



In This Issue:

IN A FORTNIGHT

By Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Jessica Drun 1

NUCLEAR POLICY ISSUES IN THE 2013 EDITION OF THE SCIENCE OF MILITARY STRATEGY: PART 1 ON NUCLEAR POLICY, STRATEGY AND FORCE MODERNIZATION

By Michael S. Chase 4

CHINA'S NORTH KOREA POLICY: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF RUSSIA?

By Mathieu Duchâtel 8

CHINA'S "ONE BELT, ONE ROAD" STRATEGY MEETS THE UAE'S LOOK EAST POLICY

By Emma Scott 12

CHINESE SUBMARINES IN SRI LANKA UNNERVE INDIA: NEXT STOP PAKISTAN?

By Vijay Sakhuja 15



Belarusian Defense Minister Lt. Gen. Andrei Ravkov meets with Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan (Source: Belarus Ministry of Defense)

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In a Fortnight

PRESIDENT XI'S VISIT TO BELARUS PROMPTS QUESTIONS OF NEW LINE ON TAIWAN

By Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Jessica Drun

Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to Belarus on May 10-12, following his visit to Russia to join President Vladimir Putin in the military parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, has led to new questions in Taiwan about Xi's policy and how Beijing will approach the issue of Taiwan's international space in the run-up to Taiwan's next presidential election in January 2016. On May 10, Xi issued a joint statement with his Belarusian counterpart Alexandre Lukashenko. Beyond the typical diplomatic language and reaffirmation of the "One China" policy, the joint statement declared that Belarus "will oppose Taiwan joining any international organization or regional organization that is limited to participation by sovereign nations, will not sell arms to Taiwan and will support the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations and the Chinese government's efforts to achieve national unification" ([Xinhua](#), May 11).

Taiwan's *United Daily News* was quick to point out that this was the first time this specific language was used in a Chinese joint statement, but in fact this exact language was used in a similar joint statement in 2013 and a 2007 joint statement only excluded the arms provision ([UDN](#), May 12; [MFA](#), November 5, 2007; [Xinhua](#), July 16, 2013). The Taiwanese government's response has focused predominantly on Belarus' opposition to Taiwan's participation in international organizations in which sovereignty is a prerequisite. On May 11, the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) spokesperson said, "The Foreign Ministry regrets the move," as the joint statement "ignored the international reality and made inappropriate remarks that affect our country's rights" and was merely an attempt to "[ingratiate] itself with the mainland" ([Central News Agency](#), May 13; [Taipei Times](#), May 13). The MOFA spokesperson correctly said that the joint statement was similar to past statements in 2007 and 2013, and did not raise the issue of banning arms sales ([China Post](#), May 13). Other Taiwanese media reported on the MOFA statement and put the joint statement in context, saying it was "rare in that it specified opposition to Taiwan independence," as China's joint statement with Russia just days prior had not mentioned Taiwan and the statement with South Korea in 2014 had said "China reiterates that there is only one China in the world and that Taiwan is an unalienable part of China. South Korea understands and respects this idea fully" ([WantChinaTimes](#), May 13).

However, the issue was a minor point of discussion in the Chinese media after typical coverage of President Xi's trip, with only one article covering the controversy ([Global Times](#), May 13). The Chinese media instead covered Belarus' role in Beijing's New Silk Road strategy, which President Lukashenko agreed to support, and the China-Belarus Industrial Park ([China Daily](#), May 7; [Xinhua](#), May 10). One Chinese expert described Belarus as "located at the intersection of the European Union and the Central Independent States, as well as the Baltic States and the Black Sea, so it can connect the Eurasian Economic Union and the EU markets, playing an indispensable role in promoting the 'One Belt, One Road' " ([People's Daily Online](#), May 10). Before President Xi's visit, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) said the joint statement would focus on "further developing and deepening bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership," without mentioning Taiwan ([MFA](#), May 4).

The specific language appears to be exclusively used in Chinese statements with Belarus, and no other country, suggesting it is likely "icing on the cake," as there is likely little that Belarus could sell to Taiwan. The former Taiwanese representative in Belarus, Jiang Shu-yi, said that there have been no previous arms sales from Belarus ([Global Times](#), May 13). According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, since 1990 Belarus has sold largely second-hand military arms from the former Soviet Union, and has no sales to any East Asian nation besides China (Beijing ordered five transportation aircraft via Russia in 2011) ([SIPRI](#), 2015). Belarus has sold other countries some aircraft, helicopters, tanks, missiles and guns, but none of these are likely of much interest to Taiwan, which is focused more on acquiring foreign submarine technology, or developing its own domestic program. Moreover, Chinese Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Fan Changlong and Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan met with visiting Belarusian Minister of Defense Lt. Gen. Andrei Ravkov in Beijing on May 25, where they agreed to deepen military cooperation and signed an agreement on Chinese military assistance ([Xinhua](#), May 25; [Belarus MOD](#), May 26). Furthermore, analysts have suggested that Belarus' strategic calculus lies in currying favor with Beijing to counter Russian influence, particularly in light of the Crimea annexation ([PTS News Network](#), May 12). Belarus has little to lose in regards to Taiwan, as MOFA shut down its representative office in Minsk in 2006 after Belarus openly opposed Taiwan's bid to join the UN and WHO ([Taipei Times](#), January 4, 2006).

China under Xi could potentially be pursuing a dual line toward Taiwan—greater engagement across the Strait and demonstrated flexibility on Taiwan's participation in international organizations, but increased international isolation through related agreements with its diplomatic allies. Following the first China-Taiwan meeting in January 2014 between Wang Yu-chi, head of Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council, and Zhang Zhijun, head of China's Taiwan Affairs Office, Kuomintang (KMT) Chairman Eric Chu visited Beijing this month and met with President Xi, where Chu called for expanded international space ([Xinhua](#), May 4; [Focus Taiwan](#), May 4). Yet this is happening against the backdrop of China's decision to deny Taiwan membership in its Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB) ([South China Morning Post](#), April 13). If the Xi administration sought to

demonstrate a softer tone with Taiwan internationally to win favor with the Taiwanese public ahead of the 2016 election, which as of now appears likely to be a repeat of the November 2014 local election in favor of the DPP against the KMT's pro-China stance, Xi could have removed the strident language from the joint statement (see [China Brief](#), December 5, 2014).

This issue may become a talking point on the campaign trail in Taiwan. While Belarus itself may not be a critical factor in the grander scheme of Taiwan's political considerations, the question of Taiwan's limited international space comes at a sensitive time. Gambia severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan in late 2013; Taiwan's singular European ally, the Holy See, made motions to establish formal relations with the Mainland during Pope Francis' visit to South Korea in August 2014; and Taiwan's offer to provide humanitarian relief for last month's earthquake in Nepal were initially rejected, pointing to the geopolitical realities preventing the island from contributing to the international community (see [China Brief](#), May 15; [Taipei Times](#), November 16, 2014; [Focus Taiwan](#), April 27). Domestically, KMT Legislator Johnny Chiang said the statement could be taken as a "warning" for Taiwan to not try to join any international organizations after the 2016 presidential election ([Taipei Times](#), May 13).

