



VOLUME 20 • ISSUE 15 • AUGUST 31, 2020

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Semi-Submersible Heavy Lift Vessels:

A New “Maritime Relay Platform” for PLA Cross-Strait Operations?

By John Dotson

Introduction

In August, naval and aviation forces of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) conducted exercise activity in four different maritime regions: the Bohai Gulf, Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea. This unusual level of exercise activity represented an effort to demonstrate the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)’s increasing maritime capabilities ([SCMP](#), August 24), as well as a symbolic political statement “aimed at deterring Taiwan secessionists” ([Global Times](#), August 23). These exercises may also have been intended in

part as a message to the United States and its military allies, who kicked off the biennial Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise on August 17 without Chinese participation ([U.S. Pacific Fleet](#), August 17; [USNI](#), August 24).

One of the noteworthy highlights of PLA exercise activity in August was a series of PLA Ground Force (PLAGF) helicopter landing and troop deployment drills at sea. These drills reportedly involved airframes and personnel from the 71st and 73rd Group Armies, as well as both PLA Navy and civilian vessels. Of particular note was the reported use of a civilian semi-submersible heavy lift vessel in some of these drills. This represents another example of the PLA's drive to achieve "military-civil fusion"—as well as an innovative use of civilian shipping, which could potentially increase the PLA's capabilities to conduct joint maritime operations in either a Taiwan invasion scenario or an island landing campaign.



Image: A Z-9 multi-mission helicopter (background) and a WZ-10 attack helicopter (foreground), part of an unidentified aviation brigade subordinate to the PLA 73rd Group Army, conduct landing drills on the flight deck of the PLA Navy amphibious transport dock Yimengshan. The training was held in "an undisclosed sea area" on August 3. (Image source: [PRC Ministry of Defense](#), August 12)

PLA Ground Force Helicopter Maritime Landing Drills in August 2020

Helicopter Drills Involving the 73rd Group Army and the PLA Navy

PRC state media sources have reported that, on August 3, elements of the PLA Ground Force 73rd Group Army conducted joint training drills with at least one PLA Navy vessel, identified as the amphibious transport dock *Yimengshan* (沂蒙山) (LPD-988). These sources identified the location only as "an undisclosed sea area," although the training was conducted within sight of land (see *images below*). The training appeared to involve shipborne landing and take-off familiarization training for pilots, as well as the deployment of soldiers to and from transport helicopters ([PRC Ministry of Defense](#), August 12). It is unclear whether this represented

smaller-scale, individual unit training, or whether it was conducted as part of a broader and more complex exercise scenario.

Whichever the case, the drills indicate intent to pursue closer joint coordination between the army and the navy—and specific interest in exploring the use of naval vessels as staging platforms for PLA Ground Force soldiers and aviation assets. This is not entirely new: in recent years the PLAGF has sought to increase the proficiencies of its aviation assets for operating over water, and PLAGF helicopters have conducted landing and troop deployment drills on PLA vessels since at least 2017 ([China Military Online](#), August 22, 2017). The August 3 drills demonstrate the PLA’s continuing interest in the potential employment of naval platforms as afloat way stations to support land-based rotary-wing aviation.



Image: A PLA helicopter (possibly a Z-8 transport helicopter) approaches a Chinese civilian semi-submersible vessel for landing and logistical support drills conducted in late August 2020. Media commentary indicated that the pilot acted “under direction of the commander on the ship” (在船上指挥员引导下, zai chuanshang zhihuiyuan yindao xia) in conducting flight operations.

(Image source: [Kuaibao.qq.com](#), August 20)

Helicopter Drills Involving the 71st Group Army and a Civilian Cargo Vessel

Another set of maritime drills was conducted by PLA Ground Force aviation units in the latter half of August, which was even more noteworthy in terms of the PRC’s potential future maritime capabilities. Per state media, the landing drills (conducted on or about August 19) involved helicopters from an unidentified aviation brigade subordinate to the PLA Ground Force 71st Group Army, and took place aboard a civilian semi-submersible heavy lift vessel (大型半潜船, *daxing banqian chuan*), or SSHLV, which was underway in the Yellow Sea. [1] In this training scenario, after first flying to a “target island” (目标岛屿, *mubiao daoyu*),

the helicopters landed on the ship for "rush repairs" (抢修, *qiangxiu*), refueling, weapons reloading, and the transfer of wounded personnel ([Huanqiu Shibao](#), August 21; [China Military Online](#), August 21).

The numbers of aircraft and personnel involved are unclear, but available text and photo sources appear to indicate the involvement of Z-8 transport and Z-19 attack helicopters ([Kuaibao.qq.com](#), August 20). Media coverage of the event also indicated the presence of PLA personnel embarked on the ship in support of the training evolutions, to include a command element (*see accompanying photos*).

Semi-Submersible Vessels and “Military-Civil Fusion”

SSHLVs are generally constructed with superstructures fore and aft, and a lower deck amidships. Such vessels have the capability to adjust their freeboard with the use of ballast tanks, to the extent that the central deck could become submerged. This is a measure conducive to the loading of large structures and other types of heavy cargo—either pierside, or at sea with the use of tugs ([Royal Boskalis Westminster N.V.](#), June 14, 2018). China’s robust shipbuilding industry is a leader in SSLV production, and 27 of the 34 large semi-submersible vessels built within the last 25 years are operated by Chinese companies. [2] In 2016 a shipyard in Guangdong Province completed construction of the *Xinguanghua*, reportedly the world’s second-largest such vessel ([CGTN/Youtube](#), December 9, 2016).



Image: The Xinguanghua (新光华 / 新光華), reportedly the world’s second-largest SSLV, operating semi-submerged while underway (undated, likely 2016). (Image source: [CGTN/Youtube](#), December 9, 2016)

Discussion of the use of SSLVs to support PLA operations dates back to at least 2017, when construction was completed on the *Zhen Hua-33* (振华-33) in the city of Qidong (Jiangsu Province). The ship was touted in PRC press as "China’s first 50,000-ton military-civilian dual-use semi-submersible vessel," capable of providing "berthing transition [for] a big ship over 10,000 tons, maritime military relay support for ship-borne helicopters, [and] rush-repair and evacuation of damaged warships" ([China Military Online](#), March 15, 2017).

The idea of using civilian vessels such as SSHLVs to support military operations provides a further illustration of the PRC's ongoing drive to pursue "military-civil fusion" (军民融合, *jun-min ronghe*), or MCF. MCF is a major ongoing policy initiative that seeks to share resources across civilian industry and the PLA, in an effort to boost both China's military capabilities and its economic development ([China Brief](#), October 8, 2019; [U.S. State Department](#), May 28). This has included a push to expand and professionalize the PLA reserve and militia units that are either housed within state-owned enterprises, or which otherwise seek to leverage the technical skills of personnel in commercial entities ([China Brief](#), October 8, 2019; [China Brief](#), October 8, 2019).

Media coverage of the August helicopter drills included mention of the need for work and coordination among various "maritime relay platform organizations" (海上中继平台组织, *haishang zhongmi pingtai zuzhi*); as well as the need for "maintenance and repair personnel platform combined support" (机务修理人员平台综合保障, *jiwu xiuli renyuan pingtai zonghe baozhang*) ([Huanqiu Shibao](#), August 21). Although it is speculative, such vague references presumably refer to both PLA detachments and civilian shipboard work units—and possibly to the mobilization of civilian sailors into PLA maritime militia units, as well. The extent to which PLA detachments might be deployed to civilian vessels, and to which civilian personnel could be mobilized for shipboard military support operations, is an area worthy of further study.

