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The CCP's Official Journal Falls in Line with Xi Jinping's Cult of Personality

By John Dotson

Introduction

Since 1988, the journal *Qiushi* (求是), produced bimonthly by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee, has served as the CCP's leading official theoretical journal. Commenced under the tenures of then-CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang and then-paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, the journal was intended to further signal the CCP's turn towards pragmatism in the 1980s, and it eclipsed in importance the Party's more Maoist publication *Red Flag* (红旗, *Hongqi*). [1] For more than three decades *Qiushi* has served as the premier outlet for the CCP's official positions on policy and ideology, and the journal describes itself as "the publication of the party central organs, [providing] an important ideological and theoretical position for the Party Center to guide the work of the entire party and the entire country" ([Qiushi website](#), August 20, 2018).

As the journal of the party leadership, *Qiushi* has always reflected the CCP's official ideological trends of the moment, and it has hardly been an outlet for the free exchange of ideas. However, under the tenure of current CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, the journal—like virtually every other state publication and media outlet—has become more and more a vehicle for promoting Xi's steadily growing cult of personality. In its present form, *Qiushi* has become virtually a “call-and-response” publication, devoted to parroting praise for Xi and the ideological formulations promoted under his name. Each issue is now centered on a designated propaganda theme and semi-standard format: first, a leading article published under Xi's name; and then, articles attributed to subordinate party organs and officials that repeat and reinforce the official message (nominally) authored by the supreme leader.



Image: A screen shot from the website of the CCP's official theoretical journal Qiushi; the image reflects a broader propaganda campaign to depict CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping as being close to China's common citizens. The image accompanies an issue centered around the theme of "Implementing the Party's Organizational Line for the New Era." (Image source: [Qiushi website](#), August 1)

Qiushi Themes in Early Summer 2020

The issues of *Qiushi* published throughout early summer 2020 all illustrated this trend, with each issue centered around a speech or article attributed to Xi:

- The first issue for June focused on the theme of "comprehensively building a prosperous society" (全面建成小康社会, *quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui*) for China under CCP governance ([Qiushi](#), Issue #11, June 1, 2020). This represented a return to a propaganda theme originally intended for broader exposure earlier in the year, before the COVID-19 outbreak pushed some state media plans to the backburner ([China Media Project](#), January 30).

- The second June issue stressed the importance of “understanding, promulgating, and implementing the civil code” (认识颁布实施民法典, *renshi banbu shishi minfadian*) ([Qiushi](#), Issue #12, June 16, 2020). The crux of this idea calls for more efficient and stringent CCP legal and administrative management of Chinese society, and parallels the theme of a Politburo “collective study session” held on this same topic in late May ([China Brief](#), June 24).
- The issue for early July centered around the slogan “Don’t Forget [Our] Original Purpose and Firmly Remember the Mission” (不忘初心, 牢记使命 / *buwang chuxin, laoji shiming*) ([Qiushi](#), Issue #13, July 1, 2020). This slogan, unveiled in summer 2019, has been closely associated with Xi’s drive for reinforced ideological orthodoxy within the CCP, and has been the subject of multiple leadership meetings and repeated media coverage over the past year ([China Brief](#), July 31, 2019; [China Brief](#), January 29; [China Brief](#), June 24).

***Qiushi* Themes in July and August Reinforce the CCP’s Position in Chinese Politics—
and Xi’s Position as the Supreme Leader**

The two most recent issues of *Qiushi*, published on July 16 and August 1, further illustrate this Xi-centric format. They also further illustrate a continuing and more comprehensive propaganda effort to assert the indispensable role of the CCP as China’s ruling political institution ([China Brief](#), December 10, 2019; [China Brief](#), December 31, 2019). The July 16 issue carried, under Xi’s name, the banner article “Communist Party Leadership Is the Most Essential Characteristic of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” with six further articles hammering home this theme. This included commentary from the editorial staff that “the role of General Secretary Xi Jinping as the core of the Party Center, and the core of the whole party, has clearly confirmed the great superiority of Communist Party leadership and the socialist system with Chinese characteristics” ([Qiushi](#), July 15).

Selected Thematic Articles in <i>Qiushi</i>: The “Comprehensive Party Leadership” Issue (No. 14, July 16, 2020)		
Nominal Author	Article Title (English)	Article Title (Chinese)
Xi Jinping (习近平)	<u>Lead Article:</u> "Communist Party Leadership Is the Most Essential Characteristic of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics"	中国共产党领导是中国特色社 会主义最本质的特征
<i>Qiushi</i> Editorial Dept. (编辑部)	"Persist In and Strengthen the Party's Comprehensive Leadership"	坚持和加强党的全面领导

CCP Central Party School (中共中央党校)	"Party Leadership Determines the Nature and Direction of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics"	党的领导决定中国特色社会主义性质和方向
CCP Party History and Documents Research Institute (中共中央党史和文献研究院)	"The Historical Logic of Deepening, Understanding, Persisting In, and Strengthening Party Leadership"	深刻认识坚持和加强党的领导的历史逻辑
National Development and Reform Commission CCP Party Organization (中共国家发展改革委党组)	"Persist In and Strengthen the Party's Centralized and Unified Leadership of Development and Reform Work"	坚持和加强党对发展改革工作的集中统一领导
Communist Youth League Central Secretariat (共青团中央书记处)	"Persisting In Party Leadership Is the Political Spirit of the Communist Youth League"	坚持党的领导是共青团的政治灵魂
Shaanxi Province Yan'an City CCP Committee (中共陕西省延安市委)	"Persist In Party Leadership, Carry Forward the Yan'an Spirit"	坚持党的领导 弘扬延安精神
Source: Qiushi , Issue #14, 2020 (July 16, 2020)		

The role of the party was further driven home in the August 1 issue, which centered around Xi's guidance to "implement the party's organizational line"—a vague set of ideas related to maintaining proper political orientation, and the efficient management of CCP component organizations and CCP cadres, in order to "make party building even stronger" ([Qiushi](#), August 1, 2020). As with other ongoing propaganda efforts to strengthen ideological indoctrination among party members ([China Brief](#), December 31, 2019), themes from the issue sought to link current events with heroic narratives from CCP history (*see photo below*).

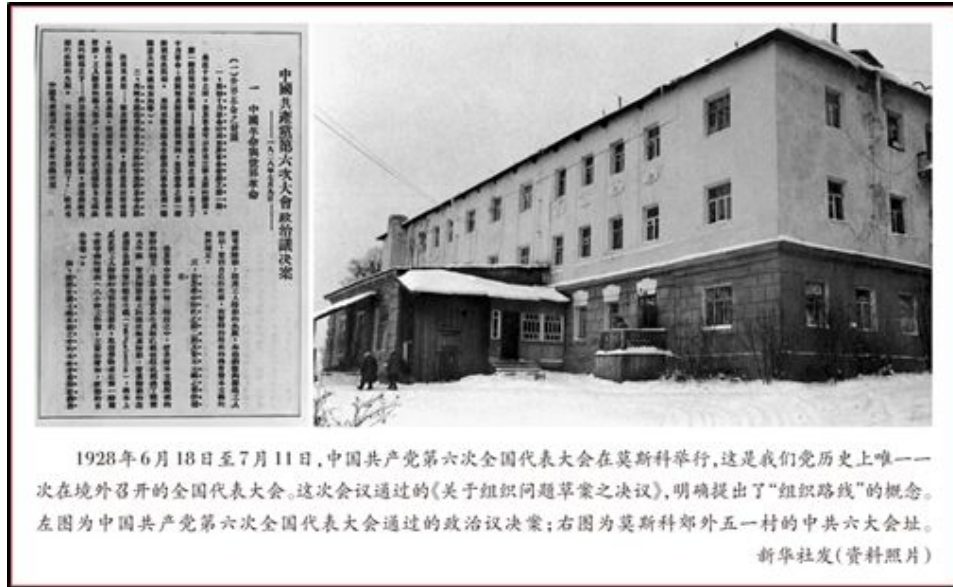


Image: A document from the 6th CCP Congress (left), and the building on the outskirts of Moscow where the congress was held in June-July 1928 (right). This image was included in the August 1 issue of *Qiushi*, which noted that the 6th Party Congress "clearly set forward the 'organizational line' concept" (明确提出了组织路线的概念, *mingque tichule zuzhi luxian de gainian*) advocated under Xi's name in the same issue. Such images and commentary are part of a larger effort to link Xi, and the slogans promoted under his name, with heroic narratives from the CCP's early history. (Image source: [Qiushi](#), August 1)

