and Making it Last

While Zhou's arrest completes an investigation that lasted for over a year, Xi has made it clear that this is not the end of his fight against corruption (see [China Brief](#), July 3). Indeed, a commentary by the *Guoping* ("National Peace") column framed the arrest as a move to clear out the obstacles to further reform ([People's Net](#), July 31). However, a purge cannot last forever, and without institutional reform progress on discipline is likely to be lost.

The announcement that the main topic of October's Fourth Plenum will be "governing according to law" confirms that reform of the legal system is the next step in Xi's anti-corruption campaign. While officials are currently on their best behavior, Xi appears to hope that more independent oversight will make temporary changes into permanent practices. There is little sign of what these reforms will look like, although legal reform pilot programs launched in four provinces in June may suggest a focus on reducing political interference in court

([China Brief](#), June 19). Plenary sessions—such as last year's Third Plenum, focused on economic reform—are used to set major goals; the decision is likely to sketch out broad principles for reform and to begin a long process of implementation.

With the arrest of a major leader in a continuing, and massive, purge, and constant reminders that the stakes of the struggle against corruption are nothing less than the survival of the party, Xi and his colleagues have sought to generate a period of crisis in which major changes are possible. The question to remain is whether this political window is wide enough—and will stay open long enough—to allow systemic change to take root.

David Cohen is the editor of China Brief.

'The No. 1 is Key': Xi Jinping Holds Forth on the Art of Leadership

By Willy Lam

In the past month or so, Chinese official media have published scores of articles containing President Xi Jinping's homilies on the art of leadership (*lingxiuxue*) and in particular, his views of the personal qualities needed to govern 1.3 billion people. These reports are based not only on Xi's pronouncements since the 18th CCP Congress of late 2012, but also on speeches and essays made and written by the 61-year-old leader when he served in Zhejiang Province and the Shanghai municipality from 2002 to 2007. Given Xi's increasing tendency to present himself as a paragon of flawless leadership, he and his entourage seem intent on erecting a personality cult that is geared toward boosting the already formidable authority of the General Secretary, President and Commander-in-Chief.

Xi's Theory of Leadership

At the 17th Party Congress of 2007, Xi was chosen as Hu's successor by former president Jiang Zemin and former vice-president Zeng Qinghong, partly due to widespread perceptions that the former party chief of Zhejiang was a team-player and not a forceful or charismatic leader ([Apple Daily](#) [Hong Kong], September

23, 2013; *Frontline* magazine [Hong Kong], February 1, 2010). Since taking office at the 18th Party Congress, however, Xi has surprised observers by publishing a large number of Maoist aphorisms that play up the qualifications—and perquisites—of a strong top leader. Like Mao Zedong—and in sharp contrast to reform-era leader Deng Xiaoping—Xi has reiterated that "the quality and ability of number one [*yibashou*] is the key" to the success of the party and state. "The top cadre must set a good example for—and vigorously push forward—the task of implementing the spirit of the central authorities [*zhongyang*]," he said in 2013. "Whether the train can travel fast depends on the lead locomotive," he added ([People's Daily](#), April 29; [Fujian Daily](#) [Fuzhou], April 5). When he was party secretary of Zhejiang, Xi pointed out that "the number one cadre's overall qualifications must be very high." "He not only has to be professionally competent but also possesses charisma, as well as the ability to bond with his colleagues." "Unity is the critical issue for building a leadership corps," he added. "If the ruling team is not united, it will become a terrible mess." ([Zhejiang Daily](#), November 6, 2003). While Mao sometimes characterized himself as "a fool who dares to move the mountain" [referring to a Chinese parable about determination overcoming insurmountable obstacles], Xi has emphasized the leader's ability to make decisions under daunting conditions—and to stick to them through thick and thin. Like Mao, Xi places emphasis on determination and perseverance in the face of adversity. After becoming General Secretary, he asked his subordinates to consider three criteria before making decisions: "Whether a policy is correct and feasible—and whether [the officials] have full confidence [in it]." Once a leading cadre is satisfied that a goal or policy meshes with the ideal of Chinese-style socialism, Xi said, "He must take full responsibility for and demonstrate full commitment [to the task at hand]" ([Yangtze.com](#) [Nanjing], July 19; [People's Daily](#), July 1).

It is not surprising that Xi has rejected the trial-and-error approach taken by Deng, which was often summarized as "crossing the river while feeling out for the boulder." Xi noted that a top leader "should have firm faith and strategic resoluteness." Whether a leading cadre dares to tackle difficult tasks is intimately linked to "the CCP's will power in remaining [China's only] ruling party," he said ([Ifeng.com](#) [Beijing], March 19; China News Service, January 30, 2013). A *People's Daily* commentary has thus

summarized Xi's views on *lingshi*. "We must have one goal; one chain of command and one coordinating authority; one decision and strategy; one [heavy] dosage of firmness and devotion; and one way of thinking" (*People's Daily*, April 24). Regarding the tricky task of making Chinese-style socialism relevant to the 21st century, Xi said: "Where is the road? It's just under our feet." "Open up a road if you are blocked by mountains; build a bridge if you come across a river," Xi added. Paraphrasing Mao's many theories about the indomitability of the human spirit, Xi said: "There is no mountain that is too tall for mankind, no road that is too long for our feet" (CNTV News, June 5, 2013; *Ta Kung Pao* [Hong Kong], February 23, 2013).

