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In a Fortnight: China Gets More Blunt, Goes on Media Offense on South China Sea Issues

At this year's Shangri-La Dialogue on Asian security, held in Singapore, China's territorial claims in the South China Sea were in sharp focus. Admiral Sun Jianguo (孙建国) again represented China at the conference, a position he is uniquely suited for due to his role as the deputy chief of the People's Liberation Army General Staff with the portfolio for foreign affairs. On this occasion, Admiral Sun left no room for negotiations regarding China's stance on the South China Sea during his speech, stating: "I hope to again reiterate, China's South China Sea policy has not and cannot change" (同时, 我愿再次重申, 中国的南海政策没有、也不会变) (*IJSS*, June 5; *Xinhua*, June 6).

In addition to ruling out a change in China's basic position, Sun also hinted that China is seeking to replace or at least supersede regional security organizations, citing a speech by Xi Jinping on April 28 before the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), where China's president and Communist Party general secretary called for the "building of a new architecture of regional security cooperation that reflects Asian needs" (*Xinhua*, April 28).

While emphasizing that other existing security frameworks have a useful place, this suggestion, and Admiral Sun's reiteration of it, are further indications that China remains committed to its formulation of "a new model of international relations" and supplanting the current security framework in Asia. Sun previously elaborated on this theme in an article in the CCP's journal *Qiushi* (Seeking Truth; 求实) (*Qiushi*, April 15).

Another member of China's delegation, PLA Major General Yao Yunzhu (姚云竹), a senior fellow at the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, differentiated between the three kinds of disputes in the South China Sea: territorial, the right of foreign militaries

to conduct surveillance within another nation's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), and lastly over freedom-of-navigation operations (IISS, June 4). Regarding the first, she stated that China had previously had success negotiating on a bilateral basis with other nations to solve territorial disputes. Public statements by Chinese official media and spokespeople have consistently emphasized that the various claims involved in the South China Sea should be resolved on a bilateral basis. But such tactics allow China to bring tremendous economic, political and media might to bear against much smaller economies. Regarding surveillance, she noted that China distrusts U.S. intentions, but that Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) have been set up to avoid conflicts. More interesting is her statement on China's perspective regarding freedom-of-navigation operations:

“I do not think any state has the right to impose its own understanding of freedom of navigation as a universal rule and to label those who do not agree as a default violator of freedom of navigation, or even a violator of the rule-based international maritime order. (IISS, June 4).

Admiral Sun's and Major General Yao's statements form part of a dual tack that China is taking ahead of the announcement of the result of arbitration regarding the legality of China's "Nine-dash Line" claim, which occupies roughly 90 percent of the South China Sea. China is on one hand denying that there is anything to debate about—China's claims to the region, to use the standard phrase “date from ancient times.” On the other hand, it is also attempting to achieve a *fait accompli* by influencing world opinion and presenting itself and its position as the correct one through publication of reams of comments by sympathetic world leaders and international relations experts.

In support of the hard line taken at the Dialogue, China is conducting an all-out push through its media outlets and diplomatically to present its positions as widely accepted. On the edges of the Dialogue, members of the Chinese delegation attempted to sway attendees by handing out pamphlets arguing China's case for sovereignty in the South China Sea (Truo

Tre News, June 5). China has gathered a group of international relations researchers to support its claim that international arbitration in the South China Sea and the Philippines should be handled bilaterally. From Russia, to Tanzania, official Chinese media outlets are trumpeting support for its side in the case (Xinhua, June 6). Targeting the U.S. audience, China's Consul General for San Francisco published a full-length article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* titled “Why China Doesn't Accept or Participate in the Arbitration” (MFA, June 14).

China's success in marshalling support for its claims is evident in the case of Malaysia. As the first nation to engage in South China Sea island-building in 1983, Malaysia has traditionally downplayed its territorial conflict with China. That reticence has changed in recent years, with conflicts over fishing and concerns about Chinese naval vessels operating in the area prompting Kuala Lumpur to take a harder stance. Yet after Malaysia's foreign ministry initially agreed to a hardline statement on China's actions, Kuala Lumpur suddenly decided to retract the statement on June 14 (CNA, June 14).

Admiral Sun's characterization of Chinese policies in the South China Sea as immovable might have been blunter or more shocking compared to other statements, but these remarks nevertheless fit into a long established pattern. Sun's arguments—specifically, “that [China] cannot permit its sovereignty and security rights and interests to be encroached upon; it cannot sit idly and watch a minority of countries stir up trouble in the South China Sea”—proceed from this proposition that China exerts complete sovereignty over the entire South China Sea (IISS, June 5). This leaves little room for real negotiations, a point further cemented by the limitations placed upon Chinese interlocutors to never be seen as giving up Chinese territory, even for a compromise. Furthermore, China is stacking the deck by creating the perception of widespread approbation of its claims. Both of these tactics could result in a *fait accompli*, no matter the result of the Arbitration: China will not allow its claims to be called into question, and will attempt to retain hegemony in the South China Sea.

U.S.-China Naval Relations After Wu Shengli: The Rise of Admiral Sun Jianguo?

Jeffrey Becker

On December 31, 2015, the PRC announced that after many years of planning and preparation, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) would begin its most substantial reorganization since 1949 (PRC Defense Ministry, January 9). According to statements by the PRC defense ministry, these reforms are designed to improve the Chinese military's ability to fight more jointly, a historically elusive goal given the PLA's organizational structure and the dominance of the PLA ground forces.

This is a critical moment for the future of the PLA, and not least of all for the PLA Navy. Admiral Wu Shengli (吴胜利), the PLA Navy's current commander, will in almost certainly step down at the next Party Congress in 2017 if not sooner. Yet Admiral Wu's retirement will come at a tumultuous time. In 2015, Xi Jinping vowed that the PLA would achieve a breakthrough (*tupo*; 突破) in military reform by 2020, improving the command system and the military's ability to operate as a joint force (China News Service, November 27, 2015). The next PLAN Commander will therefore take over in a time of profound change, as the PLA overhauls its command and control structures in an effort to become a force truly capable of joint operations.

This has drawn attention to the question of Wu's successor. While not yet confirmed, it appears that Admiral Sun Jianguo (孙建国) is likely to succeed Admiral Wu to lead the PLAN during this next period of profound change. In November 2015, Hong Kong media reported that Xi Jinping had already decided upon Admiral Sun as Wu's successor (SCMP, December 30, 2015).

What do we know about Admiral Sun Jianguo, and what would U.S.-China naval relations and continued PLAN modernization look like with Sun at the helm? Known as "Little Patton" and "the Iron Captain" during his career at sea, Admiral Sun currently

serves as one of five deputy chiefs of the PLA general staff, is one of only four Navy officers on the CCP Party Central Committee, and is already a critical member of China's military intelligence and foreign affairs system. (Southern Metropolitan Daily, July 24, 2015).

While much has been written about the life and career of Admiral Wu Shengli, far less has been written about the life of the PLAN's second highest ranking operations officer, a key figure in China's foreign military relations, and the individual likely to become the next head of China's navy at a critical moment in the service's history. This article seeks to shed some additional light on Admiral Sun, examining his career, political views, and his potential impact on U.S.-China naval relations and China's naval modernization.

