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Editor's Note: This issue represents a slight departure from our standard format (usually consisting of an editor's brief, and four contributors' articles). Due to a number of significant developments related to Hong Kong that occurred during the month of November, we have presented in this issue a lengthy overview article that summarizes these developments, and discusses the reaction on the part of the Chinese central government. This issue also includes a featured in-depth article by Dr. Anne-Marie Brady about China's military ambitions in the Arctic region. Because these articles are longer than our usual standards, this issue contains four pieces instead of the usual total of five.

Beijing's Reactions to November Developments Surrounding the Crisis in Hong Kong

By Elizabeth Chen and John Dotson

Introduction

The year 2019 has seen a gradually escalating crisis in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The territory has seen continuing unrest since mass protests first broke out in June, in response to a draft extradition law that would have allowed Hong Kong residents to be arrested and sent to mainland China for prosecution. The month of November saw five further significant developments related to the situation in Hong Kong:

- Police raids on Hong Kong universities and violent student resistance: Escalating levels of violence between police and protestors reflect increasing antagonism between the two sides, and bode ill for the peaceful restoration of order in the territory in the near term.
- The Hong Kong High Court ruling on the "mask law": The legal dispute over the city administration's effort to enforce a law banning the wearing of masks at demonstrations, and Beijing's response, presents a significant challenge to the autonomy of Hong Kong's independent judicial system.
- District council elections: The outcome of district council elections held on November 24 presented a significant loss for the pro-Beijing city administration, and indicated broad public support for the goals of the pro-democracy protest movement.
- U.S. passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019: The passage of this legislation, albeit largely symbolic, has expressed U.S. Government support for the protest movement and placed a further chill in relations between Washington and Beijing.
- An intensified propaganda campaign against alleged hostile foreign forces: PRC officials and state media launched an even-further intensified program of public messaging intended to pin the blame for the Hong Kong crisis on foreign "black hands" manipulating events from behind the scenes.

These developments are likely to significantly impact events in the HKSAR in the weeks going forward—as well as affecting the policy decisions made by senior Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials observing the unfolding situation from Beijing.

Police Raids on Hong Kong Universities and Student Resistance

Citizen protests, which have occurred primarily on weekends since early June, have become increasingly violent as tensions have grown over the past six months. On October 1—the same day that Beijing celebrated the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC)—police in Hong Kong fired live rounds at protesters for the first time ([SCMP](#), October 1). On November 4, a student protestor

named Alex Chow suffered a fatal brain injury after falling from the third floor of a parking garage where police were dispersing protesters with tear gas. [1] The latter incident provided the immediate backdrop for significant escalations in confrontations between student protestors and police, with major stand-offs centered around some of the city's most prominent universities.

On November 11, police officers confronted Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) students who were allegedly dropping objects from a bridge to obstruct the Tolo Highway in the eastern New Territories. As the situation deteriorated, protesters hurled projectiles at officers, and police fired back with pepper balls and tear gas rounds ([SCMP](#), November 11). This led to a police raid on the CUHK campus in Sha Tin, which was resisted by students with improvised barricades and hurled projectiles; police responded with tear gas and rubber bullets ([SCMP](#), November 12). The clashes and property destruction on campus led the CUHK administration to cancel the remainder of its spring academic term ([CUHK press release](#), November 13).



Image left: A street outside the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), littered with improvised obstacles placed by student protesters to block the entry of police vehicles. (Image: [SCMP/YouTube](#))

Image right: A November 13 Hong Kong Police press conference on the clashes with student protesters at CUHK. (Source: [Hong Kong Police Force Twitter](#))

During a press briefing on November 13, the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) stated that CUHK had become “a battleground for criminals and rioters,” and asserted that the school “was used as a weapons factory as several hundred petrol bombs were thrown on campus in one single day” ([Hong Kong Police Force Facebook](#), November 13). The same day, the PRC’s Hong Kong Liaison Office warned that Hong Kong was “sliding into the abyss of terrorism,” and called for a harsher crackdown to end the chaos by “every necessary means” ([SCMP](#), November 14). [2]

Violent confrontations between the police and protesters reached a peak on November 17, when police declared the situation at Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) in Kowloon a “riot” and laid siege to the campus. The raid was prompted in part by concerns expressed by university officials: a PolyU spokeswoman indicated that the university had reached out to the police on November 16 after becoming aware that “many

of its laboratories were broken in and some dangerous chemicals taken” ([SCMP](#), November 16). In response to the raid, PolyU students and protesters resisted violently with archery equipment taken from the school’s stores of sporting equipment, and threw Molotov cocktails at officers. Some protesters tried to escape the police cordon around PolyU by abseiling down to a highway (*see accompanying image*), while others tried unsuccessfully to flee using underground sewage tunnels. Police said that around 1,100 people associated with the protest were either arrested or had their details taken down by police officers ([RTHK](#), November 20). The most dramatic phase of the stand-off ended by the evening of November 19, when volunteers and first aid workers began leaving the campus ([SCMP](#), November 20). However, some of the most determined protesters barricaded themselves in university buildings, producing a stand-off with police that lasted through the end of the month ([Hong Kong Free Press](#), December 1).

On November 18, sympathy protesters blockaded busy roads and hurled petrol bombs in locations around the city. Tsim Sha Tsui, Jordan, Yau Ma Tei, and Mong Kok saw the most chaos, and over 200 people were arrested in Mong Kok. Police reportedly fired 1,458 rounds of tear gas, 1,391 rubber bullets, 325 beanbag rounds, and 265 sponge grenades in the course of these incidents ([SCMP](#), November 20). According to a Hong Kong government report, police officers fired an estimated total 4,775 rounds of tear gas throughout face-offs throughout the city between November 2-18 ([Hong Kong Government](#), November 27).



Image: Student protesters lower themselves by rope from a bridge in an attempt to escape the police siege of Hong Kong Polytechnic University (undated, circa November 17-18). (Source: [AFP](#))

In the wake of these incidents, the city government reportedly withdrew \$178 million in planned funding for the expansion of Polytechnic University, and pulled two funding proposals worth \$32 million for the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong ([Ming Pao](#), November 27). Many of Hong Kong’s universities—including some of the top-ranked higher education centers in East Asia—are publicly funded through the University Grants Commission, a colonial-era institution overseen by the Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo). Unconfirmed accounts have indicated that the PRC has leaned on pro-Beijing members of

the LegCo to cut new funding for public universities ([HKFP](#), November 30)—a possible sign that the PRC intends to seek tighter control over the city’s educational system.