Selected Thematic Articles in <i>Qiushi</i>: The “Party Organizational Line” Issue (No. 15, August 1, 2020)		
Nominal Author	Article Title (English)	Article Title (Chinese)
Xi Jinping (习近平)	<u>Lead Article:</u> "Implement the Party's Organizational Line for the New Era, Make Party Building Even Stronger"	贯彻落实新时代党的组织路线 不断把党建设得更加坚强有力
<i>Qiushi</i> Editorial Dept. (编辑部)	"To Advance the Great Enterprise, Set Forth Strong Organizational Pledges"	为推进伟大事业提供坚强组织保证
Zhong Zuwen (仲祖文) (CCP Central Org. Dept.) [2]	"Deeply Study and Implement the Spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Speech, Resolutely Implement the Party's Organizational Line for the New Era"	深入学习贯彻习近平总书记重要讲话精神 坚定不移贯彻落实新时代党的组织路线

Wang Zhengpu (王正谱)	"Make Great Efforts to Build the Party Organizational System"	抓好党的组织体系建设
Liu Qiang (刘强)	"Make Great Efforts to Build the Party Organizational Institutions"	抓好党的组织制度建设
Yu Yunlin (喻云林)	"Make Great Efforts to Build Governing Cadre Teams and Talent Teams"	抓好执政骨干队伍和人才队伍建设
Source: Qiushi , Issue #15, 2020 (August 1, 2020)		

Conclusion

As the CCP's premier ideological journal and the official outlet of the CCP Central Committee, *Qiushi* is the most authoritative publication of the Communist Party central authorities. *Qiushi* was once a journal created, at least in theory, to supplant Maoist ideological rigidity—and to promote instead the more flexible ideological pragmatism preferred by Deng Xiaoping and others in the CCP's top leadership echelon amid the pre-Tiananmen 1980s. The journal was never a true marketplace of ideas, and its contents reflected more official messaging than substantive open debate. However, the steady transformation of *Qiushi* into yet another vehicle for the obsequious praise of Xi further demonstrates just how pervasive Xi's cult of personality has become—and just how intellectually sterile, and increasingly totalitarian in tone, discourse has become within the modern CCP. Originally founded to steer a course away from Maoist dogmatism, *Qiushi* has succumbed to the neo-Maoist revival of Xi Jinping.

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Notes

[1] The title *Qiushi* is drawn from the traditional expression *shishi qiushi* (实事求是), roughly meaning “to seek truth from facts”—an expression frequently associated with Deng Xiaoping's push for pragmatic economic reforms. The characters appearing in the journal's logo / title page are reportedly taken from Deng's own handwriting ([Qiushi English Edition](#), September 19, 2011).

[2] Zhong Zuwen (仲祖文) is a homonym/contraction (of 中共中央组织部文章, *Zhonggong Zhongyang Zuzhibu wenzhang*), and functions as a pseudonym for the CCP Central Organization Department.

The CCP's Economic Plans in the Lead-Up to the Fifth Party Plenum

By Willy Lam

Introduction

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping has given top priority to a policy of domestic consumption and innovation to ensure “safe economic growth” and to counter U.S. President Trump’s apparent efforts to boycott high-end Chinese firms and products. According to a CCP Politburo meeting late last month, the ruling CCP Central Committee will hold its Fifth Plenum—that is, the fifth meeting of the full Central Committee selected at the 19th Party Congress in 2017—in October to lay down basic strategies for the 14th Five Year Plan (2021-2025), and to draw up long-term economic blueprints through the year 2035. According to the Politburo communique, “The 14th Five-Year Plan period [will cover] the first five years after China has completed building a moderately prosperous society in all respects... The period will also mark the time for the country to build on this achievement to embark on a new journey toward the second centenary goal of fully building a modern socialist country” ([Xinhua](#), July 31).

“The Great Domestic Circulation” As the New Focus of Economic Policy

The leitmotif of the big plans on the drawing board will be safety—and the ability of the Xi-led CCP top leadership to control the nation’s economic and political resources. “We must seek development that has higher quality, higher efficiency, a higher [degree of] fairness, higher sustainability and higher safety,” the Politburo added. “We must seek a synthesis of scale, speed, quality, efficiency and safety.” This was the first time that “safe” growth was given such pride of place in the national agenda. To achieve this supreme new goal, the CCP leadership has put forward the strategy of the “dual domestic and international circulations” (国内国际双循环, *guonei guoji shuangxunhuan*). Circulation is a code word for ensuring the smooth operation of supply chains, production, logistics, sales, and consumption. Citing Chairman Mao’s famous theory of “protracted warfare,” the Politburo said the country would ceaselessly speed up the establishment of “a new developmental mode whereby the main emphasis is on the great domestic circulation, with mutually beneficial implementation of dual domestic and international circulations” ([People’s Daily](#), July 31; [Ming Pao \[Hong Kong\]](#), July 31; [South China Morning Post](#), July 30).

While the Politburo communique did not mention the United States, there is some truth to the view of former U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton that “U.S.-China decoupling is already happening” ([FCCHK](#), July 16). Apart from geopolitical contention, there are further indications that the Trump administration is moving away from the symbiotic relationship between the American and Chinese economies that began in 2001 with China’s entry into the World Trade Organization and the establishment of U.S.-China “permanent normal trading relations” ([White House](#), December 27, 2001).

Not long after taking office in 2017, Trump sought to limit the global sales of such top Chinese high-tech firms as Huawei and ZTE, owing to the alleged threats that these companies posed to American national security. Early this month, the White House banned high-flying Chinese apps such as TikTok and WeChat from the American market; it is possible that Tiktok will be forced into a purchase by Microsoft. Moreover, Chinese firms might be delisted from the New York Stock Exchange if they are found to be out of compliance with U.S. accounting standards (Finance.sina.com.cn, August 7; Caixin Global, June 9).



Image: Xi Jinping speaking to workers at a China First Heavy Industry Group Corporation facility during a trip to Qiqihar (Heilongjiang Province) in September 2018. Xi used this trip to promote, among other themes, the value of self-reliant autarky (自力更生, ziligengsheng) for China's technological and economic development.

(Image source: Zhongguo Qingnian Wang, September 27, 2018).

The Prospects for a Return to Chinese Economic Autarky

From one perspective, the Chinese market seems big enough to generate growth, including development in the high-tech sectors. Despite widespread allegations of intellectual rights property theft, Chinese authorities have claimed that robust consumption and government help have pushed Chinese technology in areas such as AI and 5G to the world's front line. As an acknowledged student of Mao, Xi has countered the challenge from the Trump administration by emphasizing the Maoist value of *ziligengsheng* (自力更生), or "autarkist self-sufficiency." "Core technologies cannot be bought [overseas]," Xi likes to say. "The 'life' of enterprises lies in their own intellectual property rights. Enterprises must ceaselessly attain breakthroughs in core technologies" (China.com.cn, December 29, 2018).

The Xi leadership has hoped to take advantage of large-scale reconstruction and investment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic to raise Chinese technology to the next level (China Brief, May 1). According to the

First Financial Daily's tally of large-scale regional projects, eight major provinces have announced investments close to 3.6 trillion dollars (25 trillion *renminbi*) ([Reportrc.com](#), March 9; [Apple Daily](#), March 2). For example, China's three biggest IT companies are set to invest more than 25.9 billion (180 billion *renminbi*) in 5G-related operations ([Economic Observation Net](#), March 24). However, according to U.S. based-Sinologist and sociologist Ho-Fung Hung, although Beijing has boasted about top-drawer high-tech inventions, Chinese industry still depends on imports of core equipment and components from the West. Now that the United States has blocked Chinese access to American know-how, "the bursting of the bubble of Xi Jinping's technological dream has taken place earlier" ([Radio Free Asia](#), July 29).

