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**Diplomatic Visits, New Arms Sales, and PLA Provocations
Raise Tensions in the Taiwan Strait**

By John Dotson

Introduction

Events throughout 2020 have seen a measured but steady increase in tensions surrounding Taiwan. The government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to deny any legitimacy to the democratically-elected government of the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan. The PRC also continues to make menacing insistence upon unification on Beijing's terms, in language that has grown more strident

throughout the tenure of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping ([China Brief](#), February 15, 2019; [China Brief](#), November 1, 2019).

Against this background, the PRC has reacted with both harsh rhetoric and saber rattling to enhanced U.S.-Taiwan diplomatic contacts in August and September, as well as a reported further round of impending U.S.-Taiwan arms sales (*see discussion further below*). One PRC English-language outlet opined in late September that “The U.S. has been releasing all kinds of supportive signals to Taiwan this year, with the level and frequency of their so-called interactions flagrantly enhanced... While [some in Taiwan] jump at such signals, they’d better think long and hard whether the signals are sweet poisons from the U.S. for Taiwan” ([PLA Daily](#), September 25).



Images: U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar visited Taiwan from 9-12 August. / Image left: ROC President Tsai Ying-Wen met with Azar on August 10. (Image source: [HHS](#), August 10) / Image right: Azar paid respects at a memorial for former ROC President Lee Teng-Hui, who died on July 30. (Image source: [HHS](#), August 12)

U.S. Diplomatic Visits to Taiwan

Recent years have seen a noteworthy increase in official and semi-official U.S.-Taiwan diplomatic exchanges. In March 2018 the *Taiwan Travel Act* (TTA) was signed into U.S. law, providing a statement of support for increased travel by high-level Taiwan officials to the United States. This was followed by unofficial “transit stop” visits in the United States by ROC President Tsai Ying-Wen (蔡英文) in 2018 and 2019, and a May 2019 meeting between U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton and his ROC counterpart David Lee (李大維) ([China Brief](#), July 31, 2019). In early February this year ROC Vice President-elect Lai Ching-te (賴清德) traveled to the United States, where he met with senior U.S. political figures and attended the annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington D.C. ([Taiwan News](#), February 4). Although Lai had not yet assumed office at the time, and therefore visited in an unofficial role, the trip produced harsh condemnations in PRC state press ([Xinhua](#), February 6). All of these visits by Taiwan officials have drawn similarly negative

reactions from the PRC Foreign Ministry and state media, as with the “stern representations” presented over President Tsai’s stop in Hawaii in March 2019 ([Xinhua](#), March 21, 2019).

These visits were reciprocated in summer and autumn this year by two visits made by U.S. officials to Taiwan. U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar conducted a visit to Taiwan from August 9-12, described by his department as “the highest-level visit by a U.S. Cabinet official since 1979,” and “part of America’s policy of sending high-level U.S. officials to Taiwan to reaffirm the U.S.-Taiwan friendship” ([HHS](#), August 4). Secretary Azar’s activities included a meeting with President Tsai; a visit to Taiwan’s Central Epidemic Command Center; and a speech at National Taiwan University (HHS, [August 10](#); [August 11](#); [August 12](#)). This trip was followed in mid-September by a visit from U.S. Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Keith Krach, who traveled to Taiwan to attend a memorial service for former ROC President Lee Teng-hui ([U.S. State Department](#), September 16).

New Arms Sales from the United States to Taiwan

In spring and summer 2019, the U.S. Defense and Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) made announcements for a series of major arms sales to Taiwan, to include deals for one hundred eight M1A2T Abrams battle tanks, and sixty-six F-16C/D Block 70 fighter aircraft. [1] U.S. arms sales to Taiwan invariably draw a harsh reaction from PRC spokespersons and state media: state broadcaster CGTN opined in July that “the Taiwan card played by the U.S. is dangerous and doomed to fail,” and asserted that “the arms sales violate international law, international relations norms, [and] the one-China principle” ([CGTN](#), July 14).

Thus far in 2020, only two additional arms sales packages to Taiwan have been officially announced: the sale of eighteen MK-48 Mod6 Advanced Technology (AT) Heavy Weight Torpedoes (HWT) and related equipment (estimated cost of \$180 million) ([DSCA](#), May 20); and maintenance and recertification support for Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missiles (estimated cost of \$620 million) ([DSCA](#), July 9). However, media reports in September and October indicated agreement between the U.S. and Taiwan governments for another major series of arms sales, involving seven categories of weapons systems valued at an approximate total of \$7 billion dollars. Per these unofficial reports, two of the most noteworthy purchases would include: a \$400 million package of MQ-9B Reaper drones, along with associated equipment and training ([WSJ](#), September 16; [Taipei Times](#), September 17); and the purchase of an undisclosed number of AGM-84H/K SLAM-ER, a long-range air-to-ground missile that could be deployed by aircraft against ground and naval targets ([Taipei Times](#), September 20). Unconfirmed media reports in mid-October indicated that the U.S. Congress had been notified of intent to proceed with some of these sales, to include the Reaper drones, one hundred Harpoon anti-ship missiles, and sensor pods for F-16 aircraft ([Reuters](#), October 13).

PLA Naval Exercises and Aircraft Provocations

The sea and airspace around Taiwan have seen an elevated level of People's Liberation Army (PLA) presence, patrol, and exercise activity since the beginning of 2020 ([China Brief](#), April 1). In a briefing presented to Taiwan's legislature on October 7, ROC Defense Minister Yen De-fa (嚴德發) stated that PLA aircraft had conducted a total of 219 flights into Taiwan's southwest ADIZ in 2020; as well as 49 flights that crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait, the most since 1990 ([FocusTaiwan](#), October 7).

This trend ramped up in late summer and early autumn, as PLA deployments have been used to express Beijing's displeasure with the closer U.S.-Taiwan relationship. In announcing a series of PLA Eastern Theater Command naval drills near the Taiwan Strait beginning September 18, the nationalist *Global Times* proclaimed that the "PLA operations have multiple dimensions that make secessionists on the island a turtle in a jar, and the PLA can turn the exercises into real action any time if Taiwan secessionists insist on their obduracy" ([Global Times](#), September 18).

Some of the most provocative actions in September involved PLA aviation sorties. In previous years, the Taiwan Strait centerline (海峡中线, *haixia zhongxian*), although an unofficial demarcation, was generally observed as a boundary by both PRC and ROC military aircraft. This changed in the early months of 2020, when PLA aircraft conducted multiple incursions across the centerline ([China Brief](#), April 1). On September 18-19, PLA aircraft conducted an aggressive series of incursions in the vicinity of, and across, the centerline—with PRC state media explicitly linking this activity to the concurrent visit of U.S. Undersecretary of State Keith Krach ([Global Times](#), September 18). Per media accounts based on Taiwan Ministry of Defense information:

- On September 18, a total of 18 PLA aircraft—reportedly consisting of two H-6 bombers, eight J-16 fighters, four J-11 fighters, and four J-10 fighters—either operated near, or crossed over, the centerline of the Taiwan Strait ([Global Times](#), September 18; [Taipei Times](#), September 20).
- On September 19, a total of 19 PLA aircraft—reportedly consisting of twelve J-16s, two J-11s, two J-10s, two J-11s, two H-6 strategic bombers, and a Y-8 maritime patrol plane—conducted flight operations in a similar manner. The J-10 and J-11 fighters reportedly crossed the centerline in the northern part of the Strait, while the H-6 bombers and the Y-8 entered Taiwan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in its southwest quadrant ([Taipei Times](#), September 20).

The incursions on September 18-19 were accompanied by other incidents beginning in the latter half of September, in which PLA Y-8 maritime surveillance aircraft—operating either singly or in pairs—began conducting regular flights that crossed into the southwestern area of Taiwan's ADIZ. Such incidents occurred on at least seven days between September 16-30; and continued with twelve such reported flights between October 1-17. [2]

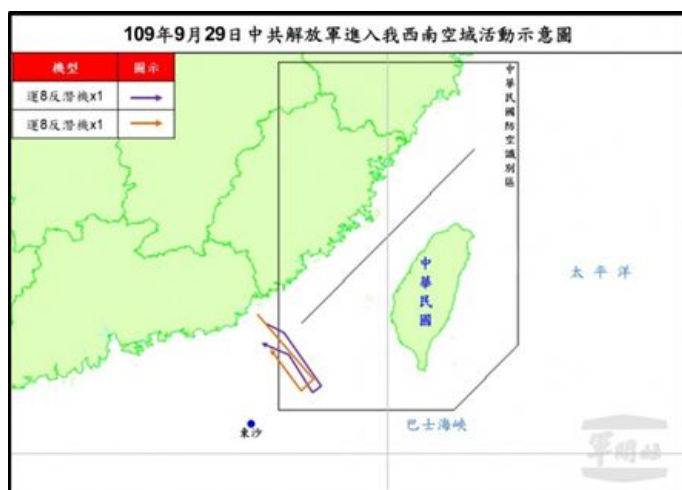


Image left: A graphic from Taiwan’s Ministry of Defense, showing the flight paths of two PLA Y-8 maritime patrol aircraft that entered the southwest corner of Taiwan’s ADIZ on September 29. / Image right : A photo of one of the PLA Y-8 aircraft. (Image source: [ROC Ministry of Defense](#), September 29)

As with the naval drills, PRC state media has characterized the provocative aircraft sorties as an assertion of the PLA’s will and readiness to confront any challenge over Taiwan. Per the *PLA Daily*, the “exercises staged recently by the [PLA] in the Taiwan Straits were designed to target foreign interference and the few ‘Taiwan independence’ secessionists and their activities... If ‘Taiwan independence’ forces dare to separate Taiwan from China by any name in any way, we will resolutely thwart their scheme at all costs” ([PLA Daily](#), September 24).

In her National Day speech on October 10, ROC President Tsai Ying-Wen made reference to this more provocative posture by PRC forces, referring to “harassment by air and sea from the other side [that] has raised tensions in the Taiwan Strait.” In response, she vowed that “we will continue to modernize defensive combat capabilities and accelerate the upgrading of our asymmetrical capabilities to deal with military expansion and provocation from the other side of the Taiwan Strait” ([Focus Taiwan](#), October 10). In its official Twitter account, the ROC Ministry of National Defense has commented on the PLA flights into Taiwan’s ADIZ by stating that the ROC Air Force scrambled fighters and “deployed air defense missile system[s] to monitor the activity,” and that “No matter what... we will keep protect[ing] our country firmly” ([ROC Ministry of Defense Twitter](#), October 11).