There are reasons to believe U.S.-China naval relations under Sun might be subject to a downturn—he has a reputation as a hawk, and at times has been an outspoken critic of U.S. Policy in Asia and toward China. An examination of Sun's background, however, suggests that a turn toward more hawkish policies is not an inevitable outcome of a Sun Jianguo tenure as PLAN commander. Admiral Sun is a statesman with a wealth of engagement experience which should serve him nicely when engaging his U.S. Counterparts. Moreover, the PLA Navy's approach to its relationship with the U.S. Navy is ultimately a product of CCP policy, and not Admiral Sun's to construct independently. While Sun's personality will no doubt leave its mark, the overall trajectory of this relationship will be shaped by national level strategic objectives on both sides.

Sun and Wu: The More Things Change...

Admirals Wu Shengli and Sun Jianguo share a number of similarities in their personal backgrounds. These similar experiences—particularly their formative early years in the PLA during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), might inform their worldviews, and their perspective on important issues such as training. Both men for example come from families with impeccable Party credentials. Wu and Sun are sons of former party officials. Admiral Wu's father, Wu Xian, was a Red Army political commissar and

Zhejiang Vice Governor. Admiral Sun's father was a county Party Secretary. Both men also count Wuqiao County in Hebei Province as their ancestral home on their father's side, yet both were raised in Zhejiang Province due to their father's careers—Admiral Wu to the city of Hangzhou, and Admiral Sun to Ningbo (*The Diplomat*, June 1).

Despite an age difference of seven years, Admirals Sun and Wu were also both affected by the tumult of the Cultural Revolution. Born in 1952, Admiral Sun's career was impacted by this period earlier in his career. Admiral Sun began his military career in 1968, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, just as most of China's institutions for professional military education (PME) had either been shut down or were just being re-established.

The military Admiral Sun joined prioritized political ideological over professional acumen. Training and technical knowledge were radically deemphasized. [1] By this time, for example, previous requirements for PLA Navy submarines to be manned with a 70:30 ratio of qualified to unqualified crewmen ran counter to Maoist teachings that political will could overcome a lack of expertise, and were revised downward allow for as much as 80 percent of a submarine's crew to be newly assigned, unqualified personnel. Meanwhile, basic training time was cut in half, while time spent at torpedo target practice was cut by two-thirds. [2]

In what undoubtedly helped to improve upon deficiencies in prior professional training Sun returned to the academy in 1978 to enroll as a member of the deputy captains' class, just as Deng Xiaoping was embarking upon the economic reforms that would remake China into the economic powerhouse it is today. [3] Thus, while today's China may evoke images of a rising power, complete with an increasingly capable blue water navy, it is important to remember that, like Wu, Sun came of age when China was unstable, weak, and vulnerable.

A Career Submariner

As a career submariner, Admiral Sun spent his time at sea commanding both conventional and nuclear submarines. He reportedly participated in submarine

operations off the Taiwan straits to monitor Taiwanese military activities. [4] In 1985, at a time when PLAN surface forces were just conducting their first port visit abroad, Admiral Sun achieved notoriety within the PLAN by breaking a world record for the longest continuous submarine tour previously held by the United States (*Chengchi University Center for China Studies*, [Accessed June 3]). Were Admiral Sun to become PLA Navy commander, he would be just the third submariner to hold the position, following in the footsteps of past PLAN Commanders Admirals Zhang Lianzhang (1988–1996), and Zhang Dingfa (2003–2006). [5]

Some have argued that given this professional experience, the PLAN would likely begin to prioritize its submarine forces under his tenure. However, while Admiral Sun would undoubtedly have a say in these decisions, force acquisition and training in the PLA are political and bureaucratic collective decisions made with input from a number of political actors, including other members of the CMC, the newly established PLA Training and Management Department, and Xi Jinping himself. Thus, it would be dangerous to infer too much about future PLAN priorities simply based on Admiral Sun's career at sea.

Staff Career

Upon returning to shore duty, Admiral Sun experienced a rapid rise through the ranks. From 2000 to 2004, he served as a PLAN deputy chief of staff, and later PLAN chief of staff. In 2006, he became an assistant to the Chief of the PLA General Staff, General Liang Guanglie. After Liang left the General Staff to head the Ministry of Defense in 2007, Admiral Sun remained as an assistant to his replacement General Chen Bingde. In 2008, he was given the high-profile assignment of coordinating the PLA's relief efforts following the Sichuan earthquake, a responsibility which likely helped him secure a promotion in 2009 to Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff, a position held previously held by Admiral Wu from 2004–2006 before he became PLAN Commander. [6]

A Key Actor in PLA Foreign Engagement

During his experience as a senior naval officer, Admiral Sun has had ample opportunities to travel and

engage with foreign naval counterparts. He has traveled throughout Asia, and had led or accompanied numerous international delegations throughout the world, including Botswana, Chile, Colombia, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Iran, Mauritania, Senegal and Senegal to name a few (see also [China Vitae](#)). [7]

Moreover, as one of five deputy chiefs of the PLA general staff, and the only naval officer in that position, Admiral Sun is responsible for managing the PLA's intelligence and foreign affairs portfolios. [8] Like previous deputy chiefs responsible for military intelligence, Admiral Sun also chairs the China Institute for International Strategic Studies, a think tank affiliated with the Second Department of the PLA General Staff Department, the primary organ responsible for human intelligence gathering and analysis. [9]

These positions and experiences have given Admiral Sun ample opportunity to engage with foreign military personnel, either semi-formally as CIISS chair, or through more formal meetings with foreign military counterparts. In 2015 alone for example, he met in Beijing with military counterpart from Hungary, Cambodia, and Laos, and traveled to Vietnam, Singapore, and Tehran, the latter to meet with Iranian Chief of Staff Hassan Firouzabadi to discuss the possibility of expanding military cooperation between the two countries ([PRC Defense Ministry](#), October 15, 2015). In this capacity, Admiral Sun is empowered to sign agreements on behalf of the PLA. He was, for example, the signatory to the India-China Confidence Building Measure with Indian Defense Secretary Mathur Shri in 2013, helping to further stabilize this important border relationship ([Gov. of India Press Information Bureau](#), October 23, 2013). Admiral Sun also represents the PLA at major multinational security dialogues, including the Shangri-La Dialogue, which he attended in 2015 ([Xinhua](#), May 31, 2015).

Yet despite this vast experience engaging with foreign military counterparts, some have suggested that Admiral Sun may be more comfortable in private one-on-one engagements, and may be still warming up to his role as a public figure. During his public

comments in 2015 at the Shangri-La dialogue, he appeared nervous, stuck largely to his script, and relied heavily on cue cards when answering reporters' questions ([AMTI Brief](#), May 31, 2015). This behavior however, was also likely at least in part influenced by the fact that he was on the defensive, deflecting growing criticism of China's activities in the South China Sea. Reports on Sun's performance at Shangri-La 2016 noted that he was more at ease and better prepared, though still declined to respond directly to questions, and did nothing to assuage the concerns of countries in the region regarding China's behavior in the South and East China Seas ([South China Morning Post](#), June 8).

A Staunch Defender of China's Policy

Through these foreign military and public engagements Admiral Sun has developed a reputation as a strong and vocal supporter of China's foreign policy. He has also been a vocal critic of the United States on more than one occasion. Following the U.S. Justice Department's indictment of five PLA officers on charges of commercial cyber espionage, Admiral Sun was quoted in Xinhua as saying "in terms of both military and political intelligence and trade secrets, the United States is the world's No. 1 cyber thief and its spying force should be indicted" ([Xinhua](#), May 27, 2015). The fact that this was later published in the English-language *China Daily*, the Party's newspaper specifically aimed at foreign audiences, suggests he was delivering a Party-vetted message rather than simply espousing his own personal views ([China Daily](#), May 28, 2015).

