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One Kuomintang mayoral candidate bows in apology for defeat
(Credit: South China Morning Post)

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In a Fortnight

TAIWAN'S "VOTE OF NO CONFIDENCE" FOR KMT (AND CHINA TOO)

By Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga

Taiwan's largest election ever, on November 29, led to a rousing, if not expected, defeat of Taiwan's governing and pro-status quo party, the Kuomintang (KMT), by the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), dealing a crushing blow to Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou's administration. Moreover, the election was widely seen as a rejection of the KMT's pro-China policies, especially in the wake of this spring's Sunflower Movement in Taiwan and the ongoing Occupy Central Movement in Hong Kong. The DPP landslide raises the prospects of a DPP victory in Taiwan's upcoming 2016 presidential election, suggesting a new challenge to cross-strait relations.

An "Unprecedented and Crushing Defeat"

With 22 counties and municipalities, as well as more than 11,000 lower-level positions, up for grabs, KMT candidates lost 16 of the 22—including to an independent in the all-important Taipei mayoral race. The KMT's "unprecedented and crushing defeat" was at least somewhat predictable, as President Ma's

approval rating had dipped as low as 9.2 percent last September and now hovers around 20 percent (*People's Daily Overseas*, December 2; *Taipei Times*, September 16, 2013). The election also followed the Sunflower Movement, the youth-led protest this March and April against the KMT's rushed passage of the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA), and the Hong Kong protests, which influenced at least some Taiwanese voters to become further disillusioned by Chinese President Xi Jinping's repeated offer of "one country, two systems" (see *China Brief*, April 9; *China Brief*, October 23; *Taipei Times*, September 26). Ma's entire cabinet resigned from their government positions and nearly all of the senior KMT leaders resigned from their party posts in the wake of the election, including Ma as chairman of the party.

The DPP victory came despite efforts to boost the KMT's showing at the polls, with Beijing offering subsidized airfares to Taiwanese living in China, who generally support the KMT. Furthermore, Beijing's decision to hold high-level meetings with Taiwanese officials over the last year afforded Taiwan more legitimacy than ever before, though unsurprisingly not enough in the eyes of Taiwan. Zhang Zhijun, the director of China's Taiwan Affairs Office, met with his Taiwanese counterpart, Wang Yu-chi, three times this year, including most recently at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November. During their first meeting in Nanjing this February, the highest-level meeting between the two sides since the KMT lost the Chinese civil war, Zhang referred to Wang using his official title of "minister," signaling a symbolic nod to Wang's position and thus Taiwan. Yet Beijing appears to have hedged the possibility of a DPP victory in 2014 and 2016, as Zhang visited the DPP-stronghold of Kaohsiung during his June trip to Taiwan, meeting Mayor Chen Chu (*South China Morning Post*, June 25).

The KMT's defeat may lead Beijing to reevaluate the ratio of its "carrot and stick" approach to Taiwan. Although the most effective policy would likely be to enhance high-level political engagement and further economic generosity through more cross-strait agreements while President Ma is still in office, Beijing is more likely to favor reducing official cross-strait meetings and further constricting Taiwan's international space if Ma slows engagement, which he may do after his comments following the election: "I have heard their voices and I

will not evade my responsibility to start reforms" (*South China Morning Post*, November 29). The DPP is also in the process of gauging their future China policy, as it froze discussions on foreign policy in the run-up to the election, and the DPP understands that its victory was more a vote against the KMT than a show of support for the DPP's China policy. Ultimately, however, a return to military tension is unlikely as long as President Xi feels confident China holds the cards.

Blame the KMT, Not the CCP

The Chinese government ignored any connection to the KMT's pro-China policies and had a rather muted response, with limited discussion in state-run media and orders for censors to "not hype Taiwan's 'nine-in-one' election, [...] contain [online] commentary [and] uniformly delete all content attacking the political system of the mainland" (*China Digital Times*, November 30). One *People's Daily Overseas* article, entitled "Nine-In-One, the KMT Lost to Themselves," said "the election was a strong vote of no confidence against the Ma administration" (*People's Daily Online*, December 1). Several articles cited the rise in gasoline and electricity prices, wage stagnation and food scandals, while another mentioned Ma's inept management of the KMT and the party's inability to pass major laws easily despite holding majority in the legislature, as the main reasons for the DPP's victory. State-run media also explained the defeat as tied to KMT's failure to recognize and adapt to the changing nature of the Taiwanese electorate—more centrist voters and politically-involved young adults. Yet the Chinese media did not label Ma a "lame duck president," as it did when U.S. President Barack Obama suffered a similar defeat in the November U.S. midterm elections (see *China Brief*, November 7).

There was no introspective criticism of China's role in the KMT's defeat, in stark contrast to the *People's Daily's* jubilant coverage of President Ma's 2012 reelection that proudly touted the source of his victory as improved cross-strait relations under his pro-China policies (*People's Daily*, January 15, 2012). In fact, there was no significant discussion of the election's consequences for cross-strait relations until *People's Daily Overseas* ran an article four days later. Breaking with lighter coverage over the first few days, the article said that the elections were "local" and thus "had little connection to cross-strait relations"

(*People's Daily Overseas*, December 3).

Beijing Warns DPP to be Pragmatic

The December 3 article made a clear statement of Beijing's policy: "The DPP faces two roads: one is to continue to maintain its 'independence' stance and reject the '[19]92 Consensus,' stop the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement, damage the Taiwanese peoples' happiness and suffocate Taiwan's economic development; or the second is to cast away its fantasy, respond to the will of the people for peace and development, and pragmatically adjust its cross-strait policy." And just to reinforce Beijing's upper hand, the article quoted a Chinese analyst as saying, "with the mainland's strengthening comprehensive power and expanding international influence, the mainland already fully controls the leadership role in cross-strait relations, so any governing authority in Taiwan will find it difficult to resist the historical trend of peace and development for cross-strait relations." The official Chinese government statement from the Taiwan Affairs Office was, "We hope compatriots across the Strait will cherish hard-won fruits of cross-strait relations, and jointly safeguard and continue to push forward peaceful development of cross-strait relations" (*Xinhua*, November 29). Clearly, a DPP-led Taiwan in 2016 is already on Beijing's mind, and memories of the DPP's only previous president, Chen Shuibian, worry the Chinese government.

Preview to 2016 and Beyond?

Discussing the implications for Taiwan's upcoming presidential election, the *People's Daily Overseas* said 2016 will ultimately be decided by which party can "catch up with the will of the people" and "who will be the best in the voters' eyes" (*People's Daily Overseas*, December 1). Likely projecting undue pessimism, the article questioned Tsai Ing-wen's leadership of the DPP as weak and unable to unify the party, adding that Tainan Mayor Lai Ching-te may challenge Tsai for the presidential nomination. In contrast, another article said the KMT's "future is very pessimistic" and that the DPP's growing control over local positions would have "serious consequences" for the next presidential election (*People's Daily Overseas*, December 2).

With the DPP's surge in momentum comes responsibility to calibrate its cross-strait policies not only for Taiwanese

voters, but also Taiwan's security. Former DPP leader Chen Shuibian's presidency was marked by cross-strait tensions over his pro-independence stance, and the DPP has not officially abandoned that position. While the DPP appears to be moving to a more pragmatic, if ambiguous, policy under Tsai, Taiwan's next president will have to decide how much maneuvering is necessary to satisfy voters—and how much Beijing will tolerate.

Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga is the editor of China Brief.