The Potential Role of SSHLVs in Maritime Operations

PRC media commentary on the August drills, both official and unofficial, expressed enthusiasm for the potential use of SSHLVs to support the PLA in future maritime operations. Colonel Xu Yifeng (徐益锋), deputy commander of the 71st Group Army aviation brigade engaged in the training, was cited as stating that the drills had "improved the pilots' deck-landing ability on the offshore platforms and also the maintenance personnel's comprehensive support capacity, laying a solid foundation for the cross-sea operations of the PLA Army's helicopters" ([China Military Online](#), August 21). Another source noted that the SSHLV's large deck space and cargo carrying capacity made it "extremely well-suited to supplement amphibious landing ships," and that it might even "serve as a temporary helicopter carrier" (作为临时直升机母舰, *zuowei linshi zhishengji mujian*) ([Kuaibao.qq.com](#), August 20).

Particularly noteworthy was the idea that such a vessel could act as a "maritime relay platform" (海上中继平台, *haishang zhongji pingtai*) to support PLA operations. As indicated in one state newspaper, "When conducting major missions on the periphery of islands and reefs, [one side] could deploy a large-scale semi-submersible ship... to act as a maritime relay platform; in addition to increasing the ocean-crossing combat capabilities of helicopter units, it would also increase helicopter combat radius" ([Huanqiu Shibao](#), August 21). Another online commentary indicated that:

Although our country does not have dedicated military-use [SSHLVs], as we move down the military-civilian dual-use road, in wartime this kind of [SSHLV] has functions that must not be

overlooked. First, [SSHLVs] can reliably transport tremendous loads of equipment across long distances, raising up our country's strategic transport capabilities. Next, [SSHLVs] can act as seaborne bases, strengthening our military's amphibious attack capabilities. Finally, this kind of ship can become a maritime repair and supply platform, providing wartime equipment logistical support. (Kuaibao.qq.com, August 20)



Image: PLA personnel conducting helicopter refueling and weapons reloading drills on the deck of a civilian SSHLV, late August 2020. (Image source: Junshi Baodao, August 19)



Image: Colonel Xu Yifeng, identified as the “deputy commander of a certain 71st Group Army aviation brigade,” speaks with a PRC state media reporter about the helicopter training drills.

(Image source: Junshi Baodao, August 19)

Conclusion

The idea of using SSLVs to support naval operations is not new: for example, in an initiative dating back to at least 2014, the U.S. Navy has explored this idea as part of the “Mobile Landing Platform” concept. This

envisions the employment of SSHLVs, in lieu of traditional (and more expensive) naval amphibious vessels, to support mission areas such as counter-terrorism and humanitarian relief by serving as mothership platforms for landing craft air cushion (LCAC) amphibious hovercraft ([U.S. Navy/YouTube](#), March 6, 2014). However, the PLA's experimentation with using SSHLVs as a potential "maritime relay platform"—intended to extend the combat radius of PLA rotary-wing aircraft, as well as to provide a mobile way station for logistical and medical support—is an innovative concept.

In addition to the roles and logistical skill sets reportedly practiced (at least at a basic level) in August, this also raises the potential prospect of SSHLVs being deployed as makeshift helicopter carriers. Such a move would increase the number of platforms available to provide the PLA with maritime air support in either a Taiwan Strait conflict, or a smaller-scale island seizure campaign. The extent to which these aspirational concepts might be fleshed out through further training and organizational development will be a topic well worth watching.

The author is grateful to Lt. Col. Dennis Blasko (U.S. Army, retired) for his suggestions and comments on an initial draft of this article. Any errors are solely my own responsibility.

John Dotson is the editor of China Brief. For any comments, queries, or submissions, feel free to reach out to him at: cbeditor@jamestown.org.

Notes

[1] The ship name has not been identified in official reporting, although one official English-language PRC military news website has stated that the ship was constructed by Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries Co., Ltd. (See: "Multi-Type Army Helicopters Conduct Deck-Landing Training on Civilian Semi-Submersible Vessel," *China Military Online*, Aug. 21, 2020.

http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-08/21/content_9887106.htm.) Some online sources of uncertain reliability have identified the vessel in question as the *Zhen Hua-28* (振华-28), but this is otherwise unconfirmed. [See: "The Dead District" Twitter account, Aug. 20, 2020, <https://twitter.com/TheDeadDistrict/status/1296484782021521408/photo/1>; and "Zhen Hua-28 Has Become the Focus of American Interest! PLA Amphibious Combat Capability Takes a Big Step Forward, and Now Equals the American Navy" ("振华28"成美国关注焦点！解放军两栖作战大迈进，已与美军同级), *Tengxun Wang*, Aug. 25, 2020, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200825/20200825A049Z400.html?pc>.]

[2] Conor M. Kennedy, *China Maritime Report No. 4: Civil Transport in PLA Power Projection Projection* (China Maritime Studies Institute, Dec. 2019), p. 16.

<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

The Controversies and Security Concerns Surrounding TikTok

By David Volodzko

Introduction

In July, the music and lip-syncing short-video app TikTok (蒂克托克, *DikeTuoke*)—popularly used by dancers, singers, magicians and fashion bloggers—became another point of tension in the growing conflict between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). On July 31, U.S. President Donald Trump told reporters that he planned to ban TikTok in the United States. Microsoft immediately suspended talks to buy TikTok's U.S. operations, but resumed talks days later, after Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella reportedly spoke to the U.S. President and agreed to close a deal by September 15 ([Microsoft](#), August 2).

The PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs has accused the United States of threatening TikTok without evidence, and the Chinese government will no doubt retaliate. Beijing's general response to such actions has been quid pro quo: for example, it closed the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu following the closure of the PRC Consulate in Houston, and it revoked press passes for journalists representing several U.S.-based news outlets after the U.S. State Department designated five Chinese state-run media outlets as units of the Chinese government ([U.S. State Department](#), February 18; [PRC Foreign Ministry](#), March 18; [PRC Foreign Ministry](#), July 30).



Image: A political cartoon from the PRC state-owned China Daily depicts a reckless Uncle Sam robbing the Statue of Liberty in his rush to target TikTok. (Image source: [China Daily](#), August 3)

On August 3, Hu Xijin (胡锡进), the editor-in-chief of the PRC state-run *Global Times*, called the potential purchase "open robbery" ([Twitter](#), August 3). On the same day, the English-language press outlet *China Daily*, which is owned by the Chinese Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department (中宣部,

Zhongxuanbu), stated in an editorial that efforts to pressure TikTok into a purchase by Microsoft “were tantamount to inviting potential U.S. purchasers to participate in an officially sanctioned ‘steal’ of Chinese technology,” and vowed that “China will by no means accept the ‘theft’ of a Chinese technology company, and it has plenty of ways to respond if the administration carries out its planned smash and grab” ([China Daily](#), August 3).