Admiral Sun has also been vocal in his own writings regarding the need for China to manage its relationship with the United States through both cooperation and confrontation. Writing in the journal *International Strategic Studies*, the flagship journal for the PLA-affiliated think tank he chairs, Admiral Sun notes the importance of managing great power relationships as critical to China's overall strategic stability. However, while Sun sees relations with the United States as China's most important great power relationship, he also notes that the "China-Russia relationship is one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world and also one of the best great power relations," suggesting that Admiral Sun views

improving China-Russian relations as a potential hedge against a downturn in U.S.-China relations. [10] This sentiment was also apparent during Admiral Sun's meeting with Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov on the sidelines of the 2016 Shangra-La Dialogue, where he noted that "both sides are faced with a more complicated international security situation and closer mutual security cooperation is in need" (*Xinhua*, June 3).

Admiral Sun has also not shied away from acknowledging that China may have to confront the United States sometime in the near future in order to defend China's national interests. Writing in the June 2015 issue of *Qiushi*, the Party's theoretical mouthpiece, Admiral Sun notes that U.S.-China relations have evolved through both cooperation and struggle, and that "facts have proven that without struggle (*douzheng*; 斗争) it is impossible to make the United States respect China's core interests" (*Qiushi*, February 28). To be clear, Admiral Sun's use of the word "struggle" here is not an acknowledgment of the inevitability of armed conflict between the two countries, and he does not elaborate on what specific forms he believes this "struggle" will take. It does however obviously suggest a willingness to push back against the United States in order to defend China's national interests.

Prospects for U.S.-China Naval Relations Under Sun

The examples above do not necessarily mean a downturn in U.S.-China military relations, and U.S.-China naval relations in particular, are inevitable should Admiral Sun become the next PLAN Commander. First, while Admiral Sun's personality and personal style will undoubtedly influence naval relations at the senior level, it is important to remember that Admiral Sun does not make China's policy toward the U.S., but rather implements it. Admiral Sun's articles in *Qiushi*, and his quotes in the press, were likely a reflection of Party-vetted policy statements rather than his own personal view. Thus, while Admiral Sun will surely have his own views, and the capacity to affect the implementation of the PLA Navy's engagement with the United States, the overall trajectory of this relationship will be directed by a

number of factors, including CCP strategic objectives, China's activities in the region, and the national interests of the United States.

Second, though Admiral Sun has in the past been a harsh critic of the United States, as the new PLA Navy commander, the tone and tenor of his engagement with the U.S. Navy may take on a very different character. Moreover, with his growing wealth of international engagement experience, Admiral Sun had developed the skill to tailor his engagement style and rhetoric in such a way to continue to develop the professional working relationship between the U.S. and Chinese navies that appears to be the goal of both countries.

Looking Ahead

Perhaps of equal importance to the question of U.S.-China naval relations under Admiral Sun Jianguo is how long he might serve in this capacity and what he would hope to accomplish in what is likely to be a relatively short tenure. We do not know for certain whether members of China's Central Military Commission have formal retirement ages similar to those established in PLA regulations for lower ranking officers. However, past precedent suggests that Admiral Sun, who is already 64, might serve through only one five-year Party Congress, much shorter than that of Admiral Wu. Admiral Sun could therefore end up being more of a transitional figure as PLAN Commander, with attention quickly turning to his successor.

Regardless, should Admiral Sun Jianguo become the next PLAN Commander, his tenure will come at a critical time, as the PLA undergoes organizational reforms designed to make it truly capable of conducting joint operations across the services. The new head of the PLAN will have to manage this organizational transition, while continuing to bring modern ships and weapons platforms into the fold, upgrading the PLAN's personnel and defending China's maritime rights and interests. These challenges will be difficult, and they will ensure that whoever the next PLAN Commander is, that individual will have a profound and lasting impact on the Chinese navy's continued modernization.

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Notes

1. Jeffrey Becker et al., *Behind the Periscope: Leadership in China's Navy* (Alexandria, VA: The CNA Corporation, 2013), p. 173.
2. Bruce Swanson, *Eight Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Seapower*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982), p. 242.
3. Becker et al., *Behind the Periscope: Leadership in China's Navy*, p. 173.
4. Shih Min, "Hu Jintao Actively Props up 'Princeling Army,'" Chien Shao, April 1, 2006, no. 182.
5. *China's Navy 2007* (Washington, DC: Office of Naval Intelligence, March 2007), p. 12, <https://fas.org/irp/agency/oni/china-navy2007.pdf>.
6. Becker et al., *Behind the Periscope: Leadership in China's Navy*, pp. 173–174.
7. Becker et al., *Behind the Periscope: Leadership in China's Navy*, pp. 173–174, 233–236.
8. While both positions have traditionally been held by one individual, around 2013, the PLA appeared to separate the two portfolios, placing Admiral Sun in charge of intelligence, and Lieutenant General Wang Guangzhong in charge of foreign affairs. However, the two portfolios appear to have been quickly recombined in 2014. Given the recent and complete overhaul of the General Staff Department however, Admiral Sun's roles, responsibilities, and position within the new PLA organizational hierarchy are unclear.
9. Mulvenon, et al, *The People's Liberation Army as Organization 1.0*, RAND, 2002. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF182.html>.
10. Sun Jianguo, "To Create a Favorable International Environment for Realization of China Dream," *International Strategic Studies*, Issue 1 (2014), p. 4.

The New PLA Joint Headquarters and Internal Assessments of PLA Capabilities

Dennis J. Blasko

The creation of new multi-service (joint) headquarters organizations at the national (strategic) and theater (operational) levels is a major component of the current tranche of reforms underway in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). These changes further concentrate ultimate leadership of the armed forces in the Central Military Commission (CMC), led by Communist Party General Secretary and President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, supported by an expanded joint organizational structure replacing the former four General Departments. Directly beneath the CMC, five new joint Theater Command headquarters have superseded the seven former Military Region headquarters.

These new headquarters contribute to the reforms' goals to resolve problems in military readiness and weaknesses in combat capabilities, build an integrated joint operations system, and increase the PLA's ability to, according to Xi's guidance, "fight and win" informationized war. Under the new structure Theater Commands are responsible for planning joint operations for a specific strategic direction and executing large-scale joint training. The four service headquarters, the newly formed Army headquarters along with the Navy, Air Force, and upgraded Rocket Force headquarters, are responsible for "construction" or "force building," which includes organizing, equipping, and training operational units to prepare them to participate in operational deployments and large joint exercises. These changes seek to reduce levels of command, shrink the overall number of headquarters personnel, and streamline decision-making, planning, execution, and evaluation throughout the PLA (*Xinhua*, January 1).

The adjustments to the PLA's headquarters structure are to be accomplished by 2020, the date announced a decade ago as the second milestone in the "Three-Step Development Strategy" to modernize China's

national defense and armed forces (Defense White Papers, [2006](#) and [2008](#)). This date is underscored in the recently announced “five-year military development plan,” which has the goal of completing the mechanization and making “important progress” on “incorporating information and computer technology” in the PLA by 2020—exactly the same goal as the milestone announced by the 2008 White Paper ([China Military Online](#), May 13). The five-year implementation period implicitly acknowledges that many details remain unsettled and must be refined to eliminate overlaps or gaps in responsibilities. Additional reforms are expected in coming decades as the PLA continues its “Three-Step Development Strategy” with the final completion date of mid-century, 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic.