China's Espionage Against Taiwan (Part II): Chinese Intelligence Collectors

By Peter Mattis

Chinese intelligence operations have long been understood in the West as somehow different than more familiar forms of espionage: inscrutable, undirected and largely run by amateurs. Like most modern states, China, however, has entrusted intelligence to professional organizations. This second installment on China's espionage against Taiwan explores the organizational landscape of Chinese intelligence with a focus on their relationship to Beijing's policymaking on Taiwan affairs. It provides four brief sketches of the Ministry of State Security, the Second Department of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff Department, the United Front Work Department and the Liaison Office of the PLA General Political Department. These institutions span the breadth of the Chinese state, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the PLA, complicating efforts to neutralize Beijing's intelligence and united front work.

The Ministry of State Security (MSS)

Founded in the 1983, the MSS has long focused on Taiwan. The Ministry's first publicized successes dealt with breaking several Taiwanese espionage rings in the mainland during the 1980s (*Xinhua*, November 22, 1984; *Xinhua*, January 12, 1987). Although the MSS now manages 32 provincial-level departments and countless local-level bureaus, state security originally included the

central ministry and a mere handful of provincial-level departments. Based on provincial leadership listings, some of the earliest departments included Shanghai, Fujian, Guangdong and Jiangsu—namely the ones with military units facing Taiwan. Moreover, the Minister of State Security has had a place on the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group since the 1980s; however, the minister did not gain a position on the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group until the late 1990s. [1]

The MSS's Taiwan operations are run out of its 15th Bureau, which maintains a public face as the Institute of Taiwan Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences ([Oriental Press](#) [Hong Kong], December 13, 2013; *The Straits Times*, December 7, 2000). Yu Keli ran the bureau for years and was a familiar feature of China's Taiwan policy landscape, but he handed leadership over to successor Zhou Zhihui earlier this year ([China Academy of Social Sciences](#), May 26). The academic cover has allowed MSS officers to travel to Taiwan to exploit opportunities for exchanges and meetings as well as to play host to a wide variety of foreign visitors. This does not necessarily mean that anything nefarious or improper occurred, but rather that the MSS exploits the opportunity to go behind the headlines, press statements and policy papers to get the kind of background information only available through personal interactions.

Below the central level, each provincial-level unit and many localities have MSS departments that conduct intelligence and security operations. Their responsibilities extend from counterespionage to event security to investigations ([China News Service](#), May 4; [Guangdong Provincial Government](#), September 16, 2010; *Caijing*, July 24, 2009). Their externally focused operations, however, are more difficult to track. Public reporting on espionage cases often vaguely refers to MSS officials outside Beijing, local security officials or local government officials (*Wen Wei Po* [Hong Kong], September 22; *Taipei Times*, January 5, 2013). These officers are more likely to be from the local state security office rather than ministry headquarters, because they have responsibility for tracking and investigating the Taiwanese in their jurisdiction. Definitive answers, however, are hard to find.

Although the MSS's intelligence collection on dissidents, counterintelligence, technology and foreign policy is well-documented, the Taiwan cases demonstrate that

State Security also targets military affairs—issues that might more properly be pursued by military intelligence. For example, Lo Ping—the Taiwanese businessman responsible for recruiting Military Intelligence Bureau officer Lo Chi-cheng—passed military-related information to MSS officers (*China Post*, November 3, 2010). The MSS also attempted to get Taiwanese missile defense and radar information in the Chou Tzu-li and Chen Hsiao-chiang case (*Wen Wei Po* [Hong Kong], September 22, 2014). At the very least, this suggests MSS reports are disseminated beyond the Party-state system to military intelligence, if not PLA decision-making bodies.

Second Department of the PLA General Staff Department (2PLA)

The 2PLA traces its lineage to the Chinese Civil War, when it was the Second Department of the Central Military Commission and played a key role in guiding Mao Zedong's columns on the Long March (*Beijing Daily*, July 6, 2011). Although most of the signals and electronic surveillance components now reside in the Third and Fourth Departments, 2PLA still manages some technical reconnaissance and controls part of the military's satellite-based collection. [2] In the realm of clandestine human agent operations, the 2PLA has been at the forefront, earning it the moniker of "China's CIA" in the Hong Kong media (*Chien Shao*, January 1, 2006). In the late 1990s, the 2PLA's superior performance against Taiwan reportedly led then-President Jiang Zemin to consider moving then-Assistant Chief of the PLA General Staff for intelligence and former 2PLA director Xiong Guangkai to take over the MSS, which had disappointed Jiang on its Taiwan intelligence collection (*South China Morning Post*, March 19, 1998).

Some of the 2PLA's clandestine agent operations are run out of five bureaus in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenyang and Tianjin. Reportedly, the bureaus sometimes use unnamed, numbered municipal government offices as cover for their operations (*Chien Shao*, January 1, 2006). Even if Hong Kong media publications are notorious for their gossip, this point is supported from both a Chinese defector, Hao Fengjun, and Taiwan's recent espionage cases. In the Vice Admiral Ko Cheng-Sheng case, the admiral and his business associate, Shen Ping-kang, who had recruited Ko into the service of Chinese intelligence, worked with officials from the Shanghai City No. 7 Office

(see [China Brief](#), November 7; [Taipei Times](#), October 3; [Taipei Times](#), December 17, 2005). Several Shanghai offices appear to be used as cover organizations, and, while the No. 7 Office is more likely to be the Liaison Office of the PLA General Political Department, the Shanghai City No. 5 Office appears to be a 2PLA office, based on tracing personnel and office addresses.

The 2PLA appears to have been the Chinese intelligence service behind some of the biggest Chinese espionage cases in the news. When a Taiwanese court threw the book at the Taiwan Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Yuan Hsiao-feng and sentenced him to 12 life terms, 2PLA was the organization that recruited Yuan's former colleague Chen Wen-jen ([Taipei Times](#), February 7, 2013). According to a knowledgeable security official, a 2PLA officer posted overseas under diplomatic cover was responsible for recruiting General Lo Hsien-che, the director of the army's communications and electronic information department, before the 2PLA officer covered as a businesswoman with legitimate Australian citizenship took over. [3] Finally, the 2PLA is believed to be behind the recruitment of Taiwanese-American businessman Kuo Tai-shen, who recruited two U.S. Department of Defense officials and may have been involved in collecting information on Taiwan ([Washington Times](#), March 10, 2010; [Financial Times](#), February 12, 2008).

CCP United Front Work Department (UFWD)

United front work (*tongyi zhanxian*) is China's name for influence operations designed to build and direct political power, both at home and abroad. As one Chinese book intended for practitioners put it, "United front work, broadly speaking, is directing different social and political forces [...] to achieve specific common goals." [4] Among the four key missions of the UFWD is "opposing and containing 'Taiwan independence' and separatist forces and activities, achieve the complete unification of the motherland, [which] is related to the problem of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and united front work serves as an important force for implementing the 'one country, two systems' policy." [5] Or, in Mao Zedong's immortal and oft-repeated words, the object of united front work is "to rally our true friends to attack our true enemies" ([UFWD Website](#), October 1).

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) primary executor of this mission is the aptly-named United Front Work Department, which currently is led by the reportedly embattled Politburo member Ling Jihua, who under former Chinese president Hu Jintao served as the director of the CCP General Office ([South China Morning Post](#), October 23). Like the MSS, the UFWD also has provincial and local branches that report to their respective Party committees, just as the UFWD reports to the Central Committee. At the center, the UFWD chief also sits on the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group, indicating the department's role in implementing, if not formulating, Chinese policy toward Taiwan. The department itself reports to the Central Committee and is overseen by Politburo Standing Committee member Yu Zhengsheng, who also chairs the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC).

