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**The CCP's Renewed Focus on Ideological Conditioning, Part 2:  
The New Five-Year Plan for Training Party Cadres**

*By John Dotson*

*Author's Note:* This is the second part of a two-part series that addresses new directives issued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the field of ideological "education." The first part ([The CCP's Renewed Focus on Ideological Indoctrination, Part 1: The 2019 Guidelines for "Patriotic Education"](#)), which appeared in our December 10 issue, examined new directives for intensified "patriotic education" among Chinese youth and the general public. This second part examines a new five-year plan unveiled by the CCP in November 2019 for more rigorous ideological indoctrination among its own cadres.

**Introduction: The Drive for Increased Ideological Conformity in the CCP**

The leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long pointed to the collapse of the Soviet Union as a cautionary example, and party organs have produced books and films that warn of the dire consequences that would follow from any steps to loosen the CCP's grip on the economy, public discourse, or political power. These materials have been made the focus of mandatory study under CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping ([SCMP](#), November 18, 2013). Alongside alleged villains such as the reformist Mikhail Gorbachev, ideological laxity among Soviet Communist Party members has been identified as a key factor in the downfall of the Soviet state. [1]

To address this, the CCP leadership has undertaken concerted efforts throughout 2019 to bolster ideological indoctrination among its own membership. Party members have been made subject to mandatory use of the smartphone app *Xuexi Qiangguo* (学习强国), which was introduced in January of this year. [2] Users are required to meet quotas of “study points” for spending time on the app, reading and commenting on articles, and taking tests about party policies ([SCMP](#), February 14, 2019). In addition to serving as a channel for ideological indoctrination, the app also serves as a surveillance tool: it both “collects and sends detailed app log reports on a daily basis, containing a wealth of user data and app activity,” and contains “code that amounts to a backdoor to rooted devices... granting complete administrator-level access to a user’s phone” ([Open Technology Fund](#), September 12).



*Image: Staff at the Guiyang City (Guizhou Province) Children’s Hospital gather to watch the film Twenty-Year Reflections on the Death of the Soviet Party and Nation (苏联亡党亡国二十年祭, Sulian Wangdang Wangguo Ershi Nianji), August 30, 2019. (Source: [Sohu](#))*

The CCP's current official ideology 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*). This ideological program is grounded in Xi's ever-growing cult of personality, and relies heavily on the dogmatic repetition of slogans rather than clearly articulated ideas. In broad terms, it strikes three general themes: (1) achieving the "China Dream" (中国梦, *Zhongguo Meng*) of restored national greatness; (2) unyielding CCP control over politics and Chinese society; and (3) continuing reforms in party-state institutions and governance. The latter element is often expressed in terms of greater centralization of power at the top echelons of the CCP, and demands for stricter personal loyalty to Xi Jinping ([China Brief](#), November 19). [3]

### **The New 2019 Plan for Training Party Cadres**

On November 11, the CCP Central Committee Office released the *2019-2023 National Work Program for the Education and Cultivation of Party Members* (2019—2023年全国党员教育培训工作规划 / 2019—2023 Nian Quanguo Dangyuan Jiaoyu Peixun Gongzuo Guihua) (hereafter "Program") ([People's Daily](#), November 12). This document was released concurrently with another major CCP policy document pertaining to "patriotic education" among both Chinese youth and the general public ([China Brief](#), December 10). Like the latter document, the *Program* demands strict fidelity to Marxism-Leninism, and all of the CCP's official ideological theories from Mao up to the present day (*Program*, art. 1).

#### "Xi Jinping Thought" as the Foundation for CCP Ideological Training

The *Program* is effusive in its promotion of Xi's cult of personality, invoking the official theory of "Xi Jinping Thought" (hereafter "XJT") nineteen times. Party members are "to be made aware of [XJT] weapons in [their] minds" (*Program*, sec. 2, art. 3), and are advised that "under the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought... [we must] unify willpower, unify action, and march forward in step" with one another (*Program*, sec. 1). The *Program* also reiterates component aspects of XJT that demand intensified loyalty to the central CCP leadership, and to Xi himself as the undisputed "core" (核心, *hexin*) of that leadership. [4] Even outside the formal rubric of XJT, Xi's speeches and favored slogans are repeatedly invoked as a guide for party cadres working in different economic sectors and different parts of the country (*Program*, sec. 2, art. 2-3).

#### Party Cadre "Education and Cultivation" Program Management

The CCP Central Organization Department (中央组织部, *Zhongyang Zuzhi Bu*) is designated as the lead agency responsible for national-level cadre education program management and curriculum development (*Program*, sec. 5, art. 2-3). Regional organization departments are similarly given primary responsibility at the local level; in this, they are to coordinate with other "relevant functional departments" in managing the "party member education and cultivation joint conference system" (党员教育培训联席会议制度, *dangyuan jiaoyu peixun lianxi huiyi zhidu*) (*Program*, sec. 5, art. 1).

The cadre training *Program* combines national-level direction with local implementation. Party committees at the county level and above (县级以上党委, *xianji yishang dangwei*) are directed to lay out requirements for subordinate echelons, and to produce an annual study plan that will include a list of books and articles for required reading (*Program*, sec. 2, art. 1). Party committees at the county level and above are also to designate cadre education instructors, selecting candidates who possess "exceptional political quality" and "high standards in theory" (*Program*, sec. 5, art. 2). For their part, "grassroots party organizations" (基层党组织, *ji ceng dang zuzhi*) should "integrate daily education management and earnestly implement" the requirements issued from above (*Program*, sec. 2, art. 1).



*Image: Members of the Xinyang City (Henan Province) branch of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (controlled by the CCP United Front Work Department) listen to a speech contest on the theme of "Studying and Implementing Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era and the Spirit of the 19th Party Congress" (May 2018). (Source: [Zhong Gong Wang](#))*

The directives of the *Program* are to be binding on all civilian party branch organizations. However, the military is to follow its own plans for ideological training: the document states that, "on the basis of the spirit of this plan," the CCP Central Military Commission will be responsible for "formulating implementation opinions" of its own for cadre education in the People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police (*Program*, sec. 5, art. 3)

### *The Party Ideological Education Curriculum*

The *Program* lays out seven basic functional areas for required ideological training, as indicated below:

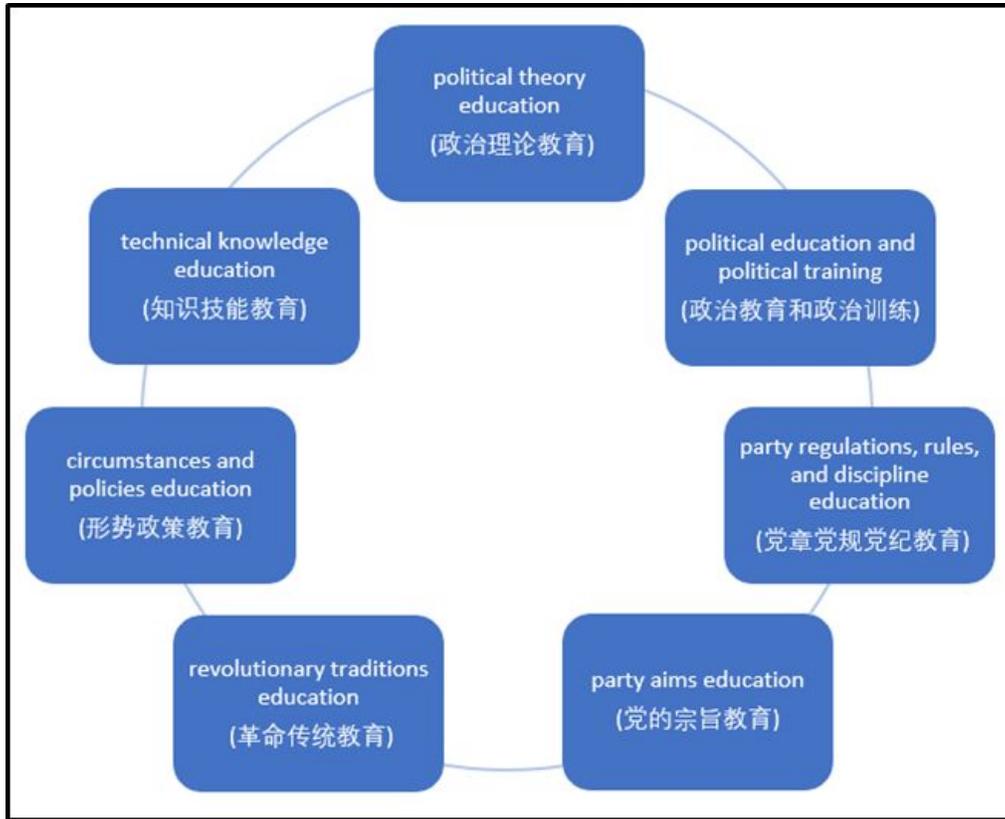


Image: The seven functional areas of required ideological training, as laid out in the CCP's new five-year plan for the ideological conditioning of party members. (Source: Compiled by the author.)

