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**The “Democratic Life Meetings” of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo**

*By John Dotson*

**Introduction: The CCP Politburo and “Democratic Life Meetings”**

On December 26 and 27, China’s central leadership held a “democratic life meeting” (民主生活会, *minzhu shenghuo hui*) for the full membership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo ([Xinhua](#), December 27, 2019). This has become an annual end-of-year tradition for the Politburo, with similarly-designated meetings held in late December of each year from 2015 to the present (*see accompanying chart*). Official press treatment of the meetings since 2015 has consistently emphasized the authoritative position of CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, invariably stating that he “presided over the meeting and delivered an important

speech" (主持会议并发表重要讲话, *zhuchi huiyi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua*) to the other assembled members.

CCP Politburo End-of-Year “Democratic Life Meetings” (2015 – present)			
Year	Dates	Official or Selected Theme(s)	Source
2015*	Dec. 28-29	Official theme: "The Three Strictnesses and the Three Truths"	三严三实 ( <i>San Yan San Shi</i> ) ( <a href="#">Xinhua</a> , December 29, 2015)
2016	Dec. 25-26	Selected theme: "Study Party Regulations and Rules, Study [the] Series of Speeches, Be Up-to-Standard Party Members"	学党章党规、学系列讲话, 做合格党员 ( <i>Xue Dang Zhang Dang Gui, Xue Xilie Jianghua, Zuo Hege Dangyuan</i> ) ( <a href="#">Renmin Wang</a> , December 28, 2016)
2017	Dec. 25-26	Two selected themes: "Set an Example in Studying and Implementing Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era" and "Set an Example in Upholding General Secretary Xi Jinping as the Core of the Party Center"	带头学习贯彻习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想 ( <i>Daitou Xuexi Guanche Xi Jinping Xin Shidai Zhongguo Tese Shehui Zhuyi Sixiang</i> ) and 带头维护习近平总书记党中央的核心 ( <i>Daitou Weihu Xi Jinping Zongshuji Dang Zhongyang de Hexin</i> ) ( <a href="#">Renmin Wang</a> , December 27, 2017)
2018	Dec. 25-26	Selected theme: "Strengthening the Innovative Ideological Weapons" of the "Four Consciousnesses," the "Four Confidences," and the "Two Upholds" [1]	强化创新理论武装... ( <i>Qianghua Chuangxin Lilun Wuzhuang</i> )... 四个意识 ( <i>Sige Yishi</i> ) 四个自信 ( <i>Sige Zixin</i> ) 两个维护 ( <i>Liangge Weihu</i> ) ( <a href="#">Xinhua</a> , December 26, 2018)
2019*	Dec. 26-27	Official theme: "Don't Forget [Our] Original Purpose and Firmly Remember the Mission"	不忘初心, 牢记使命 ( <i>Bu Wang Chuxin, Laoji Shiming</i> ) ( <a href="#">Xinhua</a> , December 27, 2019)

\* Note: The meetings for 2015 and 2019 were each designated as a "special topic democratic life meeting" (专题民主生活会, *zhuanti minzhu shenghuo hui*) due to their single overarching propaganda theme. The meetings from 2016-2018 had multiple themes, and were simply termed "democratic life meetings" in state press.

In past decades, meetings of the CCP Politburo generally took place in secret. [2] This has changed in more recent years, and Politburo meetings are often mentioned after the fact in state media—albeit irregularly, and with propagandistic rather than substantive reporting on their deliberations. The annual "democratic life meetings" are covered more consistently in state media, and are used as a venue to publicize narratives

selected by the central leadership. The 2019 gathering was designated as a “special topic” (专题, *zhuanti*) democratic life meeting, which focused on promoting one of Xi’s priority propaganda slogans for party members in the second half of 2019 (see further discussion below).

### What Is a “Democratic Life Meeting”?

In theory, “democratic life meetings” are a mechanism for CCP members to undertake self-criticism, as well as to provide constructive criticism of party practices and other CCP members, in order to improve party discipline and governance ([China Brief](#), December 31, 2019). One official CCP source notes that members of CCP local branch committees “may have different opinions in thinking and work, [which] are inconvenient to speak of in party branch (party small group) organizational life meetings.” As a result, either quarterly or every 6 months, party branch committees should:

*[C]onvene party democratic life meetings to implement party principles and policies, and pass resolutions on situations and some important internal questions for the party branch; as well as to exchange opinions, communicate thought, have honest discussions, develop criticism and self-criticism, help one another, supervise one another, sum up experiences, and integrate ideological understanding [in regard to] work style and work questions amongst one another. In this way, [these meetings] will be beneficial to party conduct, strengthen unity, and bring closer relations between the party and the masses. [3]*



*Image: In this cartoon from PRC state media, the blunt communication styles of “heavy artillery” (重炮, *zhong pao*) and “true artillery” (真炮, *zhen pao*) are allowed into a “democratic life meeting” of party members—while “salvos” (礼炮, *li pao*), “firing blindly” (空炮, *kong pao*), and “duds” (哑炮, *ya pao*) are excluded.*

*(Source: [PLA News Center](#), January 17, 2018).*

### **Themes from the December 2019 Politburo Meeting**

The overarching official theme for the December 26-27, 2019 Politburo meeting was “Don’t Forget [Our] Original Purpose and Firmly Remember the Mission” (不忘初心, 牢记使命 / *Bu Wang Chuxin, Laoji Shiming*) ([Xinhua](#), December 27, 2019). This is a propaganda slogan prominently associated with Xi Jinping, which has been promoted for party members throughout the second half of 2019. The “original purpose” (or “original aspiration”) refers to “the original goals of the CCP [which] include serving the people, rediscovering the party’s original and correct political orientations, realizing ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics,’ and strengthening ‘party construction’” ([China Brief](#), July 31, 2019).

State press coverage of the December meeting was contradictory in nature: on the one hand, it attempted to depict the meeting as a model of collegial free discussion; while on the other hand, reinforcing the ever-growing personality cult of Xi Jinping. The state news agency Xinhua asserted that “the comrades of the Politburo had frank discussions with comrades who shared similar responsibilities,” and described each member taking the opportunity to speak in turn. However, these “frank discussions” revolved around topics such as the need to “study and understand... the important instructive spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s latest important speech,” and unanimous agreement that “upholding General Secretary Xi Jinping as the core of the party center and the core position of the entire party... is the foundational political guarantee for advancing the unceasing development of socialism with Chinese characteristics” ([Xinhua](#), December 27, 2019). Televised footage of the meeting—as with similar leadership meetings in the recent past—showed Xi speaking while more junior-ranking Politburo members attentively scribbled notes, in stylized displays of subservience and symbolic political loyalty ([CCTV](#), December 27, 2019).



*Image: On December 26-27, 2019, the CCP Politburo convened a “democratic life meeting” centered around the propaganda slogan of “Don’t Forget [Our] Original Purpose and Firmly Remember the Mission.” Such meetings have become a regular end-of-year event for the CCP central leadership. (Source: [Xinhua](#))*

## Conclusion

In theory, the CCP's "democratic life meetings" should provide for honest and productive discussion of contentious issues among party members. However, the top-down nature of CCP bureaucratic power structures, in which the levers of both patronage and punishment lie in the hands of superior-ranking party officials, weighs heavily against this—as does the CCP's long history of harshly persecuting and purging dissenters within its ranks. If the heavily scripted and top-down model presented by the Politburo is any indication, the true purpose of "democratic life meetings" is to promote greater political orthodoxy: such meetings are democratic only in the sense of Leninist "democratic centralism" (民主集中制, *minzhu jizhongzhi*), in which higher-level party leadership decisions are communicated to, and made binding upon, all party members.

The December Politburo meeting provides yet another data point regarding the CCP's campaign for intensified ideological indoctrination within its own ranks ([China Brief](#), December 31). It also provides a further illustration of the personality cult around Xi Jinping, which has risen to Stalinist heights. Insofar as there has ever been space for open debate within the CCP, that space appears to be increasingly restricted, even at the top levels of political leadership. The "democratic life" of the Chinese Communist Party is on an increasingly authoritarian trajectory.

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## Notes

[1] These ideological slogans all revolve around loyalty to the CCP as an institution, and to Xi as its absolute leader. For a summary explanation of these slogans, see: John Dotson, "[The CCP's Renewed Focus on Ideological Conditioning. Part 2: The New Five-Year Plan for Training Party Cadres](#)," *China Brief* (Dec. 31, 2019), endnote #4.

[2] H. Lyman Miller, "Hu Jintao and the Party Politburo," *China Leadership Monitor* (No. 9, Winter 2004). [http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/clm9\\_lm.pdf](http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/clm9_lm.pdf).

[3] "What Is a Democratic Life Meeting?" [什么是民主生活会?], *CCP News Net* [中国共产党新闻网], Sep. 20, 2012. <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n/2012/0920/c349309-19057516.html>.

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**The CCP Response to the Wuhan Coronavirus: A Preliminary Assessment**

*By Ryan Oliver*



*Image: PRC Premier Li Keqiang speaking with local medical personnel during an inspection tour in Wuhan City, January 27. (Source: [CCTV / SCMP](#))*

*Editor's Note:* Our previous issue contained an initial analysis of the Chinese government's response to the outbreak of a previously unknown coronavirus in the central Chinese city of Wuhan ([The State Response to a Mystery Viral Outbreak in Central China](#), January 17). Since the publication of that earlier article, the Wuhan virus has proliferated rapidly—in terms of both persons infected and the geographic spread of the disease. In this issue, contributor Ryan Oliver provides an update on the spread of the virus, as well as further analysis regarding the government response at both the local and national levels.

**Introduction: The Latest on the Wuhan Coronavirus**

In December 2019, a novel coronavirus (冠状病毒, *guanzhuang bingdu*) emerged in the central Chinese city of Wuhan. The precise origin of the coronavirus remains unclear, although experts agree that it is zoonotic and likely originated at a now-closed marketplace that sold seafood and other animal products for consumption. After initial submissions to the World Health Organization (WHO) on December 31 reported that an unknown pneumonia virus had infected 59 people in Wuhan, cases soon began to surface in other Chinese cities ([WHO](#), December 31). The disease—now officially designated “2019-nCoV”—has spread beyond China's borders and is now present in 16 other countries. As of January 28, the Wuhan coronavirus has resulted in 4,599 confirmed cases of infection and 106 fatalities ([Phoenix News](#), January 28).

Faced with another spreading epidemic, the central government has responded with more speed and transparency than during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2002-2004. Wuhan

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and several other cities in Hubei province have imposed quarantines that limit public transportation, and have initiated measures to isolate these cities' populations. Major cities like Beijing and Shanghai have also imposed restrictions to manage the flow of travelers. Officials also closed many tourist sites and postponed or canceled many Lunar New Year events nationwide, while extending the New Year holiday for three additional days in support of response efforts ([Xinhua](#), January 26). Questions remain as to how effective these control measures can be in limiting the movement of people in and around China—particularly in light of the size of the cities in question, and the mass exodus of holiday travelers typical for this time of year.

Besides these quarantine measures, efforts to isolate and slow the spread of 2019-nCoV have also included sending significant financial and medical resources to Wuhan and other affected areas. In addition to the deployment of medical teams from the People's Liberation Army (PLA), China's National Health Commission has dispatched over 1,000 personnel in six medical teams from across the country to the Wuhan area ([World Journal](#), January 26). The China Development Bank has issued a 2 billion yuan (\$288.3 million) emergency loan, while the Ministry of Finance has allocated 1 billion yuan (\$144.2 million) towards combating the 2019-nCoV virus ([Sina](#), January 25). Alongside the official response from Beijing, China's private sector—including companies such as Tencent, JD.com, Lenovo and Xiaomi—has also offered contributions of funds and medical supplies ([SCMP](#), January 25).



*Image: On January 23, workers with the Wuhan Construction Engineering Group began a short-fused project to construct the Wuhan Huoshenshan Hospital, a new 25,000 square meter, 70-100 bed facility to be operated by the PLA. Chinese officials have declared that the hospital will commence operations by February 3. (Source: [CGTN / Youtube](#), January 27)*

The outbreak of the Wuhan coronavirus comes at a challenging time for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping and other CCP leaders. In addition to months of highly visible protests in Hong

Kong, unfavorable results in recent Taiwanese elections, and ongoing trade negotiations with the United States, the CCP leadership faces a new test at home—with implications sure to reverberate beyond China's borders. This test presents China-watchers with a unique opportunity to assess how the CCP addresses “continued contradictions... in attempting to improve its capacity for governance, while also maintaining a monopoly over the public dissemination of information” ([China Brief](#), January 17). Analysis of how the CCP responds to the Wuhan coronavirus and the information environment surrounding the outbreak can enhance understanding of the Party's perception of its current situation, and lend insight into its approach going forward.

### **Responses at the Local and National Levels**

After an initial delay in response in the month of December, ongoing measures to contain 2019-nCoV and manage the influx of patients in Wuhan have drawn both criticism and support. The formal announcement of the outbreak in Wuhan took approximately three weeks after the first cases emerged, thereby eliciting questions and criticism in Chinese social media about the insufficient warning by local leaders. In a CCTV interview, Wuhan Mayor Zhao Xianwang (周先旺) explained that the challenge of assessing the severity of the disease in December inhibited the local government's ability to respond promptly. Mayor Zhao also implicitly blamed restrictions put in place at the national level, which restrict local administrations from disclosing information on disease outbreaks: “Because it is an infectious disease, and we have the infectious disease prevention law to regulate the information disclosure... as a local government, after we have the information, we can only reveal it after approval” ([Caixin](#), January 28).

The initial response was also slow at the national level. In January, Chairman Xi issued directions for managing the outbreak, urging officials at all levels of government to focus on five related themes:

- 1) Fulfilling their duties effectively;
- 2) Initiating emergency response measures;
- 3) Managing their organizations;
- 4) Releasing information in an accurate and timely manner;
- 5) Ensuring accountability and oversight ([Tianjin Daily](#), January 22).

As part of his guidance, Xi directed Premier Li Keqiang (李克强) to form a steering group to tackle the spread of the disease ([Xinhua](#), January 20), and Li conducted a public inspection tour of medical facilities in Wuhan on January 27 (*see accompanying image*). State-run national media outlets have covered the outbreak—but rarely as a lead story, and senior members of the CCP have avoided direct discussion of the developing situation. Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member Han Zheng (韩正) spoke in Davos at the World Economic Forum on January 21, but failed to mention the outbreak ([CGTN](#), January 21). Two days later, Xi delivered his message to the Chinese people for the new year without discussing the situation ([Xinhua](#), January 23). Perhaps the only exception to this trend was a public statement by Vice Premier Sun



Chunlan (孙春兰), who echoed Xi's earlier guidance in urging local authorities to take responsibility for the situation and to improve transparency in reporting measures ([Xinhua](#), January 24).

A turning point may have come with the Lunar New Year on January 25, as the CCP leadership has now leaned into public management of the ongoing crisis. By the holiday's eve on January 24, 24 provinces and autonomous regions had initiated a "Class 1 Response Mechanism" (一级响应机制, *yiji xiangying jizhi*). This step centralizes management and oversight of emergency response operations, while also imposing additional movement and compliance restrictions across the territory in question ([Beijing Daily](#), January 25; [EastMoney](#), January 25). After President Xi held a PBSC meeting on January 25, Premier Li visited Wuhan to observe firsthand the emergency efforts underway ([Xinhua](#), January 27). Despite deprioritizing the outbreak in its early stages, state media outlets have not shied from reminding the public about the hard lessons learned during the SARS epidemic, and have echoed Beijing's call for greater transparency and responsibility at a local level ([Global Times](#), January 20). Going forward, the CCP central leadership is likely to play a more active role in directing the domestic response to the outbreak—and may seek to shift public anger and blame towards city and provincial-level officials.



*Image: In a January 27 appearance on state television, Wuhan Mayor Zhou Xianwang offered to resign over the city administration's handling of the virus outbreak. However, he also defended the administration against accusations that it delayed informing the public about the outbreak, implying that central government restrictions regarding information on disease outbreaks had tied the hands of local officials. (Source: [Caixin](#))*

### **Conclusion: Implications for the CCP Leadership**

The ongoing 2019-nCoV crisis presents the CCP leadership with distinct opportunities and vulnerabilities. On the one hand, management of the public narrative in state media creates sufficient space for Beijing to lay blame for the early failures at the feet of local authorities, and to take credit for the more robust response later in January. Impressive logistical figures (e.g., the volume of medical supplies contributed or the amount of

funding dedicated) and physical symbols (e.g., rapid hospital construction) provide talking points and support a narrative of energetic CCP efforts to stem the tide of the growing epidemic. With the mishandling of SARS as a point of contrast, the national-level CCP has an opportunity to claim a hard-fought victory for the people—possibly at the expense of the local officials in Wuhan and Hubei province.

On the other hand, this crisis has brought the state's monopoly over the dissemination of information into focus. Would greater transparency have allowed more agile decision-making earlier in the emergence of 2019-nCoV? Do warnings about the consequences of rumor-mongering, like the January 1 statement issued by the Wuhan Public Security Bureau, inhibit the public's ability to prepare and respond ([Wuhan PSB, January 1](#))? In other words, did the decision-making paralysis enabled by information control measures and bureaucratic opacity allow 2019-nCoV to spread unchecked? As the CCP moves forward through this unfolding situation, its leadership must weigh the credibility costs of delayed action—not to mention the lives lost and resources expended as a result—against the benefits of its iron grip on information.

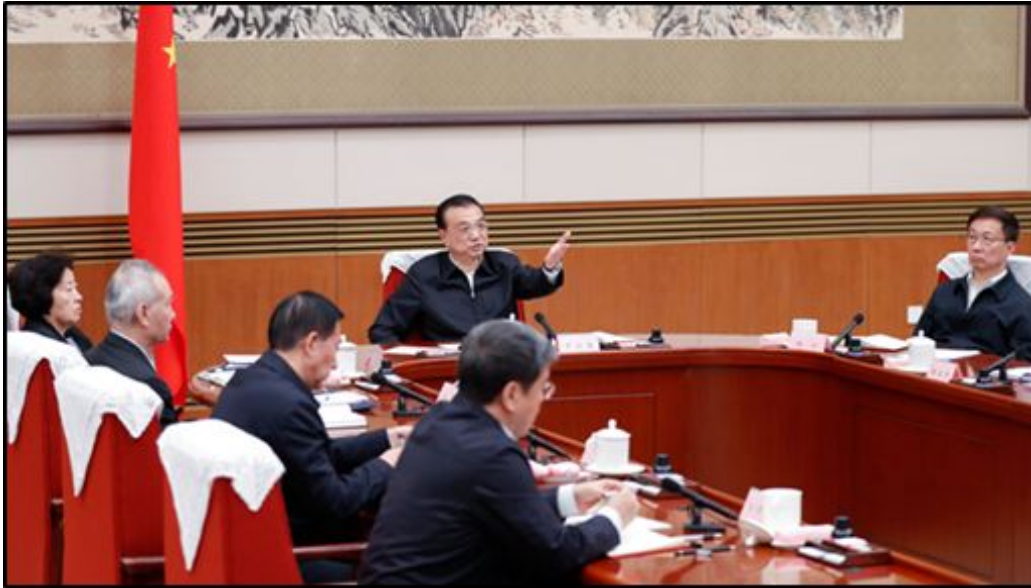
The 2019-nCoV crisis is not the only situation pressuring the CCP's hold on information. Socioeconomic forces in China continue to expand opportunities for citizen engagement online, although this double-edged sword brings with it the assured surveillance of any activity beyond officially-tolerated limits. The ongoing protests in Hong Kong, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-Wen's success in her recent reelection, and continuing trade negotiations with the United States have all created additional vectors for pressure against the credibility and strength of the CCP. Furthermore, beyond the direct costs of containing 2019-nCoV domestically, the disruption to public transportation, events, and venues during China's busiest travel season will have a significant economic impact at a time when CCP officials have scaled back estimates to account for more modest economic growth. Put into context, the 2019-nCoV outbreak is certainly a challenge for the CCP, but it is only one of many that currently tests the credibility of the Party and the sustainability of its information control practices.

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**The Future of Chinese Foreign Economic Policy Will Challenge U.S. Interests,  
Part 1: The Belt-and-Road Initiative and the Middle Income Trap**

*By Sagatom Saha*



*Image: PRC Premier Li Keqiang (center) presides over a November 25, 2019 meeting of senior CCP officials to review plans for the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025). Other figures present include Vice-Premier Han Zheng (right), a member of the Politburo Standing Committee; and Vice-Premier Liu He (second from left), the lead representative in trade negotiations with the United States. (Source: [PRC State Council](#))*

*Editor's Note: This is the first part of a two-part article that addresses the ways in which the evolution of China's internationally-focused economic policies are likely to impact—and in many instances, to clash with—the economic policies and interests of the United States. This first part focuses on the policies surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative, China's worldwide program of infrastructure construction; and on the policies that Chinese leaders are likely to adopt as they seek to avoid the "middle-income trap" of stagnating economic growth. The second part, to appear in our next issue, will examine China's efforts to advance usage of the renminbi as an international currency, and to seek a greater role in economic institutions traditionally led by the United States and its European allies.*

## **Introduction**

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping and other senior CCP leaders have prudently planned for the slowing economic growth that China now faces. CCP officials plan to transition China from its current export-led growth model to one driven by indigenous innovation, and one in which China's rising global prominence confers to it many of the same advantages traditionally enjoyed by the United States

(such as low borrowing costs and influence within international institutions). Although U.S.-China relations have become further fraught amid the trade war, many prominent China hands nevertheless assert that Beijing's long-term economic plans do not run counter to U.S. strategic interests. [1] However, many of China's planned foreign economic initiatives—to include the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), global value chain advancement, and *renminbi* (RMB) internationalization—will come at U.S. expense. Policymakers in both Washington and Beijing should accordingly expect U.S.-China tensions to persist beyond the Trump administration.

China's need for new growth vehicles is twofold: its economic size has not translated into global influence, and its current economic model is losing steam. First, China's transformation into the world's second-largest economy has yet to yield equivalent influence in the international system. Beijing's sway in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), for example, lag behind China's status as the largest trade partner and foreign investor for much of the world. The United States, by contrast, has leveraged its economic status to maintain effective control of the Bretton-Woods institutions, to obtain low borrowing costs, and to exercise punishing sanctions programs against unfriendly governments.

Second, Chinese growth has seen a secular decline over the last decade (*see figure 1*). The official projected GDP growth rate for 2020 is 6.1 percent ([Xinhua](#), November 30, 2019), but some Chinese officials have hinted that they expect lower sub-6 percent growth in 2020 ([South China Morning Post](#), November 14, 2019). This is a noteworthy signal, for CCP discourse has previously identified the benchmark of 6 percent GDP growth as necessary to avoid social unrest ([China Brief](#), March 22, 2019).

**Figure 1. Chinese Annual GDP Growth (2008-2018)**



Source: World Bank

## China Faces the “Middle-Income Trap”

The trade war bears some responsibility for the recent economic slowdown, but the decade-long decline suggests that China risks falling into the “middle-income trap,” in which emerging economies lose their competitive edge in manufactured-good exports without entering high-value-add segments of the global economy. China has likely exhausted the growth potential that physical capital and labor can provide in manufactured goods. Further, low capital efficiency prevents China from competing in high-value sectors. Chinese capital investments produce less output compared to other countries, particularly developed ones ([Caixin](#), November 20, 2017).

This inefficiency leads to poorer economic performance as Beijing funnels savings into state-directed firms in an opaque and inefficient manner, thereby misallocating massive sums of investment. China’s lack of a market economy, which would otherwise shut down unproductive firms and expand efficient ones, exacerbates this problem. Beijing could inject even more capital into state firms to stimulate growth—and indeed, the People’s Bank of China moved in this direction at the beginning of 2020 by cutting reserve requirements for Chinese banks ([PBOC](#), January 6). However, this strategy will likely prove to be a short-term fix that increases inflation and labor costs without fixing underlying problems of structural inefficiency.

China could instead discourage household savings and encourage consumption. China has one of the world’s highest national savings rates, more than triple the average for emerging economies ([IMF](#), December 11, 2018). Chinese domestic consumption is increasing as discretionary income grows, but meaningfully curbing household savings would require shifts in demographics, the social safety net, and credit access. Some of these levers might be outside Beijing’s control or ability to tightly manage. Beijing’s new economic plans are accordingly directed towards the world beyond China’s borders.

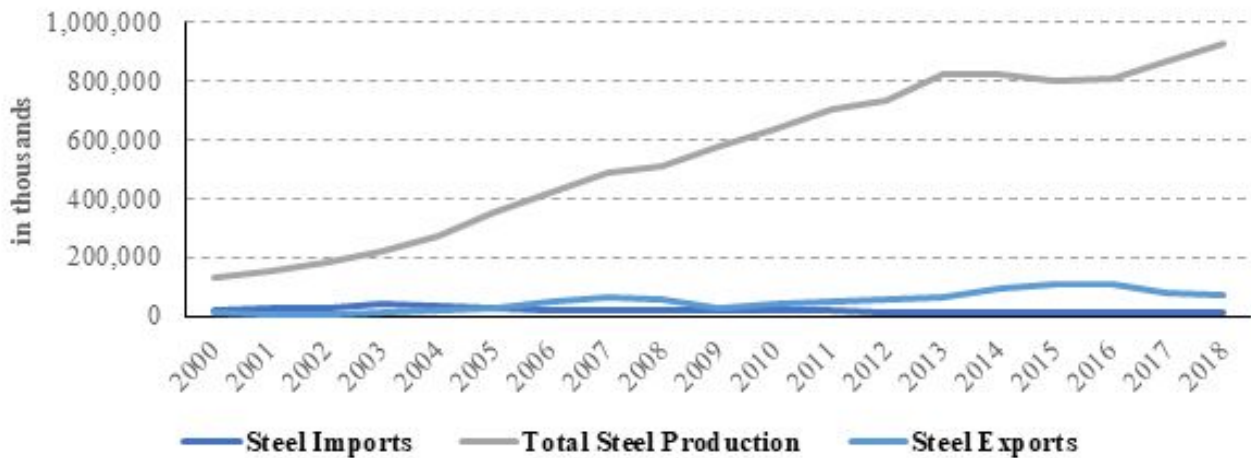
## The Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative is Chairman Xi’s signature foreign policy initiative. The BRI aims to translate China’s economic potential into a global network of alliances. Beijing touts the initiative as an opportunity for “win-win cooperation” between itself and participating countries, but the BRI primarily serves China’s own domestic economic concerns—most particularly, the industrial overcapacity problem. In one prominent example, Chinese steel production skyrocketed at the turn of the century alongside China’s steep economic growth (*see figure 2*).

The growth of state-led steel and coal firms facilitated the quick construction of China’s roads, ports, bridges, dams, and power plants. Chinese steel demand, buoyed by the real estate sector, continued to grow through 2019—however, domestic supply has still outpaced demand, and early projections expect a drop in domestic demand in 2020. [2]

Past industrial policies left Chinese officials with a stark choice between boosting Chinese construction abroad or shutting down domestic coal and steel plants—which in turn would cause political and social unrest. BRI provides an opportunity for the former by allowing Chinese state-led firms to maintain high production levels amid slowing Chinese economic growth. While Beijing’s “Going Out” policy has encouraged Chinese firms to invest overseas for many years, BRI is a far more ambitious iteration. BRI projects entail region-spanning road, rail, and power infrastructure that employ China’s domestic resources—as well as reorienting global political and economic relations with China at the center.

**Figure 2. Chinese Steel Production and Trade (2000-2018)**



Source: World Steel Association

However, BRI could prove a double-edged sword, as it does little to improve Chinese capital efficiency. BRI pumps capital into China’s inefficient firms that do not naturally serve any market at home or abroad. Further, Beijing has loaned billions to countries with questionable ability to repay their debts. [3] BRI ironically had more tenable prospects when it was first formulated amid higher Chinese economic growth in 2013. Slower economic growth means that Beijing cannot afford for BRI countries to regularly default as the cost of state firms remaining engaged.