These reforms come as the Chinese military has reached a critical point in its long-term modernization process. The PLA has recognized that many traditional strategic and operational concepts and practices must be revised as potential threats and economic imperatives have changed. Fundamental to this new thinking are the official statements that “China is a major maritime as well as land country” and “The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned.” Therefore, “great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests. It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests...” (Defense White Papers, [2013](#) and [2015](#)). Both statements are related to the goal of breaking the “big Army” concept (“大陆军”观念 或 思维) ([China Military Online](#), February 3).

Though these new requirements have been verbalized officially only in recent years, the trends in PLA force development toward greater emphasis on missile, naval, air, and cyber/electronic warfare capabilities have been apparent for the past two decades. Employing these “new-type combat forces” in new missions demands integrated command and control of units operating at much greater distances from China’s borders than ever before. Though ground forces have not been left behind totally in the current phase of modernization, this shift in doctrine comes

at the expense of the PLA’s traditional base of power and leadership, the Army and Army generals.

The following sections describe the efforts in motion to satisfy the PLA’s increased need to develop joint headquarters and officers capable of commanding joint forces. As with other aspects of modernization, these efforts begin with the realistic acknowledgment of existing shortfalls in PLA capabilities.

Internal Assessments of PLA Capabilities

Critiques of inadequacies in joint training and command capabilities in all services are perennial topics found in the domestic Chinese military literature though often buried in long texts. For example, less than a year ago, the commander and political commissar of the former Nanjing Military Region commented that the low level of joint training and poor joint training mechanisms have restricted integrated operations and are fundamental issues in the transformation of the military ([Xinhua](#), July 3, 2015). More recently, the English-language edition of [China Military Online](#) stated that there is a “shortage of officers who have a deep knowledge of joint combat operations and advanced equipment.” Moreover, the PLA has “developed and deployed many cutting-edge weapons, including some that are the best in the world, but there are not enough soldiers to use many of those advanced weapons. In some cases, soldiers lack knowledge and expertise to make the best use of their equipment” ([China Military Online](#), April 28). Similar criticism is common in the Chinese-language military media.

Internal critiques like those above, along with the identification of other shortcomings in organization, doctrine, training realism, and logistics, are intended to inform PLA personnel of areas that need to be improved and motivate them to work harder to improve overall capabilities. These assessments frequently follow descriptions of positive developments and often are couched in terms of “some units” or “some commanders,” but are widespread enough to indicate that the problems are serious systemic shortcomings for much of the entire force.

Generally speaking, the PLA sees itself as not having the military capabilities and capacity to be confident

in accomplishing many of the tasks it may be assigned. In 2006, then-CMC chairman Hu Jintao summarized the situation in a formula known as the “Two Incompatibles” (两个不相适应), which referred directly back to his own doctrinal vision known as the “historic missions” (*China Brief*, May 9, 2013). The “Two Incompatibles” said the PLA’s “level of modernization does not meet the requirements of winning local war under informatized conditions and its military capability does not meet the requirements of carrying out its historic missions at the new stage of the new century.” Though appearing frequently during Hu’s tenure as CMC chairman, the formula has been used less regularly since Xi replaced Hu, but as recently as mid-April 2016 (*China Military Online*, April 19).

Since 2013, under Xi’s leadership, the “Two Big Gaps” (两个差距很大) and the “Two Inabilities” (两个能力不够 – translations of the Chinese terms vary) have come to prominence as general descriptions of PLA capabilities. Similar to the “Two Incompatibles,” the “Two Big Gaps” states “(1) there are big gaps between the level of our military modernization compared to the requirements for national security and the (2) level of the world’s advanced militaries” (*China Air Force*, April 16, 2013).

The “Two Inabilities” reinforces these points and further identifies problems specifically in officer capabilities: The PLA’s ability “(1) to fight a modern war is not sufficient, (2) our cadres at all levels ability to command modern war is insufficient” (*China Air Force*, July 12, 2013). These two formulas sometimes are paired together and have been associated with the “Two Incompatibles” (*China Military Online*, February 5, 2015 and *CPC News Network*, December 11, 2013).

Beginning in 2015, the “Five Incapables” (五个不会) formula began to be used which criticizes “some” leaders’ command abilities: “Some cadre cannot (1) judge the situation, (2) understand the intention of the higher up authorities, (3) make operational decisions, (4) deploy troops, and (5) deal with unexpected situations” (*China Military Online*, February 5, 2015). This assessment is a particularly stark acknowledgement of operational and tactical leadership shortfalls. It is an example of why the PLA prioritizes officer

training over troop training as reflected in another common slogan: “in training soldiers, first train generals (or officers)” (练兵先练将 or 练兵先练官) (*China Military Online*, January 13 and April 12).

Though the public acknowledgement of weakness may sound strange to foreign ears, in Chinese military thinking which is based on Marxist theory, these assessments represent the “thesis” of positive developments balanced by the “antithesis” of remaining problem areas, which are to be overcome through scientific efforts leading to a “synthesis” signifying progress. The process is then repeated, especially when new technologies and weapons are issued to the force.

The judgments described above are well known to the PLA senior leadership and frequently repeated in their own writings or speeches. The reforms underway are intended to address the shortcomings in joint command organization and officer development.

The New Joint Headquarters

The new CMC staff organization consists of 15 departments, commissions, and offices (*China Military Online*, January 11). These new staff offices expand a few previously existing CMC organizations, incorporate the functions and many of the personnel from the former four General Departments, and, in the case of the National Defense Mobilization Department, take over the responsibilities of the Military Regions in commanding the provincial Military Districts, PLA reserve units, border and coastal defense units, and the militia.

The CMC staff organization primarily supports the members of the CMC, presently composed of the supreme civilian party and government leader, Xi, and 10 senior PLA officers, 6 Army generals, 1 Navy admiral, 2 Air Force generals, and a Rocket Force general. As such, the CMC itself is a joint organization with its personnel distributed among the services very close to how the 2.3 million personnel in the PLA (prior to the 300,000 man reduction) were allocated: approximately 73 percent Army/Second Artillery, 10 percent Navy, and 17 percent Air Force. The composition CMC leadership is not set by law and is subject to change.

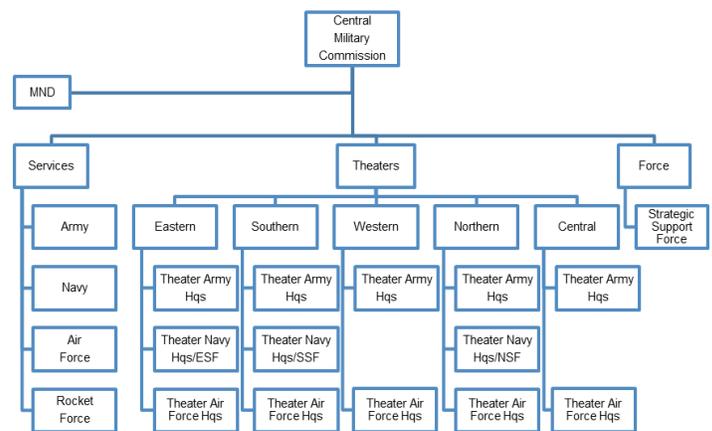
A photograph of the CMC and the “new heads of [its] reorganized organs” revealed 69 officers, including the 10 CMC generals/admiral and another 59 CMC staff directors/officers, of which 51 were Army/Rocket Force, five Navy, and three Air Force. [1] ([Xinhua](#), January 11). Though the CMC is a joint organization, its leaders and its primary staff officers still are mostly Army officers. The percentage of non-Army officers in lower-level CMC staff billets is not known.