Another prominent goal of "self-reliant economic development" is ensuring food safety. The official media on August 11 cited Xi Jinping as saying that, although China had experienced bumper harvests the past several years, China must "adopt a crisis mentality toward food safety." Xi stated that "We must resolutely stop wastage of food and earnestly nurture the habit of frugality" in eating and drinking ([Gov.cn](#), August 11). While on a trip last month to the predominantly agricultural province of Jilin, the party leader said: "We must put grain safety in a prominent position and never relax [the goal of] grasping grain production. We must speed up the change of agriculture production methods." As an example, Xi's advisers have urged more experimentations with collectivized farming in the three northeastern provinces ([People's Daily](#), July 25). Given the fact that China has to import up to 30 percent of some produce, agricultural or grain self-sufficiency may never be realized. Despite this, the CCP leadership has warned that China must not become dependent on the imports of potentially hostile countries such as the United States ([Apple Daily](#), August 11).

Another primary goal of autarkist "safe development" is finding employment for workers laid off due to the coronavirus crisis. UBS Securities assessed in late April that perhaps 80 million jobs had been lost in services, industry, and construction; and that more than 10 million other jobs could evaporate in export sectors, as orders cease and businesses avoid large worker gatherings due to lingering pandemic fears ([Radio French International](#), April 30).

The Xi leadership has also resorted to another Maoist solution to unemployment: urging high school and college graduates to go to the countryside "to learn from the masses." On March 26, party and government authorities published an "opinion on comprehensively boosting labor education among college, high-school and primary-school students in the new era." During the Cultural Revolution, Mao sought to partially solve China's unemployment crisis by sending students "up to the mountains and down to the villages." Throughout this year, an estimated 10 million students will be "sent down" to the countryside to seek work ([PRC Government](#), March 26; [Radio French International](#), April 11, 2019; [China Brief](#), April 29, 2019).

Despite Xi's apparent penchant for reinstating Maoist norms, the official media has denied that Beijing is re-embracing the Great Chairman's autarkist economic policies. For example, an official Xinhua commentator indicated in early August that despite the fact that the new development pattern of domestic circulation "puts more emphasis on self-sufficiency, it's improper to interpret it as a policy shift to less opening up or less

active interaction with foreign markets.” A *People’s Daily* commentary at the same time noted that the great domestic circulation strategy was to “facilitate better connectivity between domestic and foreign markets for more resilient and sustainable growth” ([Xinhua](#), August 5). Apart from purchasing more agricultural products from the United States, however, which is essential to the country’s “grain safety,” Beijing has yet to show the West that it intends to pursue equitable trade or market reforms ([Cn.reuters.com](#), July 31; [Finance.sina.com.cn](#), July 15).

Conclusion

One silver lining in the “new cold war” between the United States and China is that negotiations are still taking place regarding the “second phase” of the trade deal. At least from the American perspective, the “second phase” deals mainly with U.S. requests that the Chinese party-state authorities relax control over the economy—particularly the state-owned enterprise conglomerates. Vice-Premier Liu He (刘鹤), Xi’s main economics adviser, seems sanguine about the symbiosis of the “domestic and foreign circulations.” Liu has said that “We still face the relatively massive pressure of the economy going downwards,” but he has also claimed that the situation is improving: “A new scenario of domestic circulation in the main, coupled with mutually beneficial dual domestic-foreign circulation, is taking shape” ([First Financial News](#), June 19). What Liu and his colleagues have so far failed to offer are market-oriented reforms, coupled with the gradual retreat of the party-state apparatus from the economy.

Indeed, in line with previous plenums, these high-level conclaves are partly called to eulogize General Secretary Xi for his contribution to “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era.” In the past few years, Xi’s theories about the economy, foreign and military affairs are said to exemplify “the force of the truth of 21st century Chinese Marxism” ([Guangming Daily](#), February 27, 2018). As Hong Kong-based Sinologist and columnist Sun Jiaye has pointed out, the fact that the Fifth Plenum is intended to set economic policies through to the year 2035 illustrates the determination of Xi—often known as the “21st century Mao”—to remain the nation’s supreme leader until he reaches the ripe old age of eighty ([Ming Pao](#), August 6). At this stage, there don’t seem to be any voices in the party opposing the over-concentration of policy-making at the top that has been the hallmark of Xi since he came to power in 2012. However, whether such Mao-style decision-making will reinstate reforms—particularly in the wake of the pandemic—necessary to render the country competitive with the U.S.-led Western alliance remains a big question.

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**The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Two:
China's (Para)Military Efforts to Promote Security in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan**

By Sergey Sukhankin

Introduction

Successfully realizing the ambitions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will require the People's Republic of China (PRC) to guarantee the protection of its workers, businesses, and critical infrastructure in BRI countries. The first part of this short series of articles discussed Beijing's general views on the security challenges to PRC interests in Central Asia ([China Brief](#), July 15). This second article is concerned with two specific cases: Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, these two states remained heavily dependent on Russia in terms of economics and security ([lpg-journal.io](#), April 8). However, China's increasing influence has now created a state of "competitive cooperation" between Beijing and Moscow.



Image: A map of Tajikistan, which also shows Kyrgyzstan to the north, and the borders that the two countries share with the PRC's western region of Xinjiang. The area shaded in orange is the "Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region," a key region linking the PRC and Afghanistan. (Image source: [Elizon](#))

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan occupy key strategic territory for Beijing's interests in Central Asia, as seen in their proximity to the potentially rebellious Xinjiang region; their importance for transportation infrastructure projects linked to the BRI; and the strategic location of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (戈尔诺-巴达赫尚自治州, *Ge'ernuo-Badaheshang Zizhizhou*) of eastern Tajikistan, which covers most of the territory connecting the PRC to Afghanistan. For Beijing, the successful projection of influence over these two

countries, and their internal stability, are key conditions for the successful completion of BRI projects further afield in Central Asia.

Tajikistan: China's Anti-Terrorist Stronghold in Central Asia?

Chinese interests in Tajikistan are based on two interrelated elements. The first of these are geo-economic calculations, in which Tajikistan is viewed as an essential part of the “Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism”—a framework established in 2016 consisting of China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—intended to grant China access to the Indian Ocean ([PRC Ministry of Defense](#), August 28, 2017). The second of these are security-related concerns, which Beijing sees as connected to the so-called “Three Evils” (or “Three Forces”) (三股势力, *San Gu Shili*): terrorism (恐怖主义, *kongbu zhuyi*), separatism (分裂主义, *fenlie zhuyi*), and extremism (极端主义, *jiduan zhuyi*). Tajikistan occupies a key buffer region for China, and is seen as an integral part of these concerns ([China Brief](#), July 15).

In June 2019, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping and Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon agreed to further deepen the two countries' “comprehensive strategic partnership,” which included strengthening bilateral cooperation “in combating the ‘three forces’... as well as transnational organized crimes [and] cyber security” ([Xinhuanet](#), June 16, 2019). Chinese concerns related to the situation in Tajikistan, and potential repercussions for the BRI, have been amplified by reports that around 400 militants—associated with ISIS, Jamaat Ansarullah, and the Turkistan Islamic Movement (TIM)—have attempted to establish a new terrorist base on the territory of the GBAO ([Stanradar](#), April 23, 2020).

Fortifying Tajikistan's Physical Infrastructure

To effectively deal with these challenges, Beijing is relying on four main pillars. The first of these is fortifying Tajikistan's physical security infrastructure. The logic of creating military infrastructure in Tajikistan has been summarized by Beijing-based military expert Li Jie, who noted that if Chinese forces wish to “eliminate the so-called three forces, they need to go to their power bases and take them down. But since the PLA is not familiar with the terrain... bilateral cooperation is the best way to get win-win results” ([SCMP](#), August 28, 2018). The foundation for this policy was set in October 2016, when Beijing and Dushanbe reached an agreement on modernizing security infrastructure in their border region, which reportedly included plans for 11 “outposts of different sizes” and a training center for border guards ([Belt and Road News](#), February 26, 2019).