Controversies Surrounding the “Mask Law” and Hong Kong’s Judicial Independence

In early October Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam invoked an anti-mask law that would give police officers the power to arrest any person near a protest who refused to remove their facial covering upon demand. On November 18, the Hong Kong High Court ruled that the law “exceeds what is reasonably necessary to achieve the aim of law enforcement,” and that its provisions were unconstitutional under Hong Kong’s Basic Law ([RTHK](#), November 22). Two days later, the city government appealed the ban, and the High Court has agreed to suspend the ruling until it reviews the case in January 2020. Government lawyers are expected to challenge the High Court’s interpretation, and to argue for an executive-led framework that would give the LegCo more power to address the ongoing crisis in the city ([SCMP](#), November 27). If the government loses its appeal in the High Court, it can challenge the decision in the Court of Final Appeal, Hong Kong’s ultimate adjudication body.

On November 19, a representative of the Legislative Affairs Commission (LAC) of the PRC National People’s Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) declared that the Hong Kong court system had overstepped its authority to adjudicate, and that the November 18 decision was itself unconstitutional ([RTHK](#), November 20). The LAC’s claim was predicated on the assumption that Hong Kong’s Basic Law is a piece of domestic PRC legislation governing the HKSAR as a region of China. By this interpretation, Hong Kong’s Basic Law—and all subsequent Hong Kong legislation based upon it—derives its authority from the PRC constitution, and is thereby ultimately subject to the central government in Beijing ([RTHK](#), November 21).

The ongoing mask ban controversy, and especially the comments by the LAC, have renewed concerns in Hong Kong that either Beijing—or more directly, pro-Beijing members of the LegCo—will attempt to further erode Hong Kong’s civil liberties by weakening its traditionally independent judicial system. It is also possible that pro-Beijing LegCo members could renew discussions around the now-toxic 2003 Article 23 national security amendment—or its equally contentious counterpart, the Anti-Extradition Bill, which first catalyzed Hong Kong’s opposition protest movement in spring of this year ([China Brief](#), June 26).

The Hong Kong District Council Elections and Beijing’s Response

On November 24, Hong Kong voters turned out for the HKSAR’s district council elections. The district councils largely attend to local affairs, and their role in the city administration is chiefly advisory; however, the elections provided a barometer of public sentiment at a time when both opposition and pro-administration factions have claimed public support. In these high-turnout elections (estimated at over 70 percent of eligible voters), opposition candidates achieved a landslide victory: winning 392 out of 452 total seats (87%), which will give them control of 17 out of the territory’s 18 district councils. Conversely, these local elections

represented a dramatic loss for the HKSAR's largest pro-Beijing party, the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB). In the prior district councils, pro-Beijing representatives held 292 of 431 total seats (68%); their share will now fall to 60 of 452 seats (13%) ([HKFP](#), November 25; [SCMP](#), November 27).

While DAB still holds a majority in the LegCo, the November 24 upset has also ensured that pan-democrats are almost certain to gain several of the District Council (Second) functional seats on the LegCo in the 2020 Legislative Council elections. (The LegCo is comprised of 35 members directly elected by geographical constituencies and 35 functional constituency seats, 5 of which are nominated by the district councils.)

The results were a serious symbolic setback for the city administration and its patrons in Beijing. In the immediate wake of the elections, PRC official sources were initially limited to terse announcements that omitted discussion of the outcome, but repeated familiar accusations that “rioters, in concert with external forces” had “seriously disrupted the electoral process” ([Xinhua](#), November 25). It is very likely that the outcome produced an initial sense of genuine shock and confusion among senior CCP officials, who have internalized much of their own propaganda—and who rely for information on bureaucratic channels staffed by people incentivized to tell superiors what they want to hear.



Image: “The Opposition Tampers with a Fair Election”—a cartoon in the PRC state-controlled English-language outlet China Daily, which alleged election tampering on the part of pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong. (Source: [China Daily Twitter Account](#), November 25)

When a more articulated formal PRC response emerged in the following days, it doubled down even further on familiar themes, divided into four broad categories: (1) Youth in Hong Kong have a mindset corrupted by

colonial, Western influences; (2) Pro-administration voters in Hong Kong were intimidated or confused by protestors, or otherwise prevented from voting via electoral fraud (see *accompanying image*); (3) Sinister foreign forces manipulated the election results; and that (4) Hong Kong residents must come to accept the “one country, two systems” formula as interpreted by Beijing. As expressed in one state media commentary:

[F]idelity to the Basic Law and "one country, two systems" principle have not been established in Hong Kong, [which] follows the "colonial" system under the common law and adopts practices consistent with the West... Western forces have been exercising influence in the city, which makes some Hongkongers believe they can challenge the "one country" principle. The election result reflected a majority of Hongkongers' misunderstanding of [the] "one country, two systems" principle, the Basic Law, [and] the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation... (Global Times, November 27).

Foreign “Black Hands” and U.S. Passage of the *Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act*

From the outset of this year’s unrest, official PRC sources have maintained a consistent narrative that the Hong Kong protest movement is secretly controlled by the sinister “black hands” (黑手, *hei shou*) of hostile foreign forces—usually unspecified, but clearly understood to be centered in the United States—who are intent on staging a “color revolution” (颜色革命, *yanse geming*) in the territory (China Brief, September 6). In an August editorial titled “Withdraw Your Black Hands and Pull Back from the Precipice” (收回黑手 悬崖勒马, *Shouhui Hei Shou Xuanya Le Ma*), *People’s Daily* opined that “some politicians in Western countries have been unable to restrain themselves... stirring up trouble, giving support to violent radicals, ‘removing the mask’ to interfere in China’s domestic affairs, and [thereby] playing an extremely important role in Hong Kong’s violent activities” (People’s Daily, August 22).



Image: “Fanning the Flames”—a cartoon from PRC state-controlled press, in which Uncle Sam faces dangerous blowback resulting from his interference in Hong Kong. Such media materials are part of a sustained PRC propaganda campaign intended to promote the narrative that the U.S. Government is the secret controlling “black hand” behind unrest in Hong Kong. (Source: [China Daily](#))

Beijing's efforts to depict the protests as the result of a foreign conspiracy were kicked into even higher gear after the *Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019* was passed by the U.S. Congress and signed into law in late November ([Congressional Record](#), November 20; [WhiteHouse.gov](#), November 27). This legislation amends the earlier *Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992* by requiring the U.S. Department of State to report annually to Congress as to “whether Hong Kong continues to warrant treatment under [U.S.] law in the same manner as... applied to Hong Kong before July 1, 1997” in areas such as commercial agreements and export control policy. The law also requires an “assessment of the degree of any erosions to Hong Kong’s autonomy” in areas such as political and voting rights, press freedoms, and judicial independence ([Congress.gov](#), November 21).