Security Concerns Surrounding TikTok

TikTok, which is banned in China, was launched in September 2017—one year after the unveiling of its Chinese counterpart Douyin (抖音)—by the Beijing-based internet company ByteDance (字节跳动, *Zijie Tiaodong*). The following November, ByteDance acquired Musical.ly for \$1 billion and merged it with TikTok, expanding its user base ([Wall Street Journal](#), November 9, 2017). TikTok is now valued at about \$50 billion and has over 1.8 billion downloads worldwide (not including Douyin downloads), with about 34% in India and 9% in the United States. In the United States, the app boasts roughly 80 million monthly active users ([Smart Tower](#), April 29; [Walleroo](#), August 4). By comparison, Twitter has a market capitalization of just over \$23 billion and about 48 million monthly active users in the United States ([Omnicores](#), September 9).

Despite its potential artistic or educational value, critics of TikTok say that the app’s large user base carries with it the potential for propaganda or election interference—as well as privacy and national security concerns related to personal data. The privacy risk concerns surrounding TikTok stem primarily from three factors:

- TikTok uses unencrypted HTTP instead of HTTPS, making data transfers vulnerable to attack.
- The company has been accused of illegally storing user data. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the U.S. Justice Department are reportedly now investigating whether the company broke a deal it made with the FTC in February 2019. Under the negotiated deal, TikTok paid \$5.7 million to settle claims that it violated the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) by storing children's biometric data without parental consent, marking the largest civil penalty the FTC has ever obtained in a children's privacy case ([FTC](#), February 27, 2019).
- TikTok allegedly sends user data to China. In November, a California college student filed a class-action lawsuit claiming that she downloaded the app, but never created an account; but that it created one for her. and transferred her data to servers in China ([U.S. District Court of Northern California](#), November 27, 2019).

The company's lack of independence from Beijing has also raised national security concerns involving censorship, misinformation, and the potential for election interference. According to Article 7 of China's National Intelligence Law (国家情报法, *Guojia Qingbao Fa*), all companies are required to cooperate with the government, meaning that TikTok cannot withhold data from state intelligence agencies ([PRC National People's Congress](#), May 12, 2018).

The company has also been accused of censoring content in accordance with Beijing policies: for example, in November 2019 a 17 year-old woman in New Jersey named Feroza Aziz posted a TikTok video, disguised as a makeup tutorial, in which she discussed human rights abuses in Xinjiang ([YouTube](#), November 26, 2019). The video received over half a million "likes," and TikTok subsequently blocked Aziz from posting content. Furthermore, TikTok's parent company ByteDance has itself been accused of involvement with the state security infrastructure in Xinjiang ([Hong Kong Free Press/Youtube](#), December 2, 2019).

Posts related to the Hong Kong protests have also reportedly been censored; and in early July, TikTok announced that it was suspending business operations in Hong Kong as a result of the PRC's newly-imposed National Security Law affecting in the territory ([Hong Kong Free Press](#), July 7; [China Brief](#), July 29).



Image: A still image from a TikTok video posted in November 2019 by a young American woman named Feroza Aziz. In the video, which was posted as a makeup tutorial, Ms. Aziz protested human rights abuses in Xinjiang, calling upon viewers to “search up right now what’s happening in China, how they’re getting concentration camps, throwing innocent Muslims in there, separating their families from each other, kidnapping them, murdering them, raping them...This is another holocaust, yet no one is talking about it... please be aware, please spread awareness.” TikTok subsequently suspended her account, thereby prompting further controversy surrounding the company’s relationship with the PRC government and its complicity in censorship. (Image source: [YouTube](#), November 26, 2019)

Restrictions Placed Upon TikTok in the United States and Other Countries

In December 2019, the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army both banned TikTok from use on government-issued mobile devices, citing a U.S. Defence Department cybersecurity awareness message issued on December 16 that reportedly identified the TikTok app “as having potential security risks associated with its use” ([Stars and Stripes](#), December 31, 2019). Last month, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that the U.S.

government was considering a ban and that Americans should be careful using the app unless they wanted their data "in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party" ([The Verge](#), July 7).

The United States is not the only country concerned about TikTok. On June 29, India—TikTok's primary market—banned the app (along with 58 other Chinese apps) after skirmishes along the Sino-Indian border left 20 Indian soldiers dead. This measure derailed ByteDance's \$1 billion expansion plan in the country ([Times of India](#), June 30). In South Korea, TikTok was fined \$155,000 for collecting data on users under the age of 14 without parental consent, and transferring the data to servers in Singapore and the United States ([Yonhap News Agency](#), July 15). In Australia, Prime Minister Scott Morrison has asked citizens to practice caution using the app, while National Party parliamentarian George Christensen has called for it to be banned entirely ([ABC \(Australia\)](#), July 7).

In the United States, other major tech companies are already seeking to take advantage of the controversies surrounding TikTok. In early August, Facebook debuted its TikTok-like Instagram feature titled "Reels" ([Facebook](#), August 5). TikTok CEO Kevin Mayer has called Reels a "copycat" product "disguised as patriotism," while Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has warned that Beijing is creating "its own version of the internet" based on its own political principles, and exporting its vision of techno-nationalism to the world ([TikTok](#), July 29; [The Hill](#), July 28).

TikTok's Response

TikTok has responded in several ways. First, it has simply denied the charges: in November, former co-CEO Alex Zhu said the company does not censor videos that displease Beijing, nor does it share user data with the Chinese government or with its parent company ByteDance. Zhu even said he would refuse CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping himself if asked to censor content or hand over data ([SCMP](#), December 12, 2019). TikTok CEO Kevin Mayer has echoed this sentiment, saying that Chinese authorities have never asked for data on Indian users—and that even if they had, the company would not comply ([Wall Street Journal](#), July 3).

TikTok has also responded by noting that its user data is stored on servers in Virginia and Singapore, and that its leadership involves non-Chinese executives. CEO Mayer is a former Disney chairman, and Chief Information Security Officer Roland Cloutier is a former U.S. Air Force and Department of Defence security specialist. TikTok also hired Adobe executive Sandie Hawkins as head of advertising in the United States, and Microsoft chief intellectual property counsel Erich Andersen as its global general counsel. Finally, TikTok has hired a team of lobbyists; announced plans to create 10,000 jobs in the United States in the next three years; formed a \$200 million fund to support U.S. content creators; promised to stop using China-based moderators to monitor overseas content; and pledged to donate \$250 million to coronavirus relief efforts in the United States ([TikTok](#), April 9; [Axios](#), July 21; [TikTok](#), July 22). In late August, TikTok also announced its intention to sue the Trump administration over two executive orders that banned the app and gave ByteDance 90 days to sell TikTok to a U.S. buyer ([TikTok](#), August 24).

Conclusion

Despite the efforts of TikTok executives to allay concerns about the app, it continues to face opposition in many of its major markets. Using servers located in Virginia does not prevent TikTok from sending user data to China, nor do foreign executive appointments guarantee independence from Beijing. Statements by company officials regarding their nominal independence from the Chinese government fail to address the pressure that Beijing could levy on the company, either through commercial pressure or Article 7 of the National Intelligence Law.