Continuing the dominance of Army officers, all the new commanders and political commissars of the five Theater Commands are from the Army. [2] Each Theater is assigned responsibility for a strategic direction (战略方向) and is to develop theater strategies, directional strategies, and operational plans for deterrence, warfighting, and military operations other than war (MOOTW). Theater headquarters may command units from all services in joint operations and MOOTW tasks and are responsible for organizing and assessing joint campaign training and developing new methods of operation ([China Military Online](#), February 1 and [March 3](#)).

The Theater Commands are structured as joint headquarters with Army and non-Army deputy commanders and political commissars, a joint staff from all services, and service component commands. Each Theater has a subordinate Army headquarters and Air Force headquarters, while the Eastern, Southern, and Northern Theater Commands also have Navy components that retain the names East Sea Fleet, South Sea Fleet, and North Sea Fleet, respectively. These component headquarters are the key link to both the Theater Commands and national-level service headquarters. Service component headquarters have operational command of units in war and may serve as campaign headquarters (战役指挥部) under the Theater Commands. They also perform “construction” leadership and management functions under the supervision of the service headquarters in Beijing. Moreover, they may act as emergency response headquarters for MOOTW missions. [3]

Rocket Force staff officers are assigned to Theater Command headquarters, but Rocket Force units appear to remain under the direct command of the

Rocket Force service headquarters in Beijing with conventional (non-nuclear) units available to support theater missions.



Training and Developing a Contingent of Joint Officers

Since their establishment, Theater Command headquarters have been engaged in functional training and evaluation to ensure their staff officers are qualified to perform their duties. For example, the Northern Theater conducted a month-long “joint operations duty personnel training camp” focused on conditions in the services and the Theater’s area of responsibility consisting of lectures, demonstrations, hands-on training, and assessments ([China Youth Online](#), February 25).

Many Theater staff officers were selected from the best of the former Military Region officers. Within the Northern Theater headquarters staff officers were required to have spent at least two years in a headquarters at or above group army level plus have participated in or organized a large-scale joint exercise. Yet even with this background many officers express lack of confidence, known as “ability panic” (本领恐慌), in their new positions. Accordingly, the Theater has created a “Three-Year Program for Building Joint Operations Command Personnel” (《联合作战指挥人才建设3年规划》) ([China Military Online](#), May 5). Such programs will be necessary not only for the first batch of Theater-level staff officers, but also for new staff officers assigned at that level in the future.

Over the past decade, the Military Regions and the services experimented with a number of programs to develop joint officer capabilities. In December 2014, the Ministry of National Defense spokesman provided this update:

After a trial period, the PLA is now applying the professional training scheme for joint operation commanding officers in the whole military. This scheme aims to optimize the command posts for joint operation commanding officers, conduct differentiated training for joint operation commanders and administrative officers, and for joint operation staff officers and other staff officers, and establish a new mechanism for the selection, training, evaluation and appointment of joint operation commanding officers, so as to improve the training of joint operation commanding officers (China Military Online, December 25, 2014).

These programs will be even more important with the establishment of the Theater Commands. Likewise, the PLA educational system of universities and academies will need to adapt its curricula and student composition to prepare officers for joint assignments and the PLA's new maritime orientation.

Conclusions

The current leadership line-up of CMC members, CMC staff, and Theater headquarters is certain to change before 2020. A measure of the PLA's commitment to jointness will be the percentage of non-Army senior officers assigned to these billets. One of the most substantial developments, both symbolically and operationally, would be the assignment of Navy or Air Force officers to command one or more Theaters, particularly the Eastern and Southern Theater Commands where the immediate need for integrated maritime and aerospace operations is greatest.

Over the long run, the PLA must develop an education, training, and assignment scheme to prepare officers of all services for joint command and staff duties. The best practices learned from experimentation from previous years will need to be codified and applied throughout the entire force. This process will

affect many aspects of the personnel system as it has been implemented for the past 60 years.

Meanwhile, doctrine and strategy must continue to evolve to support the PLA's expanded missions, technology, and potential areas of operation. The shift in mindset from a continental Army to an integrated joint force capable of operating both inside and beyond China's borders and three seas will probably take at least a generation to achieve. Commanders and staffs at all levels must prove themselves qualified to perform these new tasks not only in academic settings but also in real world missions. They will raise their level of confidence in their own abilities through the actual performance of missions, not just talking or reading about them. A significant level of unease among operational and tactical commanders and staff is clearly evident in the official Chinese military literature.

The military's senior leadership understands the many challenges confronting the PLA as it continues its multi-decade, multi-faceted modernization program. In the immediate future, the disruptions caused by changes underway could result in a more cautious attitude toward the employment of force by China's military leadership, but not necessarily its political decision-makers.

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Notes

1. The Rocket Force does not yet have a distinctive uniform different from the Army, so it is not possible to distinguish between Army and Rocket Force officers in the photo.
2. Each Theater commander has provided at least one interview to the Chinese media.
3. China Military Online, February 2, 2016 and May 10, 2016 http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-02/01/content_6883951.htm and http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-05/10/content_144076.htm, spells out these

missions for Theater Command Army headquarters. I assess the other services' Theater Command headquarters have similar functions.

Creeping Islamophobia: China's Hui Muslims in the Firing Line

James Leibold

At the recently convened Central Religious Work Conference Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed the importance of fusing religious doctrines with Chinese culture and preventing the interference of religion in government affairs and education ([Xinhua](#), April 23). These comments were directed, at least partially, at the Hui Muslim minority, marking a troubling extension of often irrational fears over the “Islamization” (伊斯兰化) of Chinese society. In subsequent days, Wang Zhengwei, the Hui director of the powerful State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) was summarily dismissed from his post, making him the shortest serving SEAC director in history and drawing public attention to the heretofore largely inconspicuous Hui community ([CCTV](#), April 28).

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, regional authorities in Gansu, Ningxia and Yunnan have been talking up the Hui and the extensive links this dispersed 11 million strong minority group has with Muslims across the globe as they promote Xi Jinping's “One Road, One Belt” (OBOR) initiative. The multi-billion-dollar OBOR strategy seeks to increase trade, investment and contact with the outside world, including Muslim majority states in Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. A recent promotional video for the China-Arab States Expo asserts the Hui are linked in “blood, faith and customs” with their fellow Muslims, making them a cultural bridge between China and the Arab and Islamic world ([China Daily](#), September 5, 2015).

China has a long tradition of dividing its Muslim population into two camps: the “good Muslims,” like the Hui, who speak the Chinese language, abide by core elements of its culture, and thus can be trusted; and the “bad Muslims,” like the Uyghurs, who continue to resist the inevitable process of assimilation and thus are susceptible to the “Three Evil Forces” (三股势力) of separatism, terrorism, and extremism. Tactically, this distinction has served the Han-dominated Chinese Communist Party (CCP) well, with the Hui functioning as strategic intermediaries along China's vast ethnic frontier, and increasingly overseas as trade and investment opportunities expand rapidly with Muslim countries.

Yet China's desire to open up commercial ties with the Muslim world is at odds with an increasing nationalist and xenophobic body politic in China. If China chooses to isolate and severely restrict Hui culture and mobility, as they have the Uyghurs, relations with the Muslims countries at the heart of OBOR could be damaged. The implications for ethnic relations in China are equally worrying.