Conclusion

The recent diplomatic visits, arms sales, and provocative tactical military activity surrounding Taiwan are taking place not only against a backdrop of deteriorating relations between Washington and Beijing, but also against that of a domestic political environment in Taiwan running ever-more counter to Beijing’s ambitions. Opinion trends in Taiwan remain resistant to the PRC program of unification ([China Brief](#), September 9, 2019;

[China Brief](#), October 19); and the current administration of ROC President Tsai Ying-Wen, which was re-elected with a decisive majority in January 2020, has explicitly rejected Beijing's framework of "One Country, Two Systems" ([China Brief](#), November 1, 2019; [China Brief](#), January 17).

These factors, combined with the ever-more strident nationalist rhetoric and behavior of the PRC state under Xi Jinping—whose administration has taken a hard line against all resistance to Beijing's centralizing authority, whether in Hong Kong or among ethnic minorities in China's border regions—bodes ill for any near-term prospects for lowering tensions in the Taiwan Strait. PLA saber rattling is likely to continue as the PRC's other policy tools achieve little success in terms of pushing Taiwan further towards unification on Beijing's terms.

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] In spring-summer 2019, four major packages of U.S. arms sales to Taiwan were announced. These were: the continuation of maintenance, logistics, and pilot training support for the ROC Air Force's F-16 fighter aircraft program ([DSCA](#), April 15, 2019); a large package of military vehicles, munitions, and support equipment, including one hundred eight M1A2T Abrams battle tanks ([DSCA](#), July 8); two hundred fifty Block I-92F Stinger missiles and four Block I-92F Stinger Fly-to-Buy missiles, with associated support equipment ([DSCA](#), July 8); and in the largest deal of all, the sale of sixty-six F-16C/D Block 70 aircraft and related equipment and support, at an estimated cost of \$8 billion U.S. dollars ([DSCA](#), August 20, 2019).

[2] The flights by Y-8 aircraft into the southwestern area of Taiwan's ADIZ occurred on September 16, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, and 29; they continued into October with such flights occurring on at least October 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16 and 17. On at least one occasion (Oct. 7), the PLA platform involved was a KJ-500 airborne early warning aircraft; and on at least one other occasion (Oct. 9), a Y-9 aircraft flew in tandem with a Y-8. For individual references on the flights in September, see: [Focus Taiwan](#), September 22; [Taiwan News](#), September 24; [Taiwan News](#), September 25; [Taiwan News](#), September 28; [FocusTaiwan](#), October 1. For references on the flights in October, see: ROC [Ministry of Defense](#), October 4; [ROC Ministry of Defense](#), October 6; [ROC Ministry of Defense](#), October 8; [ROC Ministry of Defense](#), October 9; [ROC Ministry of Defense](#), October 10; [ROC Ministry of Defense Twitter](#), updated as of October 17; and accompanying images in this article.

Taiwan Opinion Polling on Unification with China

Timothy S. Rich and Andi Dahmer

Introduction

The ill-defined sovereignty of Taiwan, which officially continues to exist under the political identity of the Republic of China (ROC), is often presented as a tension between two possible future outcomes: either unification with the People's Republic of China (PRC), or formal independence. This ambiguous status quo not only allows Taiwan's competing domestic supporters of unification or independence to believe in the possibility that their desired outcome could one day be attained, but has also led PRC officials to believe that widespread latent support for unification endures in Taiwan.

Beijing maintains that Taiwan is a province of the PRC, but its insistence on eventual unification contrasts with a growing sense of distinct Taiwanese identity on the island, as well as a declining sense of Chinese identity ([The Asia Dialogue](#), February 8, 2019; [Taiwan News](#), February 24). At the same time, an explicit move towards formal independence is constrained by the possibility of military conflict: without a guarantee of U.S. aid, it is unlikely that Taiwan's smaller military could prevent a PRC victory in the event that the sovereignty dispute became violent. [1]



Image: A pro-independence rally in October 2018 brought thousands of people onto the streets of Taipei, marking the largest such turnout in a generation. (Image source: [Straits Times](#))

With the status quo in jeopardy, two polling questions are increasingly pertinent: 1) How do Taiwanese perceive prospects for strengthening relations with either the PRC or the United States; and 2) Do Taiwanese people support unification with the PRC, or do they support an independent Taiwan? Several factors must be considered in answering the first question, which encompasses the thorny issue of Taiwan sovereignty.

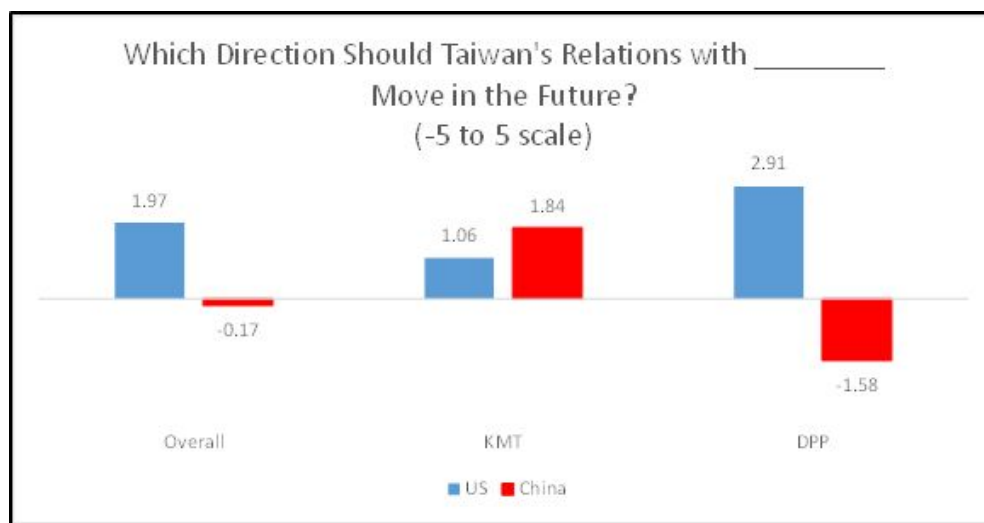
Improved relations with the PRC would likely yield economic benefits for Taiwan, and could also de-escalate the diplomatic fight that has taken place globally over the issue of formal recognition of Taiwan. At the same time, many Taiwan officials and citizens are concerned that greater economic integration will ultimately serve the PRC's longer-term goal of unification.

Strengthening relations with the United States would bolster Taiwan's security. The United States is a major supplier of weapons to Taiwan, and the country most likely to come to its aid in the event of a mainland invasion. However, closer relations with the United States could also exacerbate tensions with the PRC, thereby endangering Taiwan. In the worst case scenario, closer ties between the United States and Taiwan could convince mainland Chinese officials to act on unification sooner, rather than later—before American commitments solidify.

New Polling Information from Taiwan Regarding Views on Unification

Often lost in this “China or America” debate is a clearer understanding of what citizens in Taiwan themselves prefer. Recently received survey data from the “Taiwan’s Election and Democratization Study” (台灣選舉與民主化調查, *Taiwan Xuanju yu Minzhuhua Diaocha*) (TEDS) project from Taiwan’s National Chengchi University sheds light on this. Between January 13th to May 31st, 1,680 respondents were asked their views as to how Taiwan’s relations with both the United States and the PRC should transition, on a scale ranging from -5 (further distance) to +5 (build closer ties) ([TEDS](#), July 31; see below).

Figure 1: Support for Closer Relations with China or the United States, Broken Down by Party Lines



Source: Compiled by the authors, based on TEDS data.

The new survey results show that Taiwanese generally want to maintain the status quo relationship with China (equivalent to a 0 on the scale), while desiring closer relations with the United States. However, clear

partisan differences emerge. Kuomintang (KMT) supporters desired closer relations with both countries, favoring China over the United States. For their part, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) supporters desired closer relations with the United States and greater distance from China (*see below*). Such partisan stances are consistent with the parties' traditional positions on independence and unification issues. Additionally, a Pew Research poll earlier this year found that young Taiwanese prefer to prioritize U.S.-Taiwan economic relations ([Pew Research Center](#), May 12).

Part of the desire for closer relations with the United States, especially among DPP supporters, is likely due to security concerns about Taiwan's future. Research by Emerson Niou in 2004 suggested that public feelings for unification or independence remained unsettled: at that time, 46.38 percent of respondents indicated willingness to accept either outcome under ideal conditions—i.e., either peaceful independence, or unification under circumstances wherein both sides were politically and economically similar. [2] Such findings suggested that those who claimed to support the status quo in the early 2000s could be persuaded in favor of either unification or independence, depending upon circumstances. In the sixteen years since Niou's survey, an increasingly distinct Taiwanese identity, and growing support for Taiwanese independence, have challenged this view of malleable support for the status quo.

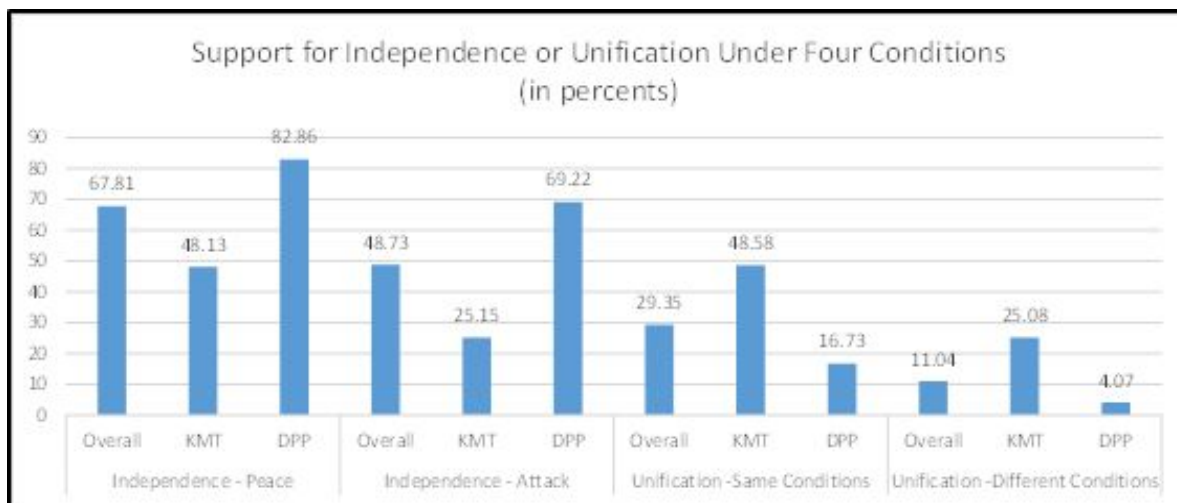
Views on Independence or Unification Under Specific Circumstances

In the TEDS survey, respondents were asked to evaluate each of the following four statements on a four-point scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

1. If Taiwan could still maintain peaceful relations with the PRC after declaring independence, then Taiwan should establish a new, independent country.
2. Even if the PRC decides to attack Taiwan after Taiwan declares independence, Taiwan should still become a new country.
3. If the economic, social, and political conditions were about the same in both mainland China and Taiwan, then the two sides should unify.
4. Even if the gap between the economic, social, and political conditions in mainland China and Taiwan is quite large, the two sides should still unify.