Like the Great Helmsman, Xi has argued that a top leader should focus on the big picture and "allow subordinates to handle concrete policies without interference [from on high]." "The No. 1 cadre's fundamental job is to point out the overall direction, tackle major matters [of state] and take care of the whole picture," Xi said repeatedly as Party Secretary of Zhejiang, describing his approach to provincial leadership (*People's Daily*, April 29; *Guangming Daily* [Beijing], January 13). While Xi seems to advocate giving subordinates at both the central and local levels more leeway, he also demands absolute obedience. This is evidenced by his recent talk with cadres in the Central Committee General Office (CCGO), the nerve center of the entire party. Xi pointed out that CCGO officials "must be totally loyal [to the center] and have an extremely high sense of responsibility." Xi added that CCGO staff "must have a correct understanding of the overall [political] situation, self-consciously obey the overall situation and resolutely safeguard the overall situation" (Xinhua, July 18; China News Service, July 18).

A Departure from Post-Mao Leaders

Among CCP leaders, only Chairman Mao previously held forth at length on a theory of leadership. Mao most memorably advised that a worthy and charismatic leader "should not be obstructed by evil circumstances: he should dare to fight with heaven, struggle against the earth and cross swords with men" (*People's Daily*, December 24, 2013; Xinhua, February 13, 2008). Scattered over Mao's voluminous works are hundreds of tips on leadership. Being the founder of the party, as well as its main military strategist, Mao believed strongly in a leader's ability to hit

on the right ideology, worldview and policies. "Providing leadership over ideas is the first priority for any top cadre," Mao told then-close colleague Liu Shaoqi in 1942. Mao also believed that the top leader should only focus on the most essential aspects of governance. "A leader should concentrate on the most important and critical issues, policies and measures," Mao said, adding that less crucial tasks should be delegated to his subordinates. Moreover, he underscored the imperative of unity, saying that a leader "must have the requisite spirit for uniting all cadres and uniting the entire party" (Qstheory.cn, November 18, 2013; Club.China.com, September 3, 2013).

The great majority of CCP chieftains after Mao were relatively reticent about leadership. Deng Xiaoping was so convinced that the Cultural Revolution and other aberrations were caused by the "personality worship" of Mao that he refused to take top posts such as party chairman, general secretary or premier. In his 1980 lecture on the reform of leadership systems, Deng said that "systems and institutions in the party and state" were much more important than individuals. "If these systems are sound, they can place restraints on the actions of bad people; if they are unsound, they may hamper the efforts of good people or indeed, in certain cases, may push them in the wrong direction," Deng said (*People's Daily*, October 18, 1980; Xinhua, October 18, 1980).

Theory and Practice

Owing to the fact that Deng's successors—Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang and, to a considerable extent, Jiang Zemin—worked under Deng's shadow, these three general secretaries seldom held forth on the art of leadership. Hu Jintao, who was famous for robotic mannerisms and cautious mentality, also refrained from this dangerous issue. The furthest that the Fourth-Generation leader went was to admonish senior cadres to be "close to the masses," so as to better bring forth a harmonious society. Hu noted that top officials must "use their power for the people, seek profits for the people and ensure that their sentiments are in sync with those of the people" (*People's Daily*, September 26, 2011; Chinese News Service, February 18, 2003). Paradoxically, it was left to Xi to lay down a definitive interpretation of Hu's leadership traits. While acknowledging Hu's willingness to resign from all his jobs at the 18th Party Congress, Xi praised Hu for having a "lofty morality and work style as well as an

unimpeachable character" (CCTV, November 15, 2012; China News Service, November 15, 2012).

By and large, Xi's leadership style has lived up to his own pronouncements. Domestically, his relentless campaign against corruption in both civilian and military sectors demonstrates a degree of boldness that surpasses his predecessors, ex-presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. In foreign policy, Xi's tough tactics against Japan and the United States testify that he is as determined as he is ambitious.

However, it is not clear whether Xi's vintage leadership style will work in a modern, and rapidly-changing, China. According to U.S.-based dissident writer Yu Jie, Xi has been amassing power "because he wants to revive the kind of authoritarian rule that Mao practiced." (Radio Free Asia, May 7; Deutsche Welle Chinese Service, March 25). Moreover, Xi's aggressive one-upmanship could undermine the unity of the disparate factions and power blocs within the CCP's topmost echelon (*Asahi Shimbun* [Tokyo], July 8; Financial Times Chinese Service, March 17). Xi's arrogating to himself ultimate decision-making powers on the economy could also lead to conflict with Premier Li Keqiang, due to the long-standing tradition that according to the division of labor among Politburo Standing Committee members, the premier is in charge of finance and economics (See [China Brief](#), July 3).

Xi's track record has indicated that despite his pledges about giving his subordinates a relatively free hand, the supreme leader is often prone to micro-management. Soon after setting up the Central Leading Group on Comprehensively Deepening Reforms (CLDCDR)—which is arguably the most gargantuan leadership organ in CCP history—Xi pointed out that reform involved "playing the piano with all ten fingers." This means that detailed, thorough-going guidance and supervision from the top was essential for the successful implementation of policy (News.163.com [Beijing], February 10; China News Service, February 9—see also [China Brief](#), November 12, 2013). Similarly, Xi indicated in an interview with Russian television while attending the Sochi Olympics in January 2014 that reform was "10 percent design and 90 percent implementation." The idea of "90 percent implementation" reflects his insistence that reform must be calibrated and executed under the meticulous supervision of the party's top echelon (CCTV, February

8; *China Daily*, February 8).