Fear of the Muslim Other

The Han ethnic majority has long been weary of the Muslim Other. A series of Muslim rebellions and interethnic violence in 18th and 19th century China left millions dead. In the recent past, however, this antipathy was not chiefly religious in nature. Rather, anti-Muslim attitudes were rooted in mutual distrust articulated in cultural, spatial and physical idioms. Muslims were marked as suspect because they didn't eat pork, kept to themselves, and looked different due to their facial hair and skullcaps.

Over the last decade this apprehension has taken on a distinctly anti-religious tone. Party officials are unhinged by the growing religiosity (especially Salafi and Wahhabi influences) among some Chinese Muslims, a trend that echoes the revival of religious beliefs across Chinese society but also the long history of ties between Chinese Muslims and the larger Muslim world. Anti-Islamic sentiment surged following a string of religiously motivated attacks, especially the March 1, 2014 butchering of 29 innocent civilians at a Kunming train station by a group of radicalized Uyghurs ([Xinhua](#), March 2, 2014).

In Xinjiang the Party crackdown hard on “illegal” (非法) and “abnormal” (不正常) religious practices among the Uyghurs. Referred to religious extremism as a “malignant tumor,” Xinjiang officials outlawed 26 “illegal religious activities” in 2013, as they tightened controls over Islamic education, worship, fasting and certain forms of veiling ([Siyuewang](#), March 17, 2014).

In the Hui areas of Gansu, Ningxia, and Yunnan by contrast, a far more relaxed approach was adopted. In the bustling city of Linxia, for example, Hui Muslims were left to freely and openly practice their religion. Known as “Little Mecca,” Linxia grinds to a halt during Friday-prayers with women in fashionable hijabs and men in traditional white skullcaps heading off to pray. Arab-style mosques are increasingly common as is the use of the Arabic script ([Duowei](#), April 26).

Yet recently the mood has darkened in the Hui areas. When local Hui officials proposed the passage of a new national law governing the halal (清真) food industry at the annual National People’s Congress, a small group of politicians and online agitators led a coordinated campaign against what they viewed as a violation of the separation of state and religion. The law was eventually abandoned ([Global Times](#), April 18; [The Diplomat](#), May 27) but the battle against the Hui had just begun.

In early May, a video of unclear origins went viral on the Chinese Internet. The 30-second clip depicts a young girl dressed in a black hijab and robe reciting the Qur’an in Arabic. It was claimed to be a kindergarten in Linxia, although the video has been on Youtube since at least 2013 ([Youtube](#), December 3, 2013). Many netizens expressed outrage: “brain-washing” and “terrorist infiltrating our schools” it was claimed ([China Change](#), May 13). In response the Department of Education in Gansu issued a statement “vehemently condemning acts that harm the mental health of the youth” ([Caijing](#), May 6).

Following the Central Religious Work Conference, rumors and conspiracy theories circulated wildly, with terms like “Hala-ization” (清真化), “Muslimization” (穆斯林化), and “Arab-ization” (阿拉伯化) trending on Chinese social media. Commentators claimed a dramatic increase in the number of

mosques; the proliferation of all things halal—water, toothpaste, rice, toilet paper, banks, and bath-houses—as well as the spread of Arabic signs, classes and even schools. Ningxia Party Secretary Li Jianhua warned against the burgeoning of halal products, arguing it threatened to undermine state security while officials in Qinghai province launched a rectification campaign against the spread of Muslim and halal signs and symbols ([Sina](#), April 28; [Phoenix](#), May 6).

On Weibo, academics and armchair agitators like Xi Wuyi and Mei Xinyu posted photos and links to stories that suggested religious extremism was rampant among the Hui (see, for example, [Weibo](#), May 21; [Weibo](#), May 23). There were also incendiary and often unsubstantiated comments about past Hui uprisings, attempts to ban alcohol, underground Islamic schools, and Han being forced to adopt halal practices, with little intervention from the usually hyper-vigilant state censors. On the tempestuous Tianya blog, netizens shared the sort of anti-Muslim epithets and doctored cartoons that sparked protests and violence in European and elsewhere—these included offensive images linking the Hui to jihadist violence, lusciousness and incest, and even the worship of pigs ([Tianya](#), May 6).

On Weixin, the ultra-nationalist “Global Sounds” (环球之音) portal, published a scathing yet anonymous critique of the “Arabization of religion in Northwest China,” which circulated widely on Chinese social media. The article repeated claims about the spread of halal and Arab-style products, architecture, and clothing, but also warned that religious organizations are working in tandem with local government officials to enforce religious law and override secular rule. Demographic changes in the Northwest, such as the declining Han population due to safety concerns and large Muslim families due to exceptions from family planning regulations, were exacerbating this situation. “From a long term perspective,” the article asserted, “the growing religiosity of people in Northwest China is certainly not something out of Arabian Nights,” rather “the religious question is already China’s most pressing problem and one of its most profound” ([Huanqiuizhiyin](#), May 4).

The former Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) Ye Xiaowei provided semi-official imprimatur for these accusations when he published an opinion piece in *Global Times*. Ye condemned the rapid proliferation of religion in China, and argued it was “a backdoor to extremism.” He called on local officials to “nip this in the bud” in order to protect the unwitting masses from being hoodwinked by religious extremists. “Behind the spread of Islam there lurks a colossal menace and ‘vile people with evil tidings’ that seek to destroy ethnic unity, stir up ethnic antagonism, and damage today’s state of peace and unity, social harmony, and ethnic amity” ([Huanqiuwang](#), May 7).

The Power Struggle Behind the Anti-Islamic Veil

In the background of this troubling wave of Islamophobia is a decade-old conflict over the future direction of ethnic and religious policy in China (see [China Brief](#), July 6, 2012). This tussle involves not only a bureaucratic turf wars but also a series of forceful and clashing personalities, and reflects a far deeper division within Chinese society between a narrow Han-defined racism and a more cosmopolitan and pluralistic vision of the Chinese nation.

This split goes all the way to the top of the Party. On one side, there is a group of assimilationists, headed by Zhu Weiqun, the Director of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), who warns that hostile forces are using religious and ethnic divisions to undermine Party rule and derail China’s rise. The solution is a major rethink of current policies in order to weaken ethnic and religious identities while strengthening a shared sense of belonging through increased interethnic fusion. Zhu served as the Executive Deputy Director of the United Front Work Department (UFWD) for over a decade before moving to the CPPCC in 2012 under the patronage of Politburo Standing Committee member Yu Zhengsheng. He has been a forceful advocate of secularism and a frequent critic of the Dalai Lama, who he recently labelled an Islamic State sympathizer ([Huanqiuwang](#), December 9, 2015).

On the other side, there is a group of multiculturalists who were led until recently by the Hui Director of the

SEAC Wang Zhengwei. In April 2015, Wang became a double deputy-minister when he was named the vice-head of the UFWD. Wang is a vocal defender of the system of regional ethnic autonomy and has long promoted the benefits of China’s ethnic diversity for the Party’s OBOR and “going out” strategy. Xi Jinping’s intervention into the ethnic policy debate at the September 2014 Central Ethnic Work Forum not only failed to bridge this ideological rupture but inadvertently added fuel to the debate (see [China Brief](#), November 7, 2014; [China Brief](#), October 19, 2015).

Zhu and Wang clashed publically throughout 2015. The Hong Kong-based Phoenix media outlet published a wide-ranging dialogue between Zhu and the Tibetan novelist Alai, where the pair argued for a new focus on interethnic blending and fusion in order to confront the altering domestic and international situation. Alai ended the dialogue by declaring that in line with other large-scale reform efforts: “some of our ethnic policies have entered a period of rethink and improvement” ([Phoenix New](#), May 31, 2015).

In response, the SEAC’s official newspaper, *China Ethnic Daily*, published a series of articles refuting point-by-point the issues raised in the dialogue, and insinuating that Zhu and Ali were advocating the sort of assimilationist and exclusionary “one nation, one culture” policies adopted by former Nationalist Party leader Chiang Kai-shek ([Duowei](#), July 17, 2015). In reply to this “slap in the face,” Zhu Weiqun accused his detractors of employing Cultural Revolution-style attacks aimed at distorting his views and distracting the public from the important issues at stake ([Phoenix News](#), July 17, 2015).

Later in the year, another row broke out over alleged abuses in the system for appointing *tulkus* (living buddhas), with claims that fake titles could be purchased for 200,000 *yuan* each (\$30,500). In a remarkable public rebuke, the Tibetan scholar Jamphel Gyatso (降边嘉措), a respected researcher at CASS and former SEAC translator for the Dalai and Panchen lamas, accused Ye Xiaowen and Zhu Weiqun of corruption on his Weibo account, asserting they abused their positions of authority over the appointment and recognition of *tulkus*. He asked how much money they pocketed, and accused them of “shirking

responsibilities,” “diverting attention,” and even “harboring ill intent” ([Invisible Tibet](#), December 15, 2015).

Yet with the surprising dismissal of Wang Zhengwei from both the SEAC and UFWD in April, Zhu Weiqun seems to have come out on top, at least in the short term. No official reason was given for the sacking, yet the overseas Chinese media claims Wang was removed for being too soft on Islam. Unnamed sources claim he actively promoted the halal food industry and the construction of mosques across the country ([Singtao](#), April 12). The new head of SEAC, the Mongol Bagatur (巴特尔), was quick to stress that all Party members and cadres “must closely observe political discipline, uphold Marxist beliefs and atheism...and must absolutely not seek one’s own values and beliefs in religion” ([SEAC](#), April 28).

Unleashing the Genie of Ethnic Hatred?

The end game is unclear at present. Wang Zhengwei retains his position as Deputy Chair of the CPPCC and is working hard to maintain a public profile despite a scathing indictment on SEAC under his leadership issued by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection ([Guangming](#), May 11; [Xinhua](#), June 8). Meanwhile speculative accusations link his name, and that of other top political leaders, to overseas bank accounts managed by the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca ([Mingjin youbao](#), March 12). Zhu Weiqun is also under attack. He recently dismissed corruption allegations as baseless and despicable—the dirty work of splittist forces—in an unprecedented interview with the *Global Times* ([Huanqiuwang](#), March 27).

Regardless, Zhu Weiqun is slated for full retirement at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, and it is unclear who will take up the mantle of the assimilationist position. Meanwhile Wang Zhengwei’s successor, Bagatur, is an ally of Hu Jintao and Hu Chuanhu, and despite the recent weakening of their Youth League (CYL) faction (团派), they remain a formidable force with continued control over the extensive ethnic bureaucracy ([China Brief](#), May 11).

These divisions at the top of the Party open up space for ethnic entrepreneurs to inflame racist and anti-religious sentiment online. At present, interethnic tensions are largely bottled up through the tight controls of the security and propaganda apparatuses. Yet if this discord continues to fester, cyber-hatred could spill over into the streets of ethnically divided communities as it did during the deadly July 5, 2009 race riots in Ürümqi.

To date, Xi Jinping has been largely powerless to rein in agitators on both sides of the ethnic and religious policy debate. Personnel changes at the 19th Party Congress will be his last chance to assert his authority over this contentious policy area. The stakes are high. If unchecked, anti-Muslim sentiment will not only damage China’s image across the Islamic world and undermine the OBOR strategy but also deepen the divide between the Han majority and China’s 120 million ethnic minorities.

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China’s Sinking Port Plans in Bangladesh

Sudha Ramachandran

A key link in China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) suffered a setback in February when Bangladesh’s Awami League (AL) government shelved plans for construction of a deep-sea port at Sonadia, south of Chittagong. Bangladesh is an important participant in China’s “One-Belt, One-Road” (OBOR) initiative. An Indian Ocean littoral state, it figures in the OBOR’s overland links (via the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar [BCIM] corridor) as well as maritime components. China was hoping to design, build and operate the port at Sonadia, which was expected to emerge an important transshipment hub for the MSR ([Daily Observer](#), September 12, 2015). It

would have been an alternative to the deep-sea port at Kyaukpyu that Beijing is building to link its underdeveloped southern provinces to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. It would have further eased its dependence on the sea routes transiting the Straits of Malacca.

The port at Sonadia would have been Bangladesh's first deep-sea port. The Bangladeshi government has been keen to build a deep-sea port in the country as its existing ports at Chittagong and Mongla have a shallow draft, are heavily congested and inadequate to meet the mounting needs of its growing economy, which is reliant on sea-borne trade. When the idea of building a new deep-sea port at Sonadia was first conceived in 2006, it was seen as a way to not only overcome the limitations of the Chittagong and Mongla ports but also to transform Bangladesh into a maritime transshipment hub for landlocked Nepal, Bhutan, India's Northeastern states and China's Yunnan province (Daily Star, March 20, 2013, Bdnews24.com, June 8, 2014 and Bdnews24.com, June 4).

When Bangladesh sought China's help to build a deep-sea port at Sonadia, the latter responded positively (Daily Star, October 25, 2010). It submitted a detailed project proposal and agreed to provide loans to cover a major part of the project cost (Daily Star, January 23, 2012 and Bdnews24.com, June 8, 2014). Other countries, including the United Arab Emirates and Netherlands submitted proposals too, but these proved less attractive to Bangladeshi decision makers (Prothom Alo, June 4, 2014). According to former Ambassador and Secretary in Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Humayun Kabir, China's experience in implementing several mega infrastructure projects in Bangladesh over the past 30 years and proven expertise in construction of deep-sea ports in the region, demonstrated that it could "provide technology, funds and expertise at a competitive rate." [1] All of these elements worked in China's favor, and Bangladesh was set to award the contract to the state-owned China Harbor Engineering Company Ltd (Prothom Alo, June 4, 2014). The two sides unexpectedly failed to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Beijing in July 2014. A few months later Bangladesh's Minister for Planning

Mostafa Kamal said that the government was reconsidering the project (Dhaka Tribune, January 11, 2015). The final blow came in February when Bangladesh called off the project (Times of India, February 8).

The Decision to Cancel

So why did Bangladesh cancel the Sonadia project? In 2014, Japan came up with a proposal for a project at Matarbari, 25 km from Sonadia, which would include not only a deep-sea port but four coal-fired power plants and an LNG terminal. It offered to provide 80 percent of the funding for the \$4.6 billion port on easy terms. Building two ports just a few kilometers apart was seen as economically unviable, and as Japan's terms were more favorable, the Bangladesh government chose the Matarbari project and scrapped a port at Sonadia (Dhaka Tribune, January 11, 2015 and Daily Observer, September 12, 2015).