PRC officialdom has reacted furiously to passage of the new U.S. law. State press opined that the “Hong Kong bill seriously distorts the facts and reflects the sinister intentions of certain U.S. politicians, and that it “blatantly support[s] the violent rioters and [will] intentionally add fuel to the flames of violence” ([People's Daily](#), December 2). On November 27, the day after the act was signed into law, U.S. Ambassador to China Terry Branstad was summoned by PRC Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng to receive “stern representations” regarding this “gross hegemonic move,” and the “severe interference” by the United States in Chinese domestic affairs ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), November 28). On December 2, the Chinese government announced that it was suspending any stops in Hong Kong by U.S. military aircraft or ships, and that it was issuing sanctions against five U.S.-based non-governmental organizations (*see further below*) ([Xinhua](#), December 2).



Image: At a demonstration held in Hong Kong on November 28, some protesters hold aloft American flags to celebrate passage of the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019, widely viewed as a symbolic statement of support for the protest movement by the U.S. Government.

(Source: [Hong Kong Free Press](#))

The Propaganda Campaign Against International NGOs

On December 2, the Chinese government announced that it was levying unspecified sanctions against five U.S.-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs): the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Human Rights Watch, and Freedom House ([Xinhua](#), December 2; [China Daily](#), December 3). A PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson justified the move on grounds that the specified NGOs “have supported anti-China plotters who messed up Hong Kong through various means... offering financial, logistic, organizational and training support, inciting extreme violent criminal acts and inflaming separatist activities... They are much to blame for the chaos in Hong Kong” ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), December 3).

Concurrent with the foreign ministry announcement, the Xinhua state news agency released onto social media a five-minute English-language propaganda video claiming, based on unspecified evidence, that “over 100 overseas NGOs have been shown to be involved in fomenting [Hong Kong’s] current unrest.” Among the organizations named were the Open Society Foundation, the International Bar Association, UN Watch, and the Human Rights Foundation, which sponsored and “provided platforms for Hong Kong separatists.” As presented in the film, the most subversive and sinister NGO is “the notorious National Endowment for Democracy in the United States.” The NED is depicted as a Cold War entity “well-known for its meddling in the internal affairs and political elections in numerous foreign countries,” and the video implies that NED acts as a front for the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (*see accompanying images*) ([Xinhua Twitter](#), December 2).



Images: Screenshots from a Xinhua-produced English-language film titled “Some Foreign NGOs Play a Sinister Role in Hong Kong Unrest,” which was posted to social media on December 2.

(Source: [Youtube](#) / [Xinhua Twitter](#))

Although blaming the Hong Kong crisis on foreign NGOs may appear absurd to most international observers, it should be treated seriously as an insight into the blinkered and conspiratorial mentality of the CCP leadership. Indoctrinated by their own propaganda, and unable to admit any fault, CCP leaders must cast about for hostile foreign conspiracies to explain their own failures in statecraft. Crude and ham-handed as it

may be, the propaganda campaign against international NGOs actually reveals a great deal about the CCP's worldview and its interpretation of the crisis in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

The developments of autumn 2019 bear significant implications for the future of Hong Kong. They are also revealing in regards to the policy course likely to be followed by the increasingly hardline CCP leadership under Xi Jinping. Beijing's responses to recent events in the HKSAR serve to illustrate its continuing rigid hard line: calls for tougher police crackdowns on protesters; threats to effectively eliminate judicial independence by central government fiat; refusal to learn from what election results indicate about public sentiment in Hong Kong; and the propagation of paranoid conspiracy theories to explain the territory's continuing unrest. The CCP's policy responses (or lack of coherent policy responses) throughout 2019 have demonstrated the Party's unwillingness to move beyond its reflexive impulse to delegitimize and suppress any opposition, without consideration given to engagement or compromise. This same course should be expected to continue as the Hong Kong crisis prepares to enter its second year.

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Notes

[1] Although Hong Kong's protests have been one of the most peaceful large scale protest movements in recent years, other casualties have occurred. On June 15, a protester dressed in a yellow poncho fell to his death during a demonstration ([Taiwan News](#), June 16). In the week following Chow's death, another young protester was critically injured after being shot by police at point blank range. Elsewhere in the city, a man was set on fire during a dispute between protesters and counter-protesters ([Axios](#), November 11).

[2] The uncharacteristic chaos and violence involved in the police siege of Hong Kong Polytechnic University caused many to fear that Beijing might decide to deploy the Hong Kong PLA Garrison to restore order in the streets; these fears were stoked when plainclothes garrison members marched out of the Kowloon East base to participate in voluntary cleanup efforts ([SCMP](#), November 16). Although PLA soldiers have participated in disaster relief efforts in Hong Kong before, many saw the Saturday cleanup effort as an implicit threat from Beijing. When questioned about the garrison's activities, Chief Executive Carrie Lam was adamant that the PLA would not be called in to Hong Kong ([HKFP](#), November 19).

**The CCP's Renewed Focus on Ideological Indoctrination, Part 1:
The 2019 Guidelines for "Patriotic Education"**

By John Dotson

Author's Note: This is the first part of a two-part briefing series that will address new directives issued in November 2019 by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the field of ideological "education." This first part examines a new set of directives for intensified "patriotic education," which is intended to indoctrinate Chinese youth—as well as Chinese society as a whole—with loyalty to the ruling Party. The second part, to appear in our next issue, will examine a new five-year plan recently unveiled by the CCP for ideological training among its own cadres.

Introduction: The Hong Kong Crisis and Beijing's Renewed Calls for "Patriotic Education"

Per the official narratives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the unrest that has roiled the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) throughout 2019 has resulted from a range of causes: these include economic factors such as income inequality and the lack of affordable housing ([China Daily](#), September 9), as well as the alleged sinister influence of foreign forces ([China Brief](#), September 6). However, one of the strongest and most consistent themes promoted by CCP sources is that the youth of Hong Kong lack a proper political consciousness and sense of identity ([SCMP](#), March 4). As stated in an early November op-ed in the state-run *China Daily*, "The wish for Western-style liberal democracy is a malignant virus that infects places with weakened ideological immune systems... Without addressing this weakness, Hong Kong will face similar, perhaps even worse, problems in the future." As a result of this, the "most important responsibility" of the city administration is "raising the moral standards of its citizens"—and therefore, "Hong Kong should find a way to improve the patriotic education of its residents" ([China Daily](#), November 6).

Such narratives are nothing new: in 2012 efforts to implement pro-Beijing curricula were a source of controversy and protests in Hong Kong ([BBC](#), September 8, 2012), and in 2017 the central government revived its calls for stricter education controls in Hong Kong in the wake of youth unrest ([VOA](#), July 2, 2017). However, this narrative has grown stronger throughout the second half of 2019, as both People's Republic of China (PRC) officials and state-controlled media have criticized the "liberal studies" curriculum of Hong Kong schools, as well as a mindset allegedly corrupted by the legacies of British colonial rule ([China Daily](#), September 2; [China Daily](#), September 3). Official statements emerging from the CCP Central Committee fourth plenary session in October indicated that Beijing's leaders had determined that the nearer-term solutions to Hong Kong's problems lay in tighter central government control, and implementation of a new national security law; and that the longer-term solutions would be found in closer economic integration of Hong Kong with the mainland, and a more "patriotic" curriculum in the school system ([SCMP](#), November 1).