The figure below shows rates of support (agree/strongly agree) for each statement across the general population, broken down across the lines of Taiwan's two main political parties. Across the entire population, more than two-thirds of respondents agreed that they would support independence if peaceful coexistence with China was a possibility. Among DPP supporters, peaceful independence elicits stronger agreement (82.86 percent), compared to less than half of KMT supporters (48.13 percent). All three polling populations indicated weaker support for the prospect of independence if China were to attack: a 69.22 percent majority of DPP supporters still supported independence under this scenario, compared to only 25.15 percent of KMT supporters and 48.73 percent of respondents overall.

Figure 2: Support for Independence or Unification Under Varying Conditions, Broken Down by Party Identification



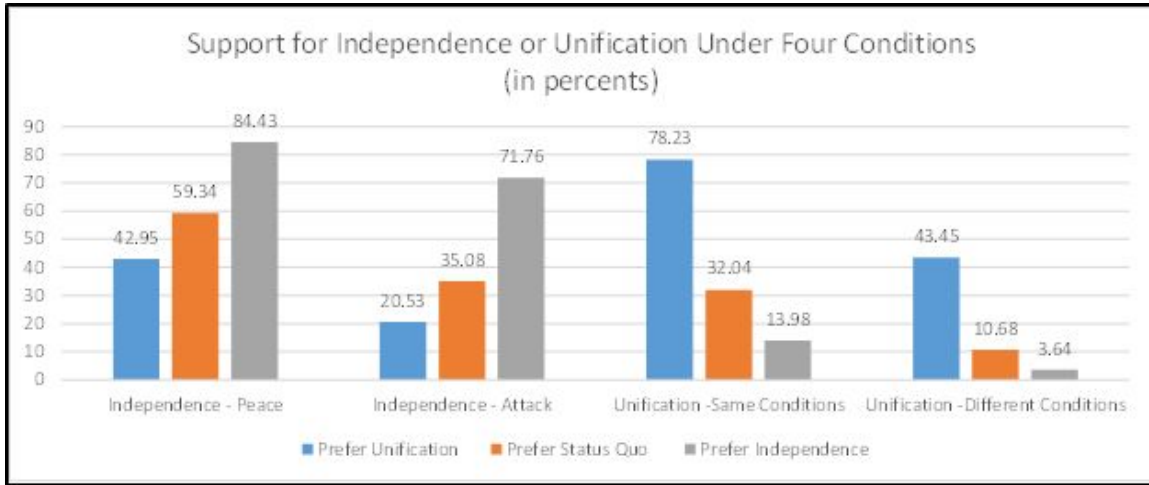
Source: Compiled by the authors, based on TEDS data.

On the other hand, the data shows limited support for unification even under the “ideal conditions” of economic, social, and political conditions being the same in Taiwan and China (see below). Overall, less than a third of respondents (29.35 percent) supported unification under ideal conditions. KMT supporters were nearly evenly split, with 48.58 percent supporting unification under ideal conditions. Only 16.73 percent of DPP supporters were in favor of unification under ideal circumstances. Support for unification drops if framed under non-ideal conditions, wherein economic, social, and political differences between the two sides continue. Only 11.04 percent of respondents across the board supported unification with non-ideal conditions, with wide divergence between KMT supporters (25.08 percent) and DPP supporters (4.07 percent). It is worth noting that KMT respondents supported both ideal options (i.e., peaceful independence vs. unification under similar conditions) at nearly identical rates.

Support for Independence or Unification as Determined by Existing Preferences for Status Quo, Independence, or Unification

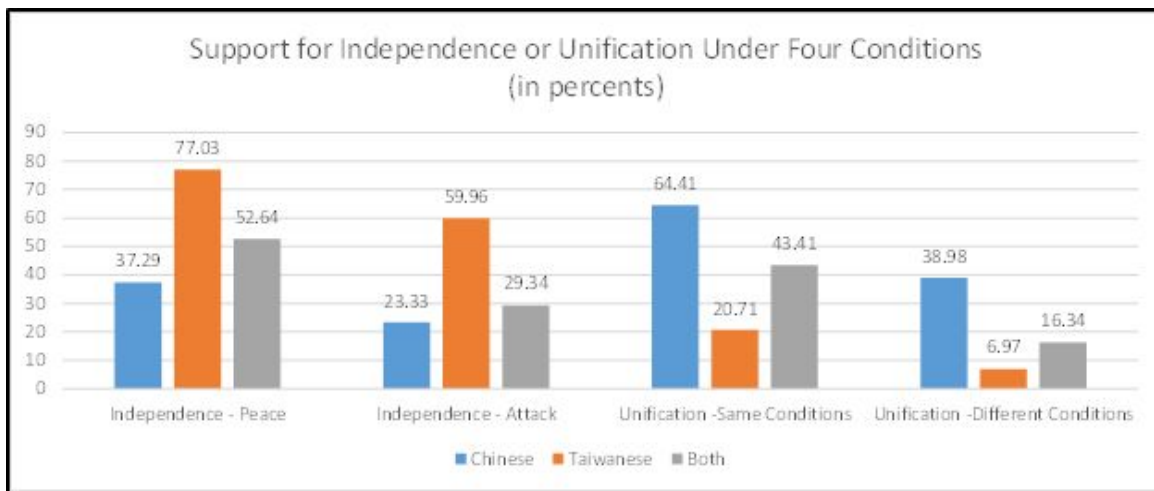
A majority of those supportive of the status quo (59.34 percent) and a supermajority of independence-minded respondents (84.43 percent) supported independence under ideal conditions. Surprisingly, 42.95 percent of respondents who said they supported unification also supported peaceful independence. Support dropped across all three groups (i.e., pro-status quo, pro-independence, or pro-unification) under circumstances in which independence would lead China to attack Taiwan. Only 32.04 percent of respondents overall were receptive to the idea of unification even under ideal conditions, compared to 78.23 percent of unification-minded respondents and a paltry 13.98 percent of independence-minded respondents.

Figure 3: Support for Independence or Unification Under Varying Conditions, Broken Down by Existing Preferences



Source: Compiled by the authors, based on TEDS data.

Figure 4: Support for Independence or Unification Under Varying Conditions, Broken Down by Sense of Identity



Source: Compiled by the authors, based on TEDS data.

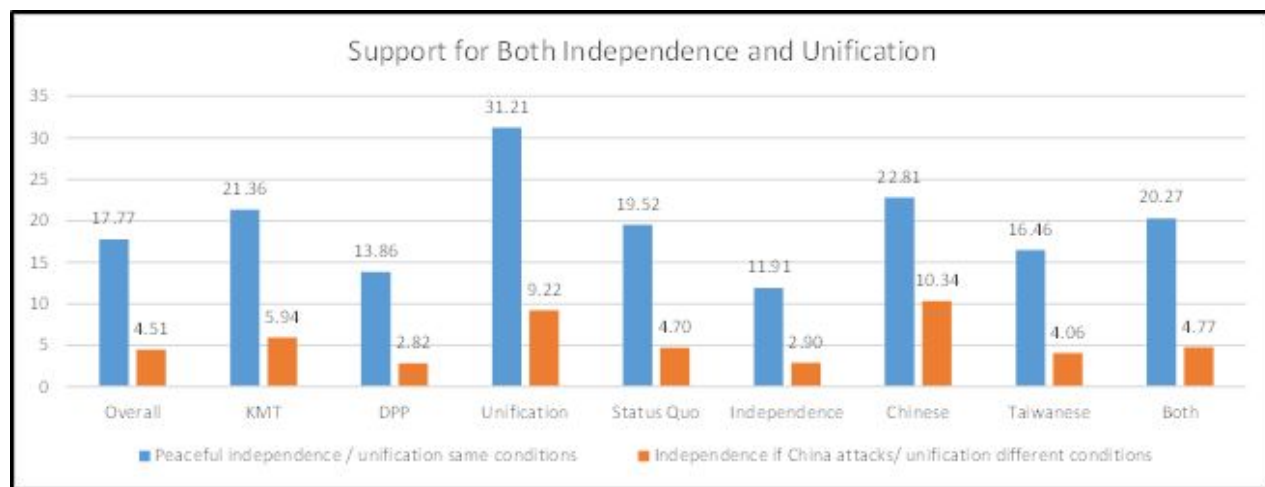
Support for Independence or Unification Broken Down by Sense of National Identity

A clear majority of respondents who identify as Taiwanese support independence under peaceful conditions (77.03 percent), while a smaller majority (52.64 percent) of those identifying as both Chinese and Taiwanese support peaceful independence (see below). In contrast, only 37.29 percent of respondents identifying as Chinese support independence under peaceful conditions. Meanwhile, the majority of respondents identifying as Chinese support unification under ideal conditions (64.41 percent), compared to only 20.71 percent support from those identifying as Taiwanese, and 43.41 percent support from dual-identity respondents.

Again, we see declines in support for both independence and unification under less than ideal conditions, although nearly 60 percent of those identifying as Taiwanese were still supportive of independence if China were to attack. More than one-third of those identifying as Chinese were still supportive of unification even if China and Taiwan did not have similar economic, political, and social conditions.

While a majority of Taiwanese support the ill-defined status quo for the time being (51.81 percent), it would be incorrect to assume that this ambiguity equates to respondents being open to both unification and independence, as they were in 2004. Only 17.77 percent of respondents overall were supportive of independence or unification under ideal scenarios (i.e., independence with peace, or unification with similar political and social conditions); within this 17.77 percent of respondents, the highest levels of support came from unification supporters (31.21 percent), Chinese identifiers (22.81 percent), and KMT supporters (21.36 percent). Meanwhile, only 11.91 percent of independence supporters, 13.86 percent of DPP supporters, and 16.46 percent of Taiwanese identifiers were supportive of both ideal conditions. Perhaps surprisingly, 19.52 percent of those that stated they preferred the continuation of the status quo indicated their support for both options, further suggesting that status quo supporters should not be viewed as indifferent or persuadable. Across every subgroup, joint support for independence and unification under less ideal conditions elicited far lower support.

Figure 5: Conditional Support for Both Independence and Unification



Source: Compiled by the authors, based on TEDS data.

Conclusion: What Does This Tell Us?

First, as Taiwanese identity grows over time and Taiwan's democratic governance and liberal principles become a greater foil to the so-called "China model" of governance promoted by Beijing, support for Taiwan-centric actions (such as constitutional reform to change the country's name) will likely continue to grow among the Taiwanese public ([SCMP](#), May 25, 2019; [Taiwan News](#), April 17; [Taiwan News](#), July 22;

[Channel News Asia](#), September 2). These actions, while not explicit moves towards formal independence, are indicative of a decline in public support for unification.