Known UFWD activities largely trace back to Chinese associations for promoting friendship and Chinese culture, both to Chinese and outsiders. Huangpu (Whampoa) Academy Alumni Association is one such group, and it has promoted a significant number of exchanges with retired Taiwanese military and intelligence personnel ([China Brief](#), October 14, 2011). [6] At the association's celebration of the 90th anniversary of the Huangpu Military Academy earlier this year, CPPCC Chairman Yu and UFWD Director Ling presided. Yu exhorted the association to persist in upholding the major policies for Taiwan affairs ([Xinhua](#), June 18). The association, however, has drawn more CCP luminaries, and it was one of the organizations that feted retired Taiwanese flag officers and Honorary Kuomintang Chairman Lien Chan—who also served as Taiwan's vice president under Lee Teng-hui and as Kuomintang chairman from 2000 to 2005—during his trip to China at the beginning of this year ([CPPCC News](#), February 24). The UFWD also has been active inside Taiwan since the easing of cross-strait travel restrictions, with UFWD officials making almost 4,000 individual trips, including more than 900 in the first half of this year ([Taipei Times](#), June 1; [Liberty Times](#), June 1).

Although some UFWD activities and exchanges might simply be explained away as feel-good sessions, the persistent presence of retired Taiwanese officials as Chinese intelligence's key entry point into the island's sensitive institutions suggests that participation in such

events warrants suspicion. According to the same Hong Kong article with corroborated information on the 2PLA, the UFWD is allowed to recruit Taiwanese as its agents just the same as its intelligence counterparts (*Chien Shao*, January 1, 2006). The department also appeared in the case involving Vice Admiral Ko Cheng-sheng, the former deputy commander of Taiwan's navy. As part of his intelligence relationship, Ko's handlers introduced him to UFWD officials, but it is not clear on whose behalf Ko tried to recruit several junior naval officers (*Taipei Times*, October 3).

Liaison Office of the PLA General Political Department (GPD/LO)

Another organization to surface in the Ko-Shen case was the PLA's General Political Department (GPD), which, among its many responsibilities, handles the military contribution to united front work (*Taipei Times*, October 3). This falls under the department's Liaison Office (GPD/LO), which evolved out of the Civil War-era GPD Enemy Work Department. [7] The GPD/LO's responsibilities, as defined by the *Chinese People's Liberation Army Political Work Regulations* description of liaison work (*lianluo gongzuo*), are the following: "Conducting enemy disintegration [and] rallying friendly military work" (*jinxing wajie dijun, tuanjie youjun de gongzuo*); "develop Taiwan work;" "investigate and research the situation of foreign militaries, enemy militaries, and national separatists inside and outside [China];" and "guide [Chinese] force's conduct of psychological warfare research and training." Perhaps unsurprisingly, the GPD/LO is known for its work on Taiwan, since the Kuomintang (KMT) was the most consistent CCP adversary over the 20th Century (*Chien Shao*, January 1, 2006).

The strangest feature about the GPD/LO department is its personnel. This department is closely linked to the CCP's elite families, and its senior leadership has included the offspring of Deng Xiaoping and Marshal Ye Jianying. To the extent that the GPD/LO has been studied by researchers, they have suggested most officers are not career military officers like their 2PLA counterparts and often have a diverse set of experiences. The GPD/LO, thus, is like an army made of colonels and generals, and a survey of biographical profiles on Chinese wikis for GPD/LO bears this out (*Chien Shao*, January 1, 2006). [8] In combination with the office's connections to business

and finance, the GPD/LO has surfaced periodically in corruption crackdowns—most recently, related to the follow-up on Xu Caihou (*Mingjingbao*, September 5; [South China Seas Conversations](#), June 7, 2013).

Conclusions

This organizational mapping of Chinese intelligence collectors operating against Taiwan spans the whole of the Chinese Party-army-state. The lines of control run directly to the decision makers at the Central Military Commission, the Central Political and Legal Affairs Committee and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress, as well as the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group. This leaves little room to doubt China's Taiwan intelligence apparatus is executing established policy. Despite the cross-strait warming since Taiwan elected President Ma Ying-jeou in 2008, no noticeable change has taken place in Beijing's intelligence operations against Taiwan. China still searches for Taiwan's military vulnerabilities and develops united front work, as Part One of this series made clear (see [China Brief](#), November 7).

The most important implication of the breadth of Chinese collectors is that it reduces the value for Taiwan and the United States of recruiting individuals within these organizations. This is not to say that these agents are not valuable and have not proven valuable (*China Post*, November 3, 2010). However, developing a sufficiently wide enough network within the CCP's security apparatus would be a difficult undertaking—arguably, something no intelligence service has ever achieved. This problem also is compounded by China's continuing interest in handling operations according to linear principles, also called "single line handling" (*danxian lianxi*). "Single line handling," an operational principle developed in the early days of CCP intelligence, means that only those operatives and managers with a direct interest in an operation are aware of what is taking place. Although this extreme compartmentalization was developed to protect CCP intelligence officers who were working within the KMT military and intelligence apparatus during the Civil War, anecdotal evidence suggests the principle remains active. For example, at least two MSS elements simultaneously were developing a U.S. analyst, who was then living in China, without being aware of the other's effort. The situation exploded after one group pitched the analyst,

and the analyst informed the other MSS office, which had seniority, so the two state security elements finally became aware of other. [9] Similarly, a Chinese defector to the United States in 1985, based on the known cases prosecuted after his defection, revealed relatively few operations, despite being from a politically-connected family and previously serving as a deputy bureau director. [10]

For Taiwan, or any other country so targeted, the response to Beijing's efforts to collect intelligence and shape the political environment cannot be left to the security and intelligence agencies alone. Democratic countries in particular are hampered by the fact that suborning public debate generally falls under freedom of speech, making any government action difficult if not impossible unless an obvious line, such as cash for services, is crossed and discovered. Efforts to track and publicize China's activities and the organizations involved are the next obvious first steps, because only widespread awareness will bring tipoffs for the security services and greater scrutiny over interactions with Chinese intelligence and political warfare agencies.

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Notes

1. Lu Ning, "The Central Leadership, Supraministry Coordinating Bodies, State Council Ministries, and Party Departments," in *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform 1978–2000*, ed. David Lampton (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 50, 414.
2. Ian M. Easton and L.C. Russell Hsiao, *The Chinese People's Liberation Army's Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Project: Organizational Capacities and Operational Capabilities*, Project 2049 Occasional Paper, March 11, 2013, p. 2.
3. Author's Interview, September 2012.

4. Zhuang Congsheng, chief ed., *Tongyi zhanxian zhibi shouce* [United Front Knowledge Manual], 2nd Ed. (Beijing: Huawen chubenshe, 2006), p. 4.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
6. The Huangpu (Whampoa) Military Academy was the Soviet-sponsored Kuomintang professional military training school (1924–1926), which also served as a training ground for many future PLA officers, including Chen Geng and Lin Biao. Zhou Enlai, later premier and the first chief of CCP intelligence, served as director of the academy's political department.
7. For the most complete history available, see, Mark Stokes and L.C. Russell Hsiao, *The People's Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics*, [Project 2049 Institute](#), October 14, 2013.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
9. Author's Interview, June 2012.
10. Nicholas Eftimiades, *Chinese Intelligence Operations* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), p. 34.

China's Soft-Power Deficit Widens as Xi Tightens Screws Over Ideology

By Willy Lam

Even for a country that is notable for its myriad contradictions, the gap between China's hard and soft power has never been more pronounced. The year 2014 has witnessed the kind of global hard-power projection that is unprecedented in recent Chinese history. The two-year-old Xi Jinping administration has used China's growing economic and military might to impose its stamp on the world order. Yet the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) increasingly draconian efforts to impose ideological control on 1.3 billion Chinese has not only stifled their creativity but also detracted from the worldwide appeal of the "China model."

Beijing Buying International Influence Through New Forums

From January to November this year, President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang—who is ranked second in the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC)—visited 26 countries over a total of 70 days. Yet it was during year-end multinational gatherings—particularly the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing, the G20 meeting in Australia, and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) conclave in Myanmar—that China's hard-power putsch was most impressive (see [China Brief](#), November 7; [People's Daily](#), November 25; [Jinghua Daily](#) [Beijing], November 24). Xi revived old concepts such as the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP)—which was first proposed at the 2004 APEC meeting—and unveiled new institutions such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). He gave a big push to the inchoate New Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. The Chinese government is shelling out half of the \$100 billion seed money for the AIIB; this is in addition to a similar amount that Beijing has committed to the BRICS Development Bank established earlier this year. Moreover Xi announced at the APEC conference that his government would offer \$40 billion in loans for infrastructure development related to the two Silk Road schemes ([Ta Kung Pao](#) [Hong Kong], November 18; [People's Daily](#), November 9). These

multi-pronged proposals seem geared toward buying support from countries that might otherwise be lured into joining America's perceived containment policy against China. Beijing also hopes that a web of finance and infrastructure—for example, high-speed railway networks partially financed by China—might restore the country's traditional status as the Middle Kingdom of the Orient.

The Xi administration has also pulled out all the stops to project military power. At the annual Zhuhai Air Show in Guangdong province that was held the same time as APEC, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) showcased state-of-the-art weapons such as the J-31 stealth jet fighter, which is billed as China's answer to the United States' F-35 (see [China Brief](#), November 16, 2012). The official media reported that sales of Chinese-made hardware had kept rising. "The demand for our products from emerging markets continues to expand, and now a lot of foreign armies are coming to us," said Liu Song, Deputy General Manager of Norinco, one of the country's biggest arms manufacturers ([China Daily](#), November 17; [Global Times](#), November 11). At the same time, PLA construction teams are enlarging islets in the South China Sea through relentless reclamation (see [China Brief](#), October 23). Western news agencies recently reported that a strip of land large enough to serve as a runway for jet fighters had been added to Fiery Cross Reef (called Yongshu Reef in China) in the Spratlys chain of disputed islands ([Reuters](#), November 22; [Ming Pao](#) [Hong Kong], November 22). This was in addition to similar reclamation work being done on Johnson Reef, another Spratly outcropping that is called Mabini by the Philippines and Chigua by China ([Jane's IHS](#), September 19; [South China Morning Post](#), June 8).

The Xi administration is aware that the fast-rising quasi-superpower is disproportionately weak in the soft-power department. It is estimated that the country spends \$12.5 billion a year on disseminating Chinese culture and ideas through means ranging from establishing nearly 500 Confucius Institutes worldwide to running TV news channels in English and other languages (see [China Brief](#), October 10; [Times Higher Education](#), November 20; [The Australian](#), November 17). In the wake of the 14-year-old Boao Forum on Asia—dubbed the "Chinese Davos"—Beijing has also been organizing international colloquiums to bolster China's say in matters ranging

from economic development to international relations. The newly upgraded Xiangshan Forum, which is the Chinese equivalent of the Shangri-La Dialogue, is aimed at promoting exchanges of views among military personnel from some 40 countries on issues of security and confidence building (*Global Times*, November 25; *The Diplomat*, September 15).

Xi's Control of Internet Reflects Larger Scheme

The First World Internet Conference (FWIC) held in Wuzhen, Zhejiang Province, in mid-November, was a good example of the Xi administration's effort to enhance the country's influence on the Internet. Titled "An Interconnected World Shared and Governed by All," the international gathering would, according to President Xi's congratulatory message, show that "China is ready to work with other countries to deepen international cooperation, respect sovereignty on the Internet [and] uphold cyber security." The supreme leader called on Chinese and foreign Internet entrepreneurs to "jointly build a cyberspace of peace, security, openness and cooperation and an international Internet governance system of multilateralism, democracy and transparency" (*China Daily*, November 19). As a gesture of good will to representatives of multinationals taking part at the FWIC, censorship on Google, Facebook and YouTube was lifted in Wuzhen for three days, a noted center of private enterprise (*Bloomberg*, November 21; *China Times* [Taipei], November 20).

Hard-line statements made by senior cadres, however, show that the CCP still regards the Internet as a dangerous medium through which "anti-China hostile forces" attempt to subvert what President Xi called "Chinese citizen's self-confidence in the path, theory and systems of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*People's Daily*, September 23, 2013). Xi told the Wuzhen conference that "the development of the Internet has posed new challenges to national sovereignty, security and development interests." While talking to Chinese and foreign participants at the FWIC, Vice-Premier and Politburo member Ma Kai indicated that "the Internet is a double-edged sword." "If we use it well, [the Internet] could be Alibaba's treasure trove," he added. "If not, it could become a Pandora's box." He then unveiled what the Chinese media called a "four-fold security concept": an Internet that will safeguard Chinese sovereignty and

ensure data security, technological safety and safety in applications (*Ta Kung Pao*, November 20; *Xinhua*, November 19).

As Chairman of the CCP's Central Leading Group on Internet Security and Informatization, President Xi is the first PBSC-level cadre to personally take charge of policies related to the Internet. Since the Fifth-Generation leader took power in late 2012, the number of dissidents arrested for allegedly spreading rumors or fomenting anti-party sentiments on the Internet has increased dramatically. For example, since the Umbrella Movement erupted in Hong Kong in late September, police and state-security officers have arrested a few dozen mainland Chinese intellectuals for posting articles on the Internet that supported pro-democracy activists in the Special Administrative Region (*Financial Times*, November 18; *Apple Daily*, [Hong Kong], October 13; *BBC Chinese Service*, October 1).

Party Role in Literature Harkens to Mao Era

President Xi has also revived theories about literature and the arts that are a throwback to the stultifying strictures of Maoism, which militate against not only global norms but former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's ethos about the open-door policy. On October 15, Xi presided over a seminar on literature and the arts with several dozen exemplary "engineers of the soul," or writers, artists, musicians and performers who had received official plaudits for singing the praises of orthodox values. The CCP General Secretary admonished them to "take patriotism as the leitmotif for artistic creation." "We must provide guidance for people to establish and uphold correct views about history and the state...so that their integrity and backbone as [model] Chinese will be enhanced," said the Party boss. While Xi cited the importance of "the fusion of Chinese and Western [traditions]," he repeated Mao's dictum that "things from abroad should sub-serve Chinese needs" (*Xinhua*, October 15; *Chinanews.com*, October 15). Indeed, Xi's talk was modeled upon Chairman Mao Zedong's renowned Yan'an Talks on Arts and Literature, which were held at the CCP's Shaanxi revolutionary base in 1942. Mao pointed out that "there is no such thing as art for art's sake," and that "proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are...cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine." [1]

Xi saluted the works of ultra-nationalist blogger Zhou Xiaoping as an example of lofty patriotism ([South China Morning Post](#), November 2; [Voice of America](#), October 22). The 33-year-old writer is famous for articles that eulogize the “China Dream” and criticize the U.S. government for trying to subvert China’s socialist regime. “China’s oriental culture will ultimately defeat Western hegemony,” Zhou wrote in a recent article. He outlined in another article the nine strategies with which “the United States is waging a cultural Cold War against China.” “We must uphold our own cultural values,” he told *People’s Daily* ([People’s Daily](#), October 24; [Guangming Daily](#), [Beijing], July 24). Xi’s decision to highlight Zhou, combined with earlier *People’s Daily* coverage, proves that Xi’s Internet crackdown still leaves room for Party sycophants.

Document No. 9 Rolls Back University Independence, Enforces Party Control

The Xi leadership has also sought to tighten control over the country’s professors and university administrators. Last October, the Ministry of Education issued a circular entitled “Opinions on strengthening long-lasting mechanisms for the construction of morality among college teachers” to all institutes of higher learning. Academics and college staff were asked to refrain from engaging in seven pernicious activities, including “hurting the interests of the state,” “words and deeds that run counter to the goals and directions of the party” as well as “soliciting and accepting bribes from students or their parents” ([Guangming Daily](#), October 13; [Ming Pao](#), October 11). These edicts came on the heels of the Central Party Document No. 9, entitled “Concerning the Situation in the Ideological Sphere,” that the CCP General Office last year dispatched to Party units handling education, ideology and the media. Teachers and media personnel were instructed to steer clear of “seven unmentionable topics” (*qige buyaojiang*), namely: universal values, press freedom, the civil society, citizens’ rights, the party’s historical aberrations, the “privileged capitalist class” and independence of the judiciary ([Mirrorbooks.com](#) [Hong Kong], April 15; [BBC Chinese Service](#), May 28, 2013).

The authorities have also indirectly encouraged students to expose liberal and “pro-West” professors who often speak ill of China. In a much-noted article last month, the official *Liaoning Daily* cited remarks by students of different universities who complained that their teachers

lacked patriotism and were “prone to singing the praises of other countries.” The article, titled “Teachers, please do not talk about China this way,” urged professors to “stop making disparaging remarks” about the Party and the country. *Liaoning Daily* also revealed that it had sent reporters to attend close to 100 lectures in five universities in Shenyang, Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan and Guangzhou ([BBC Chinese Service](#), November 16; [Liaoning Daily](#), November 14). Intellectuals in Beijing have compared President Xi’s draconian policies against dissidents to the Anti-Rightist Movement of the 1950s, in which Chairman Mao Zedong labeled hundreds of thousands of writers and teachers “rightists” and forced them to undergo re-education in the villages ([Radio Free Asia](#), November 19; [Utopia Net](#) [Beijing], November 18).

Reclaiming China’s Narrative From the West

At the Fourth Plenum of the CCP Central Committee last month, the Xi administration pledged to bolster the “rule of law” and to curtail political interference in judicial proceedings (see [China Brief](#), November 20). A spate of trials of dissidents and political activists, however, has raised questions about Party authorities’ commitment to global standards of jurisprudence. Several writers, lawyers and NGO activists—who are known for being liberal critics of the CCP—have been charged with offenses that could carry sentences of up to life imprisonment. For example, Gao Yu, a respected journalist and author, was last month put on trial for “illegally providing state secrets to [media] outside China.” The lawyer and relatives of the 70-year-old dissident noted that the alleged “state secrets” were the Document No. 9 issued by the CCP General Office in 2013 ([Radio Television Hong Kong](#), November 21; [Radio Free Asia](#), November 18). And Pu Zhiqiang, an internationally recognized rights lawyer whose clients included Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo, was also due to appear in court on charges including “incitement to subvert state power,” “incitement to separatism,” and “picking quarrels and stirring up trouble” ([Radio Free Asia](#), November 24; [China Digital Times](#), November 21).

According to Shanghai-based academic Zhang Weiwei, China should stop ceding “rights of discourse” to the West. “As a major power, China should get out of the constraints of narratives about ‘the West being the center’ and ‘the end of history,’” said Zhang, who was one of Deng Xiaoping’s English interpreters. “We must

use our own language to answer big questions such as ‘where we came from’ and ‘what path should we take’” (*Ming Pao*, November 22; *China.com.cn*, December 20, 2013). Similarly, well-known Tsinghua University media scholar Li Xiguang noted that “the soft power of a country manifests itself in whether it had the power to define and interpret ‘universal values’ such as democracy, freedom and human rights.” Li indicated that in order to enhance the attractiveness of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” “we must let the whole world hear the stories that Chinese citizens have to tell about their democracy, liberty, human rights and rule of law” (*People’s Daily*, May 4, 2012; *People’s Daily*, February 7, 2012). The problem, however, remains that given Beijing’s stringent restrictions on democracy and civil rights, there does not seem to be much that ordinary Chinese can say on these topics that could reflect well on either the CCP or the China model.

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Notes

1. Mao Zedong, “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” May 2, 1942. Available at Marxists.org.

Xi’s Military Reform Plan: Accelerating Construction of a Strong PLA

By Kevin N. McCauley

Chinese President and Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping’s military reform plan, announced at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee in November 2013, will take form over the next several years (see *China Brief*, November 20, 2013). The reforms, which appear to be the most significant taken in at least three decades, address several major issues requiring resolution before the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) can achieve significant modernization objectives. These include overcoming vested interests and reaching a consensus on modernization goals that have slowed progress in the past; providing high level direction to synchronize the diverse components of military modernization, particularly standardization for C4ISR; and optimizing the force structure to meet the requirements of modern warfare. [1]

While a general consensus on the way forward seems to have been reached within the Central Military Commission (CMC) and apparently the PLA in general, it also appears that some details have not been finalized. The general consensus on some of the difficult issues has likely been achieved by President Xi through a combination of promotions, the anti-corruption campaign within the PLA, as well as appealing to the collective interest and Party loyalty to build a strong modern military over preserving the primacy of the ground forces. Remaining decisions, such as the structure of joint commands, need to be resolved expeditiously if the reforms are to take place over the next few years. However, the PLA needs to carefully approach important issues with far reaching consequences—such as joint operations commands, changes in the military region (MR) system and force structure changes to limit the disruption and reduction in combat effectiveness—and mitigate risks during the implementation phase (*Xinhua*, August 11; *Chinamil.com*, March 16; *China Military Online*, February 28).

Reporting in the Chinese press and PLA sources provides a general outline and areas of emphasis in Xi’s

reforms. The plan reinforces ongoing reform priorities and attempts to succeed in areas that have been thwarted in the past. Some of the highlights with potentially significant consequences include an accelerated pace to modernization; the creation of peacetime joint commands to jump start the move to an integrated joint operations capability; an apparent increased emphasis on PLA Navy (PLAN) and Second Artillery Force (SAF) modernization; addressing problems of morale, corruption, attracting and training quality personnel; and overcoming a pervasive peacetime mentality.

Military Reform Areas of Emphasis

Accelerate Modernization and Preparations for Military Struggle.

The desire to accelerate military modernization has been highlighted by the PLA. This is in part a response to a complex security environment, as well as a perception that a quickening pace in the revolution in military affairs and modernization of advanced militaries in the world is threatening to leave the PLA further behind. The possibility remains for external conflicts and internal instability, including strategic containment and geopolitical competition, territorial disputes, ethnic and religious unrest as well as separatist and terrorist forces (*Global Times*, August 31; *PLA Daily*, August 31). [2] Preparation for military struggle is also a prominent theme, with preparation for combat a basic task for any armed force. For China, this is related to views on the potential for conflict, becoming more proactive strategically, particularly in regards to territorial disputes, the need to improve warfighting capabilities as well as meet new and expanding military requirements. Preparations include improving strategic planning and innovation, as well as crisis prevention, deterrence and limiting or controlling a crisis or conflict (*Xinhua*, March 15; *China Military Online*, November 21).

Joint Command and C4ISR. The creation of a modern and efficient joint command system is a top priority, as is the establishment of a force-wide command information system providing interoperability between the services in order to move toward an integrated joint operations capability. While there has been much discussion of joint command organization and functions in PLA academic circles, there appears to be a sense of urgency to resolve disagreements over structure and joint command

processes. Reforms include optimizing the CMC joint headquarters structure, functions and strategic management. Theater joint operations commands are planned, with adjustments in the military region system that should at least limit the traditional dominance of the ground forces. It is not clear whether a flatter command structure will be part of the restructuring as has been advocated by PLA academics (*Xinhua*, November 15, 2013). [3]

Plans call for strengthening the command information system with accelerated modernization of information systems through better centralized management. While C4ISR has been a focus of past modernization efforts, the lack of integration has hampered joint operations training and development as the military regions and group armies were left to locally solve joint communications problems. The PLA has already begun to emphasize high-level direction, with the CMC becoming more involved in modernization details. The GSD established an Informationization Department in June 2011 and Military Training Department in December 2011 to provide greater supervision in these critical areas. The modernization program will continue to strengthen development of an integrated information infrastructure throughout the military to enable a system of systems operational capability (*Xinhua*, November 15, 2013; *PLA Daily*, December 23, 2011, “Commentary: PLA’s joint operation still faces problems”; *Chinamil.com*, July 1, 2011; *Chinese Ministry of Defense*, December 22, 2011).

Training. Reform efforts emphasize improvements in training, especially joint training, to approach actual combat conditions. The need to approach actual combat in training is in part to overcome the lack of PLA combat experience in modern warfare. The continued upgrades to large training bases to support joint training should help in this area. According to the PLA, additional reasons include the following: the need to achieve and maintain a high combat readiness in order to prepare for and win a potential conflict; focus on actual operational requirements to shorten the transition to wartime readiness levels in a crisis; providing rigorous and complex training to strengthen troops toughness and fighting spirit; eliminating a perceived peacetime mentality within the PLA; overcoming continuing problems of scripted exercises, indifference to realistic training and fear of

accidents that limits training intensity; the standardization of evaluation methods to eliminate falsification of training results; and the conduct of specialized, non-war military training to support emergency responses. The PLA will need to revise and synchronize combat regulations, the training outline, and actual combat requirements to resolve conflicts in order to improve complex realistic training ([Xinhua](#), November 15, 2013; [Xinhua](#) March 20).

[4]

Cultivating Military Talents. The quality of officers and men is viewed by the leadership as inadequate, with additional resources needed to develop the specialized skills in core competencies to conduct modern joint operations and support the broad modernization effort. The personnel evaluation and selection process also requires improvements to correct significant problems, as evidenced by press reporting on PLA corruption cases related to promotions and conscription. The establishment of a standardized selection process based on qualifications is also seen as a means to attract and retain skilled personnel. President Xi's reform program intends to further improve military educational institutes with increased funding, enhanced scientific and technological education as well as joint operations training. Problems include weak and out-of-date courses, instructors that are out of touch with modern operational requirements, lack of innovation, as well as fraud and corruption within the educational institutes, which is polluting the academic environment ([China Military Online](#), July 16; [China Military Online](#), December 30, 2013).

Equipment and Force Modernization. Reductions in a force that is too large and rebalancing the ratio of forces between the services and between branches could lead to increased modernization resources for PLAN and SAF forces. The PLAN, presumably including the PLAN Air Force (PLANAF), is viewed as supporting comprehensive national strength, and could well receive special emphasis under President Xi's modernization program. Maritime rights, territorial issues economic interests—including the desire to reestablish a “Maritime Silk Road”—are among potential security or development issues that highlight a priority for accelerated naval modernization. Reported aircraft carrier construction plans would support a greater maritime presence further from China's coast. The SAF is a key component of long-range joint firepower strikes that would be critical to any campaign,

as well as providing nuclear deterrence. This is not to say the PLAAF is not an important focus of modernization with modern aircraft in development, only that the PLAN and SAF will receive greater emphasis under Xi's reform plan ([China Military Online](#) January 9; [Xinhua](#) April 16, 2013; [South China Morning Post](#) October 22).

Some areas such as new type operational forces will increase, while other areas such as non-combat forces will decrease. The PLA press has described army aviation, special forces and electronic warfare units as new types of operational forces, while PLA academics have given space and network operations forces as examples. It appears the ground forces will complete the transition from its current mixed division and brigade structure to a brigade/battalion structure during a force reduction. Force reductions will also allow for a phasing out of multiple types of old equipment. This will support greater standardization within units, increase modernization levels and operational readiness, while reducing logistics requirements and other problems caused by multiple and aging equipment types. Logistics has also been highlighted, with an increase in mobile logistics forces to support joint operations advocated, evident in the Jinan MR's special project in joint logistics over the last decade ([Chinamil.com](#), December 10, 2013; [China Military Online](#), November 17). [5]

Discipline, Loyalty and Corruption. Unhealthy tendencies, corruption and lax discipline within the military, considered serious by the leadership, are being addressed through campaigns targeting military loyalty to the Party, anti-corruption and adherence to laws and regulations as evidenced in the PLA press. The Party is also concerned about diverse and unhealthy concepts transmitted by social media and the Internet leading to ideological infection, issues not limited to the PLA but the population in general. Corruption is certainly a real problem in the PLA, but the additional areas of concern could indicate serious internal problems that would also affect warfighting capabilities ([China Military Online](#), January 17; [China Military Online](#), July 16; [Xinhua](#), November 4; [Xinhua](#), November 20, 2013).

High Stakes of Reform

The shape of Xi's military reform plan should become evident over the next two years, as will the level of success in overcoming institutional impediments to some of the key areas. The reorganizations and reforms appear to be the most extensive in at least three decades, and will have a far-reaching impact on the direction and pace of military transformation efforts.

The level of consensus, particularly support from the ground forces, will be an important determinant in the level of success. The public announcement of the plan's general outline would seem to imply consensus has been achieved, although continuing calls for loyalty and discipline in the PLA could indicate all are not in agreement. In particular, plans to create theater joint commands with a possible reduction in MRs, which has been blocked in the past, would represent a level of military control or at least influence by President Xi that his predecessors did not possess. This consensus was likely achieved by a combination of promotions, the threat of prosecution for corruption, calls for loyalty and discipline, as well as an appeal to the collective interests of the PLA and China over self-interest.

Success or failure of the reforms will have significant impacts on the region and on the PLA's transformation into an information-era military. Success will accelerate the pace of transformation and implementation of an advanced joint operations capability, which has seen much discussion by PLA academics, but has failed to move forward as a result of a past blockage of the creation of joint commands, and poor joint operations education and training efforts. Operationalizing a modern joint operations doctrine will increase warfighting capabilities as the service units become integrated at the campaign and tactical levels, improve situational awareness as well as provide for greater agility, flexibility and initiative at lower echelons. Plans to increase the joint operations capabilities of the CMC headquarters could mean greater micromanagement of operations during a conflict. Success in the reforms with improved joint and precision operations capabilities could lead the leadership to believe they can control and limit risk in a short-duration military operation with limited objectives in a crisis over a territorial dispute.

Failure to implement the reforms would represent a major setback for President Xi and the stagnation of PLA modernization efforts. It would leave PLA academics endlessly discussing the way forward for reforms without implementation. For the PLA it would mean that it would continue to field new equipment, but without the system of systems operations integration of hardware and force groupings, and without the modern joint doctrine required to optimize employment of the modern weapons and equipment. The PLA would be forced to continue conducting coordinated joint operations based on following planned operations with limited flexibility. In modern warfare this will greatly restrict the PLA's agility and ability to respond rapidly to changing battlefield situations. This would probably not adversely affect short, low-intensity operations over territorial disputes with more backward militaries. However, in a potential higher intensity and longer duration conflict with Japan's modern military, possibly backed up by the U.S. military, the PLA could rapidly lose the initiative as its pre-war operational plans are overtaken by events, and with lower-echelon commanders ill prepared to use initiative within the context of operational objectives.