China's Direct Security Presence

The second pillar is the direct presence of Chinese forces in the country. Tajik authorities have repeatedly denied “rumors” regarding the existence of Chinese military bases in the country ([Asiaplustj.info](#), February 21, 2019). However, in the Murghob District of the GBAO, a Chinese military base—officially, a Tajik base built to protect Chinese investments—has been operating for at least four years ([Centralasia.media](#), February 20, 2019). Locals have claimed that several hundred Chinese soldiers have been deployed at the base

([Currenttime.tv](#), February 19, 2019). Further investigations have revealed that the “Chinese soldiers” are in fact representatives of the Chinese People's Armed Police (中国人民武装警察部队, *Zhongguo Renmin Wuzhuang Jingcha Budui*), or PAP. The paramilitary PAP is responsible for internal security, riot control, antiterrorism, disaster response, law enforcement, and maritime rights protection ([Gov.cn](#), August 27, 2009), and operates as a rough analogue to Russia's National Guard ([Carnegie.ru](#), March 25).

Combined Training and Military Assistance

The third of Beijing's pillars consists of training and military support. This is intended to serve a dual purpose: in addition to dealing with Islamic militants, it also increases China's influence in the country. This is especially the case given the state of Tajikistan's economy, and the near-complete collapse of its armed forces and defense industry after 1991 ([Dfnc.ru](#), 2019). According to local analysts and military experts, Tajik military capabilities are still inadequate for the range of challenges faced by the country, and therefore require foreign assistance ([Stanradar.com](#), February 25, 2020).

The intensification of Chinese-Tajik military cooperation reached another landmark in 2016, when combined military exercises (involving 10,000 men) were held in the Pamirs region, in the Ishkashim district of the GBAW ([Riss.ru](#), April 22). Three day military exercises were repeated in the same area in 2019 ([CANN](#), April 21), which led some international observers to comment that Dushanbe was “increasingly outsourcing its security needs to Beijing” ([Eurasianet.org](#) July 9, 2019). Furthermore, among Central Asian states Tajikistan is the largest recipient of uncompensated Chinese military aid, which now also extends to matters such as the construction of military facilities and apartments for Tajik military officers ([President.tj](#), May 5, 2016).



Image: PLA troops perform a pass-in-review march during the “Cooperation 2019” (协作-2019, Xiezuozuo-2019) counter-terrorism exercise in Tajikistan.
(Image source: [Dangdai Xianfeng Wang](#), August 16, 2019)

The fourth of Beijing's pillars for increasing security (and its own influence) in Tajikistan is the use of private security companies (PSCs), a phenomenon likely to grow in significance as China's BRI projects continue to expand throughout the world. As noted by Lu Guiqing, general manager of the Zhongnan Group Corporation: "[W]hen you 'go out' safety is the most important" ([SCMP](#), April 24, 2017). While there is no firm evidence to indicate that Chinese PSCs are currently operating in Tajikistan, analysis of the Chinese PSCs industry points to China Overseas Security Group (中国海外保安集团, *Zhongguo Haiwai Bao'an Jituan*), Frontier Services Group (先丰服务集团, *Xianfeng Fuwu Jituan*) and G4S (杰富仕, *Jiefushi*) as the enterprises best suited for deployment to the country ([China Brief](#), May 15).

In light of a controversial 2011 agreement that reportedly put 1 percent of Tajik territory under *de facto* PRC control, as well as huge financial debts owed by the Tajik government, Beijing has significant opportunities to boost its military and paramilitary presence in the country—which in turn will open up valuable inroads to Afghanistan ([Vesti.kz](#), October 4, 2011).

The PRC's Security Interests in Kyrgyzstan

The range of challenges faced by China in Kyrgyzstan is similar to those found in Tajikistan. The prospects of terrorism and public unrest are the two main challenges faced by the Chinese in the country; to which must also be added anti-Chinese sentiment, which is sometimes accompanied by violence ([Forbes.kz](#), September 18, 2019). The incident with arguably the greatest impact on Chinese security perceptions related to Kyrgyzstan was the 2016 terrorist attack on the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, which vividly exposed the weaknesses of the Kyrgyz security system. As noted by Li Lifan of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences: "[T]he attack will almost certainly have security implications for many Chinese projects in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian nations as they become the new linchpin of the 'One Belt One Road' initiative." Another commentator, Li Wei of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, predicted that security conditions would worsen "[D]ue to collusion between local fundamentalist movements and the exiled Uygur Muslim extremist groups" ([SCMP](#), September 1, 2016).

To deal with these challenges, the Chinese side is likely to rely on two main tools. The first of these consists of exercises and military aid to boost local security capabilities, which were seriously weakened after the dissolution of the USSR. [1] Similar to a parallel effort in Tajikistan, the PRC has sponsored an aid program for the construction of apartments for local military officers ([Tj.sputniknews.ru](#), March 22, 2017). The first combined Sino-Kyrgyz anti-terrorism exercises were launched on October 11, 2002 near the PRC-Kyrgyz-border (the Irkeshtam crossing area), and involved Kyrgyzstan's border forces and approximately 300 Chinese troops from Xinjiang ([China.org.cn](#), October 11, 2002).

Later, Kyrgyz armed forces anti-terrorism training was placed primarily put under the framework of the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, the Chinese have maintained a significant role: between 2003 – 2016, the Kyrgyz military held ten exercises or training events with their

Chinese counterparts (Carnegie.ru, March 25), and this has been accompanied by the growth of Chinese military aid (Refworld.org, September 4, 2014). An important milestone was reached in 2019, when a bilateral counter-terrorism exercise titled "Cooperation-2019" was launched at a training base in Xinjiang region, involving members of the PAP and the National Guard of Kyrgyzstan (Xinhuanet, August 7, 2019). [2]

Kyrgyzstan: The Ideal Testing Ground for Chinese Private Security Companies?

The second major tool that the Chinese are likely to employ (or test out) in Kyrgyzstan are PSCs, which are emerging in importance as the BRI expands (China Brief, May 15). Given the lower level of risk in Kyrgyzstan (as compared to neighboring Tajikistan), and the general weakness of Chinese PSCs, Kyrgyzstan offers a promising testing ground for these companies. Voices arguing for the use of PSCs to protect Chinese nationals in Kyrgyzstan became louder after the outbreak of mass protests, accompanied by violence, in the central Naryn Region (Uyghur Congress, January 26, 2019). These incidents revealed explicit anti-Chinese sentiment, and vividly demonstrated difficulties that Chinese businesses have had with protecting their employees and property (Knews.kg, August 26, 2019). In addition to a very harsh official statement issued by PRC officials that demanded improved security for Chinese nationals in the country, Chinese businesses have unofficially asked for permission to employ PSCs (Forbes.kz, September 18, 2019).

Local commentator Mederbek Korganbayev has written that "[I]n the future China might be able to lobby—through the Kyrgyz Parliament—for a law allowing Chinese investors to use PSCs on the territory of Kyrgyzstan." The author also presumed that the personnel of Chinese PSCs will be equipped with "ordnance weapons as well as special means [*spetsredstva*]" (Centralasia.news, August 25, 2019). Kyrgyz officials denied these assertions, calling the article "lies" and promising to severely punish those spreading such information (Kaktus.media, August 26, 2019).

However, given overall trends—including the growing privatization of security—this prospect does not seem totally unfounded. One of the largest Chinese state-owned enterprises operating in the country, China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC), has concluded an agreement with the Kyrgyz government regarding public surveillance. According to local sources, cameras and other gadgets could be used by China "for protection of its interests in case of outbreaks of anti-Chinese demonstrations, and provocations aimed against Chinese nationals" (la-centr.ru, September 1, 2019).

According to some experts, China Railway Group Limited—involved in the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway (CKU) project—relies for security services on Zhongjun Junhong (中军军弘安保集团, *Zhongjun Junhong Anbao Jituan*) one of the largest Chinese private security companies, which has had a branch in Kyrgyzstan since 2016 (Mp.weixin.qq.com, April 27, 2019). This PSC has reportedly secured more than twenty Chinese clients in Kyrgyzstan: in addition to China Railway Engineering Group, these clients include Sinohydro, Huawei Technologies, and Sanmenxia Luqiao Construction Group (The Diplomat, July 3, 2019).