Second, it will become harder for PRC officials to maintain the fantasy narrative of broad popular support in Taiwan for unification, and PRC disinformation campaigns targeting Taiwanese public opinion will likely be increasingly contested by independence-oriented politicians ([SCMP](#), January 7; [Recorded Future](#), April 29; [IRI](#), August 25). With declining support for unification under any conditions, we may see a stronger push for more overt influence and disinformation campaigns from mainland China, which will risk exacerbating the sovereignty problem. Lastly, analysts should pay greater attention to interpreting Taiwanese public support for the status quo; and also to examining how the aforesaid “status quo” is defined in the popular consciousness. Rather than seeing support for the status quo as being equivalent to political indifference, the data collected by the TEDS poll instead suggests that many Taiwanese are hesitant to reveal their true preferences. For now, some Taiwanese may see the status quo as the most realistic option.

Moving forward, whether Taiwan pursues closer political and economic ties with the PRC or with the United States, these survey results suggest that the majority of KMT respondents will prioritize relations with China, consistent with their broader preferences for unification and desire to warm cross-strait relations to levels last seen under the Ma Ying-jeou administration. DPP supporters, concerned that closer relations with China may lead to unification by other means, will conversely continue to prioritize economic and political ties with the United States.

Ultimately, Taiwan can neither afford to ignore the competing interests of the PRC and the United States, nor the reality that improving relations with one will likely come at the expense of the other. Taiwan also cannot ignore the possibility that both sides may prioritize relations with each other at Taiwan’s expense. The U.S.-Taiwan relationship is currently experiencing a historic high, with the recent passing of the TAIPEI Act in the U.S. Senate and two high-level visits by senior U.S. officials. However, recent history has also shown the dangers that Taiwan faces—caught as it is in an ambiguous position of sovereignty, with its security in large part dependent on the greater U.S.-China relationship.

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Andi Dahmer is a 2018 Harry S. Truman Scholar and a recent graduate of Western Kentucky University.

Notes

[1] See: David Pierson and Ralph Jennings, "To Stop a Chinese Invasion, Taiwan Needs a Stronger Military," *LA Times*, October 6, 2020.

<https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-10-06/china-taiwan-military-service>.

[2] See: Emerson M.S. Niu, "Understanding Taiwan Independence and its Policy Implications," *Asian Survey* vol. 44, no. 4, University of California Press, July/August 2004.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2004.44.4.555>.

Sino-Indian Trade and Investment Relations Amid Growing Border Tensions

By Anita Inder Singh

Introduction

Following Chinese intrusions into India's northern territory of Ladakh beginning in June ([China Brief](#), July 15), relations between the two countries have seen a major downturn. Two strands of official Chinese thinking have emerged from statements by People's Republic of China (PRC) officials, as represented by PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) and PRC Ambassador Sun Weidong (孙卫东) in New Delhi: that Beijing does not offer any prospect of an early settlement to the border dispute, and that it accuses India of infringing on China's territorial sovereignty. Wang Yi maintains that the Sino-Indian boundary between China and India "has not yet been demarcated," and that China will firmly safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity ([Global Times](#), September 1). Sun Weidong asserts the official PRC line that there has been no Chinese transgression in Ladakh, and that the disputed territory belongs to China ([PRC Embassy in India](#), August 28).



Image: Indian and PRC officials at a signing ceremony during the Sixth India-China Strategic Economic Dialogue, held in New Delhi in September 2019. (Image source: [NITI Aayog Twitter](#), September 9, 2019)

Despite earlier flare-ups such as the 2017 Doklam crisis, New Delhi in recent years has viewed India's politico-economic connection with China through rose-colored glasses. At the Wuhan (2018) and Chennai (2019) summits Prime Minister Narendra Modi saw a Sino-Indian strategic convergence at hand ([Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#), April 28, 2018; [Xinhua](#), April 29, 2018). In Chennai he reportedly envisioned "a beautiful future" for India-China relations ([Xinhua](#), October 13, 2019). For his part, President Xi Jinping has urged the elephant and the dragon to further align their development strategies and to build a partnership in manufacturing industries.

In response to the recent border incidents, the Indian government has looked to restrict Chinese investment in India, and there have been public calls for boycotts of Chinese-made goods. However, this has highlighted the disparity in economic power between the two countries, as well as the extent to which India is dependent on Chinese goods. Ambassador Sun, and commentaries in PRC state media, continually highlight India's economic weakness, the ultranationalism that its widespread poverty allegedly inspires, and the difficulties it faces in overcoming its problems as one of the countries most affected by COVID-19. The *Global Times* editorialized this summer that the "gap between China's and India's strength is clear" ([Global Times](#), June 17; [Global Times](#), August 27).

India Confronts Major Gaps in Its Economic Relations with China

In 2019, India's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was \$2,104, while China's was \$10,261 ([World Bank](#), June 17). India's defense budget for 2020-21 is \$66.9 billion ([IDSA](#), February 4); China's is \$178.6 billion ([ChinaPower](#), May 22). In its worst contraction on record, India's GDP has contracted by 23.9 percent this year during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Financial Times](#), August 31); conversely, China's GDP has reportedly risen by 3.2 percent in the second quarter of this year ([Financial Times](#), July 16). In light of such figures, it is little wonder that China frequently contrasts India's weakness with its own power.

The China-India Trade Deficit

After the United States, China has become India's second-largest trading partner. China is the biggest source (14 percent) of India's imports, as well as the destination for 5.4 percent of its exports. Less than 1 percent of China's imports come from India, but 3.1 percent of its exports go to India ([Trading Economics](#), undated). The volume of trade has increased considerably over the past two decades. In 2000, trade volume between the two countries stood at \$3 billion. In 2008, bilateral trade reached \$51.8 billion; after another eight years, in 2016, Sino-Indian bilateral trade amounted to \$71.8 billion ([Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#), October 2017). In 2018, it reached an all-time high of \$95 billion ([Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#), September 26, 2019; [Global Times](#), January 14).

India's trade deficit with China increased by more than 200 percent, from \$16 billion in 2007-2008 to \$51 billion in 2016-2017 ([BloombergQuint](#), April 16, 2018). In 2018 India's deficit expanded to \$57.86 billion ([Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#), September 26). The deficit accounted for an estimated 58 to 60 percent of India's total bilateral trade ([Indian Embassy in PRC](#), undated; [Global Times](#), January 14; [Hindustan Times](#), August 26). A decline in imports from China caused the deficit to fall to \$48.66 billion in 2019-20 ([Economic Times](#), July 2).

Chinese Investment in India

Chinese investment in India rose sharply in the last six years. In 2014 net Chinese investment in India was \$1.6 billion; current estimates range from \$8 to \$26 billion, and the true figure could be even higher. [1] China has become a significant source of foreign direct investment (FDI) for India in recent years, with some

estimates pointing to investments adding up to \$10 billion from 2017 to 2019 ([Global Times](#), June 30). Much of the investment has been made in strategically crucial areas, by state-owned companies involved with military technology development and intelligence work for the People's Liberation Army. Half of Indian “unicorns” (private start-up tech firms) have Chinese funding ([Timesnow](#), June 18). Chinese investment has driven the development of multiple Indian industries, to include mobile phones and technology, household electrical appliances, infrastructure, automobiles, and pharmaceuticals ([Yale Global](#), October 24, 2017).

In 2015, India's Ministry of Commerce envisaged increased Chinese investment in India's industrial parks and special economic and manufacturing zones ([Business Standard](#), July 26). In the same year, the Chinese tech giant Alibaba invested in 40 percent of Paytm, a digital services platform ([Alibaba](#), September 29, 2015; [NDTV](#), December 3, 2016). The investment paid off a year later, when New Delhi carried out a demonetization policy that disrupted India's economic life and promoted a cashless economy ([Livemint](#), 10 Jan 2017).



Image: Protestors in Mumbai call for a boycott of Chinese-made goods following clashes between Indian and Chinese troops in the Aksai Chin region, June 2020. (Image source: [The Hindu](#), June 24)

India Takes Action Against Chinese Tech Companies

Even before the Ladakh intrusion, New Delhi had decided to scrutinize investment from neighboring countries to counter the chances of “opportunistic takeover” of Indian companies as the coronavirus pandemic devastated India's economy ([Business Standard](#), April 20). The PRC protested that the barriers set by India for investors from specific countries violated the World Trade Organization's principle of non-discrimination and failed to comply with general trends in terms of the liberalization and facilitation of trade and investment. China asserted that its companies had created a large number of jobs in India and promoted “mutual beneficial and win-win cooperation” ([China Daily](#), July 4).

Restrictions on Chinese-Made Mobile Apps

Soon after the clashes broke out in Ladakh, India banned 59 Chinese apps, including TikTok, WeChat, and Helo ([Economic Times](#), July 29; [Xinhua](#), July 28). India has been TikTok's largest foreign market ([Global Times](#), July 3); but now ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, stands to lose \$6 billion and might have to stop doing business in India ([Global Times](#), July 1; [Business Standard](#), July 3). On September 2, India banned another 118 mobile apps including the hugely popular mobile gaming app PUBG, whose largest subscriber base is in India ([Xinhua](#), September 2; [Business Standard](#), September 3; [Global Times](#), September 3).

In announcing these bans, India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology cited concerns about data security, and asserted that the mobile applications were harmful to Indian sovereignty and the defense of its cyberspace. PRC state media has alleged that anti-China feeling in India flowed from "something more than just the border clashes between the two countries... It reflects the rise of Hindu nationalism and the prominence of India's ambition and pursuit to become a major power," and asserted that, in a society characterized by "great uncertainties," the anti-China stance was "one of the main means for certain individuals to forge social consensus" ([Global Times](#), July 1).

Chinese Telecoms and India's 5G Network

On August 13, India announced that Huawei and ZTE would be excluded from India's plans to roll out its 5G networks ([Business Standard](#), August 13). PRC Ambassador Sun Weidong alleged that such treatment of a Chinese private company by "a certain country" impeded "normal market cooperation and scientific and technological development under the pretext of 'national security' even without any factual basis and concrete evidence." According to Sun, such "hegemonic actions" flouted the rules of the market and the principle of fair competition, and would eventually harm India's interests and credibility ([PRC Ambassador in India](#), TV interview, August 28).

Contradicting the earlier announcement, India's Minister of State for Electronics and Information Technology, Sanjay Dhotre, informed parliament on September 17 that there was no plan to exclude Huawei or ZTE from 5G infrastructure contracts ([Business Standard](#), September 17). Huawei has reportedly made agreements with the Indian companies Airtel and Reliance Jio in Bengaluru, and with Vodafone Idea in Delhi; while ZTE has reportedly negotiated a deal with Airtel for coverage in Kolkata. Indian telecommunications companies have indicated willingness to withdraw applications made with the Chinese companies if the government makes a clear statement of intent. However, in light of contradictory statements, the current state of government policy is unclear.

India Remains Dependent on Trade with China

Despite talk of restricting trade and investment with China, the outstanding fact is that India remains dependent on trade with China—to include dependence on Chinese imports for producing its own exports.

For example, China is the source of more than 60 percent of ingredients for Indian pharmaceuticals exported to other countries ([Hindustan Times](#), July 13). In 2019-20, 93 percent of Indian imports of plastic dolls and 97 percent of its imports in integrated circuits came from China ([Livemint](#), June 26). Hindus comprise some 80 percent of India's population, but even figurines of Hindu gods and goddesses have been imported from China ([Yale Global](#), October 24, 2017)!

India could be China's fastest-growing market, but Ambassador Sun contends that discriminatory restrictions hurt Chinese companies—and has urged India to provide an open, fair, transparent, and non-discriminatory business environment for Chinese enterprises to invest and operate in India ([Xinhua](#), August 29). Sun has further stated that China and India are “partners rather than rivals,” and that they should “put the boundary question at an appropriate place in our bilateral relations and not allow differences to disturb the relationship” ([PRC Embassy in India](#), August 28). By contrast, India prioritizes borders and territory over trade: as External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar affirmed in August, the stand-off is “surely the most serious situation after 1962” ([Defence Aviation Post](#), August 27).

Conclusion

India faces two awkward facts: first, an entrenched territorial contest with China is India's biggest security headache; and second, it possesses a weaker economy and dependence on Chinese trade and investment. India can neither reduce its strong trade and investment ties with China quickly, nor undo them completely. It must also navigate both political and diplomatic aspects of the relationship: authoritarian, expansionist China's strong trade and investment ties with most democracies have confirmed that the strength or weakness of economic ties between countries may not determine the tone of political relationships.

Beijing will continue to complain about India's restrictions on its investments. It will also harp on what it perceives as India's violation of China's territorial sovereignty, India's enfeebled economy, and its alleged poverty-driven ultranationalism. China sometimes depicts India as weak; sometimes as a country infringing international economic norms; and sometimes as an aspiring global power. For India, the territorial dispute threatens to outweigh the benefits of economic collaboration with Beijing, but India cannot easily give up its economic reliance on China. The coronavirus pandemic, the border clashes, and New Delhi's curbs on Chinese investment have deepened the Sino-Indian rift. No solutions to either the border or economic disputes between the two countries appear to be on the horizon.

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(2006). She is currently writing a book on the United States and Asia. More of her work may be viewed at: www.anitaindersingh.com.

Notes

[1] Ananth Krishnan, *Following the Money: China Inc's Growing Stake in India-China Relations* (New Delhi: Brookings India, 2020).

[2] Richard M. Rossow, "U.S.-India Economic Ties: Opportunity through Crisis" (Center for International and Strategic Studies, May 13, 2020).

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-india-economic-ties-opportunity-through-crisis>.

**The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Three:
China's (Para)Military Efforts to Promote Security in
Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan**

By Sergey Sukhankin

Editor's Note: This is the third installment of a three-part China Brief series about the Chinese government's efforts to exert greater influence over regional security arrangements and policy in the states of Central Asia. The first part, "[The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part One: Chinese and Regional Perspectives on Security in Central Asia](#)," appeared on July 15; the second part, "[The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Two: China's \(Para\)Military Efforts to Promote Security in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan](#)," was published in our August 12 issue. In this third and final installment, Jamestown Fellow Sergey Sukhankin analyzes the ways in which China's growing presence is affecting developments and security relationships in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

Introduction

Addressing the 56th Munich Security Conference in February, Kazakhstan President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev emphasized Central Asia's strategic importance for the realization of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the crown jewel foreign policy program of the People's Republic of China (PRC) ([Belt and Road News](#), June 4). President Tokayev's speech failed to mention that the opportunities for regional development along the BRI are balanced by security-related challenges. The first two articles of this series provided an overview of the general security environment in the region, followed by an analysis of the PRC's security activities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan ([China Brief](#), August 12). This third article will examine the PRC's military and paramilitary security initiatives in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—three of the larger and more economically developed countries in the macro-region of Central Asia.

Kazakhstan: The Central Pillar of the BRI?

According to PRC officials, Kazakhstan occupies a key position in the Central Asian segment of the BRI ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), September 7, 2013). Kazakh authorities share this perception, describing their country as "the first and key country of the Silk Road Economic Belt, a kind of geo-economic gateway of China to the West" ([Belt and Road News](#), February 18, 2019). As evidence of the depth of the bilateral relationship, Beijing has pledged to invest more than \$5 billion in local infrastructure through 2022, while Kazakhstan is the only country in Central Asia to have established an "all-around strategic partnership" with China ([Belt and Road News](#), June 6). Kazakhstan is expected to play an instrumental role in BRI-related infrastructure projects, such as: the China-Kazakhstan-Russia-Western Europe Transport Corridor; the China-Kazakhstan-Western Asia Transport Corridor; and the China-Kazakhstan-South Caucasus/Turkey-Europe Transport Corridor ([Astana Times](#), June 3). The Kazakhstan government is also

expected to help China promote free trade zones along these routes ([Belt and Road News](#), September 20, 2019).

One major topic of concern for Beijing is the potential threat posed by Islamic radicals and their potential ties to ethnic minorities such as the Uyghurs. According to Human Rights Watch, in 2019 alone Kazakh authorities detained 500 alleged members of the Islamic State and their families, and sentenced fourteen citizens for participating in conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan ([Human Rights Watch \(Russia\)](#), undated).

Rapidly spreading Sinophobia in Kazakhstan has also become a great concern for China. As noted by the political commentator Dosym Satpiev, “Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country that has always had anti-Chinese sentiments” ([Azattyq.org](#), September 9, 2019). The year 2019, described in local media as the “year of growing anti-Chinese sentiments,” culminated in a major demonstration in the city of Zhanaozen ([Central Asia News](#), January 17). Anti-Chinese demonstrations have sometimes grown openly hostile, especially in the western part of Kazakhstan—to include protests around the North Troyes oilfield and the town of Atyrau ([Diapazon.kz](#), September 23, 2010; [Kapital.kz](#), November 29, 2013; [Atpress.kz](#), February 28, 2018). One 2019 conflict triggered by unequal payment issues between locals and Chinese workers resulted in a harsh, first-of-its-kind warning by Geng Liping (耿丽萍), the PRC’s Consul-General in Almaty. Local sources construed this as a sign of China’s growing dominance in the country, which could potentially result in “[Chinese] police or security forces [deployed in Kazakhstan] under the pretext of protecting Chinese private property” ([Ehnews.kz](#), October 15, 2019).



Image: Kazakh and Chinese soldiers pose for a group photo during the “Fox Hunt-2019” anti-terrorist exercise held in eastern Kazakhstan, October 2019. (Image source: [Sputnik News](#))

Joint (Anti-Terrorist) Military Exercises

The PRC and Kazakhstan have conducted sixteen anti-terrorist military exercises since 2002 ([Carnegie Institute \(Russia\)](#), March 25). The drills in 2019 included the use of UAVs to detect, round up and destroy

hypothetical terrorist groups entering Kazakhstan under the guise of migrant workers from the territory of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region ([Sputnik News](#), October 14, 2019). As a part of its anti-terrorism policies, the PRC is also actively promoting the intensification of academic exchanges and knowledge transfers, building a steady link between Chinese and Kazakh military academies and institutions ([Central Asia News](#), March 8, 2019).

Arms Deals and Military Aid

China's arms deals with Kazakhstan deserve attention for two important reasons. First, the bilateral relationship has allowed Kazakhstan to acquire increasingly sophisticated weapons systems: for example, in 2016 China supplied a number of *Wing Loong-1* (翼龙-1) strike-capable drones, comparable to the U.S.-manufactured MQ-1 Predator ([Inform.kz](#), March 19, 2016). Second, the Chinese appear to have supplanted Russia as Kazakhstan's primary supplier of arms. The PRC is supplying the Kazakh military with platforms analogous to Russia/USSR-produced models—such as the Y-8 (运-8) transport aircraft, a copy of the Antonov An-12 ([Vpk.name](#), June 19, 2018). These two factors demonstrate differences in Chinese military aid to Kazakhstan, in contrast with circumstances in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan: in the latter two countries, military sales and assistance—such as a transfer of thirty heavy trucks ([Lada.kz](#), February 23, 2015)—play a less significant role in the bilateral relationship.

The Potential Deployment of Private Security Companies

Some of China's paramilitary state organizations, such as the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (新疆生产建设兵团, *Xinjiang Shengchan Jianshe Bingtuan*), are reorienting their services towards serving the needs of the BRI. Local sources in Kazakhstan have also speculated about the potential deployment of Chinese private security companies (PSCs) in the country, such as the Hong Kong-based Frontier Services Group (先丰服务集团, *xianfeng fuwu jituan*) ([The Diplomat](#), July 3, 2019). This is a sensitive issue, given the reality of growing Sinophobia alongside the expanding presence of Chinese businesses. Leading Kazakh politicians, including senator Dariga Nazarbayeva, have voiced categorical disapproval of any PSCs—either foreign or domestic—operating in the country ([Kapital.kz](#), March 1, 2018).

Uzbekistan: Testing New Forms of Security Cooperation?

The government of Uzbekistan, which seemingly stepped onto a reformist path after the 2016 election of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has viewed the BRI as a chance to become an integral part of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. This aspiration has been welcomed by the PRC. Last year, the Chinese state-managed Silk Road Fund (丝路基金, *Silu Jijin*) agreed to provide the Uzbek state-owned oil and gas corporation JSC Uzbekneftegaz a \$585 million loan ([Belt and Road News](#), October 26, 2019). Similarly, the PRC-dominated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (亚洲基础设施投资银, *Yazhou Jichu Sheshi Touzi Yinhang*) declared its readiness to grant a \$165.5 million loan (81 percent of the total cost) to pay for the Bukhara Road Network Improvement Project, to be completed by 2025 ([AIIB](#), undated).

The main threat to Chinese investors in Uzbekistan comes primarily from the activities of violent jihadists, many of whom have gained international experience fighting in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. This past May was marked by a series of troublesome events: first, the Taliban carried out operations near the Afghan-Uzbek border ([Stan Radar](#), May 18); then a network of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which had known cells in five different parts of the country, was reportedly uncovered in the Fergana Region of eastern Uzbekistan ([Russian.people.com](#), May 29).



Image: Delegates attend a meeting of the Council of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, a component organization of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in Tashkent, Uzbekistan (March 15, 2019). At this meeting, the council announced plans to convene a joint anti-terrorism exercise titled "Sary-Arka-Antiterror 2019." (Image source: [Xinhua](#), March 16, 2019)

Joint Military Exercises

In December 2017, discussions between the PRC's then-Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan (常万全), Uzbekistan's then-Minister of Defense Abdusalom Azizov, and President Mirziyoyev produced agreements for closer security cooperation. This culminated in the emergence of "Cooperation-2019" (合作-2019, *Hezuo-2019*), a joint anti-terrorism exercise between the Chinese People's Armed Police (中国人民武装警察部队, *Zhongguo Renmin Wuzhuang Jingcha Budui*) and the Uzbek National Guard, which took place in May 2019 ([Gazeta.uz](#), December 21, 2017, [China Military](#), May 17, 2019). According to PLA exercise commander Wang Ning (王宁), China views Uzbekistan as "an important strategic partner" in achieving peace and stability in Central Asia ([Xinhua](#), May 16, 2019).

Arms and Weaponry Deals

While Uzbekistan is not a top priority for China in terms of arms exports, some notable changes have taken place since 2014, when Uzbekistan became the first Central Asian state to acquire the PRC-manufactured *Wing Loong I* military drone system ([Securityassistance.org](#), June 5, 2014). Subsequently, Tashkent purchased (and successfully tested) the FT-2000—an export version of the Hongqi-9 (红旗-9), which is

similar to the Russian S-300 medium- to long-range missile system ([Podrobno.uz](#), November 8, 2019). The most recent Chinese weaponry acquired and tested by the Uzbek armed forces was the QW-18 (前卫-18) shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile system, which entered Uzbekistan's inventory in 2019 ([Polygon](#), November 29, 2019).

Non-Standard Forms of Cooperation

Chinese PSCs, represented by the China Security Technology Group (中国安保技术集团, *Zhongguo Anbao Jishu Jituan*) already offer services in Uzbekistan, albeit without an official local office ([Cstghk.com](#), undated). The Frontier Services Group has also announced plans to deploy in Uzbekistan due to the country's growing involvement in the BRI ([Frontier Services Group](#), March 2, 2018), and it is likely that PSCs will continue to expand their operations there. The majority of Uzbek policymakers, like their Kazakh counterparts, frown upon the idea of Chinese security personnel operating in Uzbekistan ([Expertonline.kz](#), August 24, 2017). Given Uzbekistan's growing economic dependence on BRI-related initiatives and its acute need for foreign investment, this position may be subject to change in the future. A second important facet of the Sino-Uzbek military partnership is military journalism and propaganda. In 2019, a delegation from the Uzbek Defense Ministry visited the PRC to study organizational and operative principles of the Chinese military media. During their trip, the delegation visited the head office of the *People's Daily* and the School of Journalism at the Renmin University of China ([Podrobno.uz](#), December 10, 2019).

Turkmenistan: The Broken Buckle of the BRI?

Turkmenistan is a neutral state, kept in isolation by its extravagant leader and beset by problems of ethnic nationalism. At the same time, it has hoped to occupy a leading role in the BRI, and to benefit from Chinese economic investments. An October 2017 book written by President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov—filled with legends, historical descriptions and local folklore, and titled *Turkmenistan is the Heart of the Great Silk Road*—underscores these high aspirations ([Turkmenistan Today](#), September 21, 2018). Turkmen authorities have primarily vested their BRI hopes in two major infrastructure projects:

- The China-Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan–Iran Railway ([Orient.tm](#), November 28, 2017).
- The Turkmenbashi International Seaport (completed in 2018), which links Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan (Baku), Kazakhstan (Aktau), and Russia (Astrakhan). The port serves as an integral part of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, facilitating the transportation of goods between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf ([Turkmenistan Railways](#), undated; [Silk Road Briefing](#), July 10, 2018).

Although the PRC's ties with Turkmenistan are not as close as those with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Beijing has increased both economic and security-related contacts with Turkmenistan in recent years. Chinese military experts have always viewed Turkmenistan as a weak state in terms of military capabilities ([Mil.qianlong.com](#), April 5, 2016). This year, China overcame Russia to become the second largest arms supplier to Turkmenistan by selling weaponry in return for natural gas payments. (China has monopolized

exports of Turkmen natural gas to such an extent that gas been used as a *de facto* form of currency in economic contacts between the two countries.)

China now supplies 27 percent of Turkmenistan's foreign arms purchases, behind only Turkey (Dfnc.ru, 2019). Between 2016–2018, Turkmenistan acquired HQ-9, Kai Shan-1 (凯山-1), and FD-2000 missiles from China (Lenta.ru, April 4, 2016; PRC Ministry of Defense, February 27, 2018). However, cooperation was strained in 2018, when the price of natural gas on the Chinese market skyrocketed. An ensuing disagreement resulted in China blacklisting Turkmenistan and putting a *de facto* temporary ban on all major types of security-related cooperation (Mnews.world, September 20, 2019).

Conclusion

While developing both economic and security-related cooperation in connection with the BRI, Beijing has become clearly aware of negative perceptions surrounding its increasing security presence in Central Asian countries. Accordingly, Beijing will continue to prioritize economics while downplaying military (or paramilitary) relationships. At the same time, Beijing will also continue to strengthen its security-related efforts at the inter-governmental level. PSCs and other semi-state actors will either keep operating without local offices (rendering *ad hoc* services), or could launch pilot projects in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—countries whose economic reliance on China is overwhelming.

Despite levels of security and military involvement that are limited at present, Chinese investments in these three Central Asian states are nonetheless increasing. This means that Central Asia—which has long remained under the Russian security umbrella—may be slowly drifting away from Moscow and towards Beijing. As the result of overwhelming Chinese economic dominance and growing “soft power” over its neighbors, the next two decades will likely witness the PRC strengthening the security vector of its Central Asian policy.

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Where to Next?: PLA Considerations for Overseas Base Site Selection

By Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga

Introduction

Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) established its first official overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, there has been much speculation about where China's next base will be. Chinese military authors have themselves shown considerable interest in this issue, discussing the value of potential overseas "strategic strong points" (战略支点, *zhanlüe zhidian*) for use by People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces ([China Brief](#), March 22, 2019). The Department of Defense's 2020 annual report on the Chinese military indicates that "Beyond its current base in Djibouti, the PRC is very likely already considering and planning for additional overseas military logistics facilities to support naval, air, and ground forces". The report lists a broad range of countries that China "has likely considered," which include: "Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, and Tajikistan" ([Department of Defense](#), September 1, 2020).

Rumors in the Western media touch on an even greater variety of locations. Cambodia has received the most attention, with reports in July 2019 indicating that an agreement had been finalized for a Chinese PLA Navy (PLAN) base at the existing Ream port facility ([China Brief](#), August 14, 2019). The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency has also pointed to Pakistan as a leading contender for another location ([Department of Defense](#), January 14, 2019). However, these conversations have overlooked one central question: how does the Chinese military itself think about selecting the locations for its overseas military bases?



Image: Cambodian Navy personnel and patrol vessels on a pier at the port facility in Ream, on the Gulf of Thailand in southern Cambodia (undated). The Ream facility is widely believed to be a likely location for a future PLA Navy base—which would make it the second PLA base abroad. (Image source: [Khmer Times](#))

Drivers of PLA Basing Abroad

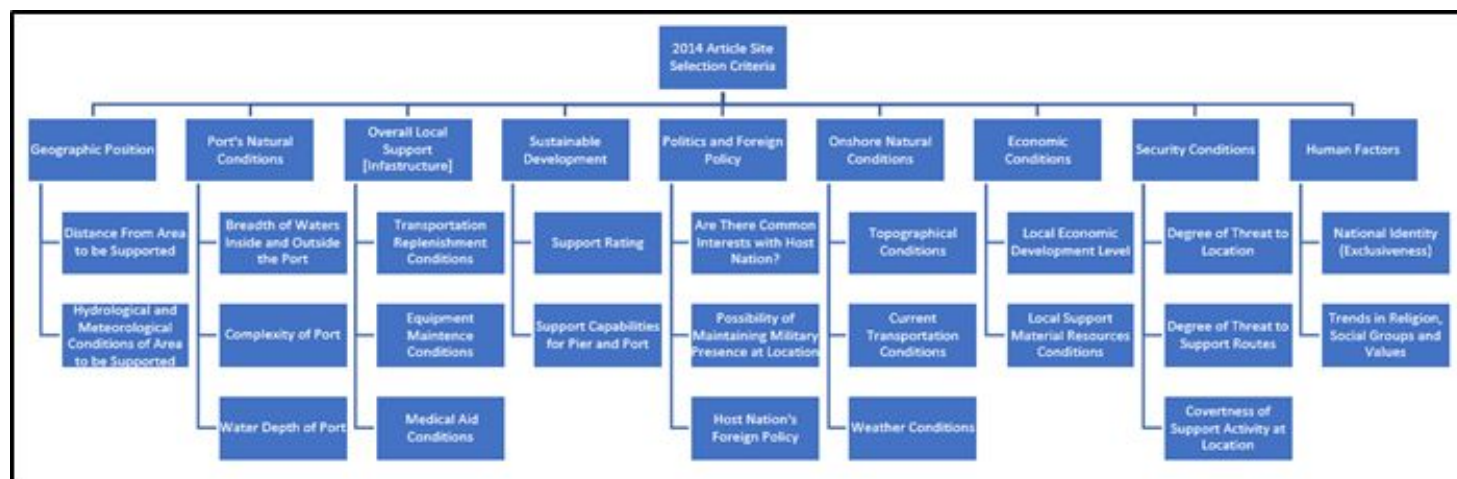
As China's national interests expand outside its national boundaries, the PLA has been increasingly called upon to protect those interests abroad. Hu Jintao's 2004 call for the PLA to shoulder "New Historic Missions" ushered in this new era, but Xi Jinping has taken it to the next level by declaring that China's interests are now global under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the "community for a shared future for mankind." Xi expects the PLA to more fully support this expansion. In his 2017 speech to the 19th Party Congress, Xi called for the PLA to become a "world class military" by 2050 and said that the CCP "must do more to safeguard China's sovereignty, security, and development interests" ([China Daily](#), October 18, 2017). The PRC's 2019 defense white paper explains that the PLA is tasked with "safeguard[ing] China's overseas interests," and explicitly states that the PLA will "[develop] overseas logistical facilities." It also identified some of the PLA's specific overseas missions that these bases will support, including "vessel protection operations, maintain[ing] the security of strategic sea lines of communications (SLOCs), and carr[ying] out overseas evacuation and maritime rights protection operations" ([Xinhua](#), July 24, 2019).

Beyond Asia, it is clear that the PLA's initial area of focus is securing the SLOCs from the Middle East through the Indian Ocean that provide the majority of China's energy imports and maritime commerce ([National Defense University](#), January 22). Thus it is not a surprise that China's first long-term foreign deployment was the Gulf of Aden counter-piracy task force (beginning in 2008) and that its first base was established in Djibouti. Ultimately, China's decisions on the future locations of Chinese military bases abroad will be made by the Chinese leadership—Xi Jinping first and foremost—based on diplomatic opportunity and broader strategic requirements. It is also important to consider that some, if not most, of the PLA's peacetime operational requirements may be fulfilled by dual-use commercial ports. However, PRC researchers have identified a number of complex criteria to consider in selecting overseas bases, as detailed further below.

Future Overseas Military Base Site Selection Considerations

PLA researchers assess potential locations for overseas military bases across a variety of economic, political, cultural, environmental, and physical infrastructure factors. Three recent articles illustrate PLA thinking on the topic: a 2014 article by professors at the PLA Navy's Dalian Naval Academy (*hereafter cited in-text as Dalian Naval Academy, 2014*); a 2017 article by a professor and graduate students at the National University of Defense Technology (NUDT) (*hereafter cited in-text as NUDT, 2017*); and a 2019 article by a professor and graduate students at the PLAN's Naval University of Engineering in Wuhan (*hereafter cited in-text as PLAN University of Engineering, 2019*).^[1] While none of the articles is singularly authoritative, their publication clearly indicates that the topic is no longer taboo—and reaffirms the widely held assumption that the PLA is planning for more overseas bases.

Figure 1: 2014 Article Site Selection Criteria



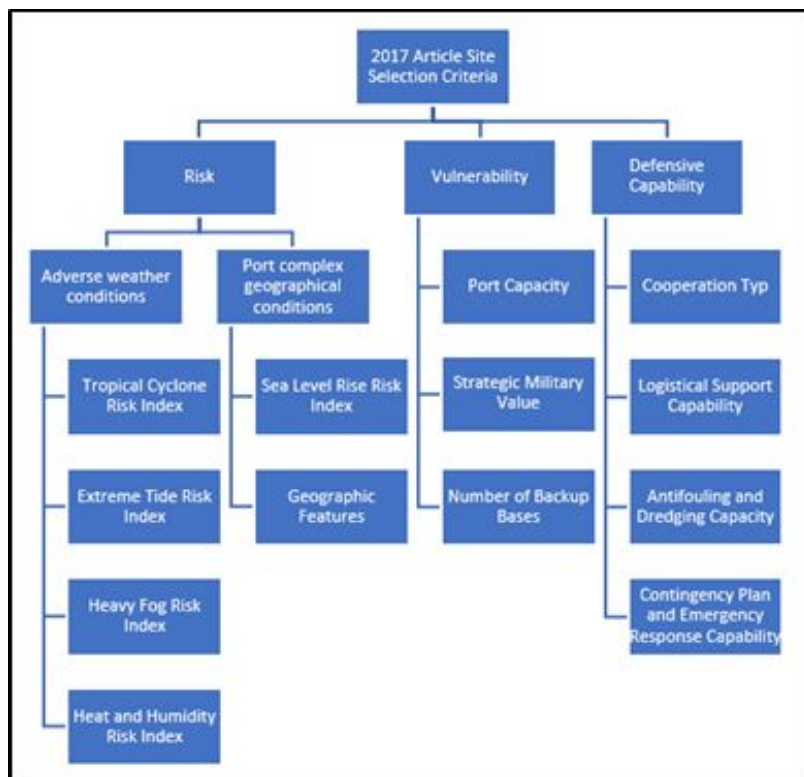
Source: Compiled by the author.

The 2014 article proposed a mixed methods analytic approach for assessing the suitability of potential base locations, incorporating both “objective” quantitative data and “subjective” qualitative data in the form of an experts committee (*Dalian Naval Academy, 2014*). The authors framed overseas bases as necessary for SLOC protection in the face of global instability, and argue that bases will display the PLAN’s strategic position, support distant sea operations, strengthen bilateral relations with the host nation, and influence regional strategic balance. They identify nine categories and 23 factors for consideration, supposedly centered on utility and timeliness for the military (see accompanying Figure 1).

The 2014 authors conducted a case study of an undisclosed location to test their methodology, using a 10-person expert committee and a set of quantitative data that was not clearly delineated. The authors excluded three criteria either because they didn’t impact the scores (port complexity) or because they overlapped with other criteria (host nation foreign policy and level of threat to the location). The unnamed location scored best on whether it would allow a military presence (even though it scored poor on foreign policy), economic development level, and having a low threat to support routes. It would be a logical assumption that Djibouti was the subject of this case study, but this cannot be determined with certainty.

The 2017 article sought to assess environmental risks (mainly climate change) to potential overseas base locations by utilizing a similar mixed methods approach and Bayesian network analysis to create a composite weighted score (*NUDT, 2017*).[2] The article frames overseas military bases as a “bridgehead” (桥头堡, *qiaotoubao*) for China’s opening to the world through the BRI, and asserts that bases can have an “important impact on China’s ability to project power and expand its overseas interests,” with attendant political and diplomatic functions. The researchers assessed 13 factors across three main categories: risk, vulnerability, and defensive capability (see accompanying Figure 2).

Figure 2. 2017 Article Site Selection Criteria



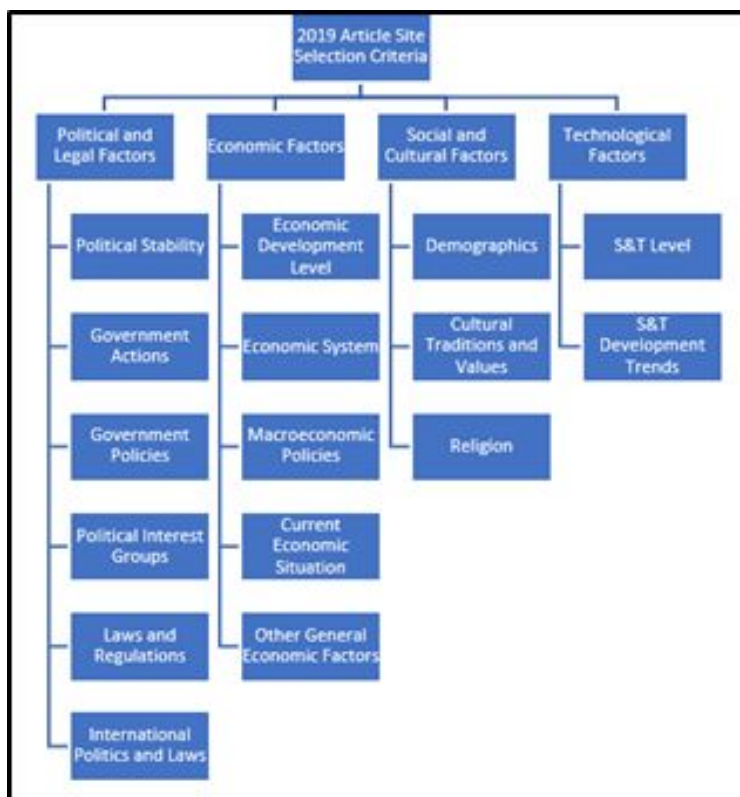
Source: Compiled by the author.

From the perspective of environmental risk, the authors assert that adverse weather is the biggest threat—especially tropical cyclones in the summer months—and they even include consideration of hot weather’s negative impact on troops’ mental well-being. The framework employed quantitative data for most of the criteria, but also used an expert committee to provide a modicum of quantitative assessment on qualitative questions such as strategic military value. While risk factors as a whole weighed heavily in the final evaluation score, the two individual criteria that weighed most heavily—and were thus the most important—were the base’s geographic characteristics (e.g., “high elevation above sea level, flat terrain, good vegetation conditions”) and its strategic military value (e.g., whether it is a strategic strongpoint, normal base, or backup base). Additionally, some criteria may reflect other considerations beyond those mentioned: port capacity is framed as a way to measure economic activity, but could also be used to measure the port’s throughput capacity for military force flow.

The article centered on a case study for an unnamed location, which appeared almost certainly to be Djibouti. This assumption is based on its assertion that the PLAN had a “pressing need” for a base to provide logistics support for the Gulf of Aden escort operations; its explicit claim that the location is near the Gulf of Aden; the time the article was written (late 2016); its use of meteorological data from the Indian government for the Indian Ocean region; and its reference to the base’s value as a “strategic strongpoint.” Assuming that it is indeed Djibouti, this case study thus provides some insights into how at least one group of PLA researchers

assessed China’s first overseas base as a baseline for future locations. The base was assessed to have good geographic conditions, high strategic military value, an average “cooperation type” (likely meaning joint management of the base location between the host nation and visiting nation personnel), and a strong emergency response capability; but a low-to-moderate logistics support capability, low port capacity, and a high risk for sea level rise. This analysis suggests that Djibouti was selected more for the strategic value of its geographic location than for its ability to truly support PLA missions.

Figure 3. 2019 Article Site Selection Criteria



Source: Compiled by the author.

The 2019 article is more explicit about the objectives of China’s growing overseas military presence, linking it with the BRI, the PLA’s “going out” strategy, and the PLAN’s new service strategy of “near seas defense, far seas protection, oceanic presence, and expansion into the two poles” (*PLAN University of Engineering, 2019*). [3] The authors framed bases as providing effective and immediate logistics support for overseas operations, in order to improve the PLAN’s overseas combat capability and support security for overseas interests. They also argued that it is a way to “actively advance” China’s national development in peacetime, and assert that “in the foreseeable future, basing at overseas Chinese bases will also become normalized.”

The 2019 authors proposed a qualitative approach to evaluate potential locations, based on four categories and 16 factors centered around a “PEST” framework: political, economic, social and technological. The 2019 article ran the authors’ framework through two case studies: U.S. basing access in Singapore, and the

Chinese base in Djibouti. For Djibouti's politics, the authors explained that the country has long been politically stable; and that, because it is a poor country that needs the extra revenue, it has domestic laws that allow foreign bases. Economically, its poverty may make procurement difficult (for unstated reasons). Socially, China's foreign aid gives China a good international image that earns the local population's support; this should reduce any negative cultural impacts. Technologically, Djibouti's natural deep-water port should be able to support PLAN vessels as they become larger in size.

Considerations of Logistics Support in Base Location Selection

The presence of Chinese companies at these locations is one factor that is not explicitly considered but appears to be an important implicit consideration. Perhaps surprisingly, their presence is not treated as a one-size-fits-all solution: the 2019 article noted that, although one of the PLA's existing procurement models for replenishment without bases is to leverage Chinese companies overseas, "since their main responsibility is certainly not replenishing the Chinese military overseas, procurement channels are limited" (*PLAN University of Engineering, 2019*). The benefit of their "long-term presence," is that it "may largely mitigate the political impacts of PLA direct purchases of logistic supplies"—thereby suggesting that Chinese companies would simply act as middlemen for replenishment if bases were established. A separate July 2019 article (*discussed below and hereafter cited in-text as Military Transportation University, 2019*) similarly predicted that Chinese companies would play a go-between role to provide supplies to the PLA in wartime. [4]

Another implicit factor, at least for some Chinese analysts, may be a location's ability to host wartime pre-positioned materials (战备物资储备, *zhanbei wuci chubei* -or- 预置储备, *yuzhi chubei*) for the PLA. A July 2019 article argued that bases enable more immediate and reliable support to improve the PLA's distant sea combat capability, and that China will eventually need more bases abroad with pre-positioned material (*Military Transportation University, 2019*). [5] The article presented three options for how to use overseas military bases for this purpose. First, the base can host the material onsite in a storage warehouse. Second, the PLA can cooperate with Chinese companies drawn abroad by the BRI to leverage their local knowledge and connections, such as signing a cooperation agreement with national oil companies to ensure oil in wartime to sustain operations; or allowing "local forces" to provide non-military support like medical services, cleaning, and food. Third, the military can cooperate with the local government by either renting storage space and directly purchasing material as necessary, or even creating a joint reserve.

The article explicitly assumes that Chinese diplomacy will allow the PLA to dictate the size and scope of the in-country storage and to maintain wartime access, thereby relieving the base of space pressure and saving transportation money. This aligns with a growing body of PLA research on both pre-positioned material in general, and especially abroad, that is drawn in part from observing the practices of U.S. forces. [6] Of note, the July 2019 article noted that the United States has materiel for two army divisions in Europe, among others; and that China's base in Djibouti already hosts such pre-positioned material onsite in storage facilities. This suggests that this discussion is very operationally focused toward combat missions, and not for

military operations other than war (MOOTW) such as noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO) (*Military Transportation University, 2019*).

Ignoring Inconvenient Issues and Missing Stakeholders

These articles ignore a number of significant challenges the PLA will face as it tries to build up a series of overseas bases. They do not address the risk that host countries will limit the scope of Chinese operations in wartime. Indeed, the 2017 article posited that one possible model of base access would be that the host nation would control the base in peacetime, whereas the visiting nation (i.e., China) would use the base during a crisis (or presumably wartime) (*NUDT, 2017*). The 2014 and 2019 articles also both considered “values” and culture a positive trait for Chinese engagement, even as the 2019 article raised culturally sensitive matters such as obtaining pork in Muslim countries. The most recent 2019 article doesn’t mention the issue of denials and backtracking by potential host countries—such as Cambodia’s fervent denials that it will host a Chinese naval base ([Reuters](#), July 21, 2019).

These three studies appear to reflect distinct and separate research efforts among different PLA institutions. In one sense, this overlap shows that the PLA is clearly interested in the topic, and many organizations are likely responding to a central demand for analysis. In another sense, it reveals the fragmented nature of the PLA system. Despite what outsiders may assume to be a well-coordinated bureaucracy, these studies did not cite each other—despite being conducted over just a few years, and doing extensive literature reviews of their own niche topics.

Lastly, the lack of relevant writings by the PLA Army, Air Force, or Marine Corps suggests that the PLAN has taken the lead so far on overseas basing. Acknowledging this, one PLAAF researcher asserted that “the PLA has not yet established any overseas air transportation support bases (境外航空运输保障基地, *jingwai hangkong yunshu baozhang jidi*) due to geopolitical sensitives and a lack of demand for projection,” and that this is becoming a “bottleneck problem” limiting the PLA’s strategic power projection overseas. [7] This is similar to a complaint in the 2009 book *Strategic Air Force* that “relevant countries and relevant domestic departments are ‘not used’ to the Air Force departing the border, and categorically see it as a threat and provocation.” [8] Yet just as the PLAAF has now fully embraced operations outside Chinese territory, the construction of a bomber-length “civilian” runway next to the PRC’s likely future military base in Cambodia suggests the PLAAF may eventually be based, or at least have a regular presence, outside the country as well ([NYT](#), December 22, 2019).

Conclusion

The growing body of PLA literature on overseas basing presents an opportunity to better understand PRC planning for overseas operations and long-term military presence outside China’s borders. In one sense, the ultimate location of future Chinese bases is simply dependent on other countries’ political will to host Chinese forces. However, where the PRC decides to pursue bases will be a more complicated calculus dependent on

a number of factors: where the PLA wants to base itself, where Beijing thinks its forces will be welcomed, and where countries perhaps feel they have little recourse to reject a Chinese military presence. [9] Understanding how the PLA decides upon its desired base locations will be one component of limiting the expansion of the Chinese military abroad.

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Notes

[1] In order, see: Ma Liang [马良], Zhang Lin [张林] and Liu Xinke [刘新科], “Overseas Security Method of Assessing Point Location Based on Rough and Evidence Reasons. Bases” [“基于粗集和证据推理的海外基地保障点选址评估”], *Command Control & Simulation* [指挥控制与仿真] 36:1, February 2014, pp. 88-93; Jiang Deliang [姜德良], Zhang Ren [张韧] and Ge Shanshan [葛珊珊], “Natural Risk Scenario Simulation Assessment of Overseas Support Bases Based on Uncertain Knowledge” [“知识不确定条件下的海外保障基地 自然风险情景模拟评估”], *Marine Science Bulletin* [海洋通报] 36:5, October 2017, pp. 504-511, 537; Luo Zhaohui [罗朝晖], Wan Jie [万捷] and Li Hongyang [李弘扬], “Research on Factors in Site Selection of Overseas Military Base of Chinese Navy” [“我国海军海外基地选址因素研究”], *Logistics Technology* [物流技术], 2019, pp. 141-144.

[2] The authors have applied a similar framework to assess the risk of climate change on China’s domestic satellite launch sites. See: Song Chenyang [宋晨阳], Zhang Ren [张韧], and Xu Zeshui [徐泽水], “Safety Risk Analysis and Assessment of Climate Change on Satellite Bases” [“气候变化对中国卫星发射基地安全的影响与风险评估”], *Military Operations Research and Systems Engineering* [军事运筹与系统工程], April 2018.

[3] For more on this, see: Ryan Martinson, “The Role of the Arctic in Chinese Naval Strategy,” *China Brief*, December 20, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-role-of-the-arctic-in-chinese-naval-strategy/>.

[4] Li Shougeng [李守耕], Chen Tieqi [陈铁祺], Wang Feng [王丰], “On Preset Reserve Mode for Combat Readiness Material” [“战备物资预置储备模式研究”], *Journal of Military Transportation University* [军事交通学院学报], July 2019, pp. 57-60, 70.

[5] Also called “物资储备” or “预置预储” or “战储” (or in this case “海外战储”).

[6] For other PLA writings on overseas basing and pre-positioned material, see: Jiang Deliang [姜德良], Zhang Ren [张韧] and Ge Shanshan [葛珊珊], “Natural Risk Scenario Simulation Assessment of Overseas Support Bases Based on Uncertain Knowledge” [“知识不确定条件下的海外保障基地 自然风险情景模拟评估”], *Marine Science Bulletin* [海洋通报] 36:5, October 2017, pp. 504-511, 537; Liang Feng [梁峰], Gan Ming [甘明], and Wang Feng [王丰], “Overseas War Readiness Materials Reserve Mode in US Army and Enlightenment” [“美军海外战备物资储备模式及启示”], *Journal of Military Transportation University* [军事交通学院学报], November 2017; Wu Jiayi [吴佳熹] and Liu Shenghan [刘晟含], “A Study on the Stockpiling Layout of War Reserve Materiel Based on Military-Civilian Integration” [“军民融合战备物资储备布局研究”], *National Defense* [国防], January 2018; Liang Feng [梁峰], Li Zhengshuo [李政硕], Zong Fuxing [宗福兴], Yu Li [于力], and Huang Binghao [黄炳豪], “Construction of Maritime Preposition Capability of Our Army” [“关于我军海上预置能力建设的思考”], *Journal of Military Transportation University* [军事交通学院学报], June 2018; Wang Jun [汪军] and Luo Chuancai [罗传才], “Some Thoughts on How to Accelerate the Building of a Powerful Modernized Logistics System” [“关于加快建设强大的现代化后勤的思考”], *National Defense* [国防], July 2018; Wang Feng [王丰], Jiang Ning [蒋宁], Xiong Zhenwei [熊振伟] and Huang Binghao [黄炳豪], “The Development Direction of Military Logistics in the New Period” [“新时期军事物流的

发展方向”, *Packaging Engineering* [包装工程], July 2018; Zhou Fujiang [周辅疆], Luo Congwen [罗从文], Liu Yuan [刘源], “Construction of Handling Support Team in Civilian Ports for Maritime Joint Projection” [“海上联合投送民用港口装卸保障队伍建设”], *Journal of Military Transportation University* [军事交通学院学报], April 2019; Wang Guo [王果], Wang Zhibin [王志斌], Liu Jingqiao [刘靖桥], Weng Huanying [翁欢英], “Research of Amphibious Logistics Service” [“两栖登陆作战后勤保障研究”], *Ship & Boat* [船舶], April 2019. For lessons learned from the U.S. military, see: Tan Xiaolong [谭小龙] and Yuan Jinguo [袁金国], “Grasp several points in the reform of military organization” [“把握军队组织编制改革中的几个要点”], *National Defense* [国防], January 2010; Wang Hailan [王海兰] and Zhao Dazhi [赵道致], “Construction of War Preparation Reserve System Based on System Thinking” [“用系统思维理论构建战备物资预置预储体系”], *Chinese Journal of Systems Science* [系统科学学报], January 2016; Liang Feng [梁峰], Gan Ming [甘明], and Wang Feng [王丰], “Overseas War Readiness Materials Reserve Mode in US Army and Enlightenment” [“美军海外战备物资储备模式及启示”], *Journal of Military Transportation University* [军事交通学院学报], November 2017. For PLA writings on related legislation, see: Xiong Zhenwei [熊振伟] and Wang Feng [王丰], “Construction of foreign war preparation material reserve regulations and the enlightenment to our Army legislation” [“国外战储法规建设及启示”], *National Defense Science & Technology* [国防科技], March 2017; Xiong Zhenwei [熊振伟] and Wang Feng [王丰], “Thoughts on Strengthening Construction of War Readiness Reserve Legislation Under New Situation” [“新形势下加强战备物资储备法规建设的思考”], *Journal of Military Transportation University* [军事交通学院学报], July 2017.

[7] Chen Yu [陈瑜], Li Jiansi [李剑肆] and ZENG Yu [曾宇], “Research on Development of Overseas Strategic Airlift Capability” [“境外空中战略投送能力建设研究”], *Journal of Military Transportation* [军事交通学院学报] 21:2, February 2019, pp. 5-8, 40.

[8] Zhu Hui [朱晖], ed., *Strategic Air Force* [战略空军论] (Beijing, China: Lantian Publishing House [蓝天出版社], 2009), quoted in Mark Cozad and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *People's Liberation Army Air Force Operations over Water: Maintaining Relevance in China's Changing Security Environment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), p. 7.

[9] See also: Chris Horton, “The Costs of China’s Belt and Road Expansion,” *The Atlantic*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/01/china-belt-road-expansion-risks/604342/>.