In his now-famous December 2012 internal talk on the factors behind the demise of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Xi laid the blame on "traitors" such as Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. "When the Soviet Party was about to collapse, there was not one person who was man enough to turn back the tide," Xi said (*Ming Pao* [Hong Kong] February 16, 2013; BBC Chinese Service, February 16, 2013). Xi seems to have fallen for a romanticized belief in "Great Man Theory," or the non-Marxist view that history is made and unmade by a handful of geniuses. After all, most of the errors committed by Mao could be attributed to precisely the belief by the Great Helmsman—and many of his colleagues—that a demigod-like leader can do no wrong. In a private talk in 1941, Mao pointed out that "a leader's task is to draw the proper lessons [from past mistakes]" (*People's Daily*, September 14, 2012; Xinhua September 14, 2012). While Xi has impressed friends and foes alike with his super-confident, highly-charged style of leadership, the new number one has yet to demonstrate his ability to learn from the fiascos created by overconfident leaders in the party's 93-year history.

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A ‘New Situation’: China’s Evolving Assessment of its Security Environment

By David Bradley

From early 2013 through the present, high level Chinese officials have consistently used the phrase “under the new situation” (*zai xin xingshi xia*) when discussing strategic concerns such as military reform, readiness and foreign affairs. The phrase refers to a critical reassessment of the international context of Beijing’s domestic power and development path, and the forces shaping its quest for the “China Dream.” This distinctly new assessment provides impetus to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) military reform effort, anti-corruption campaign in party and military, foreign policy initiatives and justification for future changes to China’s national military strategy.

What is the ‘New Situation’?

The 2008 financial crisis—which presented “challenges and opportunities never before seen since China’s reform and opening up”—accelerated China’s reassessment of its development prospects and national security environment (*Renmin Wang*, January 4, 2010). The analysis encompassed complex changes such as multi-polarization, globalization of the world economy, rapid technological advances and increased comprehensive national power competition. An essay published in 2010 by the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) states that the results of this reappraisal were communicated in a series of prominent CCP conferences including the 4th Plenum of the 17th CCP Central Committee in September 2009 (*Contemporary International Relations*, March/April 2010). The official 4th Plenum decision document coined the “new situation” to summarize China’s national power and prospects for continued growth amid a world that “...is undergoing a period of great development, great change and great adjustment” (*Qunzhong Luxian Wang*, May 30, 2013). The “new situation” is a formulation that represents the official analysis of these changes, and implies both confidence and wariness about macro-level changes affecting China’s path to attain the “China Dream.”

Changes in Perception under Xi

Under the Xi Jinping administration, China’s overall perception of its development and security environment has distinctly shifted in two ways. First, previous articulations of the new situation were careful to characterize that the complex changes wracking the world were ongoing phenomena. Yet in 2013, two important government documents on national security and foreign policy began referring to those changes as past events. Secondly, since 2013 the frequency and authoritative uses of the “new situation” phrase has increased significantly, in particular in foreign policy and military reform contexts. This increase has corresponded with a disappearance of the Hu-era “harmonious world” characterization of the international sphere, although official documents note that “peace and development” remain a “trend of the times.”

The first change in tone for the security environment occurred in China’s latest defense white paper, “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces,” published in April 2013. For the first time, the paper announced that a “New Situation, New Challenges, New Missions” (*xin xingshi, xin tiaozhan, xin shiming*) comprised its “security situation” (*anquan xingshi*)—the term previously used (*Xinhua*, April 16, 2013; *State Council of the PRC*, April 16, 2013). The key distinction in the 2013 white paper is the sense of timing: the 2011 paper definitively states that “...the international situation is *currently undergoing* new profound and complex changes,” (emphasis added) while the 2013 paper states that those changes “...have taken place” (*State Council News*, March, 2011; *Gov.cn*, March, 2011). Furthermore, the 2011 paper says that “China is still in the period of important strategic opportunities for its development,” whereas the 2013 paper avers that “China has seized and made the most of this important period of strategic opportunities for its development.” Thus, the 2013 white paper describes a distinct change in both the domestic development situation and international milieu.

Then, in August 2013, State Councilor Yang Jiechi published an article titled, “China’s Diplomatic Innovations in Theory and Practice under the New Situation.” Here, Yang Jiechi linked a strategic and comprehensive diplomatic “start and layout” to Xi’s “accurate grasp of the changes in the global situation

and China’s development trends” as China was facing a new situation and new tasks (*Qiushi*, August 16, 2013). The article subsequently outlines diplomatic “innovations” stimulated by the recent evaluation of the overall situation. Of note, he nested the concept of a “new type of major country relations” used to describe U.S.-China relations within the broader framework of the new situation. The new type is listed as one of the “great results” of the diplomatic innovations, along with the China Dream, building friendly cooperation with peripheral and developing countries, and steadfastly defending core interests. The article does not mention “harmonious world” once, while a similar article by Yang Jiechi in October 2007 discussed the 17th Party Congress idea of building a “harmonious world” in an international situation undergoing many changes (*Xinhua*, October 15, 2007).

The reappraisal of the development and security environment is a key element underpinning China’s ambitious reform effort outlined in last November’s 3rd Plenum. The emblematic “new situation” phrase appears in the introductory paragraphs of both the 3rd Plenum “decision” as well as Xi’s “Explanatory Remarks.” However, the phrase is much less often used, if at all, when discussing domestic societal and economic reform programs such as urbanization, markets or *bukou* (nationwide registration system).