The DPP continues to reject the deliberately ambiguous "One China" element of the 1992 Consensus which has served as the underlying foundation of cross-Strait dialogue for the Ma administration and likewise the basis for his "flexible diplomacy" policy. Ma's policies has brought about a tacit "diplomatic truce" and expanded Taiwan's international space in UN-affiliated organizations through flexibility on nomenclature and seeking limited statuses instead of full membership. For example, Taiwan was invited as a "guest" of China at the 38th International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Assembly meeting, which came at the suggestion of Beijing, even though the Ma administration originally sought observer status ([Taipei Times](#), September 26, 2013). China has likewise demonstrated goodwill towards Taiwan by declining offers of establishing formal relations from Panama and El Salvador. The DPP has criticized Ma's approaches, holding that these policies give China the upper hand and a future point of leverage against Taiwan. A report from the *China Times* holds that a rejection of the 1992

Consensus would mean a termination of the diplomatic truce, purporting that within the first week of the new administration five to seven of Taiwan's allies will switch recognition to China and Beijing is likely to withhold invitations to key international organizations such as ICAO and the World Health Assembly, in order to put pressure on a DPP administration ([China Times](#), May 20).

Consequently, China may be preparing for a more heavy-handed approach to Taiwan in the event of a DPP victory in 2016 and a likely rejection of the 1992 Consensus. The recent joint statement between China and Belarus is noteworthy in the continued opposition to Taiwan's joining international organizations in which sovereignty is a requirement. Though China has always adhered to this policy, Beijing has demonstrated its flexibility in exactly *how* Taiwan can participate. Reaffirming opposition, which may come at the further cost of domestic Taiwanese support for the KMT's engagement policy under President Ma, may demonstrate that Beijing has accepted the fact that the KMT will likely lose and is now posturing for a DPP victory in 2016 - readying to switch its hand from a carrots approach to a stick one. Ultimately, analysts can only wait and see if this additional clause becomes the new norm for China's joint statements with other nations.

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Nuclear Policy Issues in the 2013 Edition of *The Science of Military Strategy*: Part 1 on Nuclear Policy, Strategy and Force Modernization

By Michael S. Chase

This article reviews the discussion of nuclear weapons policy, strategy and force modernization in the 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* (SMS), published by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) publishing house. Compared to the previous edition of SMS, the 2013 edition offers much more extensive and detailed coverage of a number of nuclear policy and strategy-related issues. Notwithstanding important developments in Chinese nuclear capabilities in recent years, such as the deployment of road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs)—SMS 2013 largely tracks with the coverage of nuclear issues in previous Chinese military publications, at least at the level of nuclear policy and strategy. At the same time, however, SMS 2013 does seem to suggest some evolution in Chinese thinking about nuclear issues. In particular, SMS 2013 appears to indicate that concerns about China's security environment and improvements in Chinese capabilities are leading to greater discussion and debate about nuclear policy and strategy issues within China. Moreover, it hints at some debates that are likely to emerge as the further development of Chinese capabilities creates new options for Chinese leaders.

Nuclear Policy and Strategy in SMS 2013

On the whole, no major changes in nuclear policy or strategy are apparent in SMS 2013. As in the previous edition, SMS 2013 places nuclear deterrence within the broader context of a set of strategic deterrence capabilities that also includes conventional, space and cyber warfare forces. Yet the volume is somewhat more detailed than earlier editions in certain respects, such as its discussion of potential challenges to the credibility of China's nuclear deterrent. SMS 2013 is also somewhat more direct in discussing Chinese force modernization and how Chinese responses are intended to ensure deterrence effectiveness, though it does not offer any details about

specific systems China is developing, such as the DF-41, a road-mobile ICBM possibly capable of carrying multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), and the hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV) Beijing confirms it has tested (*China Daily*, January 16, 2014).

With respect to nuclear policy, SMS 2013 reaffirms China's nuclear no first use (NFU) policy and states that China adheres to a "self-defensive" nuclear strategy. It indicates that the main purpose of nuclear weapons is strategic deterrence. According to SMS 2013, the nature of nuclear weapons means "the deterrence application is the principal method of the application of nuclear forces (*weishe yunyong shi be lilang yunyong de zhubiao fangshi*)." [1] Additionally, SMS 2013 states, "nuclear deterrence is the primary form of military struggle in the nuclear domain" (SMS 2013, p. 172). SMS 2013 traces this assessment to judgments former leaders Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping made about the utility of nuclear weapons in a deterrent role. In particular, SMS 2013 notes that Deng described nuclear missiles as "deterrence forces" and "deterrence weapons" (SMS 2013, p. 141–2). It further states that China's approach to nuclear counterattacks is based on the principle of "gaining mastery by striking only after the enemy has struck" (*houfa zhiren*), and that, "the nuclear counterattack operation is the sole form for China's nuclear force to employ nuclear forces in actual combat."

SMS 2013 also explains the roles nuclear weapons play in China's security strategy in a broader sense. First and foremost, according to SMS 2013, "nuclear weaponry acts as a strong 'shield' to protect national security" (SMS 2013, p. 231). More broadly, "nuclear weapons centrally embody and reflect a country's comprehensive national power and its level of science and technology." Nuclear weapons are thus irreplaceable not only for strategic deterrence, but also for cementing a country's status as a major power. For China, "Nuclear weapons have continuously served as an important mainstay supporting China's position as a major country, and in the future they will still be an important mark and symbol reflecting China's international position and image" (SMS 2013, pp. 230–1).

SMS 2013 on China's Increasingly Complex Nuclear Security Environment

SMS 2013 indicates that China faces an increasingly challenging nuclear security environment, one in which it must contend with challenges posed by a number of potential nuclear adversaries, as well as advances in enemy missile defense, conventional prompt global strike (CPGS), and nuclear capabilities. Further complicating the situation is greater pressure to participate in arms control negotiations that could limit China's ability to achieve its force modernization goals. According to SMS 2013, "Over the past few years, the nuclear security picture faced by our country has become increasingly complex." The authors offer four reasons for this pessimistic judgment:

- First, China's main potential adversary is the United States, which is increasing its missile defense capabilities. According to SMS 2013: "The main object faced by China in its nuclear struggle is the world's most powerful nuclear country. The United States sees China as its primary strategic adversary and is stepping up the building of a missile defense system for the East Asia region."
- Second, the number of countries with nuclear weapons in China's neighborhood has increased. Specifically, according to the authors: "India's nuclear strength has grown rapidly. After entry into the 21st century, the problem of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula has been constantly fermenting and the possibility of resolving it in the near future is very small."
- Third, "the world's principal countries are making great efforts to develop new conventional military capabilities." Specifically, "the United States is in the process of implementing a conventional 'Prompt Global Strike' (PGS) plan. Once it has functional capabilities, it will be used to implement conventional strikes against our nuclear missile forces and will force us into a disadvantaged, passive position. This will greatly impact our nuclear counterstrike capabilities and weaken

our nuclear deterrence outcomes."

- Fourth, China will likely face greater pressure to engage in multilateral nuclear arms control discussions as the United States and Russia decrease the numbers of nuclear weapons in their arsenals. According to SMS 2013, along with these developments, "the external pressure on the development of China's nuclear forces has seen corresponding increases. The quantitative scale of China's nuclear weapons is far from being on the same level as that of the United States and Russia. With further development of the international nuclear weapons reduction picture, the modernization of China's limited nuclear forces will experience increasing external pressure."