Image: Police and student protesters confront one another across improvised barricades on the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, November 12. (Source: [Hong Kong Free Press](#)) PRC authorities have blamed such unrest in part on the lack of “patriotic education” for Hong Kong youth.

Programs for the Ideological Conditioning of Chinese Youth

The Hong Kong crisis and Beijing’s response have raised anew the issue of pro-Communist ideological indoctrination for youth, but the contemporary origins of “patriotic education” (爱国主义教育, *aiguo zhuyi jiaoyu*) in the PRC date back more than a quarter century. In regions of China subject to the full authority of the CCP, programs for patriotic education—also referred to as programs for “building socialist spiritual civilization” (社会主义精神文明建设, *shehuizhuyi jingshen wenming jianshe*)—were implemented in the 1990s, as the CCP sought to rebuild its tattered post-Tiananmen legacy and control the narratives surrounding its role as China’s sole source of political authority. [1] The first major policy initiative was issued in 1994, when the CCP Central Committee issued national guidelines for patriotic education—to include content such as the party’s official interpretations of Chinese history, “the achievements of the country’s socialist modernization,” and the principles of “socialist democracy” ([China Daily](#), October 2, 2017).

This nationwide program has been maintained ever since, and CCP efforts at public indoctrination have been still further reinforced within the Neo-Maoist ideological revival promoted since Xi Jinping’s ascension to power ([Journal of Democracy](#), July 2016; [China Brief](#), March 5, 2018). This is particularly true in regards to programs aimed at young people, as observed earlier this year in the tight state control over activities commemorating the 100th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement ([China Brief](#), June 4); and the announcement of an ambitious plan by the Communist Youth League to recruit up to one million urban youths for terms of service in rural areas ([China Brief](#), April 24). Teachers have also been targeted for an ideological crackdown this year, as seen in directives issued by the Beijing City Education Committee to root

out "violations of virtuous behavior" among high school teachers, to include "words or deeds harmful to the authority of the Party central authorities [or] the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, [or which] go against the policies of the Party line." [2]

Following a September 24 Politburo meeting convened to discuss a new draft document on patriotic education, PRC state media signaled intent for such initiatives to be further reinforced. Per these accounts, the Politburo concurred that "[we must] persist in the guidance of Xi Jinping's thought... [and] persist in the party's theoretical education and party spirit education as the main subjects," and that patriotic education was necessary to "arouse all the people to love the party, love the country, and love socialism with great enthusiasm" ([CCP Central Party School](#), September 24).



Image: Students from a primary school in Huaying City (Sichuan Province) engage in a “patriotic education” activity, climbing a local hill to reenact the Red Army’s “Long March” of 1934-1935 (undated photo).

(Source: [Xinhua](#))

The 2019 Guidelines for “Patriotic Education”

The official document was released on November 12, when the CCP Central Committee and the PRC State Council jointly issued the “Implementation Guidelines for Patriotic Education in the New Era” (新时代爱国主义教育实施纲要, *Xin Shidai Aiguo Zhuyi Jiaoyu Shishi Gangyao*) (hereafter “*Guidelines*”). [3] The 2019 plan contains little that is new in terms of substantive thematic content, but it is striking in two respects: the extent to which it doubles down on hardline Communist ideology, and the scope of its ambitions to intensify ideological indoctrination throughout Chinese society.

The expanded program is to operate under national guidance, but with decentralized planning and implementation to be managed by regional CCP committees and propaganda departments (宣传部, *xuanchuan bu*). Per the *Guidelines*, the program will operate under “the unified leadership of party committees, with party and state exercising joint management; propaganda departments will plan and coordinate; relevant departments will each be responsible for their work patterns, establishing patriotic education joint conference systems [for] work guidance and communication coordination” (*Guidelines*, art. 32). Additionally, subordinate bodies of the CCP United Front Work Department (统一战线部, *Tongyi Zhanxian Bu*) are expected to play a prominent role in mass implementation (*see further below*).

Loyalty to the Party as the Core Element of Patriotism

The document contains limited text about encouraging respect among young people for China’s traditional history and culture (*Guidelines*, art. 12). However, such mentions are dwarfed by the plan’s heavy-handed and repeated insistence on the need to build loyalty to the ruling Communist Party as “the most steadfast advocate and practitioner of patriotic spirit” (*Guidelines*, preamble). The plan’s first listed “general requirement” is fidelity to Marxist-Leninist ideology, and the succession of official CCP ideological theories from Mao Zedong to the present (*Guidelines*, art. 1). The plan also declares that “the intrinsic nature of patriotism is to persist in the thorough integration of ‘loving the party, loving the country, loving socialism’—and that patriotic education must make clear that “the destiny of the motherland and the destiny of the party... cannot be separated” (*Guidelines*, art. 3). The plan also reiterates the need to “resolutely struggle against historical nihilism” (历史虚无主义, *lishi xuwu zhuyi*)—a coded term for any criticism of the CCP’s own history or its tenure in power since 1949 (*Guidelines*, art. 11 and 12).

The plan also unabashedly promotes the personality cult around CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, and repeatedly invokes official theories attributed to Xi. Of these, the most prominent is “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era” (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想, *Xi Jinping Xin Shidai Zhongguo Tese Shehui Zhuyi Sixiang*) (*Guidelines*, preamble, art. 1, art. 7). Per the plan, Chairman Xi’s ideology must be made “to enter enterprises, enter villages, enter institutions, enter campuses, enter communities, enter barracks, [and] enter the internet” (*Guidelines*, art. 7).

Patriotic Education Will Focus on Youth...

The *Guidelines* indicate that “Youth will be the top priority for patriotic education, with a patriotic spirit running through the entire course of school education, promoting patriotic education to enter the classroom, enter teaching materials, and enter minds” (*Guidelines*, art. 15). This will include ideology and political theory classes (*Guidelines*, art. 16), but the effort is to be much broader: “patriotic education content should merge into language, ethics and law, history, and other subject teaching materials,” so that the entire curriculum will be suffused with “patriotic” content (*Guidelines*, art. 15).

School curriculum content is to work in tandem with extra-curricular activities, to include: visits to museums and “martyrdom commemoration sites” (烈士纪念设施, *lieshi jinian sheshi*) where the CCP version of history is portrayed; military training; winter and summer camps for students; and “Study Lei Feng Volunteer Service” programs (学雷锋志愿服务, *Xue Lei Feng Zhiyuan Fuwu*) (*Guidelines*, art. 18). The ultimate aim of such programs is to produce future generations so thoroughly indoctrinated that they will “inherit red genes” (传承红色基因, *chuancheng hongse jiyin*) of loyalty to the CCP (*Guidelines*, art. 11).



*Image: Middle school students from Nanning City (Guangxi Province) view a museum exhibit as part of a program of “patriotic revolutionary traditions education and ideals conviction education” (爱国主义革命传统教育和理想信念教育, *aiguo zhuyi geming chuantong jiaoyu he lixiang xinnian jiaoyu*), March 2019. (Source: [Nanning Wenming Wang](#))*

...But Must Be Spread Throughout All of Chinese Society

Although young people are its core focus, the *Guidelines* assert that “patriotic education is education for all the people,” and that these programs must be expanded throughout Chinese society. Among the primary mechanisms for this will be “people’s groups and mass organizations” (人民团体和群众组织, *renmin tuanti he qunzhong zuzhi*), many of which are controlled by the United Front Work Department. This will include labor unions, author associations, scientist associations, and overseas Chinese groups, as well as the Communist Youth League (*Guidelines*, art. 33). Furthermore, the document calls for efforts to “merge the patriotic spirit into relevant laws, regulations, and policy systems” (*Guidelines*, art. 31)—an assertion that hints at still-further intensified control by CCP organs over PRC legal and regulatory institutions.

Conclusion

The *Guidelines* provide yet another example of the CCP's ongoing Neo-Maoist revival, as well as further illustration of how the senior CCP leadership under Xi Jinping views correct ideology as central to the party's future survival. These revised 2019 policies for patriotic education do not represent a change of direction for the CCP, as broad programs for public indoctrination through "patriotic education" have existed for many years. However, these policies do represent a dramatic intensification of these efforts, as well as revealing the CCP's totalitarian ambitions to impose these programs ever more broadly throughout Chinese society.

The CCP's internal focus on its own cadres—and its plans for more rigorous ideological indoctrination within its own ranks—will be examined in part two of this briefing series.

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Notes

[1] U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2008 Annual Report to Congress* (pp. 302-303). https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/annual_reports/2008-Report-to-Congress-0.pdf.

[2] "Guiding Opinions from the Beijing City Education Committee Regarding Dealing with Lapses of Moral Behavior Among High School Teachers" [北京市教育委员会关于北京高校教师师德失范行为处理的指导意见], document dated June 17, 2019. Posted on the website of Wuhan Dongwu University [武汉东湖学院] at: <http://www.wdu.edu.cn/gljg/gaoj/gjdt/201907/t4228764.shtml>.

[3] "Implementation Guidelines for Patriotic Education in the New Era" (新时代爱国主义教育实施纲要, *Xin Shidai Aiguo Zhuyi Jiaoyu Shishi Gangyao*), document issued by the CCP Central Committee and PRC State Council, Nov. 13, 2019. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2019/1113/c1001-31451633.html>. All translations are the responsibility of the author.

INSTC vs. BRI: The India-China Competition Over the Port of Chabahar and Infrastructure in Asia

By Syed Fazl-e-Haider

Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the central component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in South Asia, has been a source of significant attention and controversy ([China Brief](#), January 12, 2018; [China Brief](#), February 15). Parts of South Asia, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe, however, are also host to another ambitious infrastructure program: the "International North-South Transport Corridor" (INSTC), a transportation development plan first established in 2000 by Iran, Russia and India. The INSTC

envisioned a network to connect Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf ports and rail centers to the Caspian Sea, and then onwards through the Russian Federation to St. Petersburg and northern Europe. [1]

INSTC is the key to India's strategic plans for regional political and economic connectivity—and in turn, India's operational control over Iran's southeastern port of Chabahar is key to India's ambitions for the INSTC. Chabahar is strategically located as Iran's largest port outside the Gulf, offering open access to the Indian Ocean. India's role in Chabahar stands in competition with plans by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to develop the port of Gwadar, just over 100 miles to the east in Pakistan's southwest province of Balochistan. The competing plans for these ports on the Gulf of Oman highlight both the competition between CPEC and INSTC, and the broader geopolitical competition in South Asia between India and China.



Image: A map of the envisioned International North South Transportation Corridor (INSTC), which is intended to connect South Asia with Russia and northern Europe, with Iran acting as a key transportation center. The INSTC, of which India is a major sponsor, stands in competition with China's own infrastructure plans in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). (Image source: [INSTC](#), undated)

The Importance of INSTC and the Chabahar Port for India...

Chabahar is important for New Delhi to secure its economic and strategic interests in a region where China's influence is rapidly increasing. Iran, India, and Afghanistan signed a trilateral transit agreement in Tehran in May 2016, which will allow the three countries to open new routes of connection by converting Chabahar port into a transit hub. Per a further agreement made in December 2018, the Indian government has assumed

responsibility for port operations in the “India Ports Global Chabahar Free Zone” (IPGCFZ) ([Times of India](#), January 7).

Chabahar port and the INSTC offer India an alternative route for its trade with Europe, which is currently carried out primarily via the longer and more expensive Red Sea-Suez Canal-Mediterranean Sea route. Furthermore, Chabahar has been exempted from U.S. sanctions on Iran due to the port’s importance to India, and its role as a supply route to Afghanistan ([Radio Farda](#), November 6, 2018). India also sees Chabahar as a strategic counterweight to Pakistan's Gwadar port, which is being run and developed by China. India gets access to Afghanistan through Chabahar, bypassing overland routes through Pakistan—India’s arch-rival, and a close Chinese ally. India has also maintained hopes that Iran would allow India to use the Chabahar port to counter the PRC in the event that Beijing decides to station its own naval ships in Gwadar ([India Today](#), August 10, 2017).



Image: A view of the port facility of Chabahar in southeastern Iran. Indian representatives have assumed responsibility for managing the port, which could become a key node associated with the International North South Transportation Corridor (INSTC)—and a competitor with China’s plans to build up the port of Gwadar in southwestern Pakistan. (Image source: [Tehran Times](#))

All is not well in the Iran-India relationship, however. Tehran has warned that India’s decision to shut down oil imports from Iran—due to sanctions imposed by the United States—is hurting India’s future in Chabahar ([Economic Times \(India\)](#), May 24). Iranian Ambassador to India Ali Chegeni has also expressed concern over the slow pace of India’s development work at Chabahar port, complaining that it has been “very slow,” and that trade to Afghanistan is “much lower” than it should be. Due to delays in Indian plans, Tehran has decided to complete by 2021, through its own resources, a railway line connecting Chabahar port to the Afghan border at Zahedan ([The Hindu](#), September 11).