These seven areas in turn are to be suffused throughout with "party nature education" (党性教育, *dangxing jiaoyu*) and "ideals conviction education" (理想信念教育, *lixiang xinnian jiaoyu*) (Program, sec. 3, art. 1). This provision finds a parallel in the indoctrination plan for youth, which decreed that school curricula across all subject areas must be filled with "patriotic" content ([China Brief](#), December 10). Like the latter document, the *Program* is concerned with people of all ages, but youth are a particular priority: local party chairmen are directed to expose younger party members to particularly stringent political education and discipline, so that these young people will "inherit red genes" (传承红色基因, *chuancheng hongse jiyin*) and "cultivate a spirit of struggle" (培养奋斗精神, *peiyang douzheng jingshen*) (Program, sec. 3, art. 3).

#### Instructional Methods and Requirements for Party Members

The *Program* emphasizes a range of methods to achieve these goals. Party organizations at multiple levels are directed to establish XJT teaching sites, and to organize public lectures and discussion forums in which leading cadres (领导干部, *lingdao ganbu*) play a prominent role (Program, sec. 2, art. 2). Some ideological training requirements are to be addressed through private study, with an emphasis on *Xuexi Qiangguo* and other official online platforms. [5] The document also clearly states that such platforms are to be used to

support “big data” analysis of trends in party member study (*Program*, sec. 4, art. 3). Party members are expected to study in their off-work hours, with an emphasis on repetitive, day-to-day exposure to prescribed propaganda materials (*Program*, sec. 4, art. 1; sec. 2, art. 2).

Despite the emphasis on internet programs, the new vision of ideological conditioning is far from solitary. Party members are directed to visit communist historical sites together, and to renew oaths on their “political birthday” of party membership (*Program*, sec. 4, art. 2). Borrowing a page from the CCP’s Maoist legacy, members are also directed to maintain “democratic life meetings” (民主生活会, *minzhu shenghuo hui*) in which they will “seriously criticize and conduct self-criticism” in order to improve party discipline and governance. Such methods will promote a “political sense of honor” and “organizational sense of belonging” to bind party members together (*Program*, sec. 4, art. 1).

The *Program* places a particular emphasis on “party cadre collective training” (党员集中培训, *dangyuan jizhong peixun*)—a term that is not clearly defined, but appears to indicate periodic meetings for all members of the local party organization in a particular locality for the purpose of ideological instruction (see *accompanying image*). Per the plan, “party committees at various levels” (各级党委, *geji dangwei*) must organize such training annually, and county-level party schools (党校, *dangxiao*) are to take a prominent role in supporting these events (*Program*, sec. 4, art. 4; sec. 5, art. 2).



*Image: CCP members in Jili Township (Yunnan Province) hold a collective training session on the theme of “Ten Thousand Party Members Entering Party Schools,” May 24, 2018. (Source: [People’s Daily](#))*

In regards to this collective training, specific requirements are levied for party members (*Program*, sec. 4, art. 4). These requirements are:

- Grassroots-level party secretaries must participate in collective training at the county level or above at least once a year;
- Newly appointed grassroots-level party secretaries must participate in relevant training within 6 months of taking their position;
- New party members must participate in collective training within their probationary period—and within 1 year of full membership, must also attend higher-level (上级, *shangji*) collective training;
- Party members must participate in collective training and study for at least 32 hours each year;
- Grassroots-level party secretaries and party organization “team members” (班子成员, *banzi chengyuan*) must participate in training and collective study for at least 56 hours each year, to include at least one instance of collective training.

## Conclusion

In recent decades, there has been a trend among many Western commentators to downplay the role of ideology in Chinese statecraft. By such analyses, the modern-day incarnation of the CCP is best understood as an institution that practices authoritarian, developmental state capitalism, but long ago abandoned its foundational ideology—in effect, to say that the Chinese Communist Party long ago ceased to be truly communist. These views have been grounded in uncritical assumptions, and in credulous acceptance of the CCP’s propaganda directed to foreign audiences, rather than study of the copious documentary record regarding the CCP’s own internal discourses.

While cynicism about communist dogma may well be widespread throughout Chinese society and officialdom, the senior echelon of CCP leadership—in a direct trajectory from Tiananmen up to the present day—has been carefully self-selected to ensure that only faithful advocates of the CCP’s ruling position and ideological formulae may enter the sanctums of power ([China Brief](#), June 4). Even the seemingly mild-mannered Hu Jintao was a true believer in the communist system, who espoused traditional communist principles in every major public address and oversaw an intensification of state control over public discourse ([Xinhua](#), April 29, 2004; [China Daily](#), July 10, 2007).

Hu’s far more brash successor has thrown all of this into overdrive since ascending to power in 2012. Xi has demonstrated both that he regards fidelity to old school Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology as key to the CCP’s own survival, and that he views himself as a great communist leader and theoretician. The time is long overdue to take seriously the foundational worldview of CCP leaders and their pronouncements on ideology—as well as the CCP’s manifest ambitions to propagate its ideology throughout Chinese society as a whole.

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**Notes**

[1] Many examples of official CCP media materials on the fall of the Soviet Union could be cited, but two of the most prominent are: *Be Vigilant for Danger in Times of Peace: Twenty Years of Historical Lessons from the Death of the Soviet Communist Party* [居安思危：苏共亡党二十年的历史教训, *Juan Siwei: Sugong Wangdang Ershi Nian de Lishi Jiaoxun*] (Social Sciences Academic Press, 2011); and *Twenty-Year Reflections on the Death of the Soviet Party and Nation* [苏联亡党亡国二十年祭, *Sulian Wangdang Wangguo Ershi Nianji*], <https://tv.sohu.com/v/dXMvNTc5NTQzMC82MTE3ODk1NS5zaHRtbA==.html>.

[2] The title of this app (学习强国, *Xuexi Qiangguo*) is a play on words, which could be interpreted (and translated) in two different ways. The name could be translated as “Study (学习) for a Strong Country (强国).” However, the second character of the verb “study” (学习, *xuexi*) is also Xi Jinping’s surname; therefore, the title could also be interpreted as “Study Xi for a Strong Country.”

[3] Many references could be cited, but for one official source on the CCP’s current ideology, see: *Study Guidelines for 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学习纲要, *Xi Jinping Xin Shidai Zhongguo Tese Shehui Zhuyi Sixiang Xuexi Gangyao*), CCP Central Propaganda Dept. (June 2019). <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/68294/428935/>.

[4] The *Program* reiterates XJT’s component elements of the “four consciousnesses,” the “four confidences,” and the “two upholds” (*Program*, art. 1), which center upon loyalty to the CCP as an institution, and to Xi as its absolute leader. The “four consciousnesses” (四个意识, *sige yishi*) consist of “consciousness of politics, consciousness of the general situation, consciousness of the [party] core, and consciousness of alignment [with the party]” [政治意识、大局意识、核心意识、看齐意识]. [See: “Li Junru: Strengthening ‘The Four Consciousnesses’ Especially Consciousness of the Core and Consciousness of Alignment” [李君如：增强“四个意识”特别是核心意识和看齐意识], *People’s Daily Theory Channel*, March 20, 2017. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0320/c168824-29156444.html>.] The “four confidences” (四个自信, *sige zixin*) consist of maintaining “steadfast confidence in the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, confidence in theory, confidence in the system, [and] confidence in [our] culture” [坚定中国特色社会主义道路自信、理论自信、制度自信、文化自信]. [See: “Keeping Steadfast to the Fundamental Basis of the ‘Four Confidences’” [坚定“四个自信”的基本依据], *People’s Daily*, November 11, 2017. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0707/c49150-28532466.html>.] The “two upholds” (两个维护, *liangge weihu*) are to “resolutely uphold General Secretary Xi Jinping as the core of the party center, [and as holding] the core position of the entire party; [and to] resolutely uphold the authority of the party center and centralized, unified leadership” [坚决维护习近平总书记党中央的核心、全党的核心地位，坚决维护党中央权威和集中统一领导]. [See: Xue Wanbo [薛万博], “How to Correctly Understand ‘The Two Upholds’?” [如何正确理解“两个维护”?], *CCP News*, Feb. 22, 2019. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0222/c123889-30897358.html>.]