“New situation” analysis is overwhelmingly used in the context of areas relating directly to strategic security concerns and foreign affairs. That is, foreign policy, anti-corruption in both party and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and military reform and readiness. For example, Vice-chair of the Central Military Commission General Xu Qiliang published an article on the imperative for structural reform in the PLA following the 3rd Plenum that cited the new situation five times in the pursuit of the “Strong army goal” (*People’s Daily*, November 21, 2013). General Liu Yuan, a “princeling” who is outspoken against military corruption and perhaps Xi’s principal ally in the PLA, published an article in *Seeking Truth* on ways the party must “strengthen its spirit under the new situation” (*Qiushi*, July 1). An editorial published on the website of *Caixin* magazine specifically stated that “tracing corruption to its source” was the only way for the military to improve and perfect itself, so that it could achieve the “Strong army goal under the new situation”

(*Caixin*, July 2). Most recently, a People’s Daily editorial on former Politburo standing committee member Zhou Yongkang’s arrest for “serious disciplinary violations” stated that “Under the new situation, the party’s historic position, ruling conditions and party membership structure have undergone great change” (*People’s Daily*, July 30). The editorial then directly linked these changes to the imperative for “strict control of the party.” The same phrase was used in an official media announcement expelling detained General Xu Caihou from the CCP (*Yangshi Wang*, July 1). In mid-June, during a visit with PLA Air Force leaders, Xi Jinping said that “Protecting national sovereignty, security and development is a must-do requirement under the new situation” (*Xinhua*, June 17). Finally, Xi Jinping even used the phrase during his opening speech for the recent U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, saying that the United States and China “should cooperate and work to broaden areas of cooperation given the new situation” (*Caixin*, July 9).

Implications for China’s Military Strategy and Foreign Affairs

There are two primary implications for this new reappraisal of China’s development and security environment. First, the CCP’s strategic calculus is heavily shaped by official assessments. China typically alters its military strategic guidelines when it perceives a fundamental change in the international order, its security environment, domestic situation or the nature of war (see also *China Brief*, February 7). [1] Changes in one of these areas prompt a reevaluation of policy and have directly informed strategic defense posture and military reforms. Thus the present change in assessment amounts to a first step in a process that formulates new military strategic guidelines, strategic direction, or amends the PLA’s historic missions (Finkelstein [see notes], pp. 82-84). While the 2013 white paper affirmed the military’s existing historic missions, PLA watchers should look for changes to elements of the military strategic guidelines in future publications as the party and military digest the full implications of the new situation. Yang Jiechi’s article demonstrated that the changed assessment of the security environment precipitated new foreign policy initiatives. It is likely that strategic military planners are now considering similar changes to military strategy. Ultimately, the new understanding could also justify a shift away from Deng Xiaoping’s advice to “hide ability and bide time.”

Second, in a more pragmatic sense, the changed assessment is used as justification for Xi Jinping's efforts at military reform and party renewal to a variety of domestic audiences ranging from the public, party cadres and the military. Senior leaders and official media invoke the "new situation" to bolster the legitimacy of the anti-corruption campaign and give urgency to the struggle to enact long-overdue structural reform in the PLA.

Based on its ubiquity and variety of use, it appears that the "new situation" phrase has become a hallmark of the Xi administration in matters of national security and foreign policy. More importantly, it demonstrates that the party has developed a distinctly new assessment of its development and security environment. It implies that China has a sense of growing yet cautious optimism in its increasing power and perception of the enhanced opportunities of a multi-polar world. At the same time, it entails a wary view of an international situation that may not accommodate the China Dream, requiring a "strong army" to cope with new challenges, prompting "innovative" diplomatic efforts and likely prompting similar "innovations" in military strategy and doctrine to secure China's expanding interests.

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Notes

1. David Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of the 'Military Strategic Guidelines,'" in *Right-Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*, Strategic Studies Institute (2007), p. 87.

Is China's Charm Offensive Dead?

By Bonnie Glaser and Deep Pal

A series of seemingly unprovoked actions in the South and East China Sea has been described as an abandonment of the "second charm offensive" launched last year by Chinese President Xi Jinping. However, China has continued to pursue economic and diplomatic cooperation with its Southeast Asian neighbors even as it contests territory with them at sea. Rather than choosing between two different approaches to "periphery diplomacy," Xi is attempting to unite them in a single, "proactive" strategy that advances Chinese interests.

Less than a year after Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward a diplomatic strategy focused on building good relationships with China's neighbors, China appears to have soured relations with almost every country in East and Southeast Asia. From early May to mid-July, Vietnam and China were locked in confrontation over China's deployment of drilling platform HYSY 981 in disputed waters. The Philippines, still pursuing an international arbitration in which China refuses to participate, filed a diplomatic protest accusing China of land reclamation activities on Johnson South Reef, one of five outcrops in the Spratly Islands where the Chinese are allegedly transforming reefs into islands (*The Philippine Star*, June 13). After two near misses in the airspace over the East China Sea between Japanese and Chinese aircraft in May and June, Japan warned of the danger of a serious accident, prompting China to accuse the Japanese aircraft of carrying out "threatening moves." Indonesia and Malaysia, usually reluctant to offend Beijing, have also felt the need to respond to Chinese actions, the former naming China as a potential target of military exercises and the latter joining the United States in criticizing Beijing in a joint statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Najib (*The Jakarta Post*, April 1; [The White House](#), "Joint Statement by President Obama and Prime Minister Najib of Malaysia," April 27).

The situation is a far cry from the same time last year. Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang spent the better part of their first year at the helm travelling around China's immediate neighborhood, including Southeast Asia, where they promised increased trade, signed business agreements, promoted schemes to enhance ASEAN connectivity, proposed the formation of an Asian infrastructure

development bank and reassured the region that China's rise would bring prosperity to its neighbors. At the time, many observers described their sojourns as China's "second charm offensive" (for example, see Phuong Nguyen, [CSIS](#), October 17, 2013). The first charm offensive followed a decade beginning in the late 1980s marked by Chinese seizure of disputed land features in the South China Sea and passage of a Territorial Sea Law. It was launched in 1997 when Beijing declared during the Asian financial crisis that it would not devalue the RMB and was reinforced a few years later when China proposed a China-ASEAN free trade agreement, and lasted approximately 10 years.