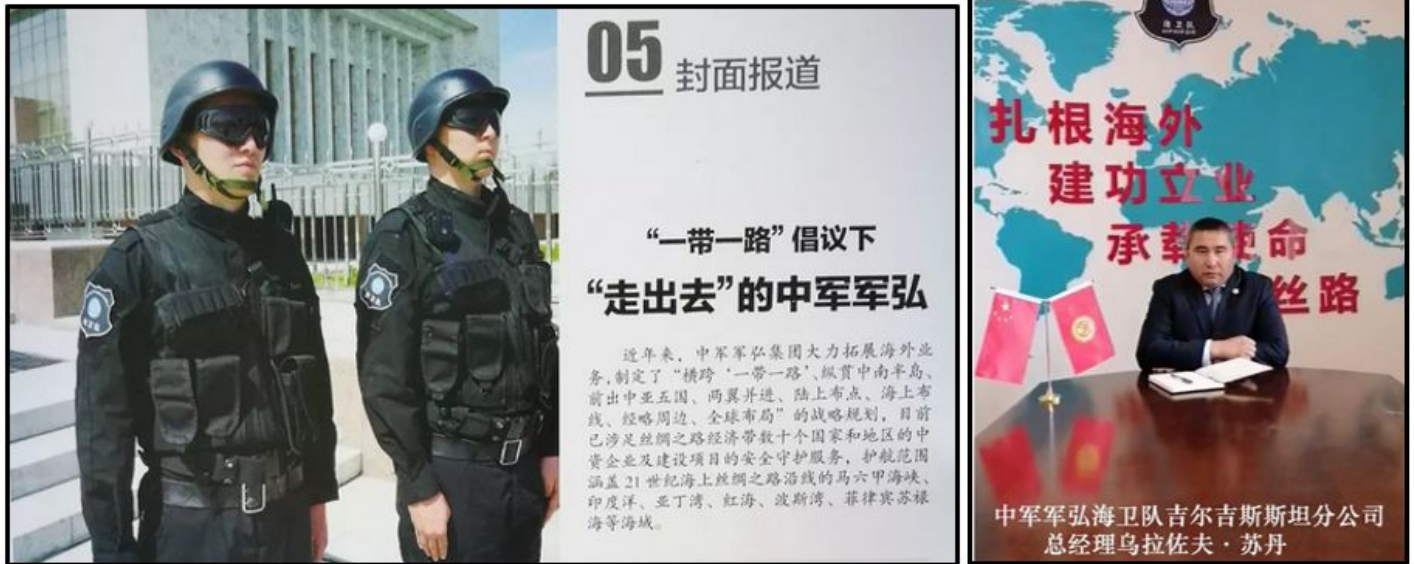


Image left: A promotional magazine article touting the role of the security contractor Zhongjun Junhong in providing security services for BRI projects. (Image source: [Weixin.qq](#), April 27, 2019). / Image right: A photo of Urazov Sudan, the general manager of Zhongjun Junhong's branch in Kyrgyzstan. The company's Kyrgyzstan branch opened in 2016, and reportedly provides security for multiple Chinese companies in the country. (Image source: [Zhongjun Junhong](#), February 17, 2020)

According to prominent Russian Sinologist Professor Alexey Maslov, for the time being the PRC is experimenting with building military facilities abroad, and cautious international deployments of its PSCs. However, the Chinese “[A]re not good in either element... [and only after] they have acquired necessary skills...it will be possible to talk about full-fledged large-scale actions” ([Afghanistan.ru](#), February 25, 2019).

Conclusion

Even though China's security presence in Central Asia has been dwarfed by its economic involvement ([SCMP](#), September 1, 2016), the successful implementation and expansion of the BRI will require Beijing to further invest in maintaining security in the region—and in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in particular. This is likely to result in growing discontent among anti-Chinese forces in the region. It is also likely to breed suspicion in Russia, which has for decades exercised a sphere of influence in Central Asian security affairs (particularly, although not exclusively, in Tajikistan). Recent moves by Chinese actors indicate that a longstanding tacit agreement—one which gave the leading security role to Russia, and the leading economic role to China—might be in the process of changing.

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Notes

[1] For example, the last military production factory in Kyrgyzstan was effectively closed down in 2013 (Dfnc.ru, accessed July 22).

[2] The PRC has sponsored exercises with Central Asian countries under the names *Xiezuo-2019* (协作-2019) and *Hezuo-2019* (合作-2019), both of which are usually translated as “Cooperation-2019.”

The Sino-Russian Disinformation Axis During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Richard Weitz

Introduction

For the first time, the European Commission has identified the People's Republic of China (PRC), along with Russia and other actors, as responsible for conducting “targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighborhood, and globally” ([European Commission](#), June 10). In the past, PRC media management normally focused on censoring undesirable narratives at home while employing positive messaging to promote favorable images of China's policies abroad. This contrasted with the more combative international approach traditionally adopted by Moscow. During the current COVID-19 crisis, however, PRC propaganda has followed the Russian practice of not only advancing positive reviews of its own actions, but also promoting negative messages about other states.

The PRC and Russian foreign ministries have jointly complained that “certain [i.e., Western] countries, out of ideological bias and political needs, have been spreading disinformation, distorting history, attacking other countries' social systems and development paths, politicizing the pandemic, pinning labels on the virus, and restrict[ing] and oppress[ing] foreign media for doing their job” ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), July 25). Their information departments have agreed to cooperate against the West's media policies, including by executing joint digital media projects ([Russian Foreign Ministry](#), July 24).

In addition to a corps of newly assertive diplomats, a powerful foundation for propelling PRC views has been provided by China's rapidly growing and lavishly funded networks of state-controlled print, broadcast, and web-based media; as well as social media accounts using software platforms that are often prohibited from operating in mainland China. Western observers have identified several covert state-sponsored social media accounts and networks that push PRC talking points regarding the pandemic and other topics. The COVID-19 crisis has provided Beijing with an opportunity to refine and augment this potent disinformation toolkit, which will likely be a feature of future PRC global strategic information campaigns.

China's New Information Operations During COVID-19

The PRC's information operations during COVID-19 have seen several innovations. Traditionally, while Russian narratives regularly highlight the poor performance of others—particularly, Western governments—Beijing's foreign messaging has normally been more positive, calling for “win-win” international cooperation in various speeches and government white papers. In its talking points on COVID, PRC messaging has sought to highlight China's successes in countering the SARS-CoV-2 virus at home, thereby promoting a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) narrative about the ruling party's effective stewardship

of national affairs. A corollary theme has been that China's success at home bought time for other countries to prepare for the pandemic.

To support this argument, a preferred technique has been to cite foreigners' praise for PRC actions. For example, Xinhua published an interview in which Dmitry Novikov, the Deputy Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Russia, called China's response to COVID-19, under the leadership of the CCP, an "outstanding example" for the international community. In Novikov's words, "The people of China showed massive heroism ... But an army needs not only brave soldiers but also wise commanders to win. The [CCP] has played a key role" in this victory ([Xinhua](#), July 1). Russian official statements have regularly defended Beijing's position that the Western democracies failed to take advantage of China's effective response to the virus, and ineptly allowed COVID-19 to spread throughout the world ([China Brief](#), June 24).

Chinese messaging has also proclaimed the PRC's leading role in helping other countries to surmount their own COVID-related challenges. A favorite subject promoted to foreign audiences has been Beijing's "mask diplomacy" of delivering medical equipment, sometimes donated but often sold, to international partners at high-profile eulogistic ceremonies ([Xinhua](#), June 27). PRC diplomats have called on other countries to join with China in "upholding the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind and working together to address" the pandemic ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), April 13).



Image: A screen shot from the Twitter account of the PRC's official Xinhua News Agency (dated June 30, 2020). PRC and Russian sources have demonstrated cooperative and mutually-reinforcing efforts in propaganda throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. (Image source: [Xinhua Twitter](#))

PRC representatives have also employed more negative messaging to counter foreign charges that the Chinese authorities covered up the origins of the virus and mismanaged its initial containment. Prominent PRC Foreign Ministry officials, reflecting the new “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy favored by the current regime, have led the rebuke of these allegations and the denunciation of those making them. For instance, on the sidelines of the third session of the 13th National People's Congress, PRC State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) castigated U.S. politicians for spreading “lies” and “prejudice” to attack and smear China ([CGTN](#), May 24). Chinese diplomats have also lashed out at foreign media outlets that contested the PRC’s victory narrative ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), April 13). In general, the official state-run media was mobilized to push the narrative that:

China is the first country to have contained the pandemic through the concerted efforts of the nation. It acted promptly to protect the health and safety of its people, actively and unconditionally shared information with other countries, including the U.S., and verified and corrected its number of confirmed cases and fatalities with big data. It has also provided assistance for more than 120 countries around the world facing the challenges brought by the epidemic, and has donated money to the World Health Organization (WHO) to help with epidemic prevention efforts.... If anyone is to blame, it is the U.S. For a long time, it ignored warnings from the WHO and China, and just sat by and watched the epidemic spread in its own country. American officials refused to take preventive measures, despite suggestions from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and experts. They remained blindly optimistic until mid-March, oblivious to the lack of medical supplies and calls for help from local governments, which then led to the worsening situation in the country ([People's Daily Online](#), April 27).

Conspiracy Theories and “Message Flooding”

Just as Russian-linked propaganda has spread falsehoods about U.S. soldiers in Europe disseminating COVID-19 throughout the continent, so the PRC media has warned Japan and other countries hosting U.S. troops that these American bases contribute to contaminating their civilian neighborhoods with the virus. In late July, a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) publication deemed “U.S. military bases in Japan ... a big loophole in Japan's pandemic prevention” because “the U.S.–Japan Status of Forces Agreement puts Japan in a subordinate position” by excluding U.S. military personnel from Japanese entry and other virus-related prevention measures. Noting that the same conditions prevail in South Korea and Europe, the author argued that American “protection has become a burden” ([China Military Online](#), July 28).

Furthermore, the PRC has followed the Russian technique of message flooding to cast doubt on any single truth, using multiple media channels to offer diverse alternative virus origin stories. These stories often cite non-PRC sources and experts to support the claim that the coronavirus could have originated “anywhere” ([CGTN](#), March 22). WHO and U.S. experts have been frequently quoted denying the Chinese origin thesis

([People's Daily Online](#), April 24), and news stories and opinion pieces have cited PRC and foreign experts to refute the “conspiracy theory widely promoted by U.S. President Donald Trump” that the virus came from the Wuhan Institute of Virology ([CGTN](#), July 25).

PRC sources have frequently insinuated that COVID-19 originated in the United States, either as a natural disease or as a weapon manufactured in a biowarfare laboratory. The U.S. military origin thesis began circulating in Chinese social media almost as soon as the virus first appeared in Wuhan ([Stanford Cyber Policy Center](#), March 31). By March, it had become a recurring narrative in PRC government propaganda: for example, *People's Daily* highlighted an online petition calling on U.S. officials to disclose more information about the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, which PRC sources have identified as a possible source of the coronavirus ([People's Daily](#), March 21).



Image: A screen shot from the PRC state-controlled, English-language news website China Military Online. This article promotes the narrative that U.S. military servicemembers are spreading COVID-19 in Japan; Russian sources have promoted similar narratives regarding U.S. troops in Europe.

(Image source: [China Military Online](#), July 28, 2020)

That same month, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian (赵立坚), who has more than half a million Twitter followers, tweeted that U.S. soldiers might have brought COVID-19 to Wuhan when they competed in the October 2019 Military World Games ([Twitter](#), March 12). Zhao subsequently referenced other conspiratorial stories profiled on Russian-linked websites, which claimed that the virus originated in the United States ([SCMP](#), March 13). Testifying to the orchestrated nature of this conspiracy theory, presumably coordinated by the Foreign Ministry's Information Department, dozens of PRC embassies and diplomats

throughout the world retweeted Zhao's comments ([Global News](#), April 8). According to one count, Zhao's tweet received more than 150 million views in a few hours ([SCMP](#), April 4).

In early May *People's Daily* chimed in, issuing provocative questions such as: "Why did Washington suddenly shut down its bioweapons lab in Fort Detrick, Maryland last July?," and "What secret research is being carried out at the biolabs established by the U.S. in former Soviet states?" ([People's Daily](#), May 1).

Despite criticism, Zhao returned to these accusations in July, insisting in a press conference that "if the US truly cares about global efforts against the pandemic, the first thing it needs to do is to fulfill its due international responsibilities and obligations and cooperate with the WHO in ways like inviting WHO experts to trace the source of the virus in the U.S." (PRC Foreign Ministry, July 10). The PRC government also supported Russia in making suspension of Western economic sanctions and other trade restrictions on countries during the pandemic a major theme of its official messaging ([Russian Foreign Ministry](#), May 13).

Social Media Manipulation

The Chinese government has long employed both "trolls" (media accounts run by humans whose identity is obscured) and "bots" (social media accounts operated entirely by computer programs). However, whereas the Russian government has generally focused these covert digital media tools on external targets, until recently the PRC's trolls and bots have been largely directed inward, to support the state's all-embracing censorship of online discourse. Over the past year, however, there has been increasing evidence of what Twitter security personnel have called "significant state-sponsored information operations" and "coordinated inauthentic behavior" orchestrated by the PRC ([Twitter](#), August 19, 2019; [China Brief](#), September 6, 2019). Previous targets of such actions—when groups of fake or hijacked accounts interact with one another to raise the profile of certain messages—have included domestic Chinese netizens, Taiwan politicians considered hostile to Beijing, anti-administration protesters in Hong Kong, and the exiled Chinese business executive and CCP critic Guo Wengui ([Australian Strategic Policy Institute](#), April 23; [Bellingcat](#), May 5).

In the last few months, these covert accounts, with obscured ties to the Chinese government, have been mobilized to influence international audiences about pandemic-related issues—including by reiterating the conspiracy claims made by PRC diplomats about the U.S. origin of the virus ([European External Action Service](#), May 20). Yet, one difference between the Chinese and Russian approach still persists: the PRC has a large number of quasi-independent "patriotic trolls" who promote Beijing's national narratives as unpaid volunteers ([Australian Strategic Policy Institute](#), April 23). They work in tandem with paid contractors ([ProPublica](#), March 26) and national intelligence operatives, in a model that parallels Russian operations.

Conclusion: Explaining Beijing's New Approach

Heightened criticism of the Chinese government during the ongoing pandemic has led Beijing's propaganda to become more aggressive and multi-dimensional. The fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has presented

a severe challenge to the PRC's media managers. The genuine anger expressed by Chinese netizens regarding the secrecy and ineptitude of their government's initial response threatened the Party's stewardship claims at home. Furthermore, the failure of PRC authorities to contain the virus within China's borders opened the country's leadership to widespread international criticism. These pressures explain the PRC's unusually aggressive and comprehensive counter-information operation. Within China, the government reinvigorated its social media censorship, expelled foreign journalists, and repressed independent Chinese journalists who questioned the approved narrative that the authorities quickly contained the pandemic ([SCMP](#), April 25).

To counter Western criticisms that the Chinese government's errors and coverup contributed to the global pandemic, PRC officials mobilized a combination of overt official propaganda and China's growing portfolio of international covert disinformation tools. Thus far, this campaign, employing tools more commonly seen in Russian influence campaigns, has experienced only mixed success. The Chinese government's massive communications infrastructure has ensured that domestic and foreign audiences are familiar with Beijing's talking points regarding the pandemic; however, outside China the country's media managers have proved unable to suppress counter-narratives about Chinese culpability for the pandemic. Furthermore, as noted above, Western governments and digital media companies have been able to identify and take down several Chinese state-sponsored inauthentic influence networks on Twitter and other social media platforms. Finally, the degree of overt Sino-Russian cooperation remains bounded: their assets have reiterated each other's messages but they have also pursued separate influence operations, including those related to medical aid deliveries to Italy, Serbia, and other countries.

China's growing role in the world, the PRC's more assertive diplomatic posture, and the waning effectiveness of more traditional means of propaganda (such as government white papers), all mean that the Chinese government will seek out new means to influence international opinion. Given China's prominent role in developing software apps like TikTok and exporting communications control technologies, Beijing has an ever-expanding network of foreign communication assets under its control. The future will likely see more PRC-orchestrated disinformation campaigns, to include those coordinated with Russia and other malign information actors.