[5] The CCP Central Organization Department operates *Communist Party Member Net* [共产党员网] at: <http://www.12371.cn/>. The *Xuexi Qiangguo* app also has a parallel official information webpage administered by the CCP Central Propaganda Department at: [www.xuexi.cn](http://www.xuexi.cn).

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**Planting the Seed: Ethnic Policy in Xi Jinping's  
New Era of Cultural Nationalism**

*By James Leibold*

**Introduction**

The recent leak of secret Chinese Communist Party (CCP) documents in Xinjiang provides irrefutable evidence of the CCP's radical plan to fundamentally remake Xinjiang society and transform the thoughts and behaviour of its Muslim minorities ([ICIJ](#), 24 November). Less well known, however, is the role that Xi and his supporters have played in reorienting People's Republic of China (PRC) policy away from a previous tolerance of ethnocultural heterogeneity, and towards a virulent form of cultural nationalism that pathologizes dissent and diversity as an existential threat to the Party and the nation.

The self-described "New Era" (新时代, *Xin Shidai*) of Xi Jinping Thought marks a decisive departure from previous attempts to propitiate ethnic minorities through special preferences and a "loose reins" (羁縻, *jimi*) system of ethnic autonomy. This new orientation is most clearly articulated in a public speech Xi Jinping gave in September, suggesting a new level of confidence in the Party's attempt to build a "spiritual homeland" (精神家园, *jingshen jiyuan*) for China's fragile political unity in the face of deep internal resistance in the peripheries of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong.



*Image: Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, and other senior CCP officials greet delegates to the "National Ethnic Unity Advancement Commendation Conference" (全国民族团结进步表彰大会, Quanguo Minzu Tuanjie Jinbu Biaozhang Dahui), held in Beijing on September 27. (Source: [Zhongguo Zhengfu Wang](#))*

### **Ethnic Minority Groups and “Leap-Frog Style Development”**

The acceptance of ethnocultural diversity is foundational to the Leninist solution of the “national question” (or the “*minzu* question” in Chinese parlance), as different nationalities or ethnic groups (民族, *minzu*) are believed to progress at varying paces towards the shared goal of socialism and harmony. In China, the advanced Han majority must lead the way, but also assist their minority “brothers and sisters” in catching up. In response, revolutionary parties like the CCP should provide breathing space and preferential development assistance to build up the trust and mutual understanding required for national integration.

Following the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, CCP leaders (including Xi Jinping’s own father Xi Zhongxun) stressed socioeconomic development as the key to stability and prosperity along the ethnic frontier. Developing the economy of ethnic regions, Deng Xiaoping asserted in 1979, is the key to effectively solving the *minzu* question. [1] Jiang Zemin echoed Deng after coming to power in 1990: “The withering away of *minzu* groups is a long term historical process, and before this happens, it is a mistake to ignore ethnic differences and peculiarities.” [2] According to former CCP General Secretary Hu Yaobang, these differences could take a hundred, if not several hundred years, to disappear. [3]

In 1999 Jiang Zemin launched the Great Western Development Strategy (西部大开发, *Xibu Da Kaifa*), which saw billions of dollars in state and private company investment in frontier regions. These massive subsidies were meant to spur what Jiang’s successor Hu Jintao termed “leap-frog style development” (跨越式发展, *kuayue shi fazhan*) in ethnic regions ([Fenghuang](#), January 23, 2010). In order to protect autonomous development, the CCP passed the highly progressive and wide-ranging Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy in 1984, which laid the legal and institutional foundations for ensuring ethnic minorities are “masters over their own affairs.”

The result was rapid yet uneven economic growth, which created new inequalities and resentments among minority and majority populations alike. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 and a new cycle of ethnic unrest led to calls for a major rethink of Party policy ([China Brief](#), July 6, 2012). Zhu Weiqun, the former Executive Director of the United Front Work Department, stated in 2012: “We need to be sober minded that rapid socioeconomic development does not guarantee [ethnic] unity and stability, and resisting splitism, in particular, will not automatically resolve itself” ([Xuexi Shibao](#), February 14, 2012).

### **Forging “Communal Consciousness”**

In his September 27 speech before “national role models for ethnic unity,” Xi Jinping stressed the deep historical foundation of the Chinese people’s culture, racial and spiritual unity, in what was arguably his most comprehensive public statement to date on ethnic policy ([Xinhua](#), September 27). In the speech, Xi highlighted the importance of strengthening Party leadership over ethnic work, fostering inter-ethnic mingling, managing ethnic affairs according to law, and harshly dealing with acts of splitism, violence, extremism and

terror. When he spoke about “pushing forward with the equalization of basic service provisions,” Xi signalled the further winding back of ethnic-based preferential policies, in order to treat each ethnic group equally before the law.

Yet what Xi termed “the communal consciousness of the *Zhonghua* nation” (中华民族共同体意识, *Zhonghua minzu gongtongti yishi*) was the main focus of his speech and subsequent policy pronouncements and media commentary. Xi declared “cultural identity the deepest level of identity,” with the magnificent *Zhonghua* culture layered on thousands of years of “grand *minzu* fusion” (民族大融合, *minzu da ronghe*). “The spirit of the *Zhonghua* nation,” Xi announced, “is mutually fostered, inherited and developed by the people of each ethnic group—already agglutinated in their blood and soul—and propels forward the formidable spiritual force of China’s advancement.” In Xi’s own words, “Chinese civilization possesses a uniquely embracive and absorbent character.”

Previous acts of resistance in Tibet and Xinjiang have hardened Xi’s resolve to transform ethnic cultures and identities, and the ongoing rebellion in Hong Kong reinforces this imperative. “We say that development is the top priority and the basis for achieving lasting security, and that’s right,” Mr. Xi said in a confidential speech while touring Xinjiang in 2014. “But it would be wrong to believe that with development every problem solves itself” ([New York Times](#), November 17). In fact, the perceived successes of the Party’s mass internment strategy in Xinjiang—with Party officials regularly asserting the absence of “terror attacks”—is encouraging the expansion of cultural nationalist tactics throughout Chinese society.

Xi warned against complacency in his recent speech ([Xinhua](#), September 27), especially in the face of a “complex international and domestic environment.” Instead he called for a re-doubling of effort and a more proactive and energetic role for the Party in guiding this process of fusion forward. The “forging of *Zhonghua* communal consciousness” is now the “main thread” (主线, *zhuxian*) of ethnic work, with the phrase written into the Party’s constitution. In a directive issued by the CCP Central Committee and the PRC State Council following Xi’s speech, the Party spoke of the dangers of “bottlenecks” and poor policy implementation, and instructed cadres to push further and deeper in “constructing” (营造, *yingzao*), “casting” (铸牢, *zhulao*), and “smelting” (熔铸, *rongzhu*) the collective consciousness of the nation ([Xinhua](#), October 23).

### **Ramping Up “Patriotic Education”**

In November the CCP Central Committee and PRC State Council issued a directive on “promoting patriotic education in the new era” ([China Brief](#), December 10). This represents a major reboot of the 1994 patriotic education campaign launched by Jiang Zemin after the 1989 Tiananmen crisis. The directive calls for the updating of methods and “vehicles” for instilling patriotism across Chinese society—including the promotion of “red tourism,” flag raising ceremonies, commemorative activities, and the celebration of traditional *Zhonghua* festivals and culture. Here ethnic minorities must conform to Han norms, with Uyghurs forced to eat pork dumplings when celebrating Chinese New Year ([ChinaAid](#), February 15, 2018) and Tibetans asked

to don “Han clothing” (汉服, *hanfu*) in the name of carrying forward traditional *Zhonghua* culture ([Zhongguo Xizang Wang](#), November 20, 2018). Xi Jinping has previously called on Party officials to “discard the dross and select the essence; weed out the chaff and bring forth new roots” when it comes to ethnic minority cultures ([Qinghai Ribao](#), September, 16, 2018).