...and China's Competing Interests in Chabahar and Central Asian Infrastructure

Delays and complications involving CPEC projects in Pakistan have reportedly led the PRC to show greater interest in infrastructure investments in Iran, particularly in the hydrocarbon sector ([China Brief](#), November 1). This interest has been reciprocated by Tehran: for example, expressing disappointment over India's waning interest in liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports, Ambassador Chegeni has indicated Tehran's interest in building an LNG pipeline to China as a component of CPEC ([The Hindu](#), September 11). Iran may also be seeking to balance against India's role in Chabahar: during a visit to Pakistan last year by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, Iran made offers to both Pakistan and China to participate in the development of Chabahar. Zarif stated that Tehran's relations with New Delhi are not directed against Islamabad, and that Iran would not allow anybody to hurt Pakistan from its territory ([Dawn](#), March 13, 2018).

In a more recent visit in May, Zarif proposed to connect Chabahar with Pakistan's own port of Gwadar in order to promote trade and commerce in the region. Zarif stated that "We can connect Chabahar and Gwadar, and then... connect Gwadar to our entire railroad system, from Iran to the North Corridor, through Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, and also through Azerbaijan, Russia, and through Turkey" ([Pakistan Today](#), May 25). Iran's proposals were welcomed in Pakistan, as the two countries are already discussing a new ferry service that would link ports in Gwadar and Karachi with the Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas ([Economic Times \(India\)](#), April 11, 2018).

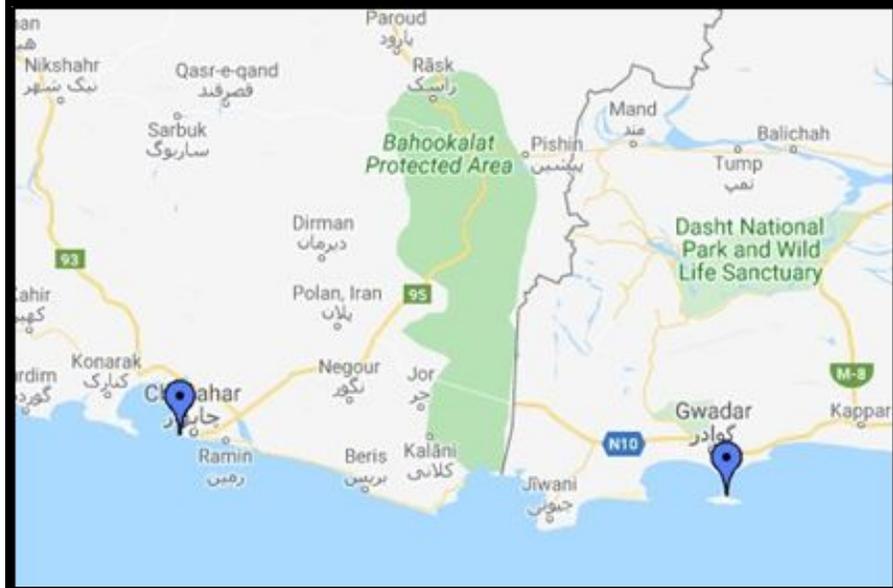


Image: The southeast Iranian port of Chabahar (operated by India) and the southwest Pakistani port of Gwadar (built and operated by China) lay approximately 100 miles apart on the coastline of the Gulf of Oman. The ports have become a focus of India-China geopolitical competition in South and Central Asia. (Image source: Google Maps)

With its capacity for huge infrastructure investments, China's potential participation in developing (or operating) Chabahar port is bound to send ripples of anxiety through New Delhi. The Chinese-run Gwadar port in neighboring Pakistan provides China a shorter overland route for Gulf oil imports relative to the maritime route through the Strait of Malacca. Beijing sees in Iran's Chabahar port another overland option for its oil imports, which could complement its use of Gwadar ([Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst](#), 26 November 2014.) Chinese and Pakistani involvement with the Chabahar port could be a strategic loss for India, and New Delhi has responded: Tehran's reservations and growing tilt towards China forced Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to discuss Chabahar with Iran on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in September. [2]

The PRC is also exploring increased infrastructure ties with Afghanistan, which could undercut one of the key benefits to India of its role in Chabahar. In September, Islamabad hosted the third round of the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' meeting, in which the three countries reaffirmed their commitment to further strengthen their relations and "advancing connectivity under the Belt and Road Initiative... and other regional economic initiatives." The three sides also agreed to pursue "China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Plus Cooperation" (CAPPC), to include projects such as construction of the Peshawar-Kabul Motorway ([Afghanistan Foreign Ministry](#), September 8).

This route could serve ultimately to link landlocked Afghanistan with Pakistan's strategic port of Gwadar—and potentially, achieve Afghanistan's formal participation in CPEC alongside Pakistan. Afghanistan is among 86 countries that have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China, but which have not yet joined the BRI. China sees strategically located Afghanistan as a bridge to help expand connectivity between East, South and Central Asian regions under the BRI. The BRI is critically important for landlocked Afghanistan, as joining the initiative could help it regain its historical position as an "Asian transit and trade roundabout" connecting South Asia to Central Asia, and East Asia to West Asia. In 2017, China for the first time invited Afghanistan to join the CPEC, but Kabul showed reluctance. In 2018, Beijing repeated its offer in the second "Trilateral Dialogue," but the Afghan government did not respond. In light of the Peshawar-Kabul Motorway agreement, Kabul now appears willing to join the CPEC bandwagon ([Pakistan Today](#), September 8).

Conclusion

The PRC is advancing the BRI in full momentum, trampling all the other interregional and intraregional connectivity plans and visions under its feet. BRI is a modernized version of the ancient Silk Road, and represents China's dual strategic and economic initiative to enhance its influence through Asia. The development of infrastructure projects under the BRI, and growing Chinese influence across South and West Asia, have thrown India's strategic INSTC connectivity plan into uncertainty. The \$62 billion CPEC, which faces India's opposition, is ruining New Delhi's strategic connectivity plans in the region.

India, which the United States sees as a counterweight to a rising China, has been engaged over the past two decades in implementing its regional plans for connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia. Iran's Chabahar port plays a key role in this, offering India a route to bypass Pakistan, its arch rival in South Asia. China's BRI has, however, knocked out India's strategic ambitions connected to the INSTC. China's Belt and Road connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia through Pakistan's Gwadar port are sidelining India and loosening its grip over Chabahar port. China is indicating to India that if there is to be a regional connectivity plan, it will develop only under one umbrella: the BRI.

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Notes

[1] The original INSTC members were Iran, India, and the Russian Federation. Membership was later expanded to eleven additional members: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, Belarus, Oman, Syria, and Bulgaria (observer status). See: INSTC website (undated). <http://instcorridor.com/>.