Another challenge that is not included in the list of four factors but is discussed elsewhere in SMS 2013 is inherent in the nuclear forces and doctrine of China's potential adversaries, particularly the United States. SMS 2013 notes that the United States is deemphasizing nuclear weapons in certain respects: "Given the sustained superiority of the United States in conventional military forces and the accelerated construction of a global missile defense system, reductions of nuclear weapons quantities and limits on the scope of nuclear weapons usage have further decreased dependence on nuclear weapons." Yet the United States remains a nuclear superpower. Moreover, like Russia, it has refused to adopt a "no first use" (NFU) policy, and SMS 2013 indicates that U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy is based on the possibility of first use of nuclear weapons (SMS 2013, p. 171).

Nuclear Force Modernization in SMS 2013

Against the backdrop of this increasingly complex nuclear security picture, SMS 2013 indicates that deterring a potential nuclear attack against China is crucial for national security. Another is being prepared to carry out a nuclear counterattack if deterrence fails. According to SMS: "The implementation of nuclear counterstrikes is both PLA Second Artillery Force's (PLASAF) fundamental method of actual combat application (*shizhan yunyong*) and is also the foundation of implementing effective nuclear deterrence (*youxiao be weishe*). Only by truly possessing nuclear counterstrike capabilities can it be guaranteed

that when suffering an enemy nuclear attack we will be able to organize an effective counterstrike, giving the enemy a certain degree of nuclear damage (*yiding chengdu de be huishang*), and only then truly achieving the goal of deterring (*shezhi*) the outbreak of nuclear war” (SMS 2013, pp. 231–2). Consequently, the main purpose of nuclear force modernization is enhancing the effectiveness of a nuclear counter-attack, which in turn makes nuclear deterrence more credible and effective. According to SMS: “Being able to carry out an effective nuclear counterstrike is the foundation of effective nuclear deterrence (*youxiao de weishe*)” (SMS 2013, p. 235).

SMS 2013 is more explicit on this point than the previous edition, particularly in its discussion of force modernization requirements needed to further improve the credibility of nuclear deterrence. Indeed, SMS 2013 indicates that a more modern nuclear force constitutes the mainstay of China’s overall “deterrence system,” which is also composed of informatized conventional forces, network attack and defense capabilities, “flexible and diverse space forces” as well as an innovative approach to People’s War based on mobilization capabilities. SMS 2013 indicates that China requires “lean and effective” nuclear strike forces to guarantee its status as a powerful country, ensure its core interests will not be violated and sustain a stable environment for peaceful development. This, in turn, requires higher levels of informatization, improved command-and-control and strategic early warning capabilities, as well as enhanced survivability based on mobility, protective measures and rapid reaction capabilities. For China’s land-based nuclear force, SMS 2013 mentions measures such as MIRVs, hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs) and increasing the number of ICBMs. SMS 2013 also highlights the importance of further developing China’s sea-based strategic nuclear force, judging that the PLAN has made progress in improving China’s sea-based nuclear deterrent, but remains behind the most advanced nuclear powers. According to SMS 2013, the development of a sea-based nuclear deterrent is important to “maintaining the reliability, dependability and effectiveness” of China’s nuclear deterrent and nuclear counterattack capabilities. Consequently, the PLAN “should accelerate the development and fielding of new types of SSBNs, to form a sea-based nuclear counterattack operational capability of a certain scale.”

SMS 2013 also discusses nuclear deterrence in more detail than the previous volume. For example, it describes nuclear deterrence strategy that involves strengthening China’s nuclear forces and “maintaining an appropriate degree of confusion” that ensures the opposing side will be uncertain about China’s actual nuclear power, the timing and scale of nuclear counterstrikes and so on. SMS 2013 indicates that such an approach “can increase the difficulty of decision-making by the opposing side and is beneficial to increasing the deterrence outcomes of China’s limited nuclear forces.” Furthermore, it suggests that some ambiguity about Chinese policy and intentions can be useful, notwithstanding the need for centralized decision-making in this extremely sensitive and strategic area. According to SMS 2013, “speaking with a unified voice from the highest levels of the government and military to the lowest levels can often enhance deterrence outcomes, but sometimes, when different things are said by different people, deterrence outcomes might be even better” (SMS 2013, p. 173).

“Actual Combat” Employment of Nuclear Weapons

SMS 2013 again departs from the previous edition in its inclusion of a section describing nuclear issues in the context of “actual combat” (*shizhan*). [2] This section explains that the possibility of nuclear war, especially large-scale nuclear war, is much lower today than it was during the Cold War, but warns that as long as nuclear weapons exist, the possibility they will be used in war cannot be ruled out. This is not only a function of the existence of nuclear weapons, according to the authors, but also of the fact that most nuclear powers have refused to commit to NFU policies and the possibility of first use remains “an important aspect of their nuclear strategies.” Thus, the issue of nuclear employment in war cannot be dismissed, since there is still a possibility that future informatized conventional wars could escalate to the nuclear level (SMS 2013, p. 171).

SMS 2013, therefore, discusses two possible types of nuclear employment in “actual combat.” The first is preemptive nuclear strikes and the second is retaliatory nuclear strikes. Here, SMS 2013 reiterates that China “insists on a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons and pursues a defensive nuclear strategy.” Accordingly, any Chinese use of nuclear weapons in actual combat would be for “retaliatory nuclear counterstrikes.” Within

this context, SMS 2013 tracks with other publications that address nuclear counterattack campaigns in that it emphasizes centralized command and the concentration of decision-making authority at the very highest levels of China's leadership. It also highlights the importance of "tight defenses" to guarantee force survivability, which is the "basic prerequisite" for carrying out nuclear counterstrikes. In addition, like other publications, it emphasizes "key-point counterstrikes" to use China's limited nuclear forces against targets that would be likely "to have a major impact on the broader strategic picture" (SMS 2013, p. 175–6). Unlike the previous edition, SMS 2013 offers some guidance on how to attempt to manage escalation in the event a conventional conflict crosses the nuclear threshold. According to the authors: "In implementing nuclear counterstrikes, we need to be able to generate unsustainable destructive results against the other side, to shock and awe them, but, at the same time, we need to control the intensity, pacing and target scope of the counterstrikes." Importantly, SMS 2013 appears to suggest that under such circumstances the purpose is not to "win" a nuclear war, but rather to deter further escalation or to resolve a conflict on acceptable terms.

One interesting area in which SMS 2013 goes beyond the previous edition, albeit only briefly, is in a discussion of the importance of unified planning. The authors explain that because PLASAF and PLAN have nuclear capabilities, unified planning is required to ensure coordination of strike targets and timing. Moreover, the authors state that because PLASAF and PLAN nuclear forces are at high risk of suffering heavy losses in the event of an enemy nuclear first strike, it is essential that unified planning make the most effective use of surviving nuclear weapons in order to achieve the desired nuclear counterstrike objectives (SMS 2013, p. 175).

Another new development in SMS 2013 is its discussion of the possibility of adopting a launch on warning posture, which the authors assert would be consistent with China's NFU policy. They write: "When conditions are met, and when necessary, one can rapidly launch a nuclear missile counterstrike when it has been clearly determined that the enemy has already launched nuclear missiles against us but said enemy nuclear warheads have yet to arrive at their targets and effectively explode or cause actual damage to us. This both conforms to our country's consistent policy of no first use of nuclear weapons and also effectively

prevents our nuclear forces from suffering greater losses, improving the survivability of nuclear missile forces and their counterstrike capabilities" (SMS 2013, p. 175). Disturbingly, SMS 2013 does not address any of the risks associated with this approach. It is worth noting, however, that some Chinese experts oppose launch on warning because they see it as inconsistent with China's NFU policy and potentially destabilizing (interviews with Chinese scholars, 2014).