Education is now the forefront of ethnic work. The Directive insists the Party actively “guide the people in establishing and persisting with the correct view of the fatherland, nation, culture and history, and constantly enhance the sense of belonging, identity, dignity and honor of the *Zhonghua* nation” ([Xinhua](#), November 12). Local study sessions are being held in Xinjiang, Tibet and other minority areas, where patriotic and ethnic unity education is now dubbed “an engineering project of the soul” (灵魂工程, *linghun gongcheng*) ([Renmin Kandian](#), November 19).



Image: A propaganda banner produced for Zhongshan Polytechnic Institute exhorts viewers to “Deepen and Expand Ethnic Unity Education, Sing the Melody of Ethnic Unity Development” (深入开展民族团结教育，唱响各民族团结发展主旋律 / Shenru kaizhan minzu tuanjie jiaoyu, changxiang ge minzu tuanjie fazhan zhuxuanlu).

(Source: [Baidu Images](#))

In his September speech, Xi Jinping urged Party officials “to plant the seed of love for *Zhonghua* deep in the soul of each and every child” ([Xinhua](#), September 27). “Culture,” Xi told the gathering of ethnic role models, “is the soul of every nation and cultural identity is the root artery of national unity.” In fact, the narrow focus on economic development in the past left China vulnerable to outside meddling, according to Zhu Weiqun, with “hostile foreign forces” exploiting ethnic sentiments and differences in order to weaken and disintegrate China ([Huanqiu Shibao](#), September 20).

Schools are the main “battlefield” in ethnic unity education, with Party officials urged to ensure that patriotism “enters classrooms, enters teaching materials, and enters pupil’s minds so the seed of ethnic unity can take root and blossom in the youth and students of all ethnic groups” ([Neimenggu Zizhiq](#), September 22). Yet this

educational work must also “push forward in all directions,” and become normalized across all Party organs, enterprises, communities, villages, places of worship, and the internet, where “big data technology” should be harnessed to promote positive cultural exchanges.

### **Tightening Up on the “Loose Reins” of Ethnic Policy**

The Party’s new approach extends well beyond Xinjiang and Tibet. In recent years, the extra points minority students receive on the university entrance exam have been significantly reduced ([Guanchazhe](#), June 6, 2017), and next year Ningxia and Shandong will join Shanxi in abolishing extra points all together ([Diyi Jiaoyu](#), December 11; [Quanmin Weixinba](#), October 31). In the name of combatting “Salafism, Arabism and Islamism” (沙化阿化伊化, *Shahua Ahua Yihua*), foreign influences were scrubbed from restaurants, mosques and cultural sites across the Northwest ([Mianshu](#), April 7, 2018), and now major cities like Beijing and Shanghai ([Reuters](#), July 31). A state-run library in Gansu publicly burned religious books, and neighbouring Ningxia altered the name of a river deemed too religious sounding ([Inkstone](#), September 28, 2018).

Change is also coming to Yunnan, where a tolerant and more relaxed approach to ethnic and religious issues has long been the norm. This year Party committees initiated “strike-hard” investigations, issued repeated warnings about the dangers of illegal religious activities, and called for the urgent “sinicization” (中国化, *Zhongguohua*) of religious activities ([Zhongguo Minzubao](#), June 11). The People’s Armed Police raided what it claimed was an illegal mosque in the historic city of Weishan ([RFA](#), December 30, 2018) while police confiscated religious books and paintings from Christian house churches across Yunnan ([Bitter Winter](#), December 8).

Meanwhile influential voices like Zhu Weiqun and Ma Rong are remobilizing in opposition to the Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy, arguably the only remaining cornerstone of the CCP’s “loose reins” system ([China Brief](#), July 6, 2012). Despite formal retirement, Zhu remains an active adviser, frequent media commentator, and occasional representative of the Party on supervisory work ([Huanqiu Shibao](#), September 20). In September, Ma Rong published a highly provocative critique of the 1984 Law, arguing it represents an “over-correction” of Cultural Revolution excesses and is out of step with the PRC Constitution ([CASS](#), September 22). Ignoring Xi Jinping’s earlier call to stop debating the law’s appropriateness ([China Brief](#), November 7, 2014), Ma boldly asserts: “The wheel of history is continuously turning, and our country’s laws must alter in accordance with new social developments and contradictions, and be revised and readjusted in the spirit of progress and seeking truth from facts.”

### **Conclusion**

It is unclear how far Xi Jinping is willing to push in this direction—the Xinjiang leaks suggest significant internal dissent—but the perceived successes of the Party’s approach in manufacturing stability in Xinjiang

and Tibet are driving the Party deeper into the lives of its citizens, Han and minority alike. The Party's heavy-handed approach to nation-building might ultimately prove counter-productive: rather than planting the seed of patriotism and unity, it is sowing mistrust and resentment among significant segments of the population who find the Party's message unpalatable.

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#### **Notes**

[1] Su Taiheng, "Kaifangxing minzu guanxi gailun" (Discussion of ethnic relations during the opening to the world), *Guizhou minzu yanjiu*, 1999(2): 105-111.

[2] Jiang Zemin, "Zai Xinjiang kaocha gongzuo shi de jianghua" (Talk during inspection tour of Xinjiang), SEAC, 5 July 2004, at <http://www.seac.gov.cn/seac/zcfg/200407/1071739.shtml>.

[3] He Fang, "Hu Yaobang yu minzu quyue zizhi" (Hu Yaobang and regional ethnic autonomy), *Aisixiang*, 10 December 2012, <http://www.hybsl.cn/huinianyaobang/huainianwenzhang/2012-12-10/32722.html>.

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## China's 2020 Economic Agenda: Maintaining Stability Amid Flux

By Yun Jiang and Adam Ni

### Introduction

China's top annual economic policy gathering, the Central Economic Work Conference (中央经济工作会议, *Zhongyang jingji gongzuo huiyi*), or CEWC, was held between December 10 and 12 in Beijing. This year's CEWC focused on the theme of "achieving developmental progress on the basis of first ensuring stability" (稳字当头, 稳中求进 / *wen zi dangtou, wen zhong qiu jin*) ([Xinhua](#), December 12)—thereby continuing a theme stressed during the meeting of the National People's Congress in March of this year ([China Brief](#), March 22). Given increasing economic risks and political challenges, both domestic and international, the party-state's focus on the supremacy of stability is unsurprising. Importantly, the CEWC reiterates that the goal of achieving a "moderately prosperous society" (小康社会, *xiaokang shehui*) by the end of 2020 is "a priority among priorities" (重中之重, *zhong zhong zhi zhong*).

This article examines the key outcomes of the 2019 CEWC, which set the overall direction of China's economic policy agenda for 2020. In doing so, we highlight a central underlying tension: on the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants to keep a steady ship at a time of economic and strategic flux; on the other, maintaining strong economic growth requires ambitious developmental goals and economic reform imperatives, which have added pressure for bold policy actions. How well Chinese policymakers can navigate this tension in 2020 has important ramifications for both China's national development and the CCP's political legitimacy.



*Image: PRC Premier Li Keqiang, who is nominally the most senior party-state official in charge of macroeconomic policy, speaks at the Central Economic Work Conference in December 2019.*

(Source: [Xinhua](#))

## The Ritual of the “Three-Step” Dance

Started in 1994, the annual CEWC is China’s most authoritative economic policy conference. It is usually attended by all members of the Politburo Standing Committee, as well as virtually all party-state actors with economic responsibilities—including central and provincial party and state organs, the military, and state-owned enterprises. This year’s conference was no exception. The conference serves three functions: to evaluate the economic policy work of the current year; to analyze and present the CCP Central Committee’s view on the current economic situation facing China; and to plan economic policy work, including macroeconomic policy and key economic development tasks, for the following year ([Xinhua](#), December 20, 2017).

As per past patterns, this year’s conference was held close to the end of the year, and like previous years it was preceded by two other annual economic policy work meetings. The first was the annual CCP Central Committee-hosted forum (held on December 4) seeking “comments” and “suggestions” on economic policy from select representatives from outside the CCP (党外人士, *danwai renshi*) ([Xinhua](#), December 6). These non-CCP groups and individuals are all closely vetted, and most are effectively controlled or co-opted by the CCP United Front Work Department. They include the eight minor non-communist parties (民主党派, *minzhu dangpai*), the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce (全国工商联, *Quanguo Gongshang Lian*), and non-party aligned personalities (无党派人士, *wu dangpai renshi*). This meeting is a forum for political ritual and theater, rather than genuine policy consultation.