In fact, the company's talks with Microsoft were reportedly spearheaded not by Mayer, but rather by Zhang Yiming (张一鸣), the founder of TikTok's parent company ByteDance. ByteDance is partly governed by an internal Communist Party committee that gathers to study President Xi's speeches, and which in 2018 shut down the company's first app *Neihan Duanzi* (内涵段子), citing its failure to respect "socialist core values" ([Sohu](#), April 11, 2018; [Haiding Qiaolian](#), August 7, 2019).

The growing tech war between the United States and China centers not only on two different models of how to handle user data; but also on two different models of the role and independence (or lack thereof) of a technology company. While the PRC exploits a fundamental vulnerability in liberal democracy—namely its openness—liberal democracies themselves are still struggling to contend with the outsized power of their own tech companies. Like Huawei, TikTok's very structural model makes it subject to suspicion: it is a tech company subject to the dictates of an authoritarian state, either directly, or indirectly via pressures upon its parent company ByteDance. As a result, TikTok's increasing popularity is almost certain to carry with it increasing public concern and government scrutiny.

David Volodzko is an editor at the technology and information company Brightwire. He is the former national editor for the Korea JoongAng Daily (the New York Times affiliate in South Korea), and a former Korea correspondent for the South China Morning Post. His writing on China and Korea has been published in Foreign Policy, The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg, The Interpreter and The Diplomat, among others. He is also a former university lecturer of rhetoric and logic and has spent over 15 years in Asia.

Beijing's Ambitions to Build Cross-Strait Transportation Infrastructure

By Kristian McGuire

Introduction

In January of last year, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping gave a landmark speech about Taiwan in which he called for the construction of bridges between China's Fujian Province and offshore islands under Taiwan's jurisdiction ([Xinhua](#), January 2, 2019). Xi's speech touched off an aggressive campaign by the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) and local Fujian officials to promote the bridges—the first stage of Beijing's ambitious initiative to build transportation links across the Taiwan Strait, a scheme with which Xi first became involved more than two decades ago.

Although this rhetorical campaign mellowed somewhat following the re-election of Taiwan President Tsai Ing-Wen and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, Beijing has not abandoned its long-term ambitions to construct transportation infrastructure projects—including some of unprecedented scale—across the waters between mainland China and Taiwan. Upcoming annual cross-Strait conferences, and the PRC's next Five-Year Plan, should shed some light on the future of Beijing's mission to construct cross-Strait transportation infrastructure.

Beijing's Longstanding Ambitions to Build Transportation Links Across the Taiwan Strait

In 1987, renowned Chinese scholars Jiang Daquan (姜达权) and Zhang Yicheng (张以诚) submitted a report to the central leadership of the CCP. The report proposed that, following completion of the projected Three Gorges Dam project, China should build tunnels across the Taiwan Strait and Qiongzhou Strait (which separates the Leizhou Peninsula of Guangdong Province from Hainan Island). A summary of the report was included in that year's "Summaries of Incoming Letters" (来信摘要, *laixin zhaiyao*) issued by the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the State Bureau for Letters and Calls, thereby gaining the attention of China's top leaders. [1]

However, it was Tsinghua University professor Wu Zhiming (吴之明)'s research in the mid-1990s on the Channel Tunnel connecting the island of Great Britain with the European mainland that finally spurred the PRC to begin planning for a cross-Taiwan Strait tunnel. In 1998, Tsinghua University's Development Research Academy for the 21st Century partnered with National Taiwan University's Civil Engineering Culture and Education Foundation to organize the first Taiwan Strait Tunnel Conference in Xiamen. The meeting was attended by various PRC officials, including members of the provincial and municipal Taiwan Affairs Offices and the State Oceanic Administration. [2] To date, a dozen such meetings have been convened in Fujian Province and Taipei ([Tsinghua University](#), January 14, 2019; [China News Service](#), October 13, 2019).



Image: Participants taking part in the "Taiwan Strait Passage Study—20 Year Recollection and Exploration Conference" (台湾海峡通道研讨20年回顾与探讨座谈会, Taiwan Haixia Tongdao Yantao 20 Nian Huigu yu Tantaoyuotanhui) hosted by Tsinghua University (January 7, 2019).

(Image source: [Tsinghua University](#), January 14, 2019).

Present at The Creation: Xi Jinping's Early Involvement with The Tunnel Project

Xi Jinping's personal involvement with the cross-Strait tunnel project dates back to his days as a party-state official in Fujian Province. Former Fujian official You Dexin (游德馨) has described how Xi played a major part in launching the project. According to You's account, Xi—acting in his capacity as Deputy Secretary of the CCP Fujian Provincial Committee—ordered the Fujian Cultural and Economic Exchange Center to join with the Development Research Academy for the 21st Century in organizing an academic seminar on constructing a cross-Strait tunnel. Soon thereafter, Xi reportedly gave a speech on the importance of the tunnel project to cross-Strait cooperation, as well as its significance to the revitalization of China, at the first Taiwan Strait Tunnel Conference in December 1998 ([Study Times](#), June 24, 2020).

During his final year in Fujian, Xi sent a letter to the third Taiwan Strait Bridge and Tunnel Conference. In it, he expressed his belief that the tunnel project would be enormously beneficial to China's future development and to the unification of Taiwan with the PRC ([China News Service](#), March 24, 2002). Xi's initial period of involvement with the tunnel project appears to have ended in late 2002 when he left Fujian. However, he reportedly maintained a special interest in cross-Strait relations after his departure. One former Fujian official has recalled how Xi, who at the time was preparing to leave Fujian to take up his new post in Zhejiang Province, told him that he hoped the official would continue his work on Taiwan affairs and would write to Xi to share ideas on the subject ([Study Times](#), July 26, 2019).

The State of Play When Xi Became General Secretary

When Xi was elevated to the position of CCP General Secretary in 2012, China appeared much closer to constructing cross-Strait transportation infrastructure than ever before. In the years since he left Fujian, there had been significant developments related to the tunnel project. Engineers from both the PRC and Taiwan, as well as economists and other experts, had refined plans for multiple cross-Strait transportation links. The PRC State Council had made the construction of at least one link official policy by including a Beijing-Taipei expressway project in its 2005 National Expressway Network Plan ([PRC State Council](#), September 16, 2005).

For its part, the government of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan had started building a bridge between Greater Kinmen (大金門, *Da Jinmen*) and Lesser Kinmen (小金門, *Xiao Jinmen*), two outlying islands under its control located just off the coast of Xiamen. The bridge project was especially important because it aligned with a 1993 ROC proposal to connect Greater Kinmen and Xiamen via Lesser Kinmen ([Taiwan Area National Freeway Bureau MOTC](#), February 2011). It also dovetailed with one of Beijing's plans for a southern cross-Strait transportation link that would run from Xiamen through Lesser Kinmen, Greater Kinmen, and the Penghu Islands (澎湖島, *Penghu Dao*) before reaching its terminus at Chiayi, Taiwan ([CCTV.com](#), April 23, 2002).



Image: Three proposed routes for cross-Strait transportation routes linking Fujian Province with Taiwan. The “Northern Route” (北线方案, Beixian Fang’An) envisions connections from Fuqing in the PRC to Pingtan Island, and then to Taiwan’s city of Hsinchu; the “Central Route” (中线方案, Zhongxian Fang’An) would run from Putian to Nanri Island, and then to the city of Miaoli; and the “Southern Route” (南线方案, Nanxian Fang’An) would extend from Xiamen to the island of Jinmen, then to Penghu Island, and finally to Chiayi in southern Taiwan. (Image source: [Ta Kung Pao](#), October 14, 2019)

Project Progress, and Roadblocks, During Xi's Tenure

During Xi's first year as General Secretary, the PRC pushed ahead with its transportation infrastructure plans. In October 2013, it began construction of the Pingtan Strait Road-Rail Bridge (平潭海峡公铁两用大桥, *Pingtān Haixiā Gongtiē Liangyong Dàqiáo*)—a section of Beijing's planned northern transportation link to Taiwan intended to run from Fuzhou to Pingtan Island, then connect with the ROC's Matsu Islands—and ultimately, to span the Taiwan Strait in the form of an underwater tunnel to Hsinchu, Taiwan ([CNR News](#), October 30, 2013).

The Pingtan Bridge, which was completed last September, has become emblematic of the sort of one-sided progress the PRC has made on a project that requires cooperation from both sides of the Strait ([Xinhua](#), September 25, 2019). On the Taiwan side, the Kinmen Bridge project, which was originally scheduled to be completed in March 2016, has faced repeated delays ([Kinmen County General Affairs Department](#), May 22, 2011). However, Taiwan's minister of transportation announced last August that the project will be completed by the middle of 2021 ([Taipei Times](#), August 12, 2019).

Political disputes, not construction delays, have been the biggest obstacles to Beijing's plans. Early in his first term as ROC president, Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) expressed his willingness to consider constructing a bridge between the Kinmen Islands and Xiamen ([Office of the ROC President](#), August 24, 2008). However, Ma and then-ROC Premier Wu Den-yih (吳敦義)—both members of Taiwan's Beijing-friendly Kuomintang (KMT) Party—were circumspect about letting the potential infrastructure project get ahead of evolving cross-Strait relations ([Radio Free Asia](#), February 5, 2009; [China Times](#), December 2, 2009). As events were to prove, the permissive environment that allowed Ma and his administration to conclude several cross-Strait agreements in his first term suffered irreparable damage midway through his second.

Certain groups within Taiwan society grew concerned about the ruling KMT's far-reaching deals with Beijing and felt that such deals deserved greater public oversight. This popular skepticism eventually gave rise to Taiwan's Sunflower Student Movement protests in spring 2014, which succeeded in blocking implementation of the monumental Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement. These protests, as well as Beijing's uncompromising response to pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in late 2014, reshaped Taiwan's political environment—effectively precluding further advancement of the cross-Strait transportation link project for the remainder of Ma's presidency. [3]

Infrastructure and Political Developments in 2018-2019

Since current ROC President Tsai Ing-wen and her independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) came to power in 2016, Beijing has refused to engage with her government, focusing instead on lobbying Taiwan opposition and local politicians to promote its transportation link agenda ([Matsu Daily](#), May 18, 2018; [China Times](#), February 14, 2019; [China News Service](#), February 19, 2019; [Matsu Daily](#), March 21,

2019). With Tsai's poll numbers flagging in late 2018 and the next ROC general election in sight, PRC party-state officials and Taiwan opposition politicians saw an opportunity to push the transportation link scheme forward.

At an August 2018 ceremony marking the opening of a water pipeline built to convey freshwater from Fujian to Greater Kinmen, Kinmen County Magistrate Chen Fu-hai called for the creation of the "Kinmen New Three Links" (金門新三通, *Jinmen Xin San Tong*). This term was a reference to the limited transportation, trade and postal links established between three municipalities in Fujian and the islands of Kinmen and Matsu in the 2000s, known as the "Three Mini-Links." In addition to the already-completed water pipeline, Chen advocated establishing an "electricity link" and a "bridge link" between Kinmen and China ([Kinmen Daily](#), August 6, 2018).

Xi Jinping put forward a similar idea in his January 2019 speech about Taiwan issues. He urged both sides of the Taiwan Strait to take the initiative in promoting greater connectivity through trade and economic cooperation, infrastructure building, energy and natural resource development, and the adoption of shared industrial standards. To start with, Xi said, the two sides should develop water, electricity, natural gas and bridge links between Fujian and the islands of Kinmen and Matsu ([Xinhua](#), January 2, 2019). The director of the TAO, Liu Jieyi, subsequently branded Xi's concept the "Four New Links" (新四通, *Xin Si Tong*); and by extension, the projects aimed at the offshore islands became known as the "Four Mini-Links" (小四通, *Xiao Si Tong*) ([Xinhua](#), January 2, 2019; [China News Service](#), January 14, 2019; [Xinhua](#), June 17, 2019). Liu and other PRC party-state officials continued to aggressively campaign for the stalled bridge projects, usually in the context of promoting all of the Four Mini-Links ([People's Daily](#), January 2; [Taiwan Affairs Office](#), January 15).

At the same time, certain KMT officials continued to wage an equally intense campaign in Taiwan to jump-start the infrastructure projects. While running in the KMT presidential primary last year, former New Taipei Mayor Eric Chu Li-luan (朱立倫) promised that, if elected president, he would support the Four Mini Links—and identified the proposed bridge to connect Kinmen with Xiamen as the most important of these ([Liberty Times](#), March 26, 2019). KMT politicians Yang Cheng-we (Chen Fu-hai's successor as Kinmen County Magistrate), and his counterpart in Matsu, Liu Cheng-ying, have emerged as some of the staunchest Taiwan proponents of the linkage projects.

Consequently, the Tsai administration has repeatedly asserted that it—and not local ROC governments—has the authority to manage cross-Strait relations ([Mainland Affairs Council](#), December 25, 2018; [Mainland Affairs Council](#), June 21, 2019). As Beijing tried to circumvent the Tsai administration in pursuit of new linkages with Taiwan, the island's DPP-dominated Legislative Yuan last year passed a long-awaited cross-Strait agreement oversight bill that will likely present further obstacles to the bridge projects ([China Post](#), May 31, 2019).

Conclusion

In the wake of Tsai Ing-wen's re-election and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic this past winter, the PRC has relaxed its pursuit of cross-Strait transportation links. However, the PRC has raised the profile of the projects too high to easily abandon them, or to let them stagnate for the next four years. In 2016, Beijing included Beijing-Taipei high-speed rail and expressway routes in its 13th Five-Year Plan ([Guancha](#), March 5, 2016; [PRC State Council](#), February 28, 2017). Furthermore, last October the TAO announced that it had unilaterally started conducting research on building bridges to Kinmen and Matsu ([Xinhua](#), October 16, 2019).

Xi Jinping is too closely associated with the PRC's cross-Strait transportation link mission to let it languish without suffering reputational costs. Both of Xi's two immediate predecessors achieved significant breakthroughs in cross-Strait relations during their respective tenures as China's top leader. Under Jiang Zemin's leadership, the PRC and the ROC established mechanisms to handle technical and business matters involving the two sides. Before Jiang left office, Beijing and Taipei realized the Three Mini-Links. Hu Jintao, in turn, helped the two sides establish direct cross-Strait flights, trade and postal links (the "Three Links"), and also saw Beijing and Taipei sign the historic Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement. Xi, for his part, has made little progress in cross-Strait relations despite his long-held interest in the subject. The success or failure of the bridge projects, the most substantial of the Four Mini-Links, will therefore loom large in his legacy.

In the coming months, the PRC is expected to convene some of its annual cross-Straits meetings, some of which were postponed due to COVID-19 ([Liberty Times](#), July 25). Two significant things to watch for are the extent to which the bridge projects will feature in the meetings, and who will be in attendance at those nominally grassroots functions. It is also worth paying attention to the extent that cross-Strait tunnel-related projects feature in the PRC's upcoming 14th Five-Year Plan. Finally, it will be worth watching whether or not the term "Four Mini-Links" is adopted by senior PRC party-state officials outside the TAO and Fujian. Although many of its projects have been stymied, Beijing has not given up on its ambitious plans to use transportation infrastructure to link Taiwan more closely to China.

Kristian McGuire is an independent, Washington D.C.-based research analyst and associate editor of Taiwan Security Research. His main research interests include U.S.–Taiwan relations, cross-strait relations, and East Asian regional security. His work has appeared in The Diplomat, Newsweek, The Interpreter, Asia Times, E-International Relations and TSR Weekly Report. You can reach him at kristianmcguire@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter @KrisAMcGuire.

Notes

[1] "Topographic and Geological Conditions in the Taiwan Strait and Suggestions for Trans-Strait Tunnel" (台湾海峡地形地质特征及其通道工程选线, *Taiwan Haixia Dixing Tezheng Jiqi Tongdao Gongcheng Xuan*)

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China-U.K. Relations Grow More Strained Over Huawei and Hong Kong

By Taylor Butch

Introduction

In October 2015, People's Republic of China (PRC) President Xi Jinping visited the United Kingdom at the request of Queen Elizabeth II, marking the first time that the PRC head of state had done so in ten years. In the lead-up to the visit, both Chinese and British officials had publicly acknowledged the significance of this meeting, calling it a “golden era” in relations between the two countries. Five years on, U.K.-China relations remains steady, but there are increasing signs of tension in the relationship. Rising controversies over Huawei's role in 5G infrastructure, and Beijing's actions to suppress opposition in Hong Kong—as well as tensions over the origins of the coronavirus pandemic—lie at the heart of this downturn in relations.



Image: PRC Ambassador to the United Kingdom Liu Xiaoming (right) speaking on a BBC news program, July 19. Liu's comments were measured in tone, but reflected the more assertive posture in public diplomacy adopted by PRC diplomats over the past year. Among other comments, Liu stated that “You've seen what happened between China and the United States... I do not want to see this tit for tat between China and the U.S. happen in China-U.K. relations. I think the U.K. should have its own independent foreign policy rather than to dance to the tune of Americans, like what happened to Huawei.”

(Image source: [PRC Foreign Ministry](#), July 20)

Huawei and “A Dark Day for China-U.K. Relations”

Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom initially welcomed business opportunities with the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei, one of the world's primary 5G companies—and furthermore, expressed

confidence in the security of Huawei networks. British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab stated in January that it was “because of the work of the Huawei Cyber Security Evaluation Centre Oversight Board, established by [the National Cyber Security Centre], that we know more about Huawei, and the risks it poses, than any other country in the world.” Raab further noted that the United Kingdom has examined “the issue of how to maintain network security and resilience over many months and in great technical detail... We would never take decisions that threaten our national security or the security of our Five Eyes partners” ([U.K. Government](#), January 28). [1]

Zhongxing Telecommunications Equipment Corporation (ZTE) and Huawei are two of the world’s largest Chinese telecom companies, and together hold an estimated 40 percent of the world’s 5G market—thereby wielding tremendous power to shape how the world uses current and future 5G technology ([U.S. Department of Justice](#), February 6). Reliance on this next-generation technology from a single Chinese company (or two state-controlled companies acting in a cooperative manner) has raised security concerns in a number of European countries ([China Brief](#), February 1, 2019; [China Brief](#), September 26, 2019). In mid-July, the U.K. government reversed course on the decision to purchase Huawei equipment: the new directive will ultimately prohibit use of the Chinese firm’s equipment effective December 31, 2020, and it calls for the removal of all of the company’s equipment from British 5G networks by year’s end 2027 ([U.K. Government](#), July 14).

Not only was this decision a major setback to China’s “Digital Silk Road” (数字丝绸之路, *Shuzi Sichou zhi Lu*)—an element of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) established in 2013, with the aim of expanding China’s role in the international telecommunications sector—but it is also a development that could severely hinder future U.K.-China relations. Beijing has called this action by the U.K. government “a wrong decision,” and has further described it as a microcosm for the entire U.K.-China relationship: “The issue of Huawei is not just about how the U.K. sees and deals with a Chinese company... It is about how the U.K. sees and deals with China” ([PRC Embassy in the U.K.](#), July 22). In an exclusive interview with the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show*, Liu Xiaoming (刘晓明), the PRC’s Ambassador to the United Kingdom, called the move “a very bad decision,” and “a dark day for China-U.K. relations” ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), July 20).

Allegations of Chinese Cyber Hacking in Britain

In addition to issues posed by telecommunications security, PRC-based actors have also allegedly been involved in recent hacks against U.K. transportation companies. EasyJet announced in a May 2020 statement that it was “the target of an attack from a highly sophisticated source” and that the “email address[es] and travel details of approximately 9 million customers were accessed” ([EasyJet press release](#), May 19). Two anonymous sources with knowledge of the investigation into the EasyJet hack told Reuters that the hacking method and techniques suggested the involvement of Chinese hackers. The sources also noted that the same group of hackers had recently targeted other airlines ([Reuters](#), May 19). Despite these allegations, U.K. officials have expressed a desire “to keep space and cyberspace from becoming virtual and actual battlegrounds” ([U.K. Government](#), August 3; [U.K. Government](#), February 25).

Growing Points of Contention Over Hong Kong and Human Rights

Days ahead of Xi's visit in 2015, U.K. Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond met in London with Hong Kong Chief Executive C.Y. Leung (梁振英), who at the time was making his first official visit to Great Britain since 2012. The two officials discussed trade issues, and the concept for Hong Kong to be an "international gateway to mainland China and Chinese investment in the U.K." ([U.K. Government](#), October 15, 2015). Hammond articulated that the United Kingdom was "fully committed" to supporting Hong Kong in its way of life and traditional freedoms. Some high-ranking Chinese officials, including PRC Ambassador to the United Kingdom Liu Xiaoming, however, expressed concern regarding any mentions of human rights being raised during Xi's trip: Liu stated publicly that raising the issue of human rights would offend Xi and harm U.K.-China relations ([SCMP](#), October 15, 2015).



Image: Then-U.K. Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond (left) and then-Hong Kong Chief Executive C.Y. Leung (right) at a photo op during Leung's visit to the United Kingdom in October 2015. The visit appeared to mark a high level of Sino-British public comity over Hong Kong; however, in 2020 issues involving the territory have contributed to a strain in U.K.-China relations. (Image source: [U.K. Foreign Office](#), October 15, 2015)

Today, the United Kingdom's stance on Chinese human rights issues has clearly shifted. In June, Prime Minister (PM) Boris Johnson publicly addressed the political unrest in Hong Kong, which first emerged in spring 2019 over Beijing's decisions to impose new legal measures on Hong Kong that would curtail the territory's traditional freedoms and dramatically erode its autonomy ([China Brief](#), June 26, 2019; [China Brief](#), July 29). "If China proceeds," Johnson said, "this would be in direct conflict with its obligations under the [Sino-British] joint declaration, a legally binding treaty registered with the United Nations... Britain would then have no choice but to uphold our profound ties of history and friendship with the people of Hong Kong." PM Johnson offered to grant up to three million Hong Kong residents the right to relocate to the United Kingdom

and ultimately gain citizenship ([U.K. Government](#), June 3). U.K. officials, leading an effort on behalf of 28 national governments, have also recently raised the issue of human rights in both Hong Kong and Xinjiang with the United Nations Human Rights Council ([U.K. Government](#), July 23).

Although Johnson articulated firm words towards China, the resident of 10 Downing Street reiterated his desire to uphold strong relations: “Britain does not seek to prevent China’s rise; on the contrary we will work side by side on all the issues where our interests converge, from trade to climate change. We want a modern and mature relationship, based on mutual respect and recognizing China’s place in the world” ([U.K. Government](#), July 3).

The Potential Impacts on Chinese Investments in the United Kingdom

Beijing has noted—and apparently taken umbrage at—recent British actions and the change in diplomatic tone. On July 22, Ambassador Liu described “blatant interference from the British government in Hong Kong affairs” and accused it of “recklessly flinging slanders at and discredit[ing] China, bilaterally and multilaterally” on the topic of Xinjiang. He further stated that “China is carefully evaluating the repercussions of the U.K.’s words and actions. We will take all necessary means and measures to safeguard the safety as well as the legitimate and lawful rights and interests of Chinese businesses and institutions in the U.K.” ([Chinese Embassy in the U.K.](#), July 22).

Liu’s last comment could be taken as a veiled threat to curtail Chinese investments in Great Britain. Chinese private and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have both made significant investments in the United Kingdom in recent years: for example, China Investment Corporation (CIC), the PRC’s sovereign wealth fund, purchased Thames Water (London’s primary water supply company) in 2012. Analysts at the time estimated the deal to be worth between 600 million to 700 million pounds (792.6 million to 924.7 million U.S. dollars) ([Reuters](#), January 20, 2012). Two other major deals followed in September 2015: a 1.9 billion pound (2.5 billion dollar) guarantee for financing the Hinkley Point nuclear plant, a deal that would reportedly create more than 25,000 jobs ([U.K. Government](#), September 24, 2015; [U.K. Government](#), September 21, 2015); and an 800 million pound (1.1 billion dollar) deal to enlarge Manchester’s “Airport City” and build high-speed rail projects ([U.K. Government](#), October 13, 2013; [U.K. Government](#), September 25, 2015).

Although many of these deals are complete, other potential Chinese investments remain under negotiation. In mid-July, for example, the Chinese social media platform TikTok dropped out of negotiations to create an overseas operations headquarters in the United Kingdom, a move that likely nullified 3,000-plus jobs ([The Guardian](#), July 19). Furthermore, U.K. lawmakers reportedly want to re-examine the Hinkley Point C Nuclear Plant deal, for a variety of potential issues ([The Telegraph](#), July 25).

The Future of U.K.-China Relations

At an HSBC Chinese New Year event in January 2020, Ambassador Liu Xiaoming stated that “The U.K. is now China's largest investment destination and the second largest source of investment in the [European Union].” China-U.K. bilateral trade reached \$86 billion in 2020 ([China Daily](#), January 31). However, relations have since soured to the point that, in July, Liu told a group of Chinese businesses in the U.K. that the relationship between the two countries has “difficulties and [is] suffering serious setbacks.” According to Liu, Chinese investment facilitates positive change in the United Kingdom by creating employment opportunities, boosting tax revenue, and improving industries; however, if China were to decrease business activity in the country, then surrounding communities would be financially and economically impacted ([PRC Embassy in the U.K.](#), July 23).

In a 2018 speech, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster David Lidington described U.K.-China relations by stating that “China has a major role to play in so many critical issues that affect the U.K. and the world at large... while it is true that the U.K. and China haven’t always seen eye-to-eye on everything, we recognize that, like all friends, our relationship is strong enough to express disagreement—and that is something to be valued and cherished” ([U.K. Government](#), April 11, 2018). These sentiments, now more than ever, are likely to be tested as the controversies surrounding human rights in China and telecommunications infrastructure in Britain grow even sharper.

Taylor Butch is a contributing analyst to the Asia Pacific Desk at Wikistrat, a foreign affairs analyst with the consulting firm Duco, and a freelance writer. His writing has been featured in international media outlets to include Asia Times, The Diplomat, Real Clear Defense, The Jerusalem Post, and The Huffington Post. He is a graduate of Elizabethtown College and King's College London.

Notes

[1] The “Five Eyes” refers to an intelligence-sharing relationship between the governments of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

The Strategic Implications of Chinese UAVs: Insights from the Libyan Conflict

By Ryan Oliver

Introduction

In recent years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has emerged as a leading producer of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) platforms for both commercial and military use, and its technologies are being used in unprecedented ways. For example, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to unfold in the early months of this year ([China Brief](#), January 17; [China Brief](#), January 29), UAVs started to appear in the skies across China. Public officials employed these UAVs to monitor the population, and to enforce restrictions (such as mandatory wearing of masks) intended to slow the spread of COVID-19 ([Global Times](#), January 31). UAVs have also been used to monitor water levels and property damage amid the severe flooding that China has experienced this summer ([China Brief](#), July 29; [CGTN](#), August 15). Such innovative—if sometimes controversial—practices reflect China's growing capabilities in the field of UAV technology.



Image: The wreckage of a UAV, purportedly a Chinese-made Wing Loong II operated by the Libyan National Army (LNA), which was shot down in the vicinity of Misurata.

(Image source: [Libyan Express](#), April 19)

Beyond its domestic employment of commercial UAVs, the PRC has also made rapid progress in the development and sale of military UAVs, which are increasingly prevalent in contemporary conflicts. China's growth in this field reflects comments made by President Xi Jinping in 2016, when he emphasized that UAVs are a critical element of combat on the modern battlefield ([PRC Defense Ministry](#), March 14, 2016). Chinese UAVs, such as the *CH-5 Rainbow* (彩虹-5, *Cai Hong-5*), reportedly operate at relatively low altitudes with more modest payloads than comparable U.S. systems. Newer UAVs in development, such as the

forthcoming *Wind Shadow* (风影, *Feng Ying*), aim to expand the capabilities of China's indigenous systems ([Janes](#), August 4).

Chinese military UAVs have spread across the world: as of March 2019, the PRC had already become the world's leading exporter of combat UAVs ([SIPRI](#), August 21; [South China Morning Post](#), March 12, 2019). This has included capturing markets in which the United States might have previously enjoyed near-exclusive access; as well as arming countries and factions to which the United States has denied sales of UAVs. At an arms conference in 2018, China's customer list for the CH-5 included Algeria, Nigeria, Jordan, Zambia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and Myanmar ([Foreign Policy](#), May 10, 2018). More recently, in July 2020 the PRC sold six CH92-A UAVs to Serbia, a NATO ally and the first European country to deploy Chinese military drones ([Bloomberg](#), August 4). Furthermore, outside the list of China's direct customers are those who receive Chinese UAVs through intermediary purchasers—as one side in the Libyan civil war has done through the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The State of Libya's Civil War—and the Role of Chinese UAV Systems

The ongoing conflict in Libya presents an opportunity to review the operational and strategic impact of Chinese UAVs in contemporary conflict. Two landmark events have shaped recent history and ultimately led to Libya's current predicament: the downfall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, and the subsequent failure of the Libyan Political Agreement since 2015 ([UNSMIL](#), December 17, 2015). In the resulting power vacuum, the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) has sparred with the Benghazi-based Libyan National Army (LNA) for control of the country and its resources. Recognized by the United Nations and the United States, the GNA also receives support from Turkey, Italy, and Qatar; supported by the Libyan House of Representatives (HoR) and led by General Khalifa Haftar, the LNA has backing from Egypt, France, Russia, and the UAE. Further complicating the conflict in Libya, local allegiances are more fragmented than these two efforts might indicate, with a smattering of militias aligning more locally and temporarily as dynamics shift ([Jamestown Foundation](#), August 14).

The conflict in Libya has evolved to feature the use of UAVs on both sides of the battlefield. Between April 2018 and November 2019, more than 1000 strikes from UAVs took place in Libya—with over 800 conducted on behalf of the LNA, and over 240 on behalf of the GNA ([United Nations](#), November 18, 2019). Turkey has provided the GNA with its *Bayraktar TB2* system, while the UAE has provided the LNA with the Chinese-made *Wing Loong II* system ([SCMP](#), September 29, 2019). Compared to the *Bayraktar TB2*, the *Wing Loong II* has advantages in cruising altitude, range, payload, and speed ([Turkey Defence Industries](#), 2017; [Army Recognition](#), April 14). Given its smaller size, range, and payload, the *Bayraktar TB2* offers the GNA a limited UAV mission set, such as harassing supply lines; the LNA, however, can use the *Wing Long II* for a much more robust range of missions. Questions remain whether GNA or LNA personnel operate the UAVs themselves, or if foreign personnel accompany the equipment to operate from the ground. It is worth

noting that these provisions of equipment and personnel violate the terms of a U.N. arms embargo, which has stood since Gaddafi's downfall in 2011 ([UN Security Council Report](#), November 29, 2019).

The impact of UAVs on the political and security situation in Libya cannot be overstated. Most significantly, the proliferation of UAVs contributes to prolongation of the conflict. As observed by Chinese military analysts, UAVs provide low-cost, high-impact means to reduce casualties and generate effects, all while leaving the fighting will of the attacker intact ([PRC Defense Ministry](#), July 17). Foreign interference has remained one of the main drivers of conflict in Libya, as external actors seek to gain influence and secure access to Libya's energy resources ([United Nations](#), July 8). By arming both sides of the conflict with modern UAV capabilities, foreign powers perpetuate conflict and reduce friction that would otherwise serve to dampen violence and leave space for reconciliation.



Image: Libyan soldiers of the Government of National Accord (GNA) in the vicinity of Sirte prepare a UAV system for operation (undated). (Image source: [Al-Araby](#), August 21)

The Geopolitical Implications of China's Military UAV Sales

The lack of transparency surrounding the PRC's involvement in Libya creates obstacles in establishing the connections between Chinese actions and their outcomes. In its public statements, the Chinese government continues to push for a ceasefire and a political solution to the Libyan conflict ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), July 8). A review of Chinese interests in Libya, however, may shed further light on how Beijing sees the situation in Libya, as well as how it views military arms sales more broadly.

First, whereas the PRC has exported a diverse range of products and services to Libya since reestablishing diplomatic relations in late 2000—reaching a peak volume of nearly \$3 billion in 2013—Libyan exports to China have consisted exclusively of energy resources, surpassing \$5 billion in 2012 ([PRC Ministry of Foreign](#)

[Affairs](#), November 7, 2000). The civil war underway in Libya appears to have disrupted Chinese-Libyan trade significantly since these high marks of nearly a decade ago. However, energy exports from Libya to China rebounded to nearly \$4 billion in 2018 ([Atlas of Economic Complexity](#), August 21). Also, Libya was approved to become a member of the China-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in December 2018 ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), May 2020). If the weapons provided to the LNA—including the *Wing Loong II*—prove decisive, Beijing could stand to benefit from Haftar’s consolidated and stabilized control of the country’s eastern and central oil fields.

Second, the cast of other foreign powers supporting Haftar’s LNA allows Beijing an opportunity to deepen its alignment with the UAE, Egypt, and Russia. In 2018, the PRC and the UAE upgraded their bilateral relationship to a “comprehensive strategic partnership.” According to China’s Ambassador to the UAE Ni Jian, “The UAE is China’s seventh-largest trading partner, and China has continued to maintain its position as the UAE’s largest trading partner” ([China Daily](#), December 2, 2019; [The National](#), July 18). The PRC has supported Egypt’s actions in Libya, recently praising the role that the latter has played in supporting regional peace and stability ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), July 24). Although Russia initially held off on revealing its precise alignment in Libya, Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov made clear after the U.S. presidential election in 2016 that Haftar’s LNA had Russian support ([Bloomberg](#), December 26, 2016). By indirectly supporting the LNA, Beijing is able to support its partners and potentially build leverage in those relationships.

Third, military sales allow the PRC to test and refine its military hardware on contemporary battlefields without direct political risk. China’s civil-military fusion campaign has emphasized the importance of its domestic defense industry, particularly in terms of how it might contribute to both economic vitality and success on the battlefield ([China Brief](#), October 8, 2019; [U.S. Department of State](#), May 2020). In contrast to the United States, which has been engaged in wars of its own for decades, the Chinese military has not had as many opportunities to gain combat experience; in this context, the PRC has become a leading contributor of troops to United Nations peacekeeping operations, and Chinese military sales have steadily risen—including becoming the largest exporter of combat UAVs in 2014-2018 ([United Nations](#), June 30; [SIPRI](#), March 2019). Particularly given the strategic significance that the PRC assigns to its UAV programs, improvements gleaned through vicarious battlefield experience are invaluable. Although the PRC has not provided UAVs directly to the factions engaged in the conflict in Libya, the employment of Chinese systems by third parties offers the benefit of battle-testing equipment without the risk of military or diplomatic repercussions.

Conclusion

The PRC is leveraging its UAV production to erode the United States’ position as the partner of choice in the arena of international security. One military analyst has assessed that Chinese drones may possess advantages over those of the United States in terms of cost and transaction processing time—as well as providing potential further advantages in the lack of attribution or accountability ([Defense News](#), May 2,

2019). In regions where U.S. military engagement efforts are not as robust or focused, the PRC is well-positioned to serve as an alternate vendor for UAVs. When coupled with a diminishing appetite in the United States for international engagement, this dynamic could create further opportunities for China to compete for the coveted status of security partner of choice that the United States has long enjoyed in many parts of the world.

Ryan Oliver is an officer in the U.S. Army National Guard. His previous positions include working as a China specialist at U.S. Special Operations Command (J5 Strategy, Policy, and Plans), and at The Asia Group, a boutique consultancy in Washington, DC. He is a graduate of Georgetown University, the George Washington University, and the Defense Language Institute. The views expressed in this article are his own, and are not intended to represent those of any U.S. government agency.