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Integrating the PLA Rocket Force into Conventional Theater Operations

By Roderick Lee

Introduction

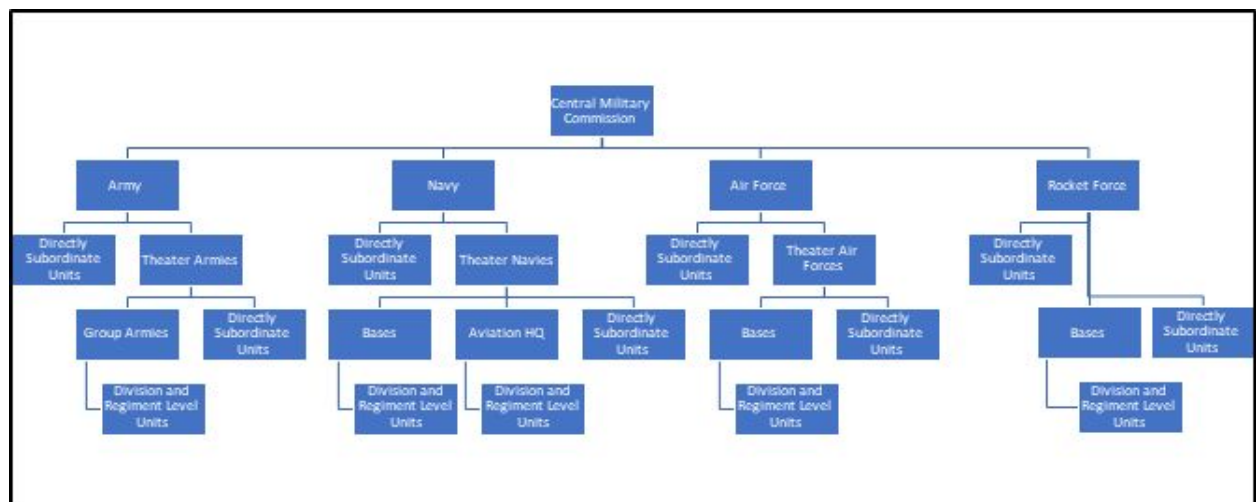
Currently, only limited analytical discussion exists regarding the command authorities over China's land-based ballistic and cruise missile inventory. Much of the discourse surrounding the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF)—the military service that operates most of China's land-based precision strike systems—focuses on nuclear command and control. Further discussions regarding the PLARF's conventional land-based ballistic and cruise missile systems are limited, and make only vague references as to how the PLA is working to integrate PLARF units into the theater command structure—without going into detail about the major obstacles that preclude full integration of the PLARF.

This article makes the case that PLA theater commands almost certainly have clearly defined operational control authorities over some of the PLARF's conventional missile force. This conclusion is based on the evidence of command authorities granted to certain PLARF bases; the integration of missile operations into theater joint operations command structure; and indications from PLA press outlets that PLARF units are subordinate to the theater command operational structure.

Understanding the Difference Between Administrative and Operational Control

This section briefly discusses how the PLA conceptually exerts administrative and operational control over its forces. Figure 1 broadly displays how the PLA oversees issues relating to manning, training, and equipment. It is also more closely aligned with what most observers traditionally associate with the PLA's organizational structure.

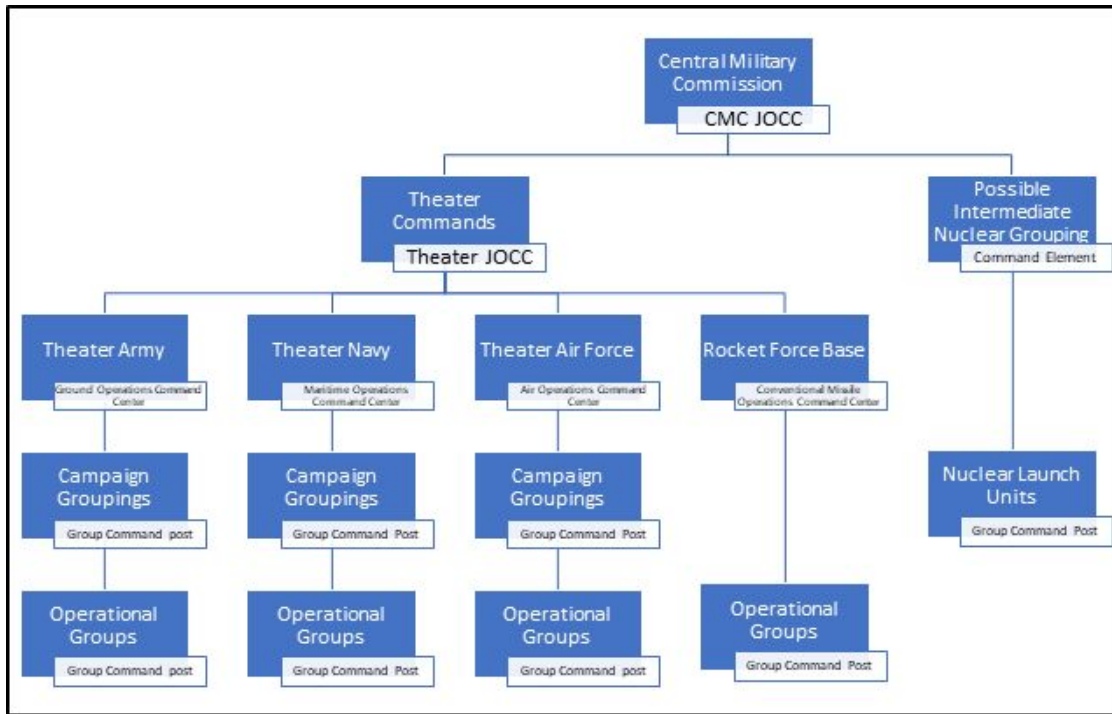
Figure 1: The PLA's Administrative Organization Chart



Source: Compiled by the author.

However, the PLA's organizational hierarchy looks a little different when it comes to operations. Figure 2 displays the operational chain of command, as well as the primary command node at each level.

Figure 2: Operational Command in the PLA



Source: Compiled by the author.

Although there are many similarities between the PLA's administrative and operational chains of command, they are not identical. Notably, the PLA uses elements of standing division and regiment-level organizations to create temporary operational and tactical groupings, termed *jituanqun* (集团群), *biandui* (编队), and *qun* (群). This means that in practice, units that report to the same higher administrative headquarters may report to two different operational commands.

Empowering PLARF Bases

As seen in Figure 2, the PLARF does not have a theater service headquarters at each of the theater commands, as the PLA's other services do. This apparent lack of theater service headquarters leads to some confusion as to how PLARF units are integrated into theater operations. This confusion is resolved by understanding that PLARF bases appear to fill a role similar to that of theater service headquarters. PLARF bases are corps or corps deputy-grade organizations that are responsible for geographic or functional areas. [1] In addition to providing administrative oversight for PLARF units under its command, a PLARF base with missile launch units also acts as the PLARF's primary campaign-level organization (基本战役单位, *jiben*

zhanyi danwei) in wartime. This means that PLARF bases are expected to conduct conventional missile strike campaigns independently or as part of a larger joint campaign. [2]

In order to enable PLARF bases to leverage joint forces when executing a conventional missile strike campaign, the PLA designates at least some PLARF base joint operation duty offices as “theater conventional missile sub-command centers,” according to authoritative PLA press from late 2017. [3] This nomenclature makes a clear connection between the theater commands and PLARF bases. Not only do these bases exert operational control over conventional missiles on behalf of the theater command, but these bases also have the authority to coordinate operations with army, navy, and air force units.

Theater Rocket Forces

In addition to designating some PLARF bases as “theater conventional missile sub-centers,” the PLA also envisions PLARF bases as being roughly analogous to theater service headquarters. They also maintain their own subordinate forces. Limited press and social media reports suggest that the PLA identifies certain PLARF units as “theater command PLARF units” (战区火箭军某部, *zhanqu huojianjun moubu*). This designation suggests that the PLA gives certain PLARF units a status analogous to that of army, navy, or air force theater-level command nodes within the theater command structure.

At the corps level, the Eastern Theater Command (and possibly other theater commands) identify PLARF bases as theater service component equivalents. The following image from a CCTV-7 series on the PLARF depicts how the Eastern Theater Command generates combat power:



Image: A still image from a CCTV-7 (state television) series, which lists service branch components of the Eastern Theater Command. “Rocket Force Bases” (火箭军基地, *Huojianjun Jidi*) are listed alongside the “Theater Army,” “Theater Navy,” and “Theater Air Force.” (Image source: *Junshi Baodao*, May 21, 2018)

This image indicates that Rocket Force bases are equivalent to theater services and contribute directly to theater command combat power. Corroborating this graphic is the fact that an Eastern Theater Command social media account also regularly reports on Number 61 Base, suggesting that this base falls under the theater command structure ([Eastern Front View \(Weixin\)](#), November 13, 2018).

At the tactical level, various PLA press sources identify multiple PLARF units as being “theater PLARF units.” To date, PLA social media has identified at least five different PLARF units across three separate PLARF bases as “theater PLARF units,” as shown below:

***Figure 3: Identified Theater-Level PLARF Units
in the Eastern and Southern Theater Commands***

Unit	Equipment	Theater
612th Launch Brigade	DF-21A (probable)	Eastern Theater Command
617th Launch Brigade	DF-15/16	Eastern Theater Command
61 Base Training Regiment	N/A	Eastern Theater Command
623rd Launch Brigade	CJ-10	Southern Theater Command
635th Launch Brigade	CJ-10	Southern Theater Command

Source: Compiled by the author.

Non-authoritative PRC press sources have also identified PLARF units subordinate to the Northern, Central, and Western Theater Commands. This small list of PLARF units under theater commands suggests that launch brigades equipped with short range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and ground launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) fall under the theater command. Assuming that the trend of PLARF SRBM and GLCM units being subordinate to the theater command holds true for the entire force, the Eastern Theater Command normally has operational control over at least four launch brigades within its area of operations, and the Southern Theater Command normally has operational control over at least three launch brigades within its area of operations.

Figure 4: Locations of Other Known SRBM and GLCM Launch Brigades in the Eastern and Southern Theater Command Areas of Responsibility



Source: China Aerospace Studies Institute PLARF Map

Notably, with the exception of a single DF-21A unit, all of the units identified by PLA social media as being a theater PLARF unit are conventional in nature, with a range limited to roughly the First Island Chain. The single Eastern Theater Command-based DF-21A unit may also be an exception due to mission and warhead limitations. Extrapolating from this small data set could suggest that the PLA withholds theater command access to conventional systems that are intended for strategic targets—such as the DF-21D or DF-26—in addition to nuclear-only systems such as intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

Why Is There No “Theater Rocket Force”?

The rationale behind the PLA not designating PLARF bases as “theater rocket forces” is likely a result of the PLARF’s relatively small force size. Theater armies, navies, and air forces control two or more corps-level entities. Those corps-level entities in turn oversee more than half a dozen division or brigade level organizations. In total, a theater service headquarters could oversee 20 or more division or brigade level organizations either directly or indirectly.

PLARF launch bases, on the other hand, oversee approximately six launch brigades and six support regiments. Half of the launch bases oversee the administration of primarily nuclear-equipped ICBM units, which most likely are under the direct operational control of the Central Military Commission. This means that PLARF launch bases only have a fraction of the responsibility of larger theater service headquarters. As

such, it makes little sense for the PLA to form fully-fledged rocket force headquarters at the theater command level.



Image: A soldier attached to an unidentified brigade under the PLA Rocket Force operates an optical sighting device in conjunction with the erection of a reported DF-21A medium-range ballistic missile system during a night training exercise in February 2020. (Image source: [China Military Online](#), February 27, 2020)

Integrating Conventional Missile Operations at the Theater Commands

Given that most conventional missile strike campaigns are to be executed as part of a larger joint campaign, the theater commands must also have an organic capability to plan and execute conventional missile operations. Theater commands have accomplished this by providing theater command staff with officers who have a PLARF background, as well as command information systems that have the functionality to pass commands to conventional missile units.

In order to help integrate and execute missile operations as part of a larger joint campaign, some if not all theater commands have dedicated PLARF staff officers. For example, Southern Theater Command (STC) deputy chief of staff Tan Jianming (谈建明) is a career PLARF officer ([Southern Daily](#), December 5, 2018; [Peng Pai News](#), July 29, 2017). He previously served in various capacities at Base 63 (formerly Base 55), which is a unit well positioned to support STC operations. It is not unreasonable to assume that other theaters also have a PLARF officer serving in similar capacities. Theater-level joint operations command centers (JOCCs) also have dedicated “conventional missile seats” from which staff officers can direct missile operations ([Xinhua](#), January 7, 2018).

In order to execute the plans developed by PLARF staff officers in theater commands, and to oversee conventional missile operations conducted in support of theater joint campaigns, at least some theater commands may have technical systems in place to pass commands to PLARF units. The aforementioned CCTV-7 television series shows that at least one probable command information system used in the Eastern Theater Command JOCC may allow staff officers to command PLARF missile units:



Image: A still image from a CCTV-7 (state television) series, which shows a probable command information system used in the Eastern Theater Command JOCC. The screen includes an icon labeled “missile orders” (导弹命令, daodan mingling). (Image source: Junshi Baodao, May 21, 2018)

Conclusion

Although units capable of both nuclear and conventional missions may pose some challenges for command and control, these difficulties are almost certainly overstated. The PLA's administrative organization does not perfectly reflect how the PLA is organized for operations. Conceptually, PLARF units can task organize into operational and tactical groups during crises or wartime, just like any other service. Although a nuclear-capable PLARF missile brigade may be administratively subordinate to a base acting as a theater command conventional missile sub-center during peacetime, under warfighting conditions that missile brigade will simply be assigned to a CMC-controlled operational group.

It appears that the PLA has taken appropriate steps to empower the theater commands by providing clearly defined operational authorities over some, if not most, PLARF conventional missile units. Although PLARF base boundaries do not perfectly match theater geographic boundaries, the PLA has clearly defined command relationships between the two. Furthermore, the PLA has empowered the theater commands with resident expertise in the form of dedicated PLARF staff officers. This provides theater commanders with what is almost certainly a major component of their regional land attack capability.

The apparent command relationship between theater commands and certain PLARF units has several implications for the United States and its regional partners. First, U.S. and partner nation planners should treat theater command PLARF units as valid targets that do not pose significant additional risks for nuclear escalation. One of the points of contention in Western discourse is that the PLARF's integration of conventional and nuclear forces complicates targeting: this is because any destruction of a PLARF unit may be perceived by the PLA as a step towards nuclear escalation. However, because the PLA has publicly identified certain units as not falling under the direct authority of the CMC, the United States and its partners should not treat these PLARF units any differently than a PLA fighter brigade or combined arms brigade.

Second, this knowledge should be used as a starting point of discussion with the PLA on issues related to escalation. A clear understanding of conventional versus nuclear command and control in the PLA at the operational and tactical level allows interlocutors to move beyond PLA attempts to stonewall conversations through claims that the opposing side simply does not understand the PLA. This in turn provides a greater chance of clarifying which PLARF units the PLA will allocate to nuclear and strategic missions.

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Notes

[1] See: 'PLA Aerospace Power: A Primer on Trends in China's Military Air, Space, and Missile Forces' 2nd ed., China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI), 2019,

https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/Books/Primer_2nd_Edition_Web_2019-07-30.pdf.

[2] See: 'Science of Campaigns [战役学],' ed. Zhan Yuliang (张玉良), 2nd ed., Beijing: National Defense University Press (国防大学出版社), 2006.

[3] See: "PLA Rocket Force Follows Reform Process and Further Advances Realistic Combat Training," [火箭军部队紧跟改革进程深入推进实战化训练], Han Xinbang (韩兴邦), Liu Ya (刘亚), Rocket Force News [火箭军报], November 15, 2017.

[4] See: CCT-7 Military Report 30 January 2018 [军事报道 20180130], CCTV-7, January 30, 2018.