Another sign suggesting a second wave of China's charm offensive was the convening of a much publicized two-day foreign policy work conference last October, with Xi Jinping presiding. It was the first such conference since 2006, and the first ever focused on China's foreign policy toward its periphery. Xi put forward the diplomatic concept of "amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness." To emphasize his vision of shared prosperity for the region, Xi also introduced the notion of a "viewpoint of values and interests" (*yiliguan*), which claims that China will not forget justice and morals in the pursuit of its interests (see also [China Brief](#), November 2, 2013). Nations in the region and the United States heaved sighs of relief as they concluded prematurely that Beijing recognized it had overreached and was correcting its policy missteps.

Rather than laying low, however, China has taken a series of assertive actions in the past year that have led to increasing mistrust even from countries previously on good terms with Beijing, seemingly undermining its own charm offensive and driving its neighbors into closer security cooperation with the United States. Is Xi Jinping's "periphery diplomacy initiative" dead within a year of its unveiling?

End of Periphery Diplomacy?

At the conference last fall, in the presence of the entire Standing Committee of the Politburo, various organs of the Central Committee, State Counselors, members of the Central Leading Small Group with responsibility for foreign affairs and Chinese ambassadors to important countries, Xi exhorted his countrymen to "advance

diplomacy with neighboring countries, strive to win a sound surrounding environment for China's development and enable neighboring countries to benefit more from China's development for the purpose of common development" ([Xinhua](#), October 25, 2013). At the same time, however, he emphasized a key strategic goal of Chinese diplomacy: China, Xi said, "needs to protect and make the best use of the strategic opportunity period [extending to 2020] to safeguard China's national sovereignty, security and development interests."

While outsiders may consider promoting a sound surrounding environment and defending territorial claims to be contradictory goals, in the minds of the Chinese leadership, they are not. Beijing does not believe that its present actions amount to abandoning the "second charm offensive." It is still committed to sharing the fruits of its economic success with its neighbors; promises made in the run up to the periphery diplomacy initiative continue to be in force. The "Maritime Silk Road," an ambitious plan to build ports and boost maritime connectivity with Southeast Asian and Indian Ocean littoral countries that Xi advanced while addressing the Indonesian parliament is being funded and actively promoted (*Washington Post*, October 9, 2013). Preparations are underway to launch the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank with capital of \$50 billion, paid for by its members.

Beijing's proactive economic diplomacy is part of a larger strategy aimed at binding its neighbors in a web of incentives that increase their reliance on China and raise the cost to them of adopting a confrontational policy towards Beijing on territorial disputes. At the same time, China continues to engage in a steady progression of small steps, none of which by itself is a *casus belli*, to gradually change the status quo in its favor. In the near term, China's leaders anticipate some resistance. Over time, however, they calculate that their growing leverage will be sufficient to persuade their weaker and vulnerable neighbors to accede to Chinese territorial demands.

Continuities and Discontinuities

China's uncompromising stance on issues of territorial integrity and sovereignty is hardly new. Hu Jintao's political report delivered to the 17th Party Congress in 2007 noted that "We are determined to safeguard China's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity and

help maintain world peace.” Five years later, the political report to the 18th Party Congress, which had Xi Jinping’s stamp of approval, used somewhat tougher language, saying “We are firm in our resolve to uphold China’s sovereignty, security and development interests and will never yield to any outside pressure.”

In between the two Party Congresses, Beijing authoritatively defined Chinese core interests as including sovereignty and territorial integrity. In his closing remarks at the July 2009 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo, listed and ranked China’s core interests as upholding our basic systems, our national security; sovereignty and territorial integrity; and economic and social sustained development ([U.S. Department of State](#), “Closing Remarks for U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue,” July 28, 2009). A similar list was included in a White Paper on Peaceful Development issued by China’s State Council in 2011 ([Chinese Government’s Official Web Portal](#), “Full Text: China’s Peaceful Development,” September, 2011).

After taking power, Xi Jinping forcefully articulated China’s resolve to defend Chinese sovereignty and territory. As early as July 2013, Xi Jinping told the 25-member Politburo that “No country should presume that we will trade our core interests or that we will allow harm to be done to our sovereignty, security or development interests,” even as he reaffirmed China’s offer, first put forward by Deng Xiaoping, to shelve disputes and carry out joint development ([Beijing Review](#), August 29, 2013). At the October 2013 periphery diplomacy conference, Xi twice referred to the need to safeguard the country’s sovereignty as part of its diplomacy in areas along its borders (Xinhua, October 25, 2013).

Although China’s renewed assertiveness on territorial matters began under Hu Jintao, Xi has advanced Chinese policy to include not only *reactive*, but also *proactive* assertiveness. In June 2012, Beijing took advantage of Manila’s initial mistake of dispatching a warship to arrest Chinese fishermen at Scarborough Shoal to seize control of the reef and its surrounding waters. China viewed this episode as a great victory, with lessons on applying a combination of diplomatic pressure, economic coercion and paramilitary intimidation during periods of confrontation. When the Japanese government purchased three of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands

from a private Japanese owner in September 2012, Beijing began conducting regular patrols in the islands’ 12-nautical mile territorial waters in a bid to challenge Tokyo’s administrative control over them.

Yet, when China announced the establishment of a new air defense identification zone in the East China Sea in November 2013 that overlapped with similar zones set up decades earlier by Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, there was no immediate provocation. Similarly, in the recent stand-off with Vietnam, there was no proximate instigation that led to the deployment of the oil rig. On the contrary, Chinese companies financed the operations themselves, ostensibly under orders from Beijing (see also [China Brief](#), June 19). The rig operated in a block owned by China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). Another state-owned firm, China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), financed the project through its subsidiary China Oilfield Services Limited (COSL), which owns the rig.

Whereas China’s approach to handling territorial disputes with its neighbors under prior leaders was characterized by alternating periods of coercion and charm offensive, Xi is clearly comfortable pursuing both simultaneously. He is convinced that China can preserve good relations with its neighbors at the same time that it attempts to change the status quo in China’s favor in the East and South China Seas.

Prior Chinese leaders consciously avoided excessive strains with too many neighbors at the same time and sought to keep relations with the United States on a positive, stable footing. Xi Jinping is evidently willing to tolerate a relatively high level of tensions with numerous countries over territorial issues. This includes ties with the United States, which have become increasingly contentious as the Obama administration has sharply condemned Beijing’s use of coercion and intimidation against nations on its periphery ([U.S. Department of State](#), “Maritime Disputes in East Asia,” February 5).

Promoting Proactive Diplomacy

Beijing has quietly discarded Deng Xiaoping’s guideline to “observe calmly, secure our position, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile and never claim leadership.” Chinese sources

reveal that Deng’s directive—known in shorthand as the *taoguang yanghui* strategy—is no longer referenced in internal meetings and party documents. While no new guideline has yet appeared in its place, potential successor formulations all advance a more proactive diplomacy.

At the periphery diplomacy conference last October, Xi advocated that China be “more *proactive* in promoting periphery diplomacy.” He used the phrase *fenfa youwei*, which is often translated as enthusiastic, but suggests a more assertive approach. In the same speech Xi also used at least two other terms in the same speech—*gengjia jiji*, meaning “more active” and *gengjia zhudong* meaning “take greater initiative,” on both occasions referring to China’s relations with its neighbors. Since the periphery diplomacy conference, various Chinese phrases have been used by senior officials to promote a more “proactive” foreign policy. Asked to describe the most salient characteristic of Chinese policy toward other countries in 2013 at the National People’s Congress press conference, Foreign Minister Wang Yi used the term “proactive” (*zhudong jinqu*). In his remarks about Chinese foreign policy going forward, he also used several other terms that connote a more active foreign policy (*jiji jinqu*, *jiji zuowei* and *jiji waijiao*). While none of these terms has been officially sanctioned as a new guideline for Chinese foreign policy, they may be trial balloons for potential replacements. The common thread among them is a rejection of the cautious, reactive approach of the past in favor of a more proactive stance. On maritime territorial disputes, this means *taking* and *making* opportunities to change the status quo in China’s favor.

Explaining the Shift

China’s new strategy can be attributed to a number of factors, most importantly, its comfort in playing a decades-long game in the South China Sea. Despite a slowing economy, China is certain that its regional clout is only going to increase, albeit at a slower pace than before. In a speech to the World Peace Forum in June, Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi stated:

By being the largest trading partner, the largest export market and a major source of investment for many Asian countries, China has accounted for 50 percent of Asia’s total economic growth. China’s continuous

growth will present even more development opportunities to Asia ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China](#) [FMPRC], “Join Hands in Working for Peace and Security in Asia and the World,” June 21).

Beijing is therefore banking on the fact that over time, none of China’s neighbors will be willing to challenge an economically strong China, as the economic cost will be simply too high. This expectation was suggested by Wu Shicun of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies expounded after the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore—“[China’s neighbors] worry that when China becomes strong one day, and is able to define the nine-dash line as it wishes, they are powerless to do anything about it” (*Straits Times*, June 2).

China is also betting that the Obama administration, with its hands full with more pressing international issues, will not intervene militarily to help countries in East Asia defend rocks and reefs and their associated maritime claims. By sowing doubts about U.S. reliability in the minds of China’s neighbors, Beijing seeks to send a message that compromise with China is inevitable.

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is likely a factor guiding certain elements of Xi’s approach to the region. Though the exact nature of the relationship between China’s new leadership and the military is sketchy at best from the outside, Xi’s gestures to the military are evident. Frequent visits to military commands, calls to the PLA to be prepared to “fight and win wars” and increased budgets for the forces signal Xi’s need and even desire to maintain support from the military. Insiders confirm that Xi has been under pressure from the PLA (as well as other groups) to be uncompromising on territorial issues. One knowledgeable source revealed privately that Hu Jintao resisted pressure from the PLA to announce the East China Sea ADIZ in his final year in power. Xi opted to approve it after only one year at the helm.

China may also be reacting to the U.S. “rebalance to Asia.” Despite repeated assurances by the U.S. to the contrary, China still believes that the rebalance is a ploy to contain and encircle it. It views the strategy as the source of tensions between China and its neighbors. The involvement of external powers in the region is seen as unhelpful and destabilizing. Xi has expressed this view

multiple times—most recently in May at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Shanghai, where he promoted building an Asia security structure in which Asian problems are solved by Asians themselves (EMPRC, “New Asian Security Concept For New Progress in Security Cooperation,” May 21). In the same speech, he warned against the strengthening of military alliances with third countries, a bald criticism of the U.S. rebalance to Asia strategy.

It is also possible that China’s more assertive strategy in the region is an attempt to shore up party legitimacy at home at a time of growing domestic stress. A related argument suggests that Xi needs to be tough on foreign policy in order to push through controversial economic reforms at home. If either of these explanations of Chinese behavior is valid, then Xi’s hawkish foreign policy stance will likely continue for some time and may be relatively impervious to external influences, including a backlash from China’s neighbors.