[2] The timing of the meeting between Iranian president Hassan Rouhani and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi was important, as it came two weeks after Tehran expressed its grievances over India's reductions in oil imports from Iran and the slow pace of work in Chabahar ([Economic Times \(India\)](#), September 27; [India Today](#), September 26).

Facing Up to China's Military Interests in the Arctic

By Anne-Marie Brady

Introduction

China's military ambitions in the Arctic, and its growing strategic partnership with Russia, have rung alarm bells in many governments. In May 2019, for the first time, the U.S. Department of Defense annual report on China's military capabilities had a section on China's military interests in the Arctic and the possibility of Chinese submarines operating in the Arctic basin ([Department of Defense](#), May 2019). In August 2019, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg raised concerns about what he diplomatically referred to as "China's increased presence in the Arctic" ([Reuters](#), August 7).

From a nuclear security point of view, the Arctic is China's vulnerable northern flank. The flight path of U.S. and Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) targeted at China transit the Arctic. [1] Key components of the U.S. missile defense system are also located in the Arctic.

Chinese submarine-based ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) operating in the Arctic could restore China's nuclear deterrence capability ([Huanqiu Ribao](#), October 28, 2013). China currently operates six nuclear-powered attack submarines, four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, and fifty diesel attack submarines, with more under construction. If Chinese nuclear-armed submarines were able to access the Arctic basin undetected, this would be a game changer for the United States, the NATO states and their partners, and the wider Asia-Pacific ([Huanqiu Ribao](#), April 11, 2012). China would be able to target missiles at the United States and Europe with ease; such ability would strengthen China's military dominance in Asia and bolster China's emerging position as a global military power. [2]



Image: A PLA Navy JIN-class (Type-094) ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) underway for a naval parade near Qingdao (Shandong Province), on April 23, 2019. (Source: [Defense News](#)).

The History of China's Arctic Submarine Ambitions

Mao Zedong set the goal of getting a Chinese submarine into the Arctic as early as 1959, when the *USS Skate* surfaced above the Arctic ice and launched the era of continuous nuclear deterrence at sea. The Arctic environment makes antisubmarine warfare challenging: the ambient noise of the Arctic pack ice renders acoustic listening devices less effective, while the opaqueness of the ice defies visual monitoring methods. Mao Zedong asked the Soviet Union to share nuclear submarine technology with China, but Khrushchev declined the request, saying China was protected by Soviet submarines. Mao Zedong is reputed to have declared that China would develop its own nuclear submarines, "Even if it takes ten thousand years!" ([Xinhua](#), July 16, 2009).

China threw its scarce resources at the nuclear submarine project throughout the 1960s, launching its first rudimentary nuclear submarine in 1974. In 1981, China's then-Minister of Defense Geng Biao authorized a budget of RMB10 billion to build six nuclear submarines—what became China's *Xia*-class submarines—with the specific goal of combatting U.S. maritime power. The following year, Geng's decision was severely criticized as the submarines would be defunct even before they were launched, as “they cannot cruise underwater in the Arctic Ocean without being detected by the other side. Thus, these submarines cannot serve as a deterrent force against any of the powerful nations.” [3] Geng Biao lost his position soon after these comments were made public.

Xi Jinping, the current President of China and Party Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was personal secretary to Geng Biao from 1979-1982. He will be acutely aware of the strategic importance of both the Arctic sea route and the Arctic nuclear missile route to China's security. Moreover, because of People's Liberation Army (PLA) involvement in setting up China's first Antarctic base during the same time period, Xi will also have long been more conscious than most senior CCP leaders about the strategic importance of Antarctica for China. [4]

In the early 1980s, Minister Geng's investment in redundant technology was a costly mistake, and one which China could not afford to fix at the time. But China's rapid economic growth and technological progress over the last two decades has changed that situation. China has steadily expanded its submarine capabilities. In 2013, China demonstrated the capacity to take its nuclear-armed submarines beyond China's near seas and into the Indian Ocean. China's nuclear submarines can now launch missiles at targets 4,600 miles away ([Wall Street Journal](#), October 24, 2014). China's land-based nuclear arsenal targeting the US already has an Arctic trajectory ([Huanqiu Junshi Wang](#), July 21, 2015). In 2015, *Global Times* predicted that the next breakthrough for Chinese submarine forces would be accessing the Arctic Ocean ([Global Times](#), November 11, 2013).

The Role of Russia and the BRI

Russia's negative attitude has always been a sticking factor in China's long-held Arctic military plans. People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarines transiting to the Arctic must get through several chokepoints: (1) the straits that divide the Japanese archipelago; (2) the Bering Strait; and (3) Russia's Severnaya Zemlya and New Siberian Islands along the Northern Sea Route. Japan, Russia and the United States closely observe these chokepoints and waters. A further potential barrier to PLAN sailing in Arctic waters is that there is a scarcity of detailed charts on Arctic sailing routes and bathymetrics. Currently Russia is reputed to have the most precise route charts, though China's polar researchers have mapped submarine and shipping routes in the Arctic for at least the last ten years. But what if Russia not only tolerated China's submarines operating in its waters, but actively facilitated their presence there?

In May 2019, in a report for a Russian military magazine, Russian military specialist Alexander Shirokorad raised the possibility of Russia providing port support for Chinese submarines in the Arctic and proposed a joint Russia-China air and missile defense system for the Arctic ([Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye](#), May 17, 2019). In August 2019, the Russian ambassador to China invited Beijing to invest in port and infrastructure development in the Russian Arctic in order to open up the Northern Sea Route ([SCMP](#), April 18, 2019). China's Arctic submarine plan will require nuclear icebreaker back-up and friendly ports. Russia has ten nuclear icebreakers (the United States has none).

Russia is also an enthusiastic partner in Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes plans for a "Polar Silk Road." China incorporated the Arctic into the BRI more than five years ago ([Zhongguo Haiyang Zaixian](#), November 25, 2014). Among Arctic region countries, Finland, Iceland, and Russia have signed on to the BRI; while Denmark, Norway, and Sweden have adopted a wait-and-see approach. Canada and the United States have made it clear they will not sign on.

BRI partners participate in China's Digital Silk Road, which utilises Beidou-3, China's indigenous global navigation system. The Beidou ground station at Norway's polar scientific hub Svalbard is crucial for the global coverage of Beidou. By 2020, Beidou will have accuracy on par with the U.S. Global Positioning System (GPS) ([Guangming Daily](#), September 12). Beidou, like GPS, provides missile positioning and timing, as well as access to fleet-based broadband for unclassified and classified systems and environmental situational awareness. During a potential conflict, if the United States denied access to GPS, China and Russia could employ Beidou and the Russian GLONASS to guide strike weapons and other military operations.

The United States now has two near-peer competitors to contend with in the Arctic, and increasingly, both competitors are cooperating on military matters. Yet we should not over-emphasize the importance of journalistic statements and political rhetoric on Chinese investment in the Russian High North. China's Arctic military interests do not depend on Russian collaboration and support.

China's Long-Term Plans for the Arctic

China has quite a long-term agenda in the Arctic. China has not been transparent about its intentions in foreign language materials; though if one can access the Chinese language discourse the policies and intentions are very clear. This reflects longstanding habits of CCP discourse management, whereby there is one message for foreigners and another for domestic audiences. [5] Foreign interlocutors trying to ascertain China's Arctic policies need to access the message aimed at foreigners, as well as what is not intended for foreign eyes and ears.

In January 2018, China's State Council Information Office released a white paper on "China's Arctic Policy" ([PRC State Council Information Office](#), January 26, 2018). This paper gave a partial account of China's Arctic

strategy, highlighting scientific and economic interests in the region while eliding China's military and strategic interests. China's polar analysts divide China's Arctic interests into three core priorities:

- Security (安全, *anquan*): the Arctic is crucial for China's nuclear deterrence.
- Resources (资源, *ziyuan*): China wants access to Arctic minerals and hydrocarbons, fishing, tourism, and transport routes.
- Strategic science and technology (科技, *keji*): access to the Arctic is essential for the roll-out of the Beidou global navigational system, China's rival to GPS. Beidou is crucial for China's cyber warfare capabilities and C4ISR.

The PLA is an important actor in planning China's future polar strategy, and its role has long been disguised by China's polar science program. But since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, China has been more and more upfront about its interests and priorities in the Arctic. The PLAN is integrating recent political, economic, and strategic developments in the Arctic into its global maritime strategy. The PLAN is the world's largest navy in terms of personnel, and second only to the U.S. Navy in fleet tonnage. In other words, China is steadily moving from being a land-based regional military power to becoming a maritime power with a global reach.

The PLA's military expansionism strategy is heavily influenced by the thinking of two foreign military theorists: U.S. naval historian Alfred Mahan, and the founding father of modern geopolitical thinking, Harold Mackinder. The CCP is following Mahan's recipe for rising powers: develop a blue water navy to protect sea lines of communication (SLOCs); develop global markets; gain privileged access to resources and/or establish colonies to secure resources; and promote maritime consciousness in the population. China's significant global shipping interests are the official justification for the PLAN's expanded maritime strategy and capabilities. [6] As Arctic shipping, tourism, scientific expeditions, and Arctic oil and mineral exploitation become more significant for China, the PLAN may be expected to become more active in protecting Chinese interests in the Arctic.

China's Maritime Presence in the Arctic

China's first ever freedom of navigation operation was conducted in U.S. territorial waters near Alaska on September 2, 2015 ([SCMP](#), September 4, 2015). Five PLAN vessels, consisting of three surface warships, an amphibious vessel, and a supply ship, were participating in a military exercise with Russian forces near Vladivostok when they took an unlikely detour to the U.S. Aleutian Islands before heading home to Chinese waters. One month later, the PLAN gave a further demonstration of its Arctic interests by sending a destroyer, frigate, and a supply ship on goodwill visits to Denmark, Finland, and Sweden.

In order to operate safely in Arctic waters, the PLAN must have: accurate bathymetric charts; the capability to monitor Arctic atmospheric conditions and utilize remote sensing to identify the thickness of Arctic ice;

submarine personnel experienced in under-ice operations; submarines capable of navigating the aforementioned series of chokepoints safely and secretly; a Chinese nuclear icebreaker; and access to friendly seaports and airports in the Arctic.

The Chinese polar science program's new research vessel, *XueLong 2*, launched in July 2019. It was built to PLAN specifics and is equipped for bathymetric surveys ([Xinhua](#), July 11). In September 2019, China successfully launched its first polar observation satellite. BNU-1 will monitor sea ice drift and ice shelf collapse, which will greatly improve China's remote sensing capability and help expand Arctic shipping ([NASASpaceflight.com](#), September 12).

In 2018, China's State Oceanic Administration announced that it was planning to build a nuclear icebreaker. (The PLAN currently has 4 diesel icebreakers for port operations.) It will be used for polar science expeditions and to support Chinese shipping in the Arctic. It will also be built to PLA specifications and could be used to rescue Chinese submarines in the Arctic. In a time of war, State Oceanic Administration vessels are under PLA command.

Since 2003, China has followed the example of other polar great powers such as Russia and the United States in setting up short-term Arctic ice camps (冰站, *bingzhan*). This enables China to avoid Arctic sovereignty issues while establishing a scientific base useful for strategic science. [7] The United States uses Arctic ice camps as temporary command centers for training submariners to operate under the ice ([Undersea Warfare](#), Summer 2018).

China and the Northern Sea Route

Chinese researchers long ago identified the importance of the Arctic sea route, describing it in 2010 as a "strategic military route" and noting that "whoever controls the Arctic will have the upper hand over other opponents." [8] Chinese researchers also stress the usefulness of the Arctic sea route for enabling China to evade existing chokepoints. [9]

China—like the United States—regards Arctic sea routes as international straits, but neither Russia nor Canada accepts this position. China favors accessing the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as it crosses directly over the Arctic Ocean. China is adamant that it must be included in setting the norms for international shipping along this route. [10] Beijing stresses its interest in the Arctic sea route as a means to position China as having legitimate interests in the Arctic region, so that it can ensure that it has a seat at the table in any future Arctic-related negotiations. [11]

From the point of view of China and the United States, the opening of the Northern Sea Route as a regular, ice-free sea route in the summer months could turn Russian and Canadian territorial waters into

acknowledged shipping straits—which would mean that international-waters rules would then apply for submarine transit. [12]



Image: The Northern Sea Route, which could open new avenues for maritime trade between Asia and Europe—and potentially, new operating areas for PLA Navy vessels. (Source: ArcticPortal.org)

Conclusion

China has a credibility gap when it comes to Arctic affairs, so it is working hard to shape the international narrative on its involvement in the region. China's military interests in the Arctic are missing from the narrative China promotes to foreigners, but are prominent in materials available in Chinese. Understanding the pace and extent of China's Arctic military interests requires access to Chinese language sources and knowledge of China's interlocked strategic, economic and science activities in the Arctic.

China's military interests in the Arctic are merged with commercial objectives, what I call the Party-State-Military-Market nexus (党政军企共建, *dang-zhen-jun-qi gongjian*). Some of China's Arctic science activities have both civil and military use ends. [13] The challenge for other states in the Arctic will be working out which partnerships with China are benign or mutually beneficial, and which will serve as force multipliers for the PLA. If China succeeds in its military goals in the Arctic, then its ascendance as a new global power will be certain.

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Notes

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