The second event was the Politburo meeting (held on December 6) that provided high-level guidance and set the tone for the CEWC that occurred a few days later ([Xinhua](#), December 6). Like in 2018, this year’s Politburo meeting preceding the CEWC also provided direction for the next year’s party discipline, integrity and anti-corruption work ([Xinhua](#), December 6; [Xinhua](#), December 13, 2018).

## Stability and Managing Risk

Economists have long expected that China’s rapid economic growth will eventually taper off. Since Chinese economic reform started in 1979, GDP growth has averaged almost 10 percent per year ([World Bank](#), December 13). In the last decade, growth has moderated. Indeed, the slowdown is perhaps faster than expected—there are doubts whether China can reach its target growth of between 6 and 6.5 percent in 2019 ([Reuters](#), November 22). While the CEWC did not specify economic growth targets for 2020, it did state the need to “ensure a reasonable economic growth and steady improvement in [growth] quality” ([Xinhua](#), December 12). This “reasonable” rate is likely to be around 6 percent ([People’s Daily](#), December 13).

In the long term, demography is one of the most serious challenges to China’s continued economic rise. Beijing is clearly concerned about its economic implications. The relaxation of the “one-child policy” to the “two-child policy” (二孩政策, *Erhai zhengce*), as well as the social campaigns to stigmatize late marriages for women, are examples of government responses ([Xinhua](#), December 27, 2015). Yet social policies to

address this demographic challenge—such as delaying retirement age—can negatively affect the career prospects of the incoming workforce, potentially adding to existing resentments in the labor market.

While the CEWC did not address the economy-related demography challenges, it did focus in on three categories of risks: financial, environmental, and external. Financial scandals and environmental degradation have proved to be potentially destabilising forces. Public protests have erupted due to investors falling victim to dodgy financial schemes, or environmental concerns such as water contamination. Given the theme of stability, it is no surprise that the CEWC repeatedly drew attention to financial and environmental risks. Wealth inequality and labor issues, which were not directly addressed by the CEWC, are also sources of destabilizing discontent. On external risks, the headline-grabbing trade conflict with the United States did not get an explicit mention, apart from the rather vague “sources of global turbulence and risks” ([Xinhua](#), December 12). Instead, the focus was on the slowing of global growth, which in turn likely means a reduction in the demand for Chinese exports.

### **Reform and Work Priorities**

This year’s CEWC identified six areas of priority for China’s 2020 economic policy agenda:

- 1) Promoting the “New Development Concept” (新发展理念, *Xin fazhan linian*), characterized by innovative, balanced, and high quality development.
- 2) Fighting the “three major battles” against poverty, pollution and financial instability.
- 3) Guaranteeing the livelihood of people, especially those in poverty. This covers quality of jobs, adequate pensions for the old, and housing price stability.
- 4) Proactive fiscal policy and prudent monetary policy. This includes the cost of financing, especially for small-and-medium enterprises (SMEs), and guiding investments towards areas such as advanced manufacturing and infrastructure.
- 5) High quality development and improving overall competitiveness through innovation and reform. This covers issues such as the commercialization of research, state-owned enterprise (SOE) innovation, strategic industry policy, business operating costs, “zombie firms”, the digital economy, care for the elderly, infrastructure, telecommunications, and disaster resilience.
- 6) Economic system reform to accelerate the development of a high-standard market system. This includes reforms for SOEs, the intellectual property regime, the tax system, and the financial system; protections for foreign investment; and active participation in global economic governance and WTO reform.

The priorities identified are comprehensive, covering a wide spectrum of economic issues. An emphasis on “quality” and “balance” in economic development is evident. On the one hand, Beijing wants the economy to continue to grow at a reasonably fast pace. This is necessary as economic growth and improved living

standards are important for legitimizing the Party's monopoly on political power. On the other hand, further sustainable growth requires further reform, which affects the material interests of a multitude of party, state, and military actors, and hampers the Party's ability to distribute economic rents to its favored clients.

Beijing sees innovation as a way of addressing structural constraints on the economy. China is catching up with advanced economies across a range of industries—in some it is already leading the world. This means that further growth in those industries can only be achieved with innovation and better technology. Promoting innovation is a theme running throughout the six priority areas, and there is a sense that Beijing sees innovation as a panacea for achieving sustainable growth while not giving up levers of state control.

Technology transfer and diffusion has been a sticking point between China and advanced economies. This is unlikely to change for the foreseeable future, even if China further strengthens intellectual property protection. An increasing number of countries and companies are grappling with rising geopolitical tension; national security concerns over the use of Chinese technology products; the relationship between the party-state and Chinese companies; and concerns over dual-use technology.

Looking outwards, China will attempt to exert more influence on global economic governance, including with respect to the WTO reform process. This will again pit China against developed economies, including the United States, the European Union, and Japan. These three economies have very different ideas from China as to what reforms are needed to maintain the efficacy of the WTO. However, China may find allies for its reform proposals among developing economies, including among the other “BRICS” (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries.

## Conclusion

Stability is the key theme of China's economic policy direction for next year. In fact, the Mandarin Chinese word for “stability” (稳, *wen*) appeared a staggering 29 times in the official Xinhua report on this year's CEWC ([Xinhua](#), December 12). Given the rising economic challenges domestically and an expected turbulent global environment next year, stability is necessary to ensure Party legitimacy and to avoid political unrest stemming from economic troubles. The Party will surely celebrate achieving a “moderately prosperous society” at the end of 2020 to remind the Chinese people of its role in poverty alleviation and improving living standards.

Balancing sustained economic growth with increased financial and environmental risks will not be easy. Beijing is putting its faith in its New Development Concept centered around “quality growth”. However, given the severe economic challenges that it faces, Beijing may redouble its efforts to push an “ethnonationalist” ideology for legitimization. In the international community, China's focus on innovation and its efforts aimed at increasing influence over global economic governance institutions may find support among some developing economies; however, it will likely lead to more friction with developed economies, including the United States, the European Union, and Japan.

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The “22 vs. 50” Diplomatic Split Between the West and China  
Over Xinjiang and Human Rights

By Roie Yellinek and Elizabeth Chen



*Image: Chen Xu (陈旭) (speaker's table, third from left), the PRC's Permanent Representative to the U.N. Office at Geneva, speaks at a July 9 side-event during the 41st session of the U.N. Human Rights Council.*

*The event, co-sponsored by the PRC and representatives of African states, focused on the theme of economic development as the core concern of human rights—a theme consistently promoted by the PRC in international fora. (Source: [Xinhua](#))*

## Introduction

On July 8, 2019, a group of 22 states issued a joint letter to the 41st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), which condemned China's mass detention of Uyghurs and other minorities in the Xinjiang region of northwest China. [1] In the letter, the signatories expressed their countries' concerns about “credible reports of arbitrary detention in large scale places of detention” in the region and “widespread surveillance and restrictions” targeting Uyghurs and other minorities. The letter (*hereafter “First Letter”*) called upon the People's Republic of China (PRC) to uphold its national laws and international commitments, and to “refrain from the arbitrary detention and restrictions on freedom of movement of Uyghurs, and other Muslim and minority communities in Xinjiang” ([UNHRC](#), July 8).

Just four days later, on July 12, 2019, another group of 37 states issued a competing letter to the UNHRC that backed the PRC's policies in the Xinjiang region ([Xinhua](#), July 13). This letter (*hereafter “Second Letter”*) asserted that “the work of [UNHRC] should be conducted in an objective... non-confrontational and non-politicized matter,” and expressed “firm opposition to relevant countries' practice of politicizing human