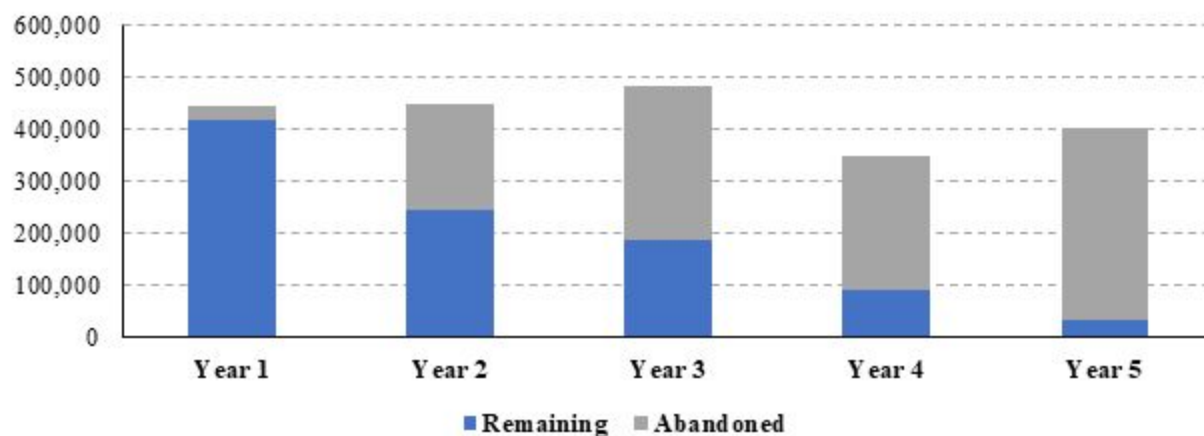
BRI outwardly seems like an effort to displace U.S. global influence and acquire dual-use infrastructure through predatory loans, but that notion ignores the initiative’s trajectory and U.S. fault in failing to provide alternative investments that fill global infrastructure gaps. Instead, BRI more likely will fuel tensions with the United States by increasing global instability. The initiative facilitates kleptocracy and raises the likelihood of global debt distress ([Foreign Policy](#), January 15, 2019). For the most part, Beijing does not intentionally engage in debt-trap diplomacy, but BRI lending is massive in scale and lacks institutional mechanisms that consider borrowers’ debt sustainability. Beijing may not be able to continue writing off and deferring debt

payments as Chinese growth slows ([China Brief](#), September 26, 2019). The United States would oppose BRI on these grounds alone if global debt distress increases.

### Global Value Chain Advancement

BRI may not address capital efficiency problems, but Beijing has other plans that do, including “Made in China 2025” and its recent Five-Year Plans (FYP). Indigenous innovation is at the heart of all these initiatives. Beijing clings to authoritarian capitalism, in which the Chinese government owns many large firms and determines which sectors receive subsidies and market protection, because the system affords tight social and political control and allows Beijing to redirect capital toward geostrategic aims. This commitment to industrial policy precludes China from bolstering capital efficiency through free markets. Beijing instead intends to enhance China’s innovative capacity at the state level. China has led the United States in patent applications for nearly a decade, but most Chinese patents hold little value—and many are discarded within five years, because they are not worth the fees to keep them (*see figure 3*).

**Figure 3. Chinese Design Patents by Status**



Source: JZMC Patent and Trademark, China National Intellectual Property

Beijing accordingly created plans promoting indigenous innovation, which are intended to increase China’s capital efficiency through state-led capitalism. First, Beijing developed “Made in China 2025” as a ten-year strategic plan in 2015 that would transform China into a leading high-value economy. Made in China 2025 identifies ten high-tech industries that the State Council deems critical to advanced economic competitiveness. Even though Beijing has quietly phased out public references to Made in China 2025 amid the trade war, some U.S. observers have criticized recent policies as a rehash of the original plan ([SCMP](#), November 20, 2019). The State Council’s 13th FYP similarly elevated indigenous innovation as its central pillar, calling for China to improve its global innovation ranking, increase research and development (R&D) personnel and spending, and boost patent filings ([PRC National Development and Reform Commission](#), March 15, 2016). The State Council has similarly signaled that industrial competitiveness through innovation

will feature heavily in the upcoming 14th FYP, to cover the years 2021-2025 ([PRC State Council](#), November 26, 2019).

To be sure, China is boosting domestic innovation capacity by improving its research institutions, but Beijing fosters “indigenous” innovation through illicit foreign policy tools—including intellectual property (IP) theft, forced technology transfers, and opaque foreign investments that siphon innovation from advanced economies ([DIUx](#), January 2018). First, Chinese IP theft costs the United States alone as much as \$600 billion annually ([IP Commission](#), February 2017). Second, Beijing consistently compels foreign firms to enter joint ventures or store their data on Chinese servers in order to access the Chinese market (PRC State Council, [2015 \[National Security Law\]](#); [2016 \[Cybersecurity Law\]](#)). For example, 20 percent of member firms in the American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai report they have been pressured to transfer technologies, with higher rates among firms in industries the State Council considers strategically important ([American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai](#), July 2018).

Third, Beijing has taken advantage of advanced economies’ weak investment screening processes to gain access to critical technologies. In 2016, Midea, one of China’s largest commercial-appliance manufacturers, took over Kuka, Germany’s largest industrial robotics firm—an unusual move given that Midea primarily sells air conditioners and washing machines. These illicit policies work toward improving Chinese capital efficiency but undermine U.S. economic competitiveness and have driven some White House officials toward a harder stance on trade with China. [4] The United States is unlikely to allow China to continue these practices unchallenged.

*This article will be continued in the next issue of China Brief.*

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### **Notes**

[1] Many examples of this could be cited, but for one of the most recent and prominent examples, see the open letter signed in July 2019 by 100 prominent persons in the fields of government, academia, and business at: M. Taylor Fravel *et al.*, “China is Not an Enemy,” *The Washington Post* (July 3, 2019). [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/making-china-a-us-enemy-is-counterproductive/2019/07/02/647d49d0-9bfa-11e9-b27f-ed2942f73d70_story.html).

[2] “China to support global steel demand growth this year,” Argus Media, October 14, 2019, <https://www.argusmedia.com/en/news/1994982-china-to-support-global-steel-demand-growth-this-year>; “China’s steel industry burdened by overcapacity, workers balk at shutting plants,” South China Morning Post, n.d., <https://www.scmp.com/business/commodities/article/1570891/chinas-steel-industry-burdened-overcapacity-w>



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[3] John Hurley et al., “Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective,” Center for Global Development, March 4, 2018, <https://www.cgdev.org/article/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-heightens-debt-risks-eight-countries-points-need-better>; Corina Pons, “Venezuela faces heavy bill as grace period lapses on China loans,” Reuters, April 27, 2018,

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-china/exclusive-venezuela-faces-heavy-bill-as-grace-period-lapses-on-china-loans-sources-idUSKBN1HY2K0>; Jeremy Page and Saeed Shah, “China’s Global Building Spree Runs Into Trouble in Pakistan,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 22, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-global-building-spree-runs-into-trouble-in-pakistan-1532280460>.

[4] For further detail and discussion of this issue, see: Amie Tsang, “Midea of China Moves a Step Closer to Takeover of Kuka of Germany,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/05/business/dealbook/germany-china-midea-kuka-technology-robotics.html?module=inline>; and Yu Zhao, “U.S. trade negotiators want to end China’s forced tech transfers. That could backfire.,” *The Washington Post*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/01/28/u-s-trade-negotiators-want-to-end-chinas-forced-tech-transfers-that-could-backfire/>.