Geopolitics played a role too. India, Japan and the U.S., which are wary of China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, are reported to have pressured the Bangladesh government to cancel the Sonadia project (Asian Age, February 10). The latter was unable to resist such pressure. India had "stood behind" the AL government in 2014 on the issue of the "questionable general elections" that returned it to power and in the circumstances, the latter did not want to "displease" India, the former ambassador observed. [2] Commenting on the AL government's vulnerability to pressure from the U.S., a retired Indian Military Intelligence specialist on South Asia pointed out that the U.S. played "a major role in bringing back Sheikh Hasina to power" and she has "a big stake in the U.S.' continued support for her." This and the fact that the U.S. is Bangladesh's largest market for readymade garments, its largest earner of foreign exchange, appears to have prompted the government to shelve the Chinese project. [3]

Setback for China

Sino-Bangladesh co-operation has deepened over the decades. The two countries now share a robust military relationship. Bangladesh is China's second largest weapons market (after Pakistan) and China is Bangladesh's largest supplier of military equipment,

accounting for 82 percent of all of Dhaka's weapons purchases between 2009 and 2013 ([Dhaka Tribune](#), March 18, 2014). China is also Bangladesh's largest trading partner; two-way trade was worth \$12 billion in 2014 ([Daily Star](#), October 2, 2015). Chinese investment in Bangladesh has grown significantly in recent years. Between 1977 and 2010, Beijing's investment in Bangladesh amounted to just \$250 million compared to roughly \$200 million in 2011 alone ([Daily Star](#), September 21, 2012). Investment has surged since with China pledging billions of dollars in investment in garment factories in special economic zones, infrastructure building, etc ([Click Ittefaq](#), September 30, 2015).

China's role in infrastructure building in Bangladesh is significant and growing. It is upgrading Chittagong port and building road and railway links from Kunming in Yunnan province to Chittagong. It has undertaken financing and building of eight "friendship bridges," including the Padma Multi-purpose Bridge, which is Bangladesh's largest-ever infrastructure project, and a high-speed "chord" train line between Dhaka and Comilla ([New Age](#), February 13, 2015; [Daily Star](#), March 8, 2015 and [Daily Star](#), October 2, 2015). Its work on the overland component of the OBOR in Bangladesh appears to be progressing well.

However, OBOR's maritime component has run into difficulties. In addition to the shelving of the Sonadia port project, development of Matarbari port is being undertaken by Japan, China's rival. Besides, the prospects of China alone being awarded the contract to build a planned port at Payra in Patuakhali district seem dim now. Since Payra is situated closer to the Indian mainland than is Sonadia, India's opposition to a China-built port here can be expected to be fiercer. At best, China can expect to be part of a large group of countries developing this port ([Times of India](#), February 8).

While China would be able to use these ports for trade, it will have to share use of these ports with other countries. This will be case with Chittagong and Mongla ports too; an MoU signed by India and Bangladesh last year allows Indian cargo ships access to these ports ([Bangladesh, Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#)).

A group of Indian analysts argue that China's MSR strategy is just a more benignly packaged version of the U.S.-coined "string of pearls strategy." ([Nikkei Asian Review](#), April 29, 2015). In the context of Bangladesh, this would mean that military motivations and not economic interests underlie China's interest in building and operating ports and that the ultimate goal is to use Bangladesh's commercial ports as naval bases should the need arise. This goal would require China to design ports and to operate them. The shelving of the Sonadia projects denies China such a role. Importantly, it would require China to have immense influence over the Bangladesh government. Bangladesh's recent decisions on port building that went against China indicate the latter's waning influence.

The cancellation of the Sonadia port is a blow more to the MSR's military goals, if any, than to its economic goals as the loss of Sonadia does not prevent China from using Bangladesh's other ports or the deep-sea port at Kyaukpyu to link up Yunnan province. It only weakens the prospects of China finding ports in Bangladesh for military use.

Battles Ahead

The setback over the Sonadia project, though disappointing to China, is unlikely to deter it from seeking greater influence in Bangladesh through investments and participation in infrastructure projects, especially port-related ones. Imported oil, much of which is transported on ships via sea routes in the Indian Ocean, makes it imperative for China to establish close ties with Bay of Bengal littoral states, including Bangladesh. It can be expected to accelerate efforts to develop such ties. Already in 2015, it promised to invest \$8.5 billion in 10 infrastructure projects ([New Age](#), February 13, 2015).

However, it can expect its investment plans in Bangladesh to be challenged by other powers that are eyeing Bangladesh as an investment destination and to further their strategic interests. Japan, for one, which is Bangladesh's largest aid donor and development partner, has pledged \$6 billion in soft loans. As part of its Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) initiative, the centerpiece of its strategy in the region, Japan is developing an industrial agglomeration

along the Dhaka-Chittagong-Cox's Bazar belt that focuses on industry and trade, energy and transportation (South Asia Monitor, April 15). The Matarbari complex is part of this initiative. Japan's wresting of the deep-sea port project from China signals Tokyo's significant capacity to take on the Chinese in South Asia.

While Japan has the technical expertise and financial muscle to match, even better Chinese infrastructure project proposals, it is India's influence in Bangladesh that is the major obstacle in the way of Beijing's ambitions in the Bay of Bengal. When Bangladesh was under military rule and in the years that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was in power, India's relations with Dhaka were under considerable strain. But with the AL at the helm since 2008 and especially after 2014, India's relations with Bangladesh have improved remarkably (The Hindu, May 11, 2015). Indeed, Bangladesh is now "clearly tilted toward India; it influences major decisions," the former ambassador observed. China wields only "moderate influence" in Bangladesh, in comparison, he said. [4] In the circumstances, it is unlikely that Bangladesh would go against Delhi to award projects to China, especially those that are seen to undermine India's security interests.

Adding to China's woes in Bangladesh is the growing convergence between India and the U.S., underscored recently in their agreeing in principle on a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, which will enable their militaries to use each other's assets and bases for repair and replenishment of supplies and assumes importance as they seek to counter the growing maritime assertiveness of China (The Hindu, April 18). On issues in India's neighborhood, the U.S. is "silently recognizing these countries as areas of India's strategic influence," the military intelligence specialist said, adding that this is "probably worrying" China. [5] This means that India's hand in Bangladesh will be strengthened by US backing.

However, China's recent setbacks in Bangladesh—besides the shelving of the Sonadia port project it lost a \$1.6 billion power project in the Khulna district in western Bangladesh to India early this year—do not necessarily mean that its future in the South Asian country is wholly bleak. It has advantages over India.

India's influence in Bangladesh may be high at present, but this could change should the AL lose power. Unlike India, China has a good relationship with political parties and politicians across the political spectrum. Additionally, while India enjoys close cultural and social ties with the Bangladeshi people, it also faces fierce opposition there from Islamists and other pro-Pakistan sections as well as those who resent Delhi's high-handed behavior. China's relationship with the Bangladeshi public, in contrast, is not tempestuous or prone to swings. Should India's influence in Bangladesh stir deep resentment in its neighbor, it could face a backlash. China would benefit from that.

The Bangladesh government will need to carefully balance the three power blocs in its region: China, India and the U.S. It needs investment and better infrastructure to trigger economic development but will need to be especially sensitive to India, its giant neighbor which surrounds it on three sides.

Conclusions

Bangladesh's shelving of the Chinese proposal for a deep-sea port at Sonadia does not bode well for Beijing. It indicates that China wary countries have the capacity and the will to counter its plans and projects. The shelving of the Sonadia port project should serve as a reminder to Beijing that regional and global powers will oppose, perhaps even displace its OBOR-related infrastructure projects with projects of their own, should China's projects threaten its rivals' security and other interests.

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Notes

1. Author's Interview, Humayun Kabir, former Ambassador and Secretary in Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Dhaka, April 21.
2. Author's Interview, Kabir.
3. Author's Interview, Col. R. Hariharan, a retired Indian Military Intelligence specialist on South Asia, Chennai, April 29.
4. Author's Interview, Kabir.

5. Author's Interview, Hariharan.

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