Jump Starting Military Reform

Some past reform areas appear to require renewed emphasis, such as reform of military educational institutes. Other areas of the plan have been blocked in the past, as is the case with joint operations commands. Hardware, organizational and soft-factor changes are required to jump start the transformation process. Accelerated modernization is an important element, although the method to achieve a faster pace of modernization is unclear beyond force reductions to allow the withdrawal of aging equipment, which would also free up some modernization funds for more important areas. There are no indications of significant increases in the defense budget above what has been the norm, perhaps due to the example of overspending on defense contributing to the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, although increased emphasis on PLAN and SAF modernization could lead to increases over time. Poor high-level direction has limited modernization progress and appears to be addressed. It appears the CMC provides greater supervision and oversight, with the General Staff Department (GSD) and other General Departments

directing detailed implementation throughout the force. Supervision by the CMC and GSD will be critical to synchronize the broad and complex modernization, and ensure that efforts are implemented uniformly rather than leaving the details to lower echelons. This direction and decision making is required to overcome past standardization problems fielding an integrated command information system to enable joint operations development, and support creation of a joint command structure.

Optimizing the overly large force structure includes downsizing, adjustments of the ratios between the services and branches as well as increases in new types of operational forces. The PLAN appears poised to receive increased modernization resources under President Xi's plan, as does the SAF. The PLAAF and a likely smaller ground force will continue modernization.

Significant reform objectives include soft factors that indicate potentially significant problems within the PLA. These include recruiting and retaining quality personnel, improving and updating military educational institutes, promoting complex and realistic field and simulation training as well as innovation in operational methods (operational art and tactics). Combating corruption and fraud, and changing a prevalent peacetime mentality within the force are important for morale and increasing combat readiness. It is unclear whether the emphasis on loyalty, discipline, morale, changing the peacetime mentality and ideological infection in the force is merely a precaution, worse casing by the leadership, or represent significant internal problems.

President Xi's jump start and acceleration of PLA transformation efforts will need to be successful if the PLA is to achieve its goals of implementing a system of systems operational capability and integrated joint operations, both keys to the PLA's future warfighting capability.

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Notes

1. C4ISR stands for Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance.
2. *Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2013); *Transformation of Generating Mode of War Fighting Capability*, (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2012). Contact author for additional sources used for this article.
3. *Joint Operations Research*, (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2013) p. 166; *Information System-Based System of Systems Operations Study*, (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2012) p. 244; *Information System-based System of Systems Operational Capability Building in 100 Questions* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, June 2011) pp. 196–197.
4. *Information System-based System of Systems Operational Capability Building in 100 Questions* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, June 2011) pp. 218 and 230.
5. *Joint Operations Research*, (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2013) pp. 165–166 and 289–290; Dong Zifeng, *Transformation of Generating Mode of War Fighting Capability*, (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2012) p. 27.

Assessing China's Afghan Peace Play

By Richard Weitz

Breaking with decades of distancing itself from Afghanistan's various armed conflicts, the Chinese government has offered to facilitate peace talks between the Afghan national government and the Afghan Taliban insurgency movement. On November 29, Sun Yuxi, China's Special Envoy for Afghanistan, for the first time publicly confirmed that he had met with representatives of the Afghan Taliban in Peshawar, Pakistan, to discuss the modalities of their possible participation in peace negotiations ([Pakistan Today](#), November 29). At the October 30 Istanbul Process ministerial conference in Beijing, the Chinese government quietly proposed establishing a "peace and reconciliation forum" in which representatives from the Kabul government, the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan and China would meet to discuss ending the fighting and reintegrating the insurgents into Afghanistan's political process ([Reuters](#), November 11).

President Ghani, who has developed good ties with Chinese officials during his years as a senior Afghan and World Bank official, made China the destination of his first official foreign visit last month. Ghani arrived in Beijing, on October 28, and met with President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders before participating in the Fourth Foreign Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul ("Heart of Asia") Process on Afghanistan. The participating countries backed 64 separate projects designed to promote Afghanistan's socioeconomic reconstruction, national security and regional integration ([China Daily](#), November 3). Arguing that, "Peace and stability in Afghanistan have a direct bearing on China's security and stability" and highlighting the reciprocal positive effects of economic development and political stability, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang delivered an opening address that offered five principles designed to support a solution to the Afghan conflict, including "a broadly-based, inclusive political reconciliation" ([Xinhua](#), October 31). Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying noted, on October 24, that the event marked the first time China had hosted a major international meeting on Afghanistan ([China Daily](#), October 30).

In their pre-summit meeting at Beijing's Great Hall of the People, President Xi called President Ghani "an old friend of the Chinese people," and said that he was prepared to work toward "a new era of cooperation in China-Afghanistan relations" to "take development to a new depth and breadth" ([Xinhua](#), October 29). Calling China a "strategic partner, in the short term, medium term, long term and very long term," Ghani pledged to assist China's campaign against terrorism, identified harmonious parallels between both countries' vision for regional economic integration and confirmed Beijing's sovereignty over "Taiwan, Tibet and other issues" ([South China Morning Post](#), October 28; [China Daily](#), October 29; [Reuters](#), October 28). In four bilateral agreements signed during the summit, China pledged 2 billion Renminbi (\$330 million) in aid to Afghanistan from 2014 to 2017—more than the approximately \$250 million that China has provided since 2001—and to train 3,000 more Afghan professionals over the next five years. Both governments called for more Chinese investment in Afghanistan and for expanded government-wide bilateral cooperation as they prepare to celebrate the 60th anniversary of their relationship next year ([Xinhua](#), October 29).

The escalation of Islamist-linked terrorism in China during the past year and the Western military drawdown have evidently alarmed Beijing and encouraged the Chinese government to take new initiatives (see [China Brief](#), November 7). China has succeeded in securing the backing of Afghanistan and its neighbors for Beijing's counterterrorist policies. In 2013, China and Afghanistan signed a terrorist extradition treaty and agreed to intensify cooperation against other transnational security threats, such as illegal immigration and trafficking in arms, narcotics and people ([Xinhua](#), September 27). But Chinese analysts still believe that foreign sponsors in Central and South Asia are abetting terrorist attacks in China. And with Western governments devoting fewer military and economic resources to the Afghan theater, Chinese leaders can less confidently rely on others to assume most of the burden of preventing Afghanistan from threatening such core Chinese interests as the PRC's internal security, its economic assets in Afghanistan as well as China's regional economic and security objectives in nearby Pakistan and Central Asia. [1]

Beijing's Afghan Chits

China brings certain advantages to its Afghan peace efforts that might make them more successful than the efforts of the United States and other countries.

First, many Afghans and others believe the Chinese argument that China can apply its enormous resources to help develop the Afghan economy and thereby address some socioeconomic causes of Afghans' discontent ([China.com](#), September 29). In 2008, the China Metallurgical Group Corporation highlighted China's potential economic role in Afghanistan by acquiring a 30-year lease to mine high-grade copper ore from the Mes Aynak mine in Logar Province for \$3 billion. The World Bank estimates that the Mes Aynak mine, which will be the largest private sector project in Afghan history when operational, would create tens of thousands of local jobs and provide the government with \$250 million in annual revenue ([International Business Times](#), August 25). In December 2011, the China National Petroleum Company signed a deal to explore for oil and natural gas in Afghanistan's Amu Darya River Basin, in return for constructing Afghanistan's first oil refinery and other compensation. Special Envoy Sun said that "we have assured the Taliban leadership that we will bring development and prosperity to Afghanistan" ([Pakistan Today](#), November 29).

Second, Afghans and others hope that China can use its influence in Islamabad to induce Pakistan's security establishment to more comprehensively support the Afghan peace process rather than pursue a dual-hedging policy of cooperating with both the Afghan government and the Taliban ([Xinhua](#), October 29). Pakistan, which has more influence with the Afghan Taliban than any other country, is one of China's closest partners. Although Chinese officials have apparently rebuked Islamabad for failing to prevent Islamist militants from using Pakistani territory to stage several attacks inside China, Chinese diplomats have recently publicly praised the Pakistani government for fighting terrorism ([Chinese Foreign Ministry](#), June 17). Pakistani mediation may also have helped the Chinese government exchange messages with the Afghan Taliban well before the recent Chinese-Taliban talks in Peshawar.