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**The Vatican Stays Away from the Hong Kong Crisis  
Due to Fears of Beijing's Retaliation**  
*By Emanuele Scimia*

**Introduction**

On January 9, in his annual message to diplomatic envoys accredited to the Holy See, Pope Francis voiced concern for the conflicts ravaging parts of the Middle East, Africa, the Caucasus, and Ukraine, as well as for the increasing number of political crises gripping Latin America. However, not a single word was offered about the situation in Hong Kong ([Vatican News](#), [Vatican State Website](#), January 9). Serious socio-political unrest began in Hong Kong last June over a now-withdrawn extradition bill that, according to protesters, would allow the extradition of political dissidents to mainland China ([China Brief](#), June 26, 2019). The pontiff has so far said nothing about the crisis in the city, much to the chagrin of many local Catholics. It seems that the Vatican has no intention of supporting the anti-government movement in Hong Kong, as such a move would hinder its attempts to improve relations with the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing.

**Dissident Voices in the Church Hierarchy**

However, things are more complex than they may appear at first glance. Quite in contrast to Pope Francis' calculated silences, the Christmas message delivered on December 20 by Cardinal John Tong Hon, the apostolic administrator (or acting bishop) of Hong Kong, suggested that the heart of the local diocese is actually beating for the democratic camp ([Sunday Examiner](#), December 20, 2019). Although Tong urged all conflicting sides to stop violence, he was categorical in demanding that the Hong Kong government had to conduct an independent inquiry into violent confrontations between the demonstrators and the police. He also expressed his hope that the city "will always uphold the core values of democracy, freedom and the rule of law." Tong, who replaced Bishop Michael Yeung Ming-cheung after his death in January last year, made an invitation last November to all parties "in conflict" to solve the situation through dialogue ([Vatican News](#), November 25, 2019). Tong is viewed as a moderate voice, and reportedly has the ear of Hong Kong's embattled Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, a devout Catholic ([Bitter Winter](#), September 8, 2019).

Tong's Christmas pastoral letter came after Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, the 88 year-old bishop emeritus of the city—and an outspoken critic of the treatment of Catholics on the mainland—lambasted the Holy See for its silence over the city's turmoil. [1] Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon (Myanmar) and head of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, has also weighed into the debate. He is one of the 44 signatories, including parliamentarians and dignitaries from 18 countries, of an open letter to Lam expressing "grave concerns at the recent escalation of police brutality over the Christmas period," urging the chief executive to direct the city's security forces to "exercise restraint, respect the right to peaceful protest and use

only proportionate measures when dealing with any violent conduct” ([Hong Kong Watch](#), December 31, 2019).

The Hong Kong administration immediately rejected the appeal. A spokesperson for Lam said it was based on wrong facts and assumptions, and that foreign actors should not meddle in the city’s internal affairs—which is the standard response of local authorities and the PRC government to those who question their handling of the protests ([AsiaNews](#), January 2).



*Image left: Cardinal John Tong, the Apostolic Administrator (acting bishop) of Hong Kong, has called for dialogue between protestors and the city administration, and called for an inquiry into the use of force by police. He has further expressed hope that the city “will always uphold the core values of democracy, freedom and the rule of law.” (Image source: [SCMP](#))*

*Image right: Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kuin, retired bishop emeritus of Hong Kong, has emerged as a harsh critic of the Vatican’s silence on both the Hong Kong crisis and the treatment of Catholics in mainland China. Cardinal Zen has asserted that Pope Francis “does not understand the Chinese Communist Party at all.” (Source: [Hong Kong Free Press](#))*

### **The Importance of the Catholic Community in Hong Kong**

Roman Catholics in Hong Kong number about 400,000 residents (roughly 6 percent of the population), plus an additional 212,000 non-residents ([Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong](#), August 31, 2018). Some 4,000 adult Hongkongers are baptized each year, according to missionary sources ([Mondo e Missione](#), December 16, 2019). Despite their relatively small numbers, Catholics are particularly active in the political arena of Hong Kong: some protest leaders are Catholic, and the Hong Kong Federation of Catholic Students is at the forefront of the democratic movement ([Angelus News](#), November 11, 2019).

Hong Kong, a British colony until its retrocession to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, is a "special administrative region" (特别行政区, *tebie xingzheng qu*) nominally ruled under the "One Country, Two Systems" (一国两制, *Yi Guo Liang Zhi*) framework. According to the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, Hong Kong will retain a high level of autonomy—including its rule of law, fundamental political rights, and press freedoms—until 2047. The city's liberal background ensures a relatively high level of religious freedom, which many Catholic Hongkongers fear could be threatened in the future by Beijing's direct rule.

The Catholic community is divided—with some openly backing pro-democracy demonstrations, while others maintain that the Roman Church should refrain from taking sides. Pope Francis evidently stands with those recommending moderation (or perhaps, silent neutrality). What is striking, however, is that while the pontiff is reticent to speak out publicly over the drama in Hong Kong, he has made his voice heard on recent anti-government protests in Chile and the Middle East ([Catholic News Agency](#), October 27, 2019; [Vatican News](#), October 23, 2019).

### **Preserving the Sino-Vatican Agreement on Bishops**

It is possible that the Holy See believes that any statement would be useless or could even make things worse, given that the leadership in Beijing would view any Vatican commentary as unacceptable interference in its domestic issues. But it is also credible to suppose that the Pope is appeasing the CCP—and a firm condemnation of violence against protesters would indeed put at risk a controversial recent PRC-Vatican deal on the selection of bishops in China.

The Holy See has had no formal diplomatic ties with China since 1951, and has clashed for years with the Communist leadership regarding episcopal appointments. Supporters of the Pope's opening up to Beijing are persuaded that the interim agreement, signed in September 2018, can improve the condition of the "unofficial" Catholic church on the mainland ([China Brief](#), October 10, 2018). However, there are indications that the Chinese government is actually continuing to crack down on underground Catholic communities ([AsiaNews](#), December 20; [AsiaNews](#) September 12, 2019).

The unofficial Roman Catholic Church in China is loyal to the Pope, and does not recognize the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) and the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference—both of which are independent of the Pope and operate under the supervision of the Chinese Communist Party's Central United Front Work Department (UFWD). Furthermore, new administrative measures for religious groups will enter into force in China on February 1 ([Xinhua](#), December 30, 2019). These measures mandate that any activity by a religious community must be approved by the government's State Administration for Religious Affairs—which was itself made directly subordinate to the UFWD in 2018 ([China Brief](#), April 24, 2018). These measures also require religious leaders and personnel to support and promote the policies and principles of

the CCP—part of an increasing drive for the “Sinicization” of religion under state control ([China Brief](#), April 9, 2019).

In a recent letter to his fellow cardinals, Cardinal Zen lamented that the Holy See was encouraging the clergy to join the CPCA, which he characterized as a schismatic church. Cardinal Zen insisted that the college of cardinals should not passively witness the “murder” of the Roman Church in China ([Life Site](#), January 8). Evidence is mounting that Zen’s concerns are not misguided: Chinese police reportedly drove a former ordinary bishop and some priests from their parishes this month, after they refused to register with the state-led religious authorities ([AsiaNews](#), January 16).



*Image: Pope Francis (left) is greeted by Cardinal Charles Maung Bo (right), the Archbishop of Yangon, as the Pope arrived for a visit to Myanmar on November 27, 2017 (Source: [Vatican News](#)). Cardinal Maung Bo, who is also head of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, is one of a number of Roman Catholic leaders in Asia who have been more outspoken than the Vatican in expressing concerns over police brutality and other matters surrounding the crisis in Hong Kong.*

## **Conclusion**

As far as its Asia policy is concerned, the restoration of diplomatic relations with the PRC appears to be the real priority for the Holy See. This is obviously being followed with bated breath by Catholics on the mainland and in Hong Kong—but also by the government of Taiwan, which sees in the Vatican its most precious remaining diplomatic partner. Pope Francis undoubtedly finds himself walking a fine line between rapprochement with China, and moral support for democracy in the former British territory.

The Holy See appears to be in no rush to appoint the new bishop of Hong Kong; it is taking its time, likely concerned that the decision might be exploited for political purposes amid the city’s ongoing chaos. The

choice of Cardinal Tong's successor will likely reveal more about the Vatican's future approach to Hong Kong. One of the potential candidates to take over leadership of the diocese is Joseph Ha Chi-shing, the auxiliary bishop of the city—and an icon of the democratic movement. One recent report, however, indicates that the true frontrunner is Reverend Peter Choy Wai-man, who is considered close to the Lam administration and the Chinese government. (For his part, the bishop of Macau, Lee Bun-sang, is aligned with the pro-Beijing establishment in that city.) ([South China Morning Post](#), January 8, 2019; [Catholic News Agency](#), January 17).

The pope has just played a trump card by nominating Luis Antonio Tagle, the archbishop of Manila, to act as the new head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (formerly known as Propaganda Fide), which is responsible for missionary activities—and therefore, for evangelization in China. The Philippine cardinal is a new variable in the China-Vatican equation. Some believe that both his personal qualities and Chinese roots make him an ideal bridge between the Roman Church and Beijing, as well as a credible candidate to succeed Pope Francis. That said, it is also true that his country's complicated relationship with China—Manila opposes Beijing's claims to a vast section of the South China Sea—may be a liability when he will have to deal with CCP leaders.

Tagle is expected to maintain a cautious stance on Hong Kong in his new position. Voices critical of the PRC regime have largely been removed from the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples during Pope Francis's tenure, but backdoor channels can be used to nudge Lam to listen to protesters, which is one of the requests in Tong's Christmas message. This could help the dialogue in the city between the opposing factions—and at the same time, shield the Holy See from possible retaliation by PRC leaders.

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## Notes

[1] Cardinal Zen has long been an outspoken critic of Vatican compromises with the Chinese central government. For one example, see: "Pope Francis Does Not Understand the Chinese Communist Party, Says Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen," *Hong Kong Free Press* (Oct. 6, 2017), <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/10/06/pope-francis-not-understand-chinese-communist-party-says-hong-kong-cardinal-joseph-zen/>. Cardinal Zen's December 2019 comments were published in the United States in: Joseph Zen, "What's Behind the Vatican's Silence on Hong Kong?" *Washington Post* (Dec. 6, 2019). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/12/06/whats-behind-vaticans-silence-hong-kong/>.

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**New Wine Into New Wineskins: The Evolving Role of the PLA Navy Marine Corps  
in Amphibious Warfare and Other Mission Areas**

*By Ying-Yu Lin*



*Image: PLAN Marine Corps heavy machine gunners conduct live-fire training during the "Cold Training – 2016 • Korla" (寒训—2016 • 库尔勒) exercise in central Xinjiang, January 2016.*

*(Source: [Zhongguo Lujun](#))*

*Editor's Note:* In February 2019, China Brief presented an article in two parts by Dennis J. Blasko and Roderick Lee, which profiled order-of-battle expansion and organizational reforms in the PLA Navy Marine Corps ([The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 1: Expansion and Reorganization](#) and [The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 2: Chain-of-Command Reforms and Evolving Training](#)). Here, China Brief presents another perspective that discusses the evolving roles for the PLAN Marine Corps—in terms of both amphibious operations alongside the PLA Army, as well as new missions in other environments.

**Introduction: The PLAN Marine Corps and the Amphibious Role of the PLA Army**

Historically, the Marine Corps was not a branch greatly valued by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). The explanation for this had much to do with the PLA's mission priorities: the PLA has looked to the Taiwan Strait as its main focus area for amphibious warfare, and the PLA Army (PLAA) has traditionally held the primary role in this functional area, with the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC) operating in a secondary role.

The former Nanjing Military Region—since reorganized as the Eastern Theater Command ([China Brief](#), February 4, 2016)—has amphibious mechanized units that were subordinate to the PLAA 1st and 73rd Group Armies (now reorganized as the 72nd and 73rd Group Armies, respectively) ([China Military](#), December 2,

2018). The amphibious mechanized units of the PLA Army feature heavier firepower and greater mobility than the PLAN Marine Corps (which originally consisted of only two brigades, the 1st and 164th, both subordinate to the South Sea Fleet). The PLAA amphibious forces focused on “big island” targets: these “big island” targets obviously included Taiwan, the PLA’s top priority scenario for resources and contingency planning. By contrast, the PLANMC was oriented largely towards the defense of islands or reefs in the South China and East China Seas.

As the PLAN has become increasingly stronger in recent years, its efforts to field greater numbers of modern warships—and the deployments and training of these ships—have attracted ever-greater attention. In line with the expansion of its parent service, the PLAN Marine Corps has also grown, in terms of both numbers and missions, to align with China’s growing overseas interests. The two original brigades of the Marine Corps have been augmented in recent years by six more—four combined arms brigades, a special operations brigade, and elements of a shipborne helicopter aviation brigade—based in multiple locations along the length of China’s coastline ([China Brief](#), February 1, 2019).

Only in recent years has the PLA as a larger institution started to rethink the value and use of the Marine Corps—a change resulting from the PLAN’s improvements in capability, and China’s growing national power and increasing overseas interests. Recent training exercises provide some indication of likely future missions for the PLAN’s larger and more capable Marine Corps branch.

### **Training Exercises of the PLAN Marine Corps**

Following from the most recent military reforms initiated in 2016, the PLAN Marine Corps has been engaged in training exercises distinct from those in the past. For example, in early 2016 the PLAN Marine Corps sent troops to conduct “cross-region long-distance mobility training” in the cold weather desert environment of Korla (central Xinjiang). In this exercise, the deployed troops were referred to as “South Sea Dragons” (南海蛟龙, *Nanhai Jiaolong*)—thereby possibly identifying them as the PLANMC special operations force (SOF) brigade based on Hainan Island, which was converted from a former PLAN *Jiaolong* naval commando unit. [1] Per press accounts, these troops conducted field maneuvers against a garrison of “Tian Mountain crack troops” (天山雄师, *Tian Shan xiongshi*) who acted as the opposing force during the exercise ([China Army](#), February 16, 2016).

In March 2018, the PLANMC held an exercise called “Ten Thousand Men and One Thousand Vehicles” (萬人千車, *Wan Ren Qian Che*) which simulated in a realistic way a cross-region projection of full-strength marine units by air to destinations in Yunnan and Shandong Provinces. State media described these and other exercises as part of normalizing “all-environment training, all-environment employment” (全域訓, 全域用 / *quan yu xun, quan yu yong*) for the Marine Corps, so that its “footprints would traverse high-latitude cold regions, gravel deserts, plateaus, and jungles” ([China Military](#), March 16, 2018).