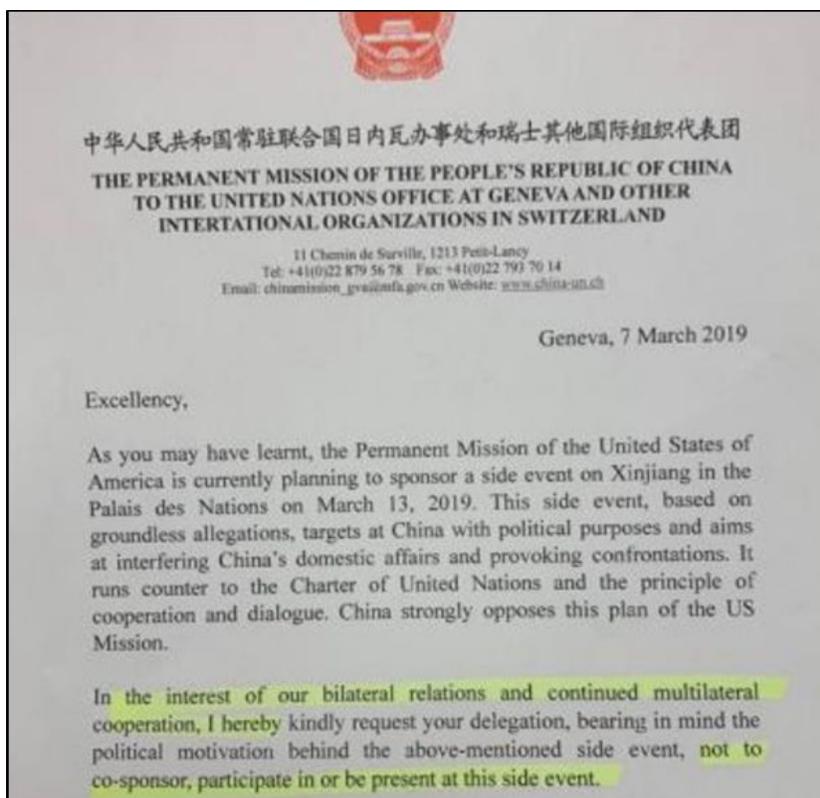
rights issues, by naming and shaming, and publicly exerting pressures on other countries.” This *Second Letter* commended “China’s remarkable achievements” in “protecting and promoting human rights through development.” The letter further “call[ed] on relevant countries to refrain from employing unfounded charges against China,” and urged the UNHRC to approach the Xinjiang situation “in an objective and impartial manner... with true and genuinely credible information” ([UNHRC](#), July 12).

One signatory state, Qatar, subsequently withdrew its support. [2] However, by the time the *Second Letter* was re-issued later in July, representatives of thirteen additional states and the Palestinian Authority had added their support, bringing the total number of signatories to fifty. [3] This letter exchange between 22 critics and 50 supporters of the PRC’s policies in Xinjiang demonstrates how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has leveraged its economic and political influence over other voting members at the UNHCR to advocate for its own positions, and to weaken legal and procedural frameworks of the international human rights regime.

### **The “Like-Minded Group” in the United Nations, and Beijing’s Campaign for Influence in the Developing World**

The PRC has been working for many years to cultivate a sympathetic voting block in the United Nations, particularly in regards to the sensitive issue of human rights. Beginning in the early 2010s, China began voting on UNHCR resolutions alongside a loose coalition of developing states usually referred to as the “Like-Minded Group of Developing Countries,” or simply the “Like-Minded Group” (LMG). [4] This grouping, comprised in the main of authoritarian (or semi-authoritarian) states from the developing world, has sought to deflect criticism of its members, and to promote a view of human rights as centered in state sovereignty and economic development ([PRC Mission to the UN in Geneva](#), June 25).

The LMG has been led at various points by Russia, China, and Egypt; but Beijing, in particular, has sought to align developing states with the PRC’s own diplomatic interests in the United Nations and other fora. Ahead of a March 13 U.N. panel discussion event on human rights violations in Xinjiang (hosted by the United States, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom), PRC diplomats directly approached delegates from developing states, and sent letters to other ambassadors. The letter decried the event as “based on groundless accusations,” which “aim[ed] at interfering in China’s domestic affairs and provoking confrontations.” Making a veiled threat, the letter advised recipients “in the interest of our bilateral relations and continued multilateral cooperation... not to co-sponsor, participate in, or be present at this side event.” [5]



*Image: A letter dated March 7, 2019 from the PRC Mission to the U.N. Office at Geneva, which was disseminated to other diplomatic representatives in Geneva. The letter warns recipients not to participate in a planned discussion event on human rights in Xinjiang, which was sponsored by the United States and four other Western governments. (Source: [Human Rights Watch](#))*

### **The Role of Muslim States in Supporting the PRC**

Looking at the “22” and “50” groups of countries brings us to two key observations. The first observation is that, in the latter group, 23 Islamic-majority states backed the PRC, thereby supporting Chinese actions that oppress their Muslim brethren. [6] This continues a pattern in which Islamic-majority states have long been resistant to criticizing the PRC over its treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities, and have even provided Beijing with diplomatic support. The attitude held by these states towards the Xinjiang issue is unlikely to change: for these governments, relations with China are far more important than supporting the Uyghurs ([China Brief](#), March 5).

Turkey, which shares ethno-linguistic ties with the Uyghurs, has a complex history with the PRC—and in recent years has shifted its stances between supporting either the Uyghur minority or China’s policies towards them ([BESA Center](#), September 1, 2017). More recently, the Turkish government has backed away from even limited rhetorical support for the Uyghurs. Turkey did not sign the *Second Letter*, but only a few days before the statement was published Turkey’s President Erdogan claimed that “residents of various

ethnicities living happily in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region thanks to China's prosperity is a hard fact, and Turkey will not allow anyone to drive a wedge in its relations with China” ([Al-Araby](#), July 3).

The 22 Signatories to the July 8 “First Letter”	The 50 Signatories to the July 12 “Second Letter”	
Australia	Algeria	Nepal
Austria	Angola	Nigeria
Belgium	Bahrain	North Korea
Canada	Bangladesh	Oman
Denmark	Belarus	Pakistan
Estonia	Bolivia	The Philippines
Finland	Burkina Faso	The Russian Federation
France	Burundi	Saudi Arabia
Germany	Cambodia	Serbia
Iceland	Cameroon	Somalia
Ireland	Comoros	South Sudan
Japan	The Congo	Sri Lanka
Latvia	Cuba	The Sudan
Lithuania	Democratic Republic of Congo	Syria
Luxembourg	Djibouti	Tajikistan
The Netherlands	Egypt	Togo
New Zealand	Equatorial Guinea	Turkmenistan
Norway	Eritrea	Uganda
Spain	Gabon	United Arab Emirates
Sweden	Iran	Uzbekistan
Switzerland	Iraq	Venezuela
United Kingdom	Kuwait	Yemen
	Laos	Zambia
	Mozambique	Zimbabwe
	Myanmar	Palestinian Authority

Table 1 (left): The list of 22 states that signed a July 8, 2019 letter to the U.N. Human Rights Council, which expressed concerns over the treatment of Uyghurs and other ethnic minority groups in the PRC.

Table 2 (right): The list of 50 states that signed a July 12, 2019 letter to the U.N. Human Rights Council, which expressed support for PRC policies in Xinjiang. (37 states signed the original letter; 1 then withdrew; and then 13 states and the Palestinian Authority subsequently signed on.) (Source: UNHRC)

**The Split Between the “22” Western Countries and the “50” Chinese-Led Countries**

The second observation is that a clear divide over human rights exists between Western states and the loose network of developing-world governments lending diplomatic support to China. The 22 signatories of the *First Letter* were all developed democracies—and with the exception of Japan, all were either European or English-speaking Western countries. Most were also either NATO members, or else hold other security relationships with the United States. The 50 signatories of the *Second Letter*, by contrast, were mostly states from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—many of them authoritarian, and concerned about criticism of their own records on human rights. Many of the 50 states are also now reliant on the PRC for investment and other development projects. The fact that the PRC has been able to organize and leverage this latter group illustrates the growing economic and diplomatic influence now wielded by Beijing around the globe.

It is noteworthy that the United States itself did not participate in the “22” group letter. This was despite the fact that senior U.S. officials have made strong statements on the Uyghur issue—for example, accusing China in May of putting more than a million minority Muslims in “concentration camps” ([Haaretz](#), May 5). The appointment of Elnigar Iltebir, an American-Uyghur, to be China Director on the U.S. National Security Council is also a signal of a firm stance on the Uyghur issue ([UNPO](#), August 19). However, it may be that senior U.S. administration officials did not want to complicate what was already a heated trade struggle with the PRC, and therefore avoided the *First Letter*.

## **Conclusion**

Two separate blocks are emerging in the world: one led by the United States, and the other by China. (Russia is also a significant player in this arena, but because of its difficult economic situation, it cannot lead the latter group of countries.) When great powers want to expand their sphere of influence, smaller countries may receive a great deal of attention—sometimes far beyond their objective importance—and Beijing has successfully cultivated many of these states. China has even brought into its diplomatic fold countries actively supported by the United States—including traditional allies that host U.S. military bases, such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Security relationships with the United States did not prevent the leaders of these states from opposing the United States and backing China on this symbolic but important issue.

The PRC’s growing influence over developing states may affect what the world will look like in the next few decades. Chinese economic growth has allowed it to establish itself as a leading diplomatic player alongside the United States—and as such, it increasingly sets the rules of the game in the international arena. Many countries from all over the world are in the process of redefining their international relationships and alliances. The fact that China has won the support of 50 countries for its Xinjiang policies, as opposed to 22 who voiced opposition, is a telling example of Beijing’s growing clout in the international arena.

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**Notes**

[1] The signatories to the July 8, 2019 letter were: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

[2] Ambassador Ali Al-Mansouri, Qatar's Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva, explained Qatar's withdrawal of support by stating that "Taking into account our focus on compromise and mediation, we believe that co-authorizing the aforementioned letter would compromise our foreign policy key priorities... In this regard, we wish to maintain a neutral stance and we offer our mediation and facilitation services" ([Al-Jazeera](#), August 21).

[3] The final list of signatories to the *Second Letter* (dated August 9) were the ambassadors of: Algeria, Angola, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Comoros, the Congo, Cuba, North Korea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Laos, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, the Philippines, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, the Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Togo, Turkmenistan, Uganda, the United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen, Zambia, and Zimbabwe; as well as the observer mission of Palestine.

[4] The LMG commonly includes: Bangladesh, China, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Syria, and Vietnam. However, the LMG is a loose grouping rather than a formal organization, and its membership is fluid.

[5] Letter from the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva, dated March 7, 2019. Obtained by Human Rights Watch, and posted at: [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting\\_resources/hrcletterchina20190329.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/hrcletterchina20190329.pdf).

[6] The 23 Muslim-majority signatories to the *Second Letter* were: Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, UAE, Uzbekistan, Yemen, and the Palestinian Authority).

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## The Role of the Arctic in Chinese Naval Strategy

By Ryan Martinson

### Introduction

In her recent *China Brief* article, Dr. Anne-Marie Brady examined the prospect of China deploying military power to the Arctic ([China Brief](#), December 10). Applying the methods she used in her pathbreaking 2017 book, Brady draws from authoritative Chinese sources to demonstrate the growing importance of the Arctic in China's strategic calculus. [1] She also cites a host of other indications that Beijing intends to send naval forces—especially submarines—north through the Bering Strait. Her research provides important context for an oracular 2019 U.S. Department of Defense claim that China could be laying the foundation for naval operations in the Arctic ([Department of Defense](#), May 2).

Building on the excellent work done by Brady and others, this article argues that the available evidence allows for more categorical conclusions about China's Arctic intentions. Specifically, the Chinese Navy has formally decided to incorporate Arctic ambitions into its naval strategy, and Chinese scientists and engineers are already conducting research to help it realize these ambitions.



*Image: The newly-commissioned icebreaker Xuelong-2 (accompanied by the first Xuelong) conducts icebreaking test operations during its maiden voyage to Antarctica, November 2019.*

*(Source: [CGTN/YouTube](#), November 29)*

### From the Near Seas to the Two Poles

In China, “naval strategy” (海军战略, *haijun zhanlüe*) serves two key purposes. It defines the principles guiding how the fleet will be used today, and it outlines the plans for building the capabilities needed to meet the requirements of tomorrow. [2] China's first official naval strategy dates to the mid-1980s, when the

service's chief preoccupation was restoration of Chinese-claimed islands (including Taiwan). Called “near seas defense” (近海防御, *jinhai fangyu*), it instructed the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to prepare to seize and maintain command of the sea in waters within the first island chain, a capability the PLAN already possessed vis-à-vis its weakest neighbors. It also catalogued the equipment and training needed to enable the service to achieve these wartime aims in scenarios involving more capable navies. [3]

By 2015, China's naval strategy had officially changed to “near seas defense, far seas protection” (近海防御, 远海防卫/护卫 / *jinhai fangyu, yuanhai fangwei/huwei*). [4] The new strategy reflected trends that had been evident for years. The PLAN's maritime defense mission remained preeminent. But the service was also increasingly tasked with operating in waters beyond East Asia, in the “far seas.” This began with an epochal 2008 decision to send successive task forces to counter Somali piracy in the Gulf of Aden, but soon extended to a whole range of other functions, often lumped under the rubric of “protecting overseas interests.”

The Arctic did not figure in either of these strategies. But we now know that it will in the next strategy. This fact was omitted from China's 2018 White Paper on Arctic Policy ([State Council Information Office](#), January 26, 2018) and its 2019 National Defense White Paper ([State Council Information Office](#), July 24) —authoritative documents largely meant for foreign consumption. However, the political commissar of Dalian Naval Academy, Senior Captain Yu Wenbing (喻文兵), revealed the name of the next strategy in a July 2018 essay. Published in the PLAN's official newspaper, Yu's essay discussed his institute's role in training and educating the leaders of the future navy. To provide context for his advocacy, he pointed out that the PLAN's strategy was transitioning to a new concept: “near seas defense, far seas protection, oceanic presence, and expansion into the two poles” (近海防御, 远海防卫, 大洋存在, 两极拓展, *jinhai fangyu, yuanhai fangwei, dayang cunzai, liangji tuozhan*). [5]

Senior Captain Yu did not indicate when this transition would be complete—but a more recent source does. In mid-2019, Ni Hua (倪华), a PLAN engineer posted to the Military Representative Office in Yichang City (Hubei Province) published an article about the need to boost China's ability to counter the threats posed by foreign sea mines. Ni began by discussing the strategic concerns shaping China's mine warfare needs. After citing the growing importance of the maritime domain to Chinese national security, he stated that “by 2030 the navy will...promote the construction and development of equipment according to the strategic requirements of ‘near seas defense, far seas protection, presence in the two oceans, expansion into the two poles.’” [6]

Most recently, the new strategic concept was broached during a presentation by Deng Aimin (邓爱民), Director of the Ship Development and Design Center of the 701 Research Institute, part of the state-owned China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC). At an October 2019 event in Shenzhen, Deng spoke on the topic of China's planned nuclear-powered icebreaker, which his team was designing. He offered some brief

remarks on the strategic drivers behind his work: “Everyone should be fairly clear about our national strategy. One aspect is the strategic position of the poles. Another is expansion into the two poles...” [7]

Clearly, then, the PLA has decided that the next naval strategy will bring the service to the Arctic. Perhaps as a result of this decision, the PLA strategic studies community has grown increasingly candid about discussing the military’s future role in this new arena. For example, in a 2017 article, three analysts from the PLAN Submarine Academy examined the increasing out-of-area requirements of China’s submarine force. They argued, “China’s submarine forces must not only operate in the Pacific Ocean; they must also operate in the Indian Ocean. In the future, they must even operate in the Atlantic Ocean and the Arctic Ocean.” [8]

A more thorough treatment of this subject was published by PLAN Captain Zuo Pengfei (左鹏飞), a lecturer at China’s National Defense University. In his 2018 volume entitled *A Study of Polar Strategy*, Captain Zuo forthrightly discusses the military value of the Arctic to China and calls for deploying Chinese naval forces to the region. He writes, “As the world becomes hotter, the Arctic passages will increasingly become important areas for the operations of China’s maritime forces. Once [Chinese] forces normalize their presence in this region, they will not only be able to effectively pin down great powers like the U.S. and Russia; they will greatly reduce pressure from primary opponents in our other strategic directions.” [9]

### **Possible PLAN Missions**

Broadly speaking, the PLAN would have two missions in the Arctic. The first mission would be to protect China’s maritime rights/interests in the Arctic Ocean. As Brady writes, these include China’s interest in unfettered navigation through Arctic waters, and access to living and non-living resources in high seas areas. PLA sources no longer demur from discussing the need to be able to protect these interests. For example, the 2015 edition of *Science of Military Strategy*, an authoritative volume published by China’s National Defense University, has several chapters discussing military struggle in the “new domains” (新型领域, *xin xing lingyu*) of Chinese national security, including the polar regions. The authors state that “The poles have become important directions in which China’s national interests have expanded overseas and into new and distant frontiers, and they have presented new topics and tasks for our employment of military forces.” [10] Just three months after this book was published, China revised its national security law, charging the PLA with responsibility for protecting Chinese interests in the polar regions. In the section on tasks for safeguarding national security, the law declared that China “persists in...safeguarding the security of our nation’s activities, assets, and other interests in outer space, international seabed areas, and the polar regions” ([Ministry of National Defense](#), July 1, 2015).

The PLAN’s second mission would be to conduct nuclear deterrence patrols. This has nothing to do with Arctic interests per se. Rather, it offers a means for China to better ensure its second-strike capability. The *Science of Military Strategy* describes the Arctic as “an ideal hiding place for strategic nuclear submarines.” [11] Captain Zuo discusses this point at length. Operating under the Arctic could improve the survivability of

Chinese submarines. In his words, “The Arctic’s bad weather and thick ice prevents all sensors from tracking and monitoring the situation under the ice. This [would] enable our ballistic missile submarines to operate with stealth, improve their survivability, and help to increase our second-strike capability.” He also writes, “Once our forces achieve forward presence in the Arctic, we’ll be able to increase the suddenness of our strikes and increase difficulties for the adversary’s strategic early-warning.... This will reduce the strategic pressure posed by America’s missile defense systems.” [12]



*Image: Scientist Han Xiao of the Harbin Engineering University poses with a “self-designed sound propagation” (自主式发射声源, zizhushi fasheng shengyuan) device during a 2018 field research mission in the Arctic. (Source: [Zhongguo Haiyang Bao](#), October 15, 2018)*

### **Science in the Service of Strategy**

Chinese scientists and engineers are already conducting the research needed to make possible PLAN operations in the Arctic. Brady highlights the need for bathymetric surveys to produce navigational charts. This is the most “dual-use” of Arctic activities: yes, future naval forces will need them, but so will Chinese civilians operating in the arctic for commercial and scientific purposes. However, Chinese scientists are also conducting research that is much more closely associated with military purposes.

One area of research is Arctic acoustics. To be effective, submarine forces require a detailed knowledge of the underwater acoustic environment in a given area of operations. Sound propagates differently through water depending on a number of factors, such as temperature, depth, and salinity. To maximize the performance of PLAN sonar in the Arctic, Chinese scientists need to develop models for sound propagation and improve them with *in situ* data. They must also reckon with acoustic phenomena that are particular to the

Arctic Ocean. The Arctic ice pack generates lots of background (or “ambient”) sound, which can pose challenges when trying to listen for the much quieter signals emitted by enemy submarines.

Chinese scientists have only just started researching Arctic acoustics. In the November 2014 issue of the *Journal of Applied Acoustics*, ten Chinese acousticians published a call to arms entitled “Arctic Underwater Acoustics: An Attractive New Topic in Ocean Acoustics.” The authors cited the military importance of this new field. In their words, “Conducting research on Arctic acoustics...is a major capability requirement for ensuring our navy’s information advantage in future mobile operations in the Arctic and an important basic research requirement for our submarines to conduct nuclear deterrence patrols and ensure the navigational safety of our warships in the Arctic...” [13] The first author of this article was Dr. Li Qihu (李启虎), a Princeton-educated acoustician at the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS) whose career has largely focused on applied acoustics for national defense. [14]

When Li et al. submitted their article, Chinese scientists were just then completing the country’s first Arctic experiments. [15] From July to September 2014, members of the sixth Arctic Expedition, operating from China’s only icebreaker, the *Xuelong*, collected basic data required for acoustics modeling. [16] Members of the seventh Arctic Expedition (2016) conducted more sophisticated experiments, led by scientists from the CAS Institute of Acoustics. At least one PLA scientist was involved in experiment design. [17] In 2018 (China’s eighth Arctic Expedition), an expert named Han Xiao (韩笑) from the Harbin Engineering University collected under-ice sound velocity profile data ([China Ocean News](#), October 15, 2018). Harbin Engineering University is a key center of undersea warfare research for the PLAN, and Han has personally received awards for his national defense acoustics research ([Harbin Engineering University](#), undated).

## Conclusion

Chinese naval strategy has evolved through two periods. Each period has brought PLAN ships, boats, and planes further away from the Chinese coast. China’s military strategists have clearly decided that the third period will bring the service to the Arctic Ocean. PLAN ships and boats will go there to show Beijing’s commitment to protecting its claimed rights and interests in the Arctic Ocean. This prospect is not remote, as Chinese warships have already operated in the Bering Sea in 2015 and 2017 ([Department of Defense](#), May 2018). In time, Chinese submarines could also sail to the Arctic Ocean to conduct nuclear deterrence patrols. This prospect is more remote, as Chinese ballistic missile submarines have yet to conduct a deterrence patrol in China’s coastal waters—let alone the remote Arctic. But with intensifying strategic competition with the United States, it is probably the more urgent of the two Arctic missions. Before this can happen, Chinese scientists will need to overcome a number of scientific and engineering challenges. This process has already begun in earnest. With the commissioning of *Xuelong 2* and a third ice-breaker on the way, these efforts should accelerate in the coming years.

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## Notes

[1] Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017)

[2] 中国人民解放军军语 [PLA Dictionary of Military Terms] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, September 2011), p. 888.

[3] Zhang Xiaolin, 毛泽东积极防御战略思想与我国“近海防御”的海军战略 [“Mao Zedong's Active Defense Strategic Thinking and China's 'Near Seas Defense' Naval Strategy”] *军事历史研究* [*Military History Research*], No. 2 (1992), pp. 13-19.

[4] The 2015 National Defense White Paper uses the term 远海护卫. The 2019 National Defense White paper uses the term 远海防卫. Both can be translated as “far seas protection.”

[5] Yu Wenbing, 乘势而上建设一流军事指挥学院 [“Take Advantage of the Situation to Build a World-class Military Command College”] *人民海军* [*People's Navy*] July 13, 2018, p. 3.

[6] Ni published this article with several experts from the CSIC's 710 Research Institute, which is also located in Yichang city. Ni Hua, Zhao Zhiping, Guan Hong, and Ai Yanhui, 我国反水雷支援舰能力建设探讨 [“Discussion of Capacity Building of China's Mine Countermeasure Support Ships”] *数字海洋与水下攻防* [*Digital Ocean & Underwater Warfare*] No. 2 (2019), p. 2.

[7] Deng spoke at a forum held as part of the 2019 Marine Economy Expo. The author attended this event.

[8] Hu Dongying, Huang Rui and Cai Guangyou, 推进潜艇兵力走向远洋的几点思考 [“Several Thoughts on Advancing the Submarine Force to the Ocean”], *船舶电子工程* [*Ship Electronic Engineering*] No. 1 (2017), p. 2.

[9] Zuo Pengfei, *极地战略问题研究* [*A Study of Polar Strategy*] (Beijing: Shishi Press, December 2018), p. 14.

[10] Xiao Tianliang, ed. *战略学* [*Science of Military Strategy*] (Beijing: National Defense Univ. Press, 2015), p. 157.

[11] Xiao Tianliang, ed. *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 158.

[12] Zuo Pengfei, *A Study of Polar Strategy*, pp 14-15.

[13] Li Qihu, Wang Ning, Zhao Jinping, Huang Haining, Yin Li, Huang Yong, Li Yu, Xue Shanhua, Ren Xinmin, and Li Tao, 北极水声学: 一门引人关注的新型学科 [“Arctic Underwater Acoustics: An Attractive New Topic in Ocean Acoustics”] *应用声学* [*Journal of Applied Acoustics*] No. 6 (2014), p. 475.

[14] Zhang Chunhua, 一位新中国声学家的成长之路 [“The Maturation of an Acoustician in New China”] *物理* [*Physics*] No. 12 (2009), p. 926.

[15] Li Qihu, Huang Haining, Yin Li, Wei Chonghua, Li Yu, Xue Shanhua, and Luan Jingde, 北极声学研究的新进展和新动向 [“New Progress and Trends in Arctic Acoustic Research”] *声学学报* [*Acta Acustica*] No. 4 (2018), p. 428. Co-author Luan Jingde works at the Naval Research Institute.

[16] Liu Hongning, Lv Lian'gang, Liu Na, Yang Guangbing, Jiang Ying, Yang Chunmei, Liu Zongwei, and Lin Li'na, 夏季加拿大海盆海冰边缘区声体积后向散射强度研究 [“Study of Volume Backscattering Strength in Summer Marginal Ice Zone of the Canada Basin”] 海洋学报 [*Acta Oceanologica Sinica*] No. 11 (2015), pp. 127-134.

[17] Co-author Xu Quanjun works at the PLA Special Office of the Marine Environment. Wei Chonghua, Huang Haining, Yin Li, Liu Na, Yang Chenghao, Xu Quanjun, and Li Qihu [“Analysis of Low-Frequency Environmental Noise Distribution in Dual-duct Waveguide”] 声学学报 [*Acta Acustica*] No. 4 (2019), pp 418-428.

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