Third, President Xi's administration has displayed a willingness to adopt a higher-profile foreign policy in general, despite the risks to Beijing of breaking with its low-key stance on controversial international issues. Xi's boldness has been most evident in the East and South China Seas, where Chinese diplomats and ships are for the first time enforcing Beijing's territorial claims, notwithstanding the risks of triggering a countervailing coalition among Japan, the Philippines and other maritime powers. To China's west, Xi has augmented China's "New Silk Road Economic Belt" vision with new infusions of cash and transportation infrastructure projects designed to facilitate China's trade with and through Central Asia, Pakistan and Iran. Although the Chinese government has preferred that other countries take the lead in stabilizing Afghanistan, China's growing regional presence in South Asia has made Chinese policy makers more sensitive to how instability in Afghanistan could disrupt China's regional economic and security plans. Even before confirming his discussions with the Taliban, Special Envoy Sun was floating such original ideas as launching joint Chinese-Indian humanitarian reconstruction projects in Afghanistan ([The Hindu](#), July 22).

Finally, China lacks the negative historical legacy of other countries that have assumed a high-profile role in Afghanistan. China is one of Afghanistan's few neighbors that has not regularly intervened in the country's civil wars. In July, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid reportedly said that, "We have no problems with China as it has never interfered in Afghanistan. The Chinese will be safe" ([The Express Tribune](#), July 26). Beijing also benefits from the advent of the new Afghan presidential administration; the Taliban evidently distrusted dealing with former President Hamid Karzai, Ghani's predecessor, as much as Pakistan and Western governments. Of course, launching a diplomatic initiative regarding Afghanistan is still a relatively low-cost, low-risk endeavor from Beijing's perspective, compared with the massive military and economic exertions of the Soviet and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) governments in Afghanistan in recent decades.

China's Afghan Challenges

Yet, China faces major challenges in bringing peace to Afghanistan when so many others, ranging from foreign countries to international organizations like the United Nations, have failed.

First, China has found it difficult to apply its potentially most powerful tool, its economic wealth, to Afghanistan due to many local obstacles. When President Xi met then-President Karzai in Beijing in September 2013, Xi said that, besides encouraging Chinese firms to invest in Afghanistan, China would “always provide assistance to Afghanistan within the realm of its capabilities” ([Xinhua](#), September 27, 2013). In 2013, this amounted to only some 200 million RMB (\$32 million), though the Chinese government also provides training to Afghan experts in such subjects as agriculture, education, engineering, finance, trade, as well as supporting Chinese language and academic exchanges ([Xinhua](#), September 27, 2013). Notwithstanding a few showcase projects that make China the largest single national source of foreign direct investment in Afghanistan, Chinese companies have only some 30 active projects in Afghanistan ([China Daily](#), October 29). Furthermore, delays in excavating a nearby 9,800-acre archeological site, falling world copper prices, inadequate Afghan investment legislation and serious security challenges have effectively halted work at the Mes Aynak copper mine ([South China Morning Post](#), August 23). Observers fear that, without large-scale foreign investment, Afghanistan's enormous natural resources will either remain undeveloped or fall under the control of black-market smugglers including warlords and terrorists ([South China Morning Post](#), August 23). The Afghan government still cannot afford to pay for its enormous army and police forces.

Second, China has few negative sanctions that Beijing can employ against the parties to prod them to make concessions. The government has generally opposed applying sanctions on principle and in any case does not provide any of the parties with much economic assistance that Beijing could threaten to withhold. China also lacks powerful military tools that it can apply in Afghanistan. However much weakened in practice, the principle of non-interference, combined with a prudent desire to avoid gratuitously making trouble by creating

new foreign adversaries, restrains China from taking steps to pressure a party into agreeing or implementing a compromise agreement.

Finally, unlike several other third countries, China does not have strong local and international partners for Afghanistan. Whereas Pakistan, Iran, Russia, India and Western governments have cultivated politicians, warlords and other influential Afghans, the Chinese government has sought to avoid getting bogged down in Afghan internal politics. Yet, whereas Russia and India have renewed their former Afghan partnership, and NATO governments have sustained their collective presence in the country, Beijing has only a problematic partnership with Islamabad. Pakistan's repeated interference in Afghan politics is widely unpopular among Afghans, while even the Chinese have recoiled at Islamabad's political instability, ties with regional terrorist groups and faltering economy. China has always directed Pakistani officials to rely on Western aid rather than expect Beijing to pay for Islamabad's flawed economic policies. Meanwhile, Russia's cooperation with China on Afghanistan, whether directly or through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, remains highly circumscribed, while formal China-NATO ties are almost nonexistent.

Washington's Cautious Welcome

In his October meeting with President Xi, President Ghani said he had told U.S. President Barack Obama earlier that week that Afghanistan “would be a model for cooperation between China and the United States” ([Bloomberg](#), October 29). At the time of Ghani's visit to Beijing, a senior U.S. State Department official insisted in a background briefing that Washington saw “Afghanistan as a place of cooperation, not competition with China,” which “is a critical partner in this region, and has an important role to play in ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan” ([China Daily](#), October 30). According to another account of this phone call with an unidentified State Department official in Beijing, the past five years have seen “an increased convergence of interest” between Beijing and Washington regarding Afghanistan as well as “broader and deeper” cooperation ([Bloomberg](#), October 30). Secretary of State John Kerry communicated the same message when showing Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi around Boston two weeks earlier ([China](#)

Daily, October 30). The United States has generally supported China's growing, if still modest, engagement in Afghanistan. The two governments run a joint program to train a small number of young Afghan diplomats each year for a couple weeks in Beijing and Washington. Wu Xi, Minister of the Chinese embassy in the United States, called the program a "good example of how the new model of major-country relationship between China and the United States can contribute to the region" (*Xinhua*, October 21). The U.S. government undertook a similar peace mediation effort a few years ago to facilitate talks in Qatar between the Afghan government and the Taliban, but both parties sabotaged the process in competing efforts to achieve tactical advantages.

In a commentary entitled, "China Faces a Delicate Task in Afghanistan," a Chinese author explained Beijing's reasoning as: "A comprehensive involvement in Afghan affairs by China will bring huge risks. It will have to confront the mess that the US experienced, the different views of Afghan sects in addition to the remaining US influence, making it a nearly impossible idea. But the West insists China is taking a free ride in Afghanistan, urging us to offer more. Kabul also has high expectations on China over its rebuilding. China has many interests in Afghanistan. No matter how risky Afghanistan's peaceful reconstruction is, China needs to be there...This is the cost of being a major power and we need to get used to it" (*Global Times*, October 30).

Nonetheless, the Chinese government has still declined to join other countries and help Afghanistan pay the estimated \$4 billion annual cost of sustaining its army and police forces. Instead, it has launched a modest program to train 300 Afghan police officers over the course of several years. However much Washington and other actors welcome China's peace initiative, and however much Chinese analysts reject President Obama's description of China as a global free rider, for the next few years, it will be the United States, not China, that will likely contribute the most financial and military assistance to the Afghan government.

Notes

1. For a discussion of these larger Chinese interests and options in Afghanistan see the author's upcoming report for The Jamestown

Foundation entitled *Opportunity or Nightmare? Beijing Ponders Western Military Withdrawal From Afghanistan*, as well as Dirk van der Kley, "China's foreign policy in Afghanistan," *Lowy Institute*, October 24; and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Daniel Trombly, and Nathaniel Barr, "China's Post-2014 Role in Afghanistan," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, Washington, DC, October.

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