These exercises were meant to underscore that the PLAN Marine Corps will be tasked with a range of operations beyond amphibious warfare. Training in different forms of terrain and climate conditions is intended to make the PLANMC acquire capabilities similar to those of the expeditionary forces of the U.S. Marine Corps—which through its history has deployed and fought in a range of locations, from the extremely cold Korean Peninsula to the desert environments of the Middle East. Such training also signals that the PLAN Marine Corps will be the vanguard defender of China’s overseas interests, and its involvement in cross-region mobility exercises is aimed at turning it into a rapid reaction force with a variety of transportation platforms at its disposal.



*Image: PLAN Marine Corps personnel prepare trucks for a field deployment during the “Ten Thousand Men and One Thousand Vehicles” (萬人千車, Wan Ren Qian Che) exercise, a long-distance force deployment exercise conducted in Yunnan and Shandong Provinces in March 2018. (Source: [Zhongguo Junwang](#))*

### **The Focus on Modularized, Combined Arms Units**

The PLAN Marine Corps is moving towards the goal of developing highly modularized marine brigades or battalions. In this way the marines can not only be integrated into theater commands’ command systems, but will also be able to operate semi-independently in executing amphibious landing missions—so that PLA Army combined arms brigades landing later may take over follow-on missions seamlessly. The goal is to get the marines prepared for expeditionary missions in the future. Given the fact that China’s future overseas bases—the first of which has been established in Djibouti ([China Brief](#), July 21, 2017; [China Brief](#), March 22, 2019)—will not have the kind of fire and logistics support from theater commands as their counterparts back at home, troops deployed to those bases must be able to fight independently ([People Daily](#), August 2, 2017). The key is in the modularization and organic combined arms capabilities of the forces involved: such units

can provide better protection to overseas bases, contribute to regional security, and present a force with more deterrent power.

The organization of the PLAN Marine Corps has been greatly changed, with more emphasis on developing modularized and combined arms formations, and enhancing brigade- and battalion-level units' capabilities to operate independently ([People Daily](#), February 11, 2018). Meanwhile, the PLANMC, in order to acquire greater air power and airlift capabilities, has been actively developing its own pilots while introducing into service transport and strike helicopters suitable for amphibious warfare ([China Military](#), December 10, 2017). Therefore, in terms of combat capabilities, the PLAN Marine Corps is also getting ready for a greater role in expeditionary missions. Its tasks in the future will include not only amphibious landing on reefs and islands, but also projecting forces using larger amphibious ships newly developed by the PLAN. In this sense, it is developing amphibious capabilities parallel to those traditionally exercised by the PLA Army.

### **Evolutions in Amphibious Warfare Doctrine Affecting the PLANMC and PLAA**

Amphibious warfare refers to projection of forces from naval ships onto a hostile shore or a target landing beach. The PLA's amphibious warfare doctrine traditionally focused on landing operations of a considerable scale, but it has shifted in recent years to adopt amphibious operations concepts copied from the United States, which include projection of power in the form of non-combat military operations, and the deployment of marines overseas ([Xinhua](#), July 9, 2018). The challenge is for the PLAN Marine Corps to move step-by-step towards the goal of becoming a more effective expeditionary force.

As far as amphibious warfare is concerned, at first glance the PLAN Marine Corps and the PLA Army's amphibious mechanized troops appear to be tasked with the same missions. However, in practice these forces are different in many ways. One major difference is that marines will have to go with PLAN warships to provide protection in an area of responsibility much larger than that of amphibious mechanized troops of the army. In line with the strategic requirements of "offshore waters defense" (近海防御, *jinhai fangyu*) and "open seas protection" (远海护卫, *yuanhai huwei*), the PLAN will gradually shift its focus from "offshore waters defense" to a combination of "offshore waters defense" with "open seas protection"—and it will therefore need to build a combined, multi-functional, and efficient marine combat force structure, including the PLAN Marine Corps.

Moreover, marines execute tactical missions with strategic significance—not only clearing the way for ground troops that land later, but also creating advantageous conditions for naval forces to gain control of the sea. With high mobility and striking power, marine infantry forces are assigned the task of conducting various kinds of raids at sea and on land, as well as special amphibious landing operations. They are thus different from the amphibious mechanized troops employed by the PLA Army.



*Images: In undated file footage, soldiers and amphibious tanks of the PLA Army 73<sup>rd</sup> Group Army practice amphibious landing operations. (Source: [Zhongguo Jun Wang](#)). Although the PLAN Marine Corps is expanding in terms of both size and missions, PLA Army amphibious forces maintain a key role in planning for island seizure and/or Taiwan invasion scenarios.*

Even after recent military reforms, the PLAA 71st, 72nd, 73rd and 74th Group Armies still maintain their amphibious mechanized units ([China Military](#), December 2, 2018; [China Military](#), May 17, 2019). Based on observed amphibious landing training exercises, we can see that the PLA Army will still play the main role in potential landing operations against Taiwan. The PLAN Marine Corps, therefore, may play a different role and have different uses in the future. It will deploy from large amphibious ships to project forces; take advantage of high-speed mobility offered by helicopters and air-cushioned landing craft; and, in the form of combined arms battalions, conduct reconnaissance, small-scale raids, infiltrations, and special operations attacks. In terms of island landing operations, the PLAN Marine Corps will likely play the role of a first attack force that operates inside hostile or contested territory; while the amphibious mechanized combined arms brigades of the PLAA will provide the main external attack force ([Sina Military](#), February 6, 2017).

The PLA's amphibious landing operations concepts are still focused primarily on “attack on main targets” (重点打击, *zhongdian daji*), “three-dimensional landing” (立体登陆, *liti denglu*), and “deep strike” (纵深突击, *zongshen*) ([People Daily](#), September 17, 2016). The focus is on landing from multiple sites and launching mobile raids—and this is a mode of operations that takes advantage of high-speed transports to conduct raids on land targets by highly-mobile forces, in all terrains and at multiple sites ([China Military](#), February 28, 2018). In PLA concepts for amphibious warfare, marines can play a key role in occupying vital sites and establishing beachheads, setting the stage for heavier forces to achieve the goal of breaking into hostile territory in depth.

## Conclusion

In summary, the post-reform PLAN Marine Corps is changing its operational paradigm to one of small-scale combined arms special operations. With the induction of new amphibious ships into service, the PLAN Marine Corps is in the process of developing into an expeditionary force. In practice, the PLAN Marine Corps may adopt an amphibious landing mode different from what has been seen before: one that will count on large amphibious ships to project forces; take advantage of the high-speed capabilities of helicopters and air-cushioned landing craft; incorporate the reconnaissance capabilities and strike power of UAVs; and conduct small-scale raids, infiltrations, and special operations attacks on multiple targets ([China Military](#), October 30, 2018).

The PLAN Marine Corps is currently moving toward modularization and combined arms formations, characterized by more flexible operational structures. In terms of PLANMC changes in operational concepts, traditional tactics and fighting methods are no longer applicable. The new force structure and operational concepts of the PLAN Marine Corps will offer it a greater role in protecting Chinese interests abroad, in a variety of terrain types and climate conditions—as well as making it a valuable counterpart to PLA Army amphibious forces in island landing scenarios involving the South China Sea or Taiwan.

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## Notes

[1] For discussion of this specific point, as well as further information about changes to the PLANMC order-of-battle, see: Dennis J. Blasko and Roderick Lee, “The Chinese Navy’s Marine Corps, Part 1: Expansion and Reorganization,” *China Brief*, February 1, 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-chinese-navys-marine-corps-part-1-expansion-and-reorganization/>

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