Conclusion

SMS 2013 is largely consistent with earlier publications, but it offers a more in-depth consideration of a number of issues related to Chinese nuclear policy, strategy and force modernization. As SMS 2013 offers a more detailed and up-to-date understanding of PLA thinking on these issues, it should be required reading for analysts who are interested in Chinese nuclear policy and strategy, nuclear force modernization and arms control policy.

This is the first of a two-part series of articles analyzing the nuclear policy sections of the 2013 Science of Military Strategy. Part 2 of this series will address the section that covers PLA Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) strategy and capabilities. The series is an excerpt from a larger chapter in China's Evolving Military Strategy (edited by Joe McReynolds), due for publication this fall by The Jamestown Foundation. You can pre-order the book through [Brookings Press](#).

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Notes

1. *The Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], 3rd ed., Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2013, p. 235.
2. It is important to note that some readers might interpret the use of this term as a discussion of "nuclear warfighting" in the sense of damage limiting or disarming strikes against an enemy's nuclear forces, but the content of the section and the way in which the term is often used in Chinese military writing suggests very strongly

that “actual war” or “actual combat” is a more appropriate translation.

China’s North Korea Policy: In The Footsteps of Russia?

By Mathieu Duchâtel

Kim Jong Un ultimately turned down Russia’s invitation to attend the May 9 Victory Day celebrations in Moscow ([NKNews](#), April 30). To the surprise of many, he missed the opportunity to make a diplomatic debut on the world stage. His visit would have also served as an occasion to break the ice with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Xi has so far refused to host Kim in Beijing. Conversely, the Chinese leader treats South Korean President Park Geun-hye with the highest diplomatic regard and reportedly enjoys a good personal relationship with her. Despite this last minute cancellation, North Korea has made significant progress in deepening relations with Russia since 2014, in the context of Russia’s confrontation with the West over the Ukraine crisis and North Korea’s own desperate diplomatic isolation. Economic cooperation and political contacts continue to expand in this “Year of Friendship” for the two countries, raising a number of questions in Beijing ([AFP](#), March 11).

So far, developments in Russia–North Korea relations have not impacted China’s North Korea policy, but they have contributed to slightly modify the terms of the ever-changing expert debate in China. Beijing has abandoned its engagement policy after the third nuclear test of February 2013, but some experts now publicly argue that the time is right to resume political contacts, cooperation projects and support for deeper economic ties with Pyongyang (see [China Brief](#), May 7, 2014). Chinese experts examine evolving Russia–North Korea ties in light of three questions: To what extent is helping North Korea break from diplomatic isolation in the national interest of China? Does Russia’s growing economic role in North Korea undermine Chinese influence? And ultimately, is the “Russia factor” important enough to justify a new adjustment in China’s North Korea policy?

Breaking From Isolation

Despite Kim Jong Un’s absence in Moscow, the frequency and the level of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s (DPRK) diplomacy with the Russian Federation have significantly increased since 2014. The starting point was the visit of Kim Yong Nam, Chairman of the Presidium of the DPRK’s Supreme People’s Assembly, to the opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympic Games in February 2014. Since then, distinguished guests from the two countries have landed in Pyongyang and Moscow (see Table 1).

This stands in stark contrast with China’s interruption of political contacts with the DPRK after Special Envoy Choe Ryong Hae’s disastrous meeting with President Xi Jinping in May 2013—a meeting designed to repair ties after the third nuclear test and possibly pave the way for a Xi Jinping–Kim Jong Un visit ([SinoNK](#), June 5, 2013). Insiders in China think that Choe Ryong Hae suffered an unprecedented humiliation in Beijing, where he may have been kept waiting for hours and met with unusual coldness. [1]

Many in China tend to see North Korea’s isolation as a factor of strategic instability because it creates the conditions for brinkmanship and strategic surprises. MFA spokeswoman Hua Chunying has commented that North Korea–Russia diplomacy benefited regional stability and peace ([Xinhua](#), January 24).

But China is facing a conundrum. Since the February 2013 nuclear test, China diplomacy has stressed that a summit meeting would not be possible unless it led to concrete results on the nuclear front. There is no open source report on the precise concessions that China may have requested in exchange for a resumption of political exchanges. Chinese diplomacy appears to favor a freeze of North Korea’s nuclear activities, a short-term tactical goal deemed more realistic than denuclearization and conceived as a way to create the conditions for later abandonment of nuclear weapons by the DPRK. [2] Many Chinese experts think highly of Siegfried Hecker’s famous “three noes”—no more bombs, no better bombs, no export—as they believe it is impossible to obtain now a commitment by North Korea to denuclearize ([Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#), April 5, 2013). China has already obtained from North Korea a declaration mentioning the

Table 1: Ministerial-Level Visits Between Russia and North Korea (Since February 2014)

North Korean visits to Russia		Russian visits to North Korea	
February 2014	Kim Yong Nam (Chairman of the Presidium of the DPRK's Supreme People's Assembly), Sochi Olympics opening ceremony	March 2014	Alexander Galushka (Minister of Development of Russian Far East)
October 2014	Ri Su Yong (Minister of Foreign Affairs)	April 2014	Yury Trutnev (Deputy Prime Minister)
November 2014	Hyon Yong Chol (Minister of Defense)	October 2014	Alexander Galushka (Minister of Development of Russian Far East)
November 2014	Choe Ryong Hae (Special Envoy)	April 2015	Alexander Galushka (Minister of Development of Russian Far East)
April 2015	Hyon Yong Chol (Minister of Defense)		

abandonment of preconditions for resuming participation in the six-party talks, when Kim Kye Gwan visited Beijing in November 2013 ([China Institute of International Studies](#), November 14, 2013).

But pessimism is the dominant feeling when it comes to contemplating additional concessions that North Korea might announce in Beijing. The DPRK has made it clear that its goal was to be recognized as a nuclear state rather than negotiating disarmament, writing the country's status as a nuclear power into its constitution and vowing to pursue economic development at the same time through its "Byongjin Line." This hard line, in frontal opposition to the basic demands of Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, explains why Chinese diplomacy is putting fewer efforts in 2015 than in 2013–2014 on the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, perceived as a lost cause, at least until after the next U.S. presidential election. Many Chinese experts also note that the main change in policy on North Korea during Xi's presidency is that denuclearization is put above all other areas of the bilateral relationship, which also explains why North Korea has interrupted some communication channels with China in retaliation.

In this context of stalemate, the Russia factor partly explains the slow and cautious relaxation of the pressure exerted by China on North Korea—a Chinese editorialist

argues that developments in Russia–North Korea relations offer an incentive to “repair the house before it rains” (未雨綢繆) with regards to North Korea. It seems that Moscow's rapprochement with Pyongyang provided pro-North Korea intellectuals an opportunity to advocate an adjustment of China's tough line. At the same time, the main debate in the Chinese press in the past six months was started by Zhejiang University Professor Li Dunqiu laying out the arguments against giving up North Korea in two articles published by the *Global Times*, including one in response to an opinion piece by retired People's Liberation Army (PLA) general Wang Hongguan detailing the case for “normalization” of relations with the DPRK (*Global Times*, [November 27, 2014](#); [December 1, 2014](#); and [December 4, 2014](#)). Although the debate was not directly related to Russia, it occurred in a context of frequent coverage of Russia–North Korea relations in the Chinese press.

Three signs of an upcoming thaw have appeared in the past six months. In December last year, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of “traditional friendship” with North Korea in a message delivered by Liu Yunshan at the DPRK Embassy in Beijing, on the third anniversary of the death of Kim Jong-il (*Yonhap*, December 18, 2014). Later, in March 2015, during his

press conference closing the third plenum of the 12th National People's Congress, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that a summit meeting could be held when "suitable" (要看双方的方便) ([China News](#), March 8). He also characterized China's North Korea policy as based on "solid foundations" and noted that "Chinese people emphasize good faith and value friendship" (中国人重信义、讲情义). This language confirmed the significant change of tone. A few days later, China appointed Ambassador Li Jinjun in Pyongyang in replacement of Liu Hongcai ([SinoNK](#), March 27). This marked a relative upgrade, as Ambassador Li was first vice Minister at the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) International Liaison Department (ILD) with two previous stints as Chinese ambassador (in Germany and Myanmar), while M. Liu was only one among the vice ministers of the same department, and had no previous ambassadorial level experience.

Reports that Kim Yong Nam may have stopped over in Beijing on his way to Bandung or met with President Xi on the sidelines of the Asia-Africa summit were misguided. But speculation that Kim Jong Un received an invitation to attend China's own celebrations of the end of World War II on September 3—the "70th anniversary of victory in the war of resistance" (抗战胜利70周年纪念活动)—is most certainly true, as North Korean communists played a major role in the resistance against Japanese forces occupying Manchuria ([NKNews](#), April 15).

The Economic Front: a Zero-Sum Game?

A major contributor to the construction of North Korea's industrial basis during the Cold War and long the biggest export market for North Korean goods, Russia is now by and large an outsider in North Korea's economy in comparison with China—the volume of bilateral trade stands at \$112 million and current plans, if successful, are to reach \$1 billion by 2020 ([38North](#), May 8, 2014). Chinese customs reported \$6.3 billion in trade with the DPRK in 2014 ([Chinese Customs](#), accessed May 15). Nonetheless, Chinese press reports in the past six months have been filled with stories of possible involvement of Russian companies in the North Korean economy. They suggest that Russia might play a greater role in the areas of energy, transportation infrastructure and extraction of mineral resources, three sectors in which China is

currently the dominant external player.

Under the leadership of the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East, economic ties between Russia and North Korea are experiencing a relative boom. The most notable developments are related to the special economic port of Rajin-Sonbong, now connected to the Russian border city of Khasan by railroad, from which Russian companies have shipped coal to the South Korean city of Pohang. Discussions are taking place regarding the construction of an electricity line to provide Russian energy to Rajin-Sonbong, as China has so far not proceeded with plans to connect the port to the Chinese grid. A "Victory project" to finance Russian investment in North Korean infrastructure on the extraction of coal and ores was also evoked in Russia, and attracted the attention of Chinese commentators. More concretely, the number of North Korean workers in Russia has risen by 20 percent year on year, nearing 50,000 individuals in early 2015, according to Russian sources ([NKNews](#), April 27).

These developments have a positive, albeit limited impact on North Korea's development, especially in the Rason area. The country needs trade and foreign investment to overcome energy shortages and meet rapidly changing consumption patterns. There are also reports that the food security problem is worsening again in 2015, a bad year for crops after two consecutive years of remarkable improvement of cereal production (but still insufficient to completely solve the issue of malnutrition). This explains reports of North Korean requests for food aid from India and the World Food Program.

Some Chinese academics have published "zero-sum" op-eds arguing that Russia's actions decreased the influence of China on the Korean peninsula, while others argue that Russia's actions lighten China's strategic burden there ([Consensus Online](#), November 1, 2014; [Phoenix TV](#), November 20, 2014). The dominant argument, though, is that Russia's involvement is not a game changer for the weak North Korean economy. The key issue is financing; with the ruble crisis, Russia does not have the means to carry out major infrastructure projects even if loans are guaranteed by minerals. This explains the anticipation in the Chinese press that the "Victory" project will fail ([Weizhi](#), October 27, 2014).

A Negligible Strategic Impact

Shortly after Li Jinjun arrived in Pyongyang, the Chinese Embassy's website posted photos and a description of his accreditation by Kim Yong Nam. The page mentioned interesting new language: "to put aside differences so as to seek common ground" (求同存异). In Chinese diplomatic language the formula is closely associated with Zhou Enlai's diplomatic style and is usually used to describe goodwill in relations with difficult partners, such as the US and Japan ([People's Daily Online](#), 2006). Xinhua, noting that Li Jinjun now systematically uses the term, compares China–North Korea relations to "brothers in the same family who sometimes have disagreements, which is inevitable [...] the most pragmatic way is to acknowledge these differences in order to move forward" ([Xinhua](#), May 8).

China has no reason to bandwagon with Russia on policy toward North Korea. As Lü Chao argues, the impact of deepening Russia–North Korea ties on the geopolitics of Northeast Asia is extremely limited and is unlikely to exert a defining influence on China ([Dangjian](#), November 11, 2014). Indeed, the nuclear problem structurally constrains what Russia can provide to North Korea ([Overseas Online](#), November 17, 2014). The DPRK's international isolation will remain severe unless progress is achieved on the denuclearization front. Many in China speculate that the endgame of North Korea's tango with Russia is to obtain a resumption of Chinese economic support, in direct continuity with the DPRK's diplomatic tradition of playing off the Soviet Union and China against each other during the Cold War. However, as Zhang Liangui observed late last year, Russia-China relations are currently so close that there is little space left for third parties to exploit contradictions ([Phoenix TV](#), November 19, 2014).

In sum, the main implication of Russia's sudden resumption of attention to relations with North Korea is to have reopened the policy debate in China, which if recent history provides any guidance might lead to a relative adjustment of China's approach. There is always the possibility that external incentives precipitate a rapprochement, such as over the deployment in South Korea of THAAD, a ballistic missile defense system that would hold some Chinese missile installations within range. But in the temporary absence of a fourth North

Korean nuclear test—which all Chinese experts agree will happen sooner or later—it is likely that China will gradually upgrade diplomatic contacts to the political level and resume economic cooperation. If ties are at least partly repaired in 2015, the questions raised by Russia's actions will have made a small but not insignificant contribution.

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Notes

1. Author's interview with senior Chinese academic, Jilin Province, April 2015.
2. For more details, see Mathieu Duchâtel and Phillip Schell, [China's Policy on North Korea: Economic Engagement and Nuclear Disarmament](#) (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, December 2013).

China's "One Belt, One Road" Strategy Meets the UAE's Look East Policy

By Emma Scott

From May 8 to 15, Dubai, the second largest state of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), hosted a first of its kind seven-day trade exhibition bringing together prominent government leaders, high net worth individuals and global corporate giants in Beijing. The week intended to showcase the opportunities Dubai presents for China and to promote a deeper understanding of Dubai as relations flourish between these two global trading centers ([Zawya](#), March 18).

A series of high-level bilateral diplomatic visits between China and the UAE have already taken place in 2015. The latest came from a delegation led by Zhao Leji, a member of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee and Head of the CCP Organization Department, for a meeting with Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, the largest UAE emirate, and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces ([Crown Prince Court](#), May 3). Zhao's delegation was preceded by a visit to Beijing by the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan Al Jaber to meet with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Wang's reciprocal visit to meet with Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi, and Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, the ruler of the emirate of Dubai ([Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [MFA], February 6; [MFA](#), February 15; [MFA](#), February 14).

At the top of China's diplomatic agenda is the continued development of the bilateral strategic partnership established in 2012, and the promotion of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and a "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," otherwise known as the "One Belt One Road" or New Silk Road strategy, which is a "systematic project" to connect Asian, European and African countries more closely ([MFA and Ministry of Commerce](#) [MOFCOM], March 28). In concrete terms, China wants to construct an interconnected system of roads, railways, maritime transport and oil and gas facilities, cross-border power

supply networks as well as other industrial, technological and economic initiatives to create an international trade and investment environment favorable to it ([MFA and MOFCOM](#), March 28).

Beijing's grand plan is to build this "Belt" and "Road" by seemingly integrating the development strategies of the countries along the routes ([MFA and MOFCOM](#), March 28). Therefore, to integrate the UAE, as Foreign Minister Wang pointed out: China wants to combine its "One Belt, One Road" westward strategy with the UAE's "Look East" policy, which seeks to increase the UAE's share of trade and investment from Asia's emerging economies as an attempt to diversify the local economy ([MFA](#), February 15; [MFA](#), February 14; [Gulf News](#), April 8). Consequently, China is seeking to launch new fields of cooperation in the relationship, including high-speed rail, nuclear power, telecommunications and financial arrangements, in addition to existing cooperation in the energy and maritime sectors ([MFA](#), February 14).

East Meets West in the UAE at Jebel Ali

Looking east, developing relations with China is amongst the foreign policy priorities of the UAE ([MFA](#), February 14). As the recent Beijing exhibition shows, the UAE is actively lobbying for investment from Chinese enterprises, and whereas China is primarily interested in the UAE as an inter-regional trading and re-export hub—shipping goods from China to the Gulf and then onwards to North and East Africa and Europe—both countries' current development strategies sync to some extent (The Zone Magazine, Issue 37, 2014). As the third largest re-export hub in the world after Singapore and Hong Kong, approximately 60 percent of China's trade passes through Dubai's Jebel Ali Free Zone (Jafza), the world's largest free zone, and Jebel Ali port for re-export ([Government of Dubai](#), 2012; [Jafza CEO](#), November 18, 2014). Trade, including re-export between China and the UAE, reached \$46 billion in 2013, a 14-percent increase on the \$40 billion in 2012, which made China the UAE's second largest trading partner after Japan. In 2014, bilateral trade volume is reported as hitting a new high of \$54 billion, of which \$48 billion was with Dubai ([UN Comtrade Database](#); [Chinese Embassy in the UAE](#), February 20). China, therefore, overtook India as Dubai's largest trading partner last year ([Gulf News](#), March 23).

Trade volume between Jafza and Chinese companies has also been increasing rapidly. In 2002, it stood at \$934.3 million, and by 2011, it had reached \$10.1 billion (The Zone, Issue 36, 2013). Consequently, today, China ranks amongst Jafza's top trade partners, with growth in the relationship constant and set to continue as discussion is underway to further enhance trade ties ([Jafza](#), March 12, 2014). A visit from the Chinese Consul General in Dubai, Tang Weibing, to Jafza last year was succeeded by a visit from a Chinese delegation of 20 businessmen representing diverse sectors of China's economy ([Jafza](#), March 12, 2014). Jafza currently hosts over 7,300 companies from 125 countries around the world, of which 238 are Chinese ([Jafza](#), December 15, 2014). This latter figure is a substantial increase on the mere 15 Chinese companies established in the zone in 2002 (The Zone Magazine, Issue 39, 2014). In recent years, the number of new Chinese companies entering annually has been growing at a phenomenal rate. 22, 27 and 79 companies entered in 2012, 2013 and 2014, respectively ([Jafza](#), December 15, 2014; The Zone Magazine, Issue 39, 2014). In 2014, of the 679 new companies that entered, 29 percent came from the Asia Pacific region, including 6 percent from China, compared with 7 and 20 percent from the United States and Europe, respectively ([Jafza](#), May 3, 2015). Contrarily, in 2012, the biggest number of new investors came from the developed world, including 9 percent from the Americas and 27 percent from Europe, which compares to 21 percent from the Asia Pacific region, of which 5 percent were Chinese (The Zone, Issue 34, 2013).

With a long-term vision, expansion and global growth in mind, numerous leading state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are amongst the Chinese companies (The Zone Magazine, Issue 25, 2010 and Issue 29, 2011). These include China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC), China Railway Engineering Middle East, China Ocean Shipping Corporation (COSCO) and Haier, China's largest home appliance brand (The Zone Magazine, Issue 36, 2013). One Chinese business man described the strategy as follows: "establish our Dubai branch; appoint a team to run the branch; find local people for local markets; and [...] provide support to distributors and customers through Dubai" (The Zone Magazine, Issue 29, 2011). Hence, it is ambition that is driving Chinese investment. For Chinese companies, a presence in Jafza is viewed as a step out of the competitive domestic market,

a stable gateway with little political risk to Middle Eastern markets and a good place to position themselves between East and West (The Zone Magazine, Issue 29, 2011).

Approximately 60 percent of Chinese companies present in Jebel Ali, including China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and its subsidiary Petrochina, as well as SINOPEC Group and its first listed company Sinochem International, deal in the oil and gas sector ([Zawya](#), April 7, 2014). Hardly surprising given that, in 2013, the Middle East supplied 52 percent of China's crude imports, of which 4 percent came from the UAE ([EIA](#), February 4, 2014). Following the signing of a strategic partnership between state-run Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) and CNPC in January 2012, CNPC obtained a concession equating to a 40 percent share in a joint venture with ADNOC to work on upstream projects in the UAE ([The National](#), April 29, 2012). This deal, while upending a decades' long status quo of Western oil companies as the dominant foreign players in the UAE oil concession system, is demonstrative of the UAE's "Look East" policy, which includes oil export market diversification and is thus well-matched to China's growing energy needs ([The Telegraph](#), April 29, 2014).

Developing an Alternative to the Hormuz Oil Chokepoint

In Fujairah Free Zone, at the eastern end of the Emirates, Sinopec, taking a 50-percent share in a joint venture with Singaporean Concorde Energy and Fujairah emirate, has constructed an oil-storage facility with a capacity of 1.16 million cubic meters, making it the largest oil storage facility in the Gulf; Sinopec will lease half ([The National](#), March 14, 2013). The terminal's location, adjacent to the port of Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman on the UAE's Indian Ocean coast, lies 160 kilometers (100 miles) south of the Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf ([The National](#), March 14, 2013). This geography makes it appealing to oil traders and tank operators as exports can circumvent the Hormuz chokepoint, reducing war risk shipping premiums levied for entering the strait as well as shipment times to Asia ([Bloomberg](#), February 19; [The Robert S. Strauss Centre](#), 2008).

Also with the Asian market in mind, the International Petroleum Company (IPIC), the investment arm of the government of Abu Dubai, which holds most of the

UAE's oil reserves, financed a 380-kilometer (230-mile) crude pipeline from Habshan onshore oil facilities in Abu Dhabi across land to Fujairah for export via the sea ([Gulf News](#), July 16, 2012). With a contract valued at \$3.9 billion, the line, including the oil terminal at Fujairah and offshore loading facilities, was constructed jointly by China Petroleum Engineering and Construction Corporation (CPECC), an affiliate of CNPC and China Petroleum Pipeline Bureau ([Gulf News](#), July 16, 2012; [hydrocarbons-technology](#)). The pipeline was completed in March 2011 and reached its full capacity in 2012, transporting 1.5 million barrels per day ([Gulf News](#), June 16, 2012; [hydrocarbons-technology](#)).

China Shipping Makes Waves in UAE Seas

Also on the Gulf of Oman, in 2014, privately owned Khorfakkan Container Terminal (KCT) received the first vessel of China Shipping Container Lines' (CSCL) expanded joint service with the United Arab Shipping Company (UASC), co-owned by the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iraq. The two carriers have signed a number of joint service agreements over the past few years connecting Asian ports with ports in the Middle East and Europe ([UASC News](#), September 9, 2014). Khorfakkan is the only fully fledged operational container terminal in the UAE located outside the Strait of Hormuz, and having underwent expansion, CSCL's increased usage of it similarly reduces the geopolitical risk factors associated with a strait closure, including pricing and transit times between North East Asia, Singapore, the Gulf and Northern Europe ([Zawya](#), August 18, 2014; [GulfTainer](#), September 2, 2009). Demonstrating further the importance attributed by China to its maritime trade with the UAE, the seventh of CSCL's recently acquired 14,000 twenty foot equivalent unit (TEU) container ships also made its maiden call to Jebel Ali port, positioned at the western end of the free zone bordering Abu Dhabi emirate. As an addition to the Far East–Middle East service, it will serve the Jebel Ali-Tianjin trade route, which is the busiest route between the Far East and the Gulf region ([The Shipping Tribune](#), March 15, 2012; [Arabian Gazette](#), April 9, 2012).

Since 2001, CSCL has also been a partner of Dubai Ports (DP) World, a global terminal port operator that was previously Dubai Port Authority and currently the

international arm of Jafza. [1] In 2014, a visit from the Chairman of Qingdao ports, Zheng Minghua, to Jafza led to the announcement of a strategic framework agreement between Qingdao Port Group and DP World, deepening further an existing partnership ([Jafza](#), November 18, 2014). The agreement focused on continued collaboration in Jebel Ali port, the mothership port of DP World, and Mina Rashid port, located at the eastern end of Jebel Ali zone close to Sharjah emirate ([DP World Press Release](#), November 23, 2014). The two marine terminal operators intend to increase trade between their respective ports by studying current liner services and trade volumes and by establishing a systematic approach to information sharing regarding port planning ([Port Technology](#), November 24, 2014). A further objective is to connect the two ports by means of a railway that would pass through the Jebel Ali Free Zone, which adds another facet of multi-modal connectivity for Chinese exporters to use the UAE as a hub for distribution within the Gulf region ([Jafza](#), March 12, 2014; [Zawya](#), January 12, 2015).

The Limits of China's Ambitions

The UAE has become an important commercial focal point for Chinese companies, and the recent high-level diplomacy has showcased China's intentions to strengthen further ties ([MFA](#), February 14). Yet with the Emirates having own corporations integrated into the global economy, the feasibility of China's plans to incorporate the UAE into its "One Belt, One Road" initiative has some limits despite the UAE's "Look East" policy. China Harbour Engineering Company previously failed to obtain the bid for construction of terminal four of Jebel Ali port and development of Chinese high-speed rail has generated little interest, as there are only short distances to be covered in the Emirates ([Meed](#), September 17, 2013; [Meed](#), March 25, 2013; [Financial Times](#), July 31, 2013). Chinese companies have been described locally as focusing only on export and import activities and as wanting government contracts without connection to the local market and culture. Abdullah Al Saleh, undersecretary to the UAE's Ministry of Economy said: that "is not the way we are doing business here" ([Gulf Business](#), February 14). These criticisms will not stop Chinese companies from ambitiously pursuing their thriving trade relationship with the UAE, nor the Chinese government from positioning the UAE as a key node in

its “One Belt, One Road” plan.

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Notes

1. Arang Keshavarzian. 2010. Geopolitics and the Genealogy of Free Trade Zones in the Persian Gulf. *Geopolitics*, 15(2): 271.

Chinese Submarines in Sri Lanka Unnerve India: Next Stop Pakistan?

By Vijay Sakhuja

The sighting of Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean has unnerved India. A People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Song-class conventional submarine along with *Changxing Dao*, a Type 925 submarine support ship, docked at the Chinese-run Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) in Sri Lanka last September ([China Military Online](#), September 24, 2014). The two vessels made a stopover in Colombo harbor for refueling as well as rest and recuperation for the crew before heading to the Gulf of Aden in support of international efforts to fight piracy ([Times of India](#), November 2, 2014). A few weeks later, a submarine (presumably the same submarine) and the *Changxing Dao* were again docked in Colombo harbor ([Colombo Mirror](#), November 3, 2014). Reports on the presence of Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean are not new. According to an Indian media report, during December 2013 and February 2014, a Chinese nuclear submarine was deployed in the Indian Ocean on patrol for two months in the ([India Today](#), March 21, 2014). Although details of the submarine deployment are not known, apparently, the Foreign Affairs Office of the Chinese Ministry of National Defense had informed India of plans to send a submarine in the Indian Ocean. Likewise, the United States, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan and Russia were also told of the planned PLA visit ([India Today](#), March 21, 2014). It has now emerged that a Chinese nuclear submarine completed a two-month escort mission in the Gulf of Aden and returned to Qingdao, its home port ([South China Morning Post](#), May 3).

India Reacts

The Indian government and analytic community were completely surprised by the presence of Chinese submarines in Colombo harbor, as Indian analysts had predicted Chinese submarines would first dock in Pakistan. The issue came up for clarification by way of a question in the Indian parliament, there were sharp comments from Indian analysts and the Indian media “played up” the visit through public debate on television.

The Minister of State for External Affairs informed the Upper House of the Indian Parliament that a Chinese submarine visited Colombo for “replenishment purposes” and the Sri Lankan government had assured Delhi that it would not do “anything against the security interests of India.” [1] The Indian Navy chief announced that Chinese naval activities in the Indian Ocean were being continuously monitored and his force was “ready to face any challenge” ([Times of India](#), September 25, 2014). However, the Indian strategic community warned that China was testing the Modi government’s resolve not only on land but also at sea ([Times of India](#), September 28, 2014). Although not connected to his visit, days before President Xi Jinping’s arrival in India, there was a stand-off between the PLA and the Indian Army in the Chumar sector of eastern Ladakh in the Himalayas, where the two sides have a boundary dispute ([Hindustan Times](#), September 16, 2014). A few weeks later, in November 2014, the PLA made a two-pronged incursion into Indian territory in the Himalayas—Chinese boats crossed into Indian waters in the Pangong lake and PLA trucks carrying troops were intercepted five kilometers into Indian territory through the land route in the same area ([The Indian Express](#), November 3, 2014).

These developments generated a public narrative of a heightened “China Threat,” particularly at sea, and Indian TV channels spent more time than normal addressing China issues by hosting a number of strategic and naval experts during prime time (a time of high viewership in India). In response, the Chinese media accused the Indian media of repeatedly trumpeting the submarine threat based on “conjectures” and being “devoid of facts,” which could potentially create more friction between the two countries and “cause unnecessary trouble to the normal military exchanges between China and India” ([China Military Online](#); December 10, 2014).

Response by China

The Chinese riposte to the high-decibel Indian concerns was quick, as a Ministry of National Defense spokesman clarified that the submarine visit to Colombo was a “routine port call” ([China Daily](#), September 26, 2014). China’s foreign ministry spokesperson stated that it is an international practice for warships to call at ports across the globe and resupply ([Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) [MFA], March 2). Also, the port call by the submarine was a “normal and transparent” activity and had the approval of the Sri Lankan government. Further, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson observed that it was her understanding that the “Sri Lankan government holds a policy of supporting international anti-piracy campaign [sic] and welcoming the docking of vessels from any friendly country in its ports” and it welcomes warships from friendly countries, including China ([MFA](#), March 2).

Sri Lanka Engages in Damage Control

The Sri Lankan government defended the submarine visit and stated that 230 foreign warships had called at Colombo port for refueling and crew recuperation since 2010 ([Xinhua](#), November 3, 2014). The Sri Lankan Navy chief denied that there was any Chinese military presence in his country and said they “will never compromise on the national security of India” ([The Sunday Times](#), October 27, 2014). The Chairman of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority dismissed Indian unease and stated that the Chinese submarine docked at the CICT because the berth had the required depth of 18 meters unlike other berths, which are only 14.7 meters deep ([The Sunday Times](#), October 19, 2014).

In March, just prior to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Colombo, the Sri Lankan cabinet decided to suspend the controversial \$1.4 billion CICT project; but a few days later, President Maithripala Sirisena met with President Xi Jinping in Beijing and clarified that the “problem does not lie with Chinese side and hoped to continue with the project after things are sorted out.” ([DNA](#), March 26). Sri Lanka is caught between the two rising Asian powers—India, a neighbor with whom it has strong civilizational ties; and China, an all-weather friend, strategic partner and a major investor in the country—and appears to exercise autonomy in the conduct of its

foreign policy ([Caixin](#), March 10).

Why Were Chinese Submarines in the Indian Ocean?

The above narrative merits an important question—what prompts China to deploy submarines in the Indian Ocean? At the strategic level, it helps China to showcase its blue water capability. Since 2008, the PLAN has dispatched 20 task forces to the Gulf of Aden in support of antipiracy patrols, comprising of destroyers, frigates, replenishment ships and, occasionally, amphibious vessels. Beijing’s naval forces have escorted 6,000 Chinese and foreign ships ([China Daily](#), January 16). These deployments tested the PLAN’s ability to undertake sustained far seas operations, expeditionary missions and humanitarian tasks, such as the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya and Yemen (see [China Brief](#), April 3). The search-and-rescue operation for the ill-fated flight MH 370, in which 217 Chinese nationals perished, further showcased the Navy’s ability to operate in the Southern Indian Ocean. Chinese scholars have argued that the PLAN is in the Indian Ocean for safeguarding national interests and performing its international duties as well as to “ensure freedom of navigation, a fundamental principle of international law” ([China Military Online](#), April 10).

There are mixed reports about the quality and stealth of Chinese submarines. The Han-class submarines are reported to be noisy and “unlikely to pose any real threat” to other submarines ([South China Morning Post](#), May 3). For instance, in 1994, a Chinese Han-class submarine was caught stalking the U.S. aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* in the Yellow Sea (see [China Brief](#), November 22, 2006). The Kilo-, Yuan- and Song-class conventional submarines are stated to be quiet. However, the PLAN has tested its submarines against the U.S. Navy and appears to have been quite successful. In 2006, a Chinese Song-class conventional submarine surfaced close to the U.S. aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk*.

It is also important to recall a 2009 incident involving the PLAN (destroyers *Hai Kou* and *Wu Pan*) and an Indian submarine. According to the Chinese media, an Indian submarine trailed the Chinese ships as they entered the Indian Ocean on their way to the Gulf of Aden, but they were successful in forcing the Indian submarine to surface, after which it left ([South China Morning Post](#), February 4, 2009). However, the Indian Navy denied

that any of its submarines had “surfaced in the Gulf of Aden region as reported in a section of the Chinese media” (*The Hindu*, February 4, 2009). This February, a Chinese military official stated that China will continue to send “different kinds of naval ships to take part in escort missions in accordance with the situation and need” (*Want China Times*, February 3).

Where Else Will Chinese Submarines Dock in the Indian Ocean Region?

Unlike the Han-class nuclear submarines, Chinese conventional submarines would necessarily require logistic and technological support in the Indian Ocean, and Indian analysts assess that the most likely countries in the region to support Chinese submarines are Pakistan and Iran. China has supplied to Pakistan a number of naval platforms and transferred technology for building frigates and missile vessels. Pakistan has had regular exchanges of high-level delegations, and the PLAN has provided training to Pakistani naval personnel (*China News*, March 26). Further, the PLAN has participated in joint and multilateral naval exercises, such as the annual Aman series held since 2007 in the Arabian Sea (*Xinhua*, March 12, 2007).

During the visit to China this March by Muhammad Zakauallah, the chief of Pakistan’s navy, General Fan Changlong, the Vice Chairman of China’s Central Military Commission, urged both sides to “enhance coordination and cooperation” on regional security issues. He also assured that China was willing “to deepen cooperation with Pakistan in anti-terrorism, maritime security and military technology” (*Economic Times*, March 26).

Pakistan was originally interested in buying Chinese submarines, but it acquired three Agosta-90B submarines between 1999 and 2006 from France due to a number of technological considerations. There was speculation that President Xi might announce the sale of eight Chinese submarines to Pakistan during his visit last month; however, a Pakistan foreign ministry spokeswoman did not confirm if discussions on the submarine sale took place (*Bloomberg*, April 18). Interestingly, India is unlikely to be deterred if Pakistan acquires Chinese submarines, as the Indian defense minister has stated that by the time France supplies the submarines to Islamabad, India would have built 15 to 20 submarines (*The Hindu*,

April 18).

Iran is another possible candidate to support Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean. The Iranian Navy operates three Kilo-class submarines acquired from Russia, and it also has indigenous capability to build submarines. Iran can offer both logistic and technical assistance for the repair and maintenance for the Chinese submarines operating in the Indian Ocean. Their navies engaged in naval exercises during the visit by two ships of the 17th escort taskforce in September 2014 (*China Military Online*, September 23, 2014).

Conclusion

Since the sighting of the Chinese submarines in Colombo, the Indian strategic community has upped the ante and argued that China has successfully challenged Indian naval supremacy in its backyard. The Indian Navy has closely followed the Chinese submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean. It is already building newer conventional and nuclear attack, and the construction of anti-submarine warfare ships is being sped up. The newly acquired P-8I maritime patrol aircraft (similar to the US Navy P-8A) are fitted with a number of modern sensors and anti-submarine weapons that should allow India to counter China’s growing naval presence in the IOR (*Times of India*, May 18). These developments have significantly augmented the Indian Navy’s maritime surveillance, reconnaissance and combat capabilities to detect Chinese submarines. In light of these events, Chinese submarines will continue to make forays into the IOR and expand the PLAN’s operational environment, which is certain to cause further alarm in India.

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[The views expressed in the above article are the author’s own and do not reflect the policy or position of the National Maritime Foundation.]

Notes

1. Rajya Sabha, Unstarred Question No. 516, “Chinese submarines docked in Sri Lankan port,” November 27, 2014.

2. Vijay Sakhuja, “Submarines in Pakistan’s Naval Strategy,” *South Asia Defence and Strategic Review*, February 8, 2010.

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