Will China’s Strategy Succeed?

China has not abandoned its charm offensive toward its neighbors, but securing good relations with the region is not China’s only goal. Xi Jinping is seeking to simultaneously assert Chinese territorial claims. To pull this off successfully, however, Beijing will have to persuade the region that confronting China is too costly and there is more to gain by accommodation. So far, the record is mixed. Despite persistent pressure from China, Japan has refused to budge from its stance that no dispute exists over the islands that Beijing lays claim to in the East China Sea. Vietnam and the Philippines are directly challenging China over territorial matters, though both nations hope to resolve their disputes without undermining overall amicable relations with Beijing. So far, countries in the region remain hesitant to band together to put greater pressure on China. At present, Beijing appears confident that it has time on its side.

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Beijing Expands its Multinational Toolkit at CICA Summit

By Richard Weitz

President Xi Jinping of China proposed a new Asian security concept on May 21, 2014 at the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). He called on Asian countries to pursue “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security” based on “peace, development and win-win cooperation” in which differences and disputes between states were resolved through dialogue and negotiations (Chinese Foreign Ministry, May 21). Chinese analysts described Xi’s proposal at aiming for security that will benefit all countries, but the incongruity between Xi’s lofty language and Beijing’s newly assertive policies in its territorial disputes with Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam leads some foreign observers to see Xi as promoting an agenda that primarily advances Chinese interests.

Xi’s Vision

In his speech at the summit, Xi defined “common” security as “respecting and ensuring the security of each and every country.” According to Xi and Chinese scholars, “common security” takes into account that Asia is a diverse but interdependent region. While Asian countries differ in size, wealth, military power, social systems, security interests, and historical and cultural traditions, they share rights and responsibilities and will jointly benefit or suffer from collective security conditions. As PLA expert Li Da Guang explains, “We all live together in this Asian garden [in a] ‘community of destiny’ (opinion.china.com.cn, May 22). Xi’s concept requires that states pursue “universal security” and refrain from seeking security at others’ expense since one nation cannot enjoy full security if others feel insecure. They must also adhere to basic norms such as “respecting sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs” (Chinese Foreign Ministry, May 21). Xi’s interpretation of “common security” does not embrace non-Asian countries, which have no right to interfere in regional security affairs.

Xi called on Asia to move away from a Cold War framework based on zero-sum thinking to one founded on

a “cooperative” approach that reflected importance, having two third of the world’s population and one third of the global economy (Xinhua, May 22). In Xi’s formulation, cooperative security entails sincere and in-depth dialogue and communications to settle disputes. Cooperating on less sensitive issues first can help states build trust that can make them more receptive to resolving more sensitive issues later. The new Asian security concept excludes the arbitrary use or threat of force, acts of provocation and escalation, placing troubles on neighboring countries or sacrificing others for selfish gains (Chinese Foreign Ministry, May 21). Li Weijian, a researcher with the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, placed Xi’s concept in historical context by describing it as an extension of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that China formulated six decades ago as an ideological challenge to the Cold War (Xinhua, May 22).

The Concept is also “comprehensive” in that it covers a wide range of traditional and non-traditional threats ranging from territorial and ethnic-religious disputes to non-traditional threats such as “terrorism; transnational crimes; environmental security; cyber security; energy and resource security; and major natural disasters” (Chinese Foreign Ministry, May 21). In addition to this comprehensive functional coverage, Chinese analysts stress that security cooperation must address immediate regional security challenges as well as preparing for future threats through a proactive approach that address the roots of threats rather than merely their symptoms (Beijing Times, May 22).

In Xi’s view, such a common, cooperative and comprehensive approach will lead to “sustainable” security since it is built on a solid foundation. In particular, Asians’ enhanced security will facilitate their socioeconomic development, which in turn strengthens their security (China Brief, May 23; Xinhua, May 21). At CICA summit, Xi said that Asia must “focus on development, actively improve people’s lives, narrow the wealth gap and cement the foundation of security” (Chinese Foreign Ministry, May 21). Chinese analysts said that Xi aimed “to promote peace and stability [in] Asia” as well as “add momentum to the rebalancing of the world’s economic and security dynamics” to Asians’ benefit (Xinhua, May 22). They emphasized the explicit link between economic development and security as reflecting a fundamental reality of modern international

relations (China.org.cn, May 20).

Chinese analysts have joined others in noting that CICA region faces serious security challenges even beyond those between China and its neighbors—the war in Syria, tensions between Israel and its neighbors, the Iranian nuclear dispute, the war in Afghanistan, Pakistani-Indian tensions, a potentially explosive situation in Korea, and transnational security challenges such as the “three evils” terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. In addition to their other complications, these security challenges threaten Asia’s economic development and enhance the influence of non-Asian powers on the continent (Beijing Review, May 26; Xinhua, June 1).

Xi probably chose CICA to advance his concept because of its large membership, which nonetheless excludes the United States and Japan, and because the organization is sufficiently malleable for Beijing to shape its future evolution in desirable ways. In addition, while China has chaired large Asian economic institutions such as APEC, CICA combines security and economics (China.org.cn, May 20). Some Chinese analysts explicitly described CICA as an instrument to enhance China’s regional influence. Shen Shinshun, Director of the Department of Asia-Pacific Security and Cooperation at the China Institute of International Studies, stated China “needs a platform to gain, maintain and strengthen its position in Asia” (Bloomberg, May 21).

Although not highlighted by Chinese analysts, Xi’s proposed Asian Security Concept would, if widely accepted, also enhance China’s influence by challenging the legitimacy of the regional security role of the United States in Asia. Xi stressed that Asian states are capable of solving regional security matters on their own, the United States is a Pacific but not an Asian country (Beijing Review, May 26). Furthermore, the United States and its key Asian ally Japan are only observers in CICA, with little impact on its agenda. In his speech, Xi also criticized the U.S.-led alliance system in Asia more directly than his predecessors. They may have been more open to the view that the alliances helped restrain the U.S. partners, whereas Chinese analysts now openly accuse Washington of encouraging its allies to confront China through the Obama administration’s Asia Pivot and statements that more openly align Washington with countries having territorial disputes with China.

Execution

With respect to building CICA as an institution, Xi said that, “China will fulfill the responsibilities of CICA chairman and work with other sides to improve the status and role of CICA, to take Asian security cooperation to a higher level” ([Xinhua](#), May 21). He called for “efforts to enhance the capacity and institutional building of CICA,” specifically citing the need to improve its secretariat. In addition, he proposed giving it a “defense consultation mechanism” and a “security response center” for major emergencies. Xi also called for establishing a supporting non-governmental exchange network in which NGOs and other CICA parties can engage through meetings and other dialogue mechanisms independent of their governments. In terms of advancing the security-development nexus developed in his speech, Xi reaffirmed China’s commitment to work with regional countries to build a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. These two cooperation initiatives offer new opportunities for Asian countries to achieve common development in a secure environment ([Chinese Foreign Ministry](#), May 21).

According to Shen Shishun, director of the Department of Asia-Pacific Security and Cooperation at the China Institute of International Studies, “this new type of Asian security concept has been in Beijing’s pipeline for a while” ([Bloomberg](#), May 21). Until recently, however, China had not prioritized CICA as a major regional security forum, focusing greater attention on other institutions such as APEC and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). CICA was a Kazakhstani creation, later chaired by Turkey until this year’s transfer of the chairmanship to China. The institution will likely become more prominent now that it is under Chinese leadership. Yang Jin, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said that, “Under the new generation of leadership, China is becoming more active diplomatically and is more willing to increase its voice on the world stage” ([Beijing Review](#), May 26).

In line with its effort to promote China’s international profile as well as that of the Xi’s presidency, Chinese analysts publicized CICA conference in Shanghai as one of the two most important manifestations of China’s “host diplomacy” in 2014 ([China.org.cn](#), April 3). Xi called CICA the largest and most representative security forum

in Asia ([CCTV](#), May 21). In addition, the Shanghai summit was the biggest in the history of CICA, with leaders and representatives from 47 countries or international organizations attending. Vice Foreign Minister Cheng Guoping further noted the significance of Shanghai in pioneering China’s post-Mo reforms and international engagement ([Shanghai Daily](#), May 19). Chinese analysts noted that CICA supports “China’s desire to ‘go out’” ([Study Times](#), June 2).

CICA and the SCO both promote regional security under Beijing’s leadership. They also complement each other in that, while CICA has a broader membership, the SCO has a more developed institutional base and a core focus on countering the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism and religious extremism, which has not previously been a focus of CICA. CICA shares some of the advantages Beijing sees in the SCO—both are new organizations that exclude the United States and Japan, giving China both the opportunity and the means to be a rule-maker rather than a rule-taker. Unlike with the UN or with the Bretton Woods-era financial institutions, whose rules and norms were solidified without major Chinese participation, Beijing can more easily direct the evolution of the SCO and CICA, still developing institutions in which China is a dominant player, in ways more favorable to Chinese interests ([Financial Times](#), May 20).

Since the summit, Xi and Chinese leaders have continued to advocate the ideas contained in their new Asian Security Concept. In a speech by General Wang Guanzhong, Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff Department before the Shangri-La Dialogue on June 1, 2014, Wang emphasized that the PLA was prepared to work with other militaries to contribute to regional peace and development through bilateral and multilateral security dialogues and exchanges” such as this October’s Xiangshan Forum in Beijing. He also proposed more practical cooperation among Asian countries in counter-terrorism, disaster relief, protection of sea lines of communication and other common security and development challenges ([IISS](#), June 1). In his speech to the opening ceremony of the sixth round of China-U.S. Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), Xi stressed the imperative of avoiding confrontation and zero-sum cooperation in favor of mutual respect, mutual trust and “win-win” outcomes that benefit other Asian-Pacific countries ([Xinhua](#), July 11).

Challenges

Chinese media cited Asian experts in support Xi’s regional security concept ([Global Times](#), May 22; [People’s Daily Online](#), May 23). CICA founder and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev also praised China’s vision for applying CICA’s vision during its chairmanship ([Tengri News](#), May 21; [wri.cri.cn](#), May 22). Even so, uniting the 24 CICA members under Beijing’s leadership will prove challenging, given that several, such as Israel and South Korea, are close U.S. allies. Serious tensions also exist between some members, such as India and Pakistan; Israel and Iran; and China and several of its neighbors. The Chinese regional silk road initiatives (and its more Pacific-focused Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) face competition from rival economic initiatives such as the Russian-led Eurasian Union and the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership. While Beijing can devote vast economic resources to support its institutional preferences, Moscow and Washington can appeal to Asian countries concerned that their interest would suffer with a restoration of Beijing’s regional hegemony. At the Shangri-La Dialogue, Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proposed an alternative new regional security concept that includes the United States as a key participant and emphasizes political democracy and other values excluded from Beijing’s vision ([IISS](#), May 30). The United States, the Philippines, and perhaps India and other Asian countries will find this vision more attractive than that promoted by Beijing.

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