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IN THIS ISSUE:

Directions Forward for Chinese Rare Earths After the Two Sessions

By Elizabeth Chen.....pp. 1-5

China's NPC and CPPCC: Xi Defies the West by Boosting Technological Self-Sufficiency And Crushing Hong Kong's Freedoms

By Willy Wo-Lap Lam.....pp. 6-11

A New Step Forward in PLA Professionalization

By Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders.....pp. 12-20

China's Xinjiang Propaganda and United Front Work in Turkey: Part Two

By Ondřej Klimeš.....pp. 21-26

Is the Growth of Sino-Nepal Relations Reducing Nepal's Autonomy?

By Dhanwati Yadav.....pp. 27-32

Directions Forward for Chinese Rare Earths After the Two Sessions

By Elizabeth Chen

Following heightened U.S.-China tensions last year, the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) issued the "Draft Regulations on Rare Earth Management" (稀土管理条例(征求意见稿), *xitu guanli tiaolie (zhengqiu yijian gao)*) on January 15. The new regulations propose stricter management of China's rare earths industry, including quota management for mining, smelting and separation; stricter enforcement of environmental protection, new project investment approval procedures; and import and export management, describing rare earths as being "of irreplaceable significance for the transformation of traditional industries...and the advancement of national defense science and technology industries" ([Xinhua](#), January 22). Shortly after the public comment period for the Regulations ended, MIIT issued its first batch of total control indexes for rare earths in 2021, mandating an 84,000 ton quota for mining, which marked a 27 percent increase from 2020 ([MIIT](#), February 19). In 2020, China's rare earth exports hit a five-year low amid the ongoing pandemic and increased demand from domestic industries.



Image: A rare earths mine in Baiyunebo, Inner Mongolia, on July 16, 2011 (Image source: [Global Times](#)).

Analysts were quick to note that whereas previous regulations were mostly focused on production, the new regulations seek to centralize Beijing’s control over the “entire industrial chain,” from production and refining to product transport and export. The regulation establishes a tracking system for rare earth products and states that companies shall abide by national laws and regulations for foreign trade, including a new national Export Control Law aimed at regulating the export of sensitive materials and technologies that went into effect on December 1, 2020 ([Nikkei Asia](#), January 16; [China Briefing](#), February 25).

Background

Rare earths, which usually refer to a basket of 17 minerals that are vital for high-tech manufacturing, have applications in emerging technologies such as high-powered magnets used in wind turbines, drones, electric vehicles (EVs), and energy-efficient batteries. They are also critical to the defense industry’s manufacturing of hypersonic aircraft, missiles, and radiation-hardened electronics. Heavy rare earths, defined as having a comparatively higher atomic weight, occur less commonly in nature—in particular dysprosium, yttrium and terbium face low supply even as they become increasingly important in the development of strategic technologies such as laser, satellite communications, and military control systems. China today accounts for more than 60 percent of global rare earth production, following more than a decade of state investment in this strategic sector ([China Brief](#), October 8, 2010). In addition to investing heavily in mine production around the world, China also dominates the rare earth refining process, with one Japanese analyst estimating that no currently operating rare earths processing facility does not involve Chinese investment of some kind ([Nikkei Asia](#), January 16). In 2019, China produced roughly 85 percent of the world’s rare earth oxides and

approximately 90 percent of all rare earth metals, alloys, and permanent magnets ([China Power](#), September 24, 2020). But China's position in the rare earths supply chain is neither absolute nor secure. Although China has the largest known deposits of rare earths, Brazil, Vietnam, and Russia also possess significant untapped resources. Both the United States and Australia have ramped up their production of rare earths since 2010, although the U.S. still exports raw materials to China for processing after closing down its last domestic rare earths processing facility in 2002 ([Defense News](#), November 12, 2019). Myanmar and Madagascar have also started to produce significant amounts of rare earths, and China relied on Myanmar for more than half its heavy rare earth concentrates in 2020 ([Reuters](#), February 10).

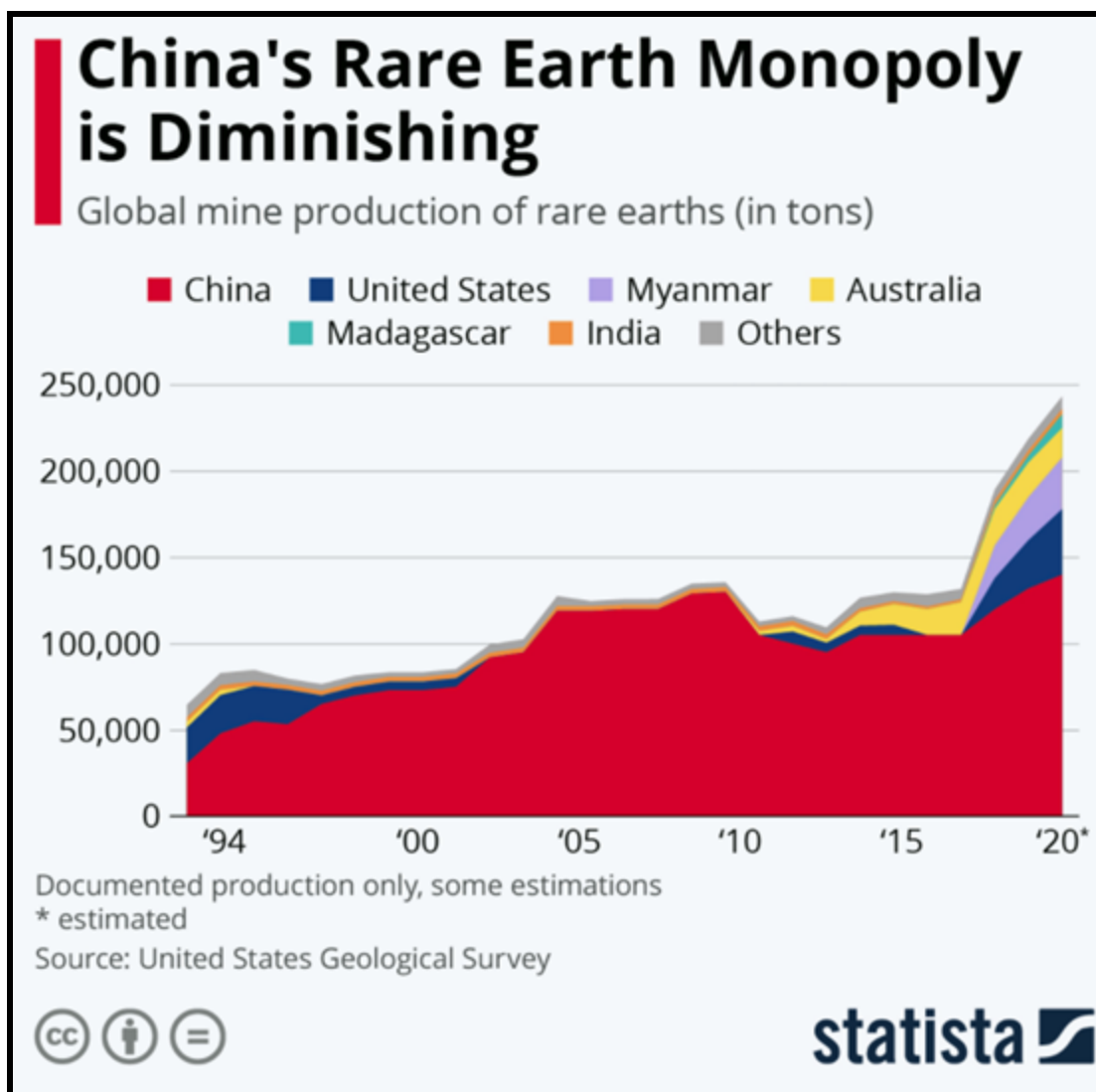


Image: The chart, published on February 2, 2021, shows global rare earth production since 1994. Note that while China only produced around two-thirds of global rare earths supply in 2020, it has a greater presence in the refining sector Image source: [Statista](#)).

As China has sought to develop its high-tech economy, its consumption of rare earths has outpaced the scale of production. Following a crackdown on illegal mining in 2018, China's domestic rare earth output declined and the state became a net importer of rare earths for the first time since 1985 ([Caixin](#), March 16, 2019). In a recent press briefing, Xiao Yaqing, Minister of MIIT, noted that local populations have pushed back strongly against environmental problems associated with rare earth mining and production.[1] Xiao also commented the rare earth industry was oversaturated and faced low resource utilization, leading to systemic underpricing and an overabundance of "low-level rare earth products," which in the long-run "is not helpful for innovation and technological progress" ([State Council](#), March 1).

International Implications

China has proven willing to leverage its control over rare earths in international diplomacy in the past. In 2010, China temporarily cut off rare earth exports to Japan following a diplomatic spat over the contested Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which are claimed by Beijing but administered by Japan. In 2019 and 2020, China threatened to suspend rare earth exports to the U.S. in response to trade tensions and U.S. arms shipments to Taiwan, respectively ([Caixin](#), May 30, 2019; [Global Times](#), October 26, 2020).

As tensions with China have increased, countries such as the U.S., Australia and Japan have begun working on initiatives to create an alternate supply chain for rare earths. Last September, then-U.S. President Trump signed an executive order declaring a national emergency in the mining industry that aimed to reduce the country's dependence on China. According to the order, the U.S. imports 80 percent of its rare earth elements directly from China, with portions of the remainder being indirectly sourced from China through other countries ([Defense News](#), October 1, 2020). In late February, President Biden signed an executive order to review and strengthen the resiliency of America's supply chains, including "critical minerals and other identified strategic materials, including rare earths" ([White House](#), February 24). As part of ongoing efforts to "decouple" the U.S.'s rare earth supply from China, the U.S. Department of Defense has given funding to the Australian Lynas Corporation and the Texas-based Blue Line Corporation to begin work on a heavy rare earth separation facility last July and a light rare earth processing facility in February ([Mining.com](#), July 27, 2020; [Defense.gov \(U.S.\)](#), February 1). The European Union has also sought to diversify its rare earths supply, funding investments valued at \$12 billion into rare earth and other green energy-related projects in 2020 ([Mining.com](#), March 10).

Conclusion

China's prioritization of emerging technologies to boost its economic development was most recently highlighted with the passing of the 14th Five Year Plan (FYP) (2021-2025) at the annual session of the National People's Congress (NPC) on March 11 ([Xinhua](#), March 14). Many of these technologies, in turn, are dependent on the use of rare earths. Analysts have also highlighted the possible vulnerabilities of lithium and cobalt (critical for the production of energy-efficient batteries used in green technologies and consumer

electronics) supply chains as well ([SupChina](#), January 19). Press releases and readouts from the NPC emphasized China's need for "self-reliance and self-strength" (自立自强, *zili ziqiang*), and Minister Xiao mentioned in passing that China had begun "mapping key industrial chains to identify our gaps and also our weaknesses and shortcomings," echoing Biden's similar prescription to review supply chains in the U.S. ([State Council](#), March 1).

The Chinese state has shown itself to be chiefly concerned with its ability to meet domestic demand for renewable and defense technology needs—and a bit defensive in the face of repeated Western concerns about the threat of Chinese rare earth export controls. In response to media reports that the U.S., Australia, India and Japan recently discussed securing the rare earths supply chain at a recent Quad meeting, the Chinese tabloid *Global Times* wrote, "China has no intention to use rare earths as a countermeasure against any country, which would only accelerate development of rare earths in other markets" ([Global Times](#), March 12). With an eye towards securing sustainable growth and development in the long term, the Chinese government has recently cracked down on mining sector excesses that have hurt output. While it is likely that the importance of rare earths will continue to loom large in China's strategic and trade relationships with the rest of the world, the continuing reform of its domestic rare earths mining and production capabilities should also not be overlooked.

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Notes

[1] For more discussion on the toxic environmental impact of China's rare earths production and refining, see: Michael Standaert, "China Wrestles with the Toxic Aftermath of Rare Earth Mining," *Yale Environment 360*, July 2, 2019, <https://e360.yale.edu/features/china-wrestles-with-the-toxic-aftermath-of-rare-earth-mining>

China's NPC and CPPCC: Xi Defies the West by Boosting Technological Self-Sufficiency And Crushing Hong Kong's Freedoms

By Willy Wo-Lap Lam

Introduction

President Xi Jinping has boosted China's ability to defy foreign threats by promoting technological self-sufficiency and tightening freedoms previously granted to Hong Kong. Projections of major domestic and diplomatic initiatives up to the year 2035 were made in early March during the annual sessions of China's legislature, the National People's Congress (NPC), and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a top advisory body. Taking advantage of the fact that China was the world's only major country to have achieved positive growth last year during the pandemic, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has stoked the flames of nationalism and augmented the authority of Xi, who is also CCP General Secretary and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), by releasing upbeat messages on economic and foreign-policy issues.

In his annual Government Work Report (GWR) (政府工作报告, *zhengfu gongzuo baogao*) to the NPC, delivered on March 5, Premier Li Keqiang signaled his confidence over the Chinese economy's future by setting a minimum benchmark of 6 percent Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth this year. Li also vowed to add 11 million new urban jobs, cutting the urban unemployment rate to 5.5 percent. And despite the fact that economic expansion in China is now mostly predicated upon government investments, Li indicated that the budget deficit would be cut from 3.6 percent of GDP in 2020 to 3.2 percent this year. Li also unveiled the "14th Five Year Plan (FYP) (2021 to 2025) and the Long-range Objectives Through 2035" (国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和2035年远景目标纲要, *guomin jingji he shehui fazhan di shisi ge wunian guihua he 2035 nian yuanjing mubiao gangyao*). China expects to double its 2020 GDP by 2035. This would require an annual GDP expansion rate of between 4.7 percent to 5 percent over the next 15 years. The economy, which is recovering from the pandemic at a relatively fast rate, is expected to follow a path of "innovation-driven development so as to speed up the realization of a modern production system" (Gov.cn, March 5). Li, who is No. 2 in the CCP hierarchy, attributed China's achievements to closely abiding by "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (China News Service, March 5; Global Times, March 5).



Image: Leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in order: Wang Qishan, Zhao Leji, Wang Yang, Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, Wang Huning, and Han Zheng attend the opening meeting of the fourth session of the 13th NPC on March 5, 2021. Li Zhanshu presided over the meeting. (Image Source: Xinhua/Li Xueren).

Seeking Technological Self-Sufficiency

A major thrust of the GWR is what President Xi calls “high-quality growth,” which prioritizes technological self-sufficiency “during an uncertain international situation.” The Chinese leadership is still smarting from decisions taken by both the previous and current U.S. administrations to drastically curtail Chinese technology firms’ ability to procure core components such as micro-chips from the U.S. and its allies. Most recently, the Joseph Biden administration has created a new initiative to establish a common supply-chain strategy with allies—including major EU countries, Japan, Taiwan, India and Australia—with the intention of reining in the advance of Chinese technology ([Asia.Nikkei](https://asia.nikkei.com), February 24).

China’s spending on scientific research and development is targeted to grow at 7 percent annually. “Basic research is the wellspring of scientific and technological innovation,” Li said in the GWR. “So we will ensure the stable functioning of funding mechanisms for basic research and boost spending in this area by a considerable sum.” “We will enhance the capacity of enterprises to make technological innovation, unlock the creativity of talent, and improve the systems and mechanisms for making scientific and technological innovation,” the premier added. Senior CPPCC member and former Minister of Industry and Information Technology Miao Wei added context, noting that China needed 30 years to become a “strong industrialized country.” Miao said that even though China’s manufacturing base was huge, it lagged behind advanced

countries in areas including “innovative ability and innovative standards as well as product quality” ([China News Service](#), March 7).

According to a draft version of the 14th FYP, seven technology areas including AI; quantum computing; integrated circuits; brain sciences; biotech; health care and deep earth, sea, space and polar explorations will get priority funding for research and development. Li and other top leaders have reiterated that technological self-sufficiency is at the core of China’s strategy to “develop new advantages” in the face of increased hostility and pressures to decouple from major Western countries ([SCMP](#), March 6; [HK01.com](#), March 5). Breakthroughs in many of the aforementioned areas ranging from AI and integrated circuits to space exploration will also have far-reaching consequences for military modernization ([Sohu.com](#), December 31, 2019).

Foreign and Military Policies

As in previous years, the main themes of the NPC were internal economic and social developments. However, economic concerns and foreign and defense policies have become increasingly intertwined under Xi. In his GWR, Li said that China was anxious to enhance multilateral, bilateral and regional economic cooperation with other nations and would continue to uphold the multilateral international trade regime. “China stands ready to work with other countries to achieve mutual benefits on the basis of greater mutual opening,” Li said, making no explicit reference to the United States. However, other top cadres emphasized that China was not afraid of taking on the U.S. or a U.S.-led coalition. In an NPC-sponsored press briefing, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that Beijing would stick to “Xi Jinping Thought on Foreign Affairs” in dealing with rival countries. Wang, who is also State Councilor, warned the U.S. not to intervene with Beijing’s policies on Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan, criticizing Washington for “wilfully interfering in other countries’ internal affairs in the name of democracy and human rights.” American policies, Wang added, were responsible for creating “lots of trouble in the world and, in some cases, turbulence and conflict” ([Xinhua](#), March 7; [Straits Times](#), March 7).

Premier Li took an aggressive stance on the need for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to seek “new, major achievements.” The PLA’s budget this year is projected at 1.36 trillion yuan (\$206.16 billion), a 6.8 percent increase over last year. While this was only slightly more than the similar increase of 6.6 percent in 2020, it is well known that the published budget does not cover costs for the development of new weapons ([Deutsche Welle Chinese](#), March 5). Li stressed that army building must follow “Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Army.” Pointing out that the military in the new century must abide by a “CMC chairman responsibility system,” Li underscored the imperative of “building up the army through [stressing] politics, and strengthening the forces through reform, technology and talents.” “We must comprehensively strengthen training and preparation for warfare,” Li added. “We must coordinate the strategic ability to [handle] risks to [national] safety in all directions and all arenas” ([China News Service](#), March 5). Li was repeating recent talking points

made by Xi. For example, the CMC chairman indicated in a speech to military officers in January that the PLA must “boost its ability to fight and to win wars” ([Xinhua](#), January 4).



Premier Li Keqiang gave his annual Government Work Report on March 5 at the 13th National People's Congress (Image source: [Gov.cn](#)).

New Harsh Policies Toward Hong Kong

The NPC and CPPCC sessions also struck a pose of defiance amid Western countries' mounting criticisms of Beijing's human rights violations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and the Hong Kong Special Administration Region (HKSAR). One of the highlights of the NPC was the introduction of a new electoral system for picking the SAR's Chief Executive (CE) and members of its Legislative Council (LegCo). The rationale for the changes comes from Xi's earlier instructions that only bona fide “patriots” could lead Hong Kong's executive, legislative and judicial departments. As a result, the “Decision to Improve the Hong Kong Electoral System” (全国人民代表大会关于完善香港特别行政区选举制度的决定, *quanguo renmin daibiao dahui guanyu wanshan xianggang tebie xingzhengqu xuanju zhidu de jue ding*), which was passed on March 11, noted that “existing loopholes and deficiencies” must be tackled to prevent “anti-China, destabilizing elements” – who often act in collusion with the West – from gaining seats in the HKSAR's organs of power ([Global Times](#), March 5; [Hong Kong Free Press](#), March 5).

Take, for example, the Hong Kong Electoral Committee which selects the CE – who is then appointed by the State Council or central government. The 1,200-member Electoral Committee used to include a small percentage of District Councilors, most of whom were directly elected by universal suffrage. Pro-democratic politicians overwhelmingly dominated the last round of direct elections for District Councilors in 2019. The 117

seats in the Electoral Committee previously reserved for District Councilors will now be scrapped and given to CPPCC members handpicked by Beijing. The Electoral Committee will also be expanded to 1,500, with the goal that more “patriots”—including mainlanders who migrated to Hong Kong after 1997—will be given the chance to select the CE. As NPC Vice-Chairman Wang Chen noted, the electoral system in the SAR must “fully reflect the political principles and criteria of Hong Kong people administering Hong Kong, with patriots as the main body” ([Xinhua](#), March 5; [NPC.gov.cn](#), March 5).

LegCo membership will be expanded from 70 to 90. However, the proportion of legislators to be returned by one-person-one-vote “geographical constituencies” will be diminished. More seats will be given to Hong Kong-based NPC and CPPCC members as well as CCP-favored representatives of business and professional bodies. At least one-third of the LegCo seats may be reserved for members of the Electoral Committee selecting the CE. Equally important is that a Candidate Qualification Review Committee of the HKSAR will be set up. Largely consisting of Electoral Committee members as well as deputies to the NPC and the CPPCC, this vetting organization will ensure that politicians and activists who want to run for the CE as well as members of LegCo and the Election Committee itself must be “patriotic” citizens, who are expected to profess allegiance to the central and HKSAR governments and who will not run afoul of the National Security Law for the SAR introduced last year ([Ming Pao](#), March 12; [Xinhua](#), March 11).

Reactions from Western countries to Beijing’s apparent attempt to undermine the “One Country, Two System” formula for running the HKSAR were swift and condemnatory. U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said the move was “a direct attack on Hong Kong’s autonomy, Hong Kong’s freedoms and the democratic processes.” Price added that Washington was working with allies “galvanizing collective action” against alleged Chinese human rights abuses in Xinjiang and “repression” in Hong Kong. Similar statements were made by the U.K. and EU authorities ([Takungpao.com](#), March 7; [Rthk.hk](#), March 6). Lord Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong, said the CCP had “taken the biggest step so far to obliterate Hong Kong’s freedoms and aspirations for greater democracy under the rule of law” ([Radio French International](#), March 6).

Conclusion: Xi’s Status Has Been Enhanced by the NPC and the CPPCC

At a recent Politburo speech devoted to laying the foundation for the party’s upcoming centenary celebrations in July, Xi said, “while we must be full of confidence, we must at the same time be mindful of dangers in the midst of stability” ([Ming Pao](#), January 8). In a January talk at the Central Party School, Xi noted that while China and the world were facing turbulent times, “time and momentum are on our side.” “The opportunities and challenges are unprecedentedly large, yet on the whole the opportunities are greater than the challenges,” he added ([Xinhua](#), January 11). Li’s NPC report has fully reflected the priorities of Xi, in particular his call for all Chinese to work with dedication and patriotism to deflect the challenges from the West.

While the annual NPC and CPPCC sessions are usually dominated by leaders such as the premier and the chairmen of the legislature and consultative conference, respectively Li Keqiang, Li Zhanshu and Wang Yang, it is evident that the supreme leader Xi has plotted the country's new directions until 2035. In the reports tabled at the two sessions as well as in publicized discussions among NPC and CPPCC delegates, Xi's instructions on various vital issues are billed as providing valuable guidance to the party, government and military. The media has gone into overdrive eulogizing "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." The CCP General Secretary is credited to have come up with "Xi Jinping Thought on the Economy," "Xi Jinping Thought on Foreign Affairs," "Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Army," and even more dicta on subjects including party construction, social construction, and ecological civilization ([Ming Pao](#), November 18, 2020). Given the increasingly well-supported assumption that the 68-year-old Xi wants to serve beyond the customary tenure of ten years, this year's NPC and CPPCC have laid a solid foundation for the Chinese president to retain power until the 22nd Party Congress in 2032 and beyond.

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A New Step Forward in PLA Professionalization

By Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders

Introduction

A linchpin of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s transformation into a "world-class military" is whether it can recruit, cultivate, and retain talent, especially among the officer corps tasked with planning and conducting future wars. Uneven progress over the past few decades has meant that deeper reforms to the officer system are necessary under the leadership of Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman Xi Jinping (习近平). New regulations announced in January 2021 suggest a commitment to clarifying hierarchical relationships between officers, improving the officer management system, incentivizing high performers, and recruiting and retaining officers with the right skills. Nonetheless, several challenges and complications remain.



Image: People's Liberation Army officers march in a parade to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 2019 (Image source: [Xinhua](#)).

Background

The new regulations are the latest step in a long but uneven path towards professionalization. The process began in the 1950s under then-Defense Minister Peng Dehuai (彭德怀) but was suspended just prior to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which the PLA focused more on political indoctrination than developing professional skills, and even abandoned formal ranks for a time. Officer ranks were not restored

until the issuance of the *Active Duty Officer Law* in 1988 ([Xinhua](#), May 12, 2014), itself part of a larger effort under then-paramount leader Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) to professionalize the personnel system through formal rules and policies. Under the leadership of former CMC chairmen Jiang Zemin (江泽民)(1989-2004) and Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) (2004-2012), the PLA made further changes to recruitment and retention policies, military training and education, pay and welfare, and related areas, to promote the army's evolving focus on fighting and winning "high-tech local wars." (高技术局部战争, *gaojishu jubu zhanzheng*)[1]

Those earlier steps were apparently unsatisfactory. PLA commentary over the last decade has frequently criticized officers as mentally and professionally ill-equipped to handle the demands of modern war.[2] Moreover, corruption flourished in the PLA during the Hu period, with widespread bribery for promotions and assignments to senior positions.[3] As early as October 2013, the Third Plenum of the 18th Party Committee referenced the need to "build a system of officer professionalization" ([Xinhua](#), November 12, 2013). The CMC endorsed this focus on revising the officer system in the general PLA-wide reform plan issued in November 2015 ([Xinhua](#), November 26, 2015). Those changes are now part of the final phase of regulation and policy reforms, following earlier changes to the command structure, force composition (including culling thousands of non-combat-focused officers from the ranks), and training and education systems.[4] Officer system reforms also followed changes to other parts of the PLA workforce, including conscripts, NCOs, and civilians.[5]

An early clue on how the officer system might evolve came in late 2016, when former CMC Political Work Department director Zhang Yang (张阳) stated that "building a new officer management system based on military rank" is an "inevitable choice...for modern military construction" ([Xinhua](#), December 20, 2016). Since the 2015 reforms prioritized larger structural changes to the PLA, in-depth consideration of officer system reforms did not begin until 2019 ([PLA Daily](#), January 9). On January 1, 2021, the CMC promulgated a series of "one basic and eight supporting" regulations (法规 *fagui*). The former "lays the foundation for the officer system," while the latter detail changes to specific areas such as promotion, appointments, education, assessments, pay, and retirement ([PLA Daily](#), January 9). Beijing has not released the full text of the new regulations but remarks by a PLA spokesman and commentary have yielded some potential insights.



Image: The promotion of seven military officers to the rank of general in December 2019. (Image source: [Xinhua](#))

Moving Towards a “Rank-Centric” System

The major change involves moving to an officer hierarchy centered primarily on rank rather than grade. Understanding this change requires a short primer on the hierarchy of PLA officers. In the Chinese system, PLA officers possess both one of 10 ranks (军衔 *jūnxián*) and one of 15 grades based on position (职务等级 *zhíwù děngjí*) (see table for details).^[6] An officer's grade was more important than rank as a determinant of his or her authority, as well as status, pay, and benefits. The grade-centric system was based on PLA ground force structure, with every PLA organization having a grade corresponding to its position in the organizational hierarchy, and officers in turn having a grade based on their positions in their organization. Because of the lack of a commensurate number of ranks and grades and misaligned promotion cycles—officers typically receive a rank promotion every four years and a grade promotion every three years—officers at a given grade might have different ranks and vice versa. This led to confusing situations in which lower-ranked officers with high grades sometimes effectively outranked higher-ranked officers with low grades.

Table: PLA's 15-grade and 10-rank Structure, 1988-

Grade	Primary Rank	Secondary Rank
CMC Chairman (军委主席 <i>junwei zhuxi</i>) Vice Chairmen (军委副主席 <i>junwei fu zhuxi</i>)	N/A GEN (上将 <i>shangjiang</i>)	N/A
CMC Member (军委委员 <i>junwei weiyuan</i>)	GEN (上将 <i>shangjiang</i>)	
TC Leader (正战区职 <i>zheng zhan quzhi</i>) Former MR Leader (正大军区职 <i>zhengda jun quzhi</i>)	GEN (上将 <i>shangjiang</i>)	LTG (中将 <i>zhongjiang</i>)
TC Deputy Leader (副战区职 <i>fu zhanqu zhi</i>) Former MR Deputy Leader (副大军区职 <i>fuda jun quzhi</i>)	LTG (中将 <i>zhongjiang</i>)	MG (少将 <i>shaogjiang</i>)
Corps Leader (正军职 <i>zheng jun zhi</i>)	MG (少将 <i>shaogjiang</i>)	LTG (中将 <i>zhongjiang</i>)
Corps Deputy Leader (副军职 <i>fu jun zhi</i>)	MG (少将 <i>shaogjiang</i>)	SCOL (大校 <i>daxiao</i>)
Division Leader (正师职 <i>zheng shi zhi</i>)	SCOL (大校 <i>daxiao</i>)	MG (少将 <i>shaogjiang</i>)
Division Deputy Leader (副师职 <i>fu shi zhi</i>) / (Brigade Leader)	COL (上校 <i>shangxiao</i>)	SCOL (大校 <i>daxiao</i>)
Regiment Leader (正团职 <i>zheng tuan zhi</i>) / (Brigade Deputy Leader)	COL (上校 <i>shangxiao</i>)	LTC (中校 <i>zhongxiao</i>)
Regiment Deputy Leader (副团职 <i>fu tuan zhi</i>)	LTC (中校 <i>zhongxiao</i>)	MAJ (少校 <i>shaoxiao</i>)
Battalion Leader (正营职 <i>zheng ying zhi</i>)	MAJ (少校 <i>shaoxiao</i>)	LTC (中校 <i>zhongxiao</i>)
Battalion Deputy Leader (副营职 <i>fu ying zhi</i>)	CPT (上尉 <i>shangwei</i>)	MAJ (少校 <i>shaoxiao</i>)
Company Leader (正连职 <i>zheng lian zhi</i>)	CPT (上尉 <i>shangwei</i>)	1LT (中尉 <i>zhongwei</i>)
Company Deputy Leader (副连职 <i>fu lian zhi</i>)	1LT (中尉 <i>zhongwei</i>)	CPT (上尉 <i>shangwei</i>)
Platoon Leader (排职 <i>pai zhi</i>)	2LT (少尉 <i>shaowei</i>)	1LT (中尉 <i>zhongwei</i>)

Structural reforms pursued under Xi created additional problems for a primarily grade-based officer system. Many organizations changed who they reported to and were reduced in grade to reflect their new responsibilities and position. At the same time, many senior PLA leaders changed assignments but kept their existing grades and ranks (even if their new positions were lower) so that they could serve until their mandatory retirement age based on grade. Compounding the problem, the reforms accelerated and formalized a shift from a four-tiered (corps-division-regiment-battalion) structure to a three-tiered (corps-brigade-battalion) structure that did not mesh with the grade system; for instance, there were now Division Leader grade officers without divisions to command.[7] The PLA could have revised the grade system to match the new structure (potentially unifying grades and ranks for each position in the new hierarchy), but this solution was not implemented because some divisions and regiments still exist.

In this context, the 2021 regulations aimed to create a clearer officer hierarchy centered around military ranks, as foreshadowed by Zhang Yang's 2016 remarks. Now the "basic order in managing authority" will be governed by rank, which will also play a key role in career development, while grade will be confined to an "auxiliary" status ([MND](#), February 1). Chinese commentary argues that this new emphasis will establish clearer relationships between officers—a function necessary during wartime when units may be reassigned and relations between commanders and subordinates realigned ([Sina](#), January 13). This change will also facilitate assignments to new organizations or to joint positions where officers from different services must work together. Non-authoritative sources also suggest better synchronization in promotion cycles. Operating on a parallel promotion schedule would reduce disparities in grade among officers at the same rank ([Sina](#), January 13).[8]

Additional Reforms

Aside from reforming the rank and grade system, the latest regulations aim to improve professionalization in two other ways. First is promoting the standardization and specialization of officer positions. The 2000 update to the *Active Duty Officer Law* divided officers into five types: military affairs, political, logistics, equipment, and technical ([Xinhua](#), May 12, 2014). However, a CMC Political Work Department commentary describes this system as "expansive," with loose boundaries between career fields, and complicated by "inconsistent training, random changes in careers, and disorderly competition" ([Pengpai](#), December 5, 2016).

The 2021 reforms created a new classification system to correct these problems. At the broadest level, the system distinguishes between command and administrative officer positions (指挥管理岗位 *zhìhuī guǎnlǐ gāngwèi*) and technical specialist positions (专业技术岗位 *zhuānyè jìshù gāngwèi*). The new system appears to retain a political (政治 *zhèngzhì*) specialization and to distinguish between operational command (指挥 *zhìhuī*) and staff (参谋 *cānmóu*) positions, with the latter focused on force development. Some command and administrative posts are reserved for officers from specific services and branches, while others are not (i.e., "joint positions" in U.S. terminology). Technical specialists have different recruitment pathways, five distinct areas of specialization, and a distinct four-tiered grade structure ([MND](#), January 28).[9]

The new categorization brings the officer system into better alignment with the PLA's new organizational structure. An aim of the personnel system reform appears to be cultivating officers with specialization in either the operational or administrative chain of command and promoting more consistent training, education, and assessments between officers in similar positions (though it hasn't been clarified whether an officer can move between tracks).[10] The PLA also claimed that a more systematic classification of technical officers would "facilitate the attraction, cultivation, and utilization of talent on a broader base" ([MND](#), January 28).[11]

The second reform strengthens the recruitment and retention of high performers and personnel with sought-after skills and experiences. The PLA has identified a need for further increases in pay and welfare benefits to produce "motivation and vitality" among officers and compete with the private sector for talent

([PLA Daily](#), January 9).[12] Consequently, the new system introduces a 19-tier officer salary and benefits scale loosely linked to rank ([MND](#), January 28). This allows officers to be rewarded for good performance without having to wait until the next promotion cycle. Officers with valuable skills who have reached their promotion ceilings can also still receive pay raises to keep them in the military.

In a further effort to attract a high-quality officer corps, the PLA announced that an officer's initial rank would be influenced by his or her education and experience level. For example, a master's degree holder would enter as a first lieutenant, while a newly minted Ph.D. would enter as a captain. Those with "high-demand" skills, presumably in areas such as cyber and engineering, would be assigned a rank that takes their education and work experience into account ([MND](#), January 28). These changes complement the shift to a "rank-centric" system in which salary and benefits are influenced primarily by rank.

Conclusion: Implications and Challenges

Reforms to the officer system may broadly help to clarify hierarchical relations between officers and attract and manage an officer corps better suited to the demands of future warfare. Some of the reforms may also set the stage for more ambitious changes. For example, standardization of officer categories in a way that reflects the PLA's new organizational structure and more uniform assessment and promotion standards would be a prerequisite for transitioning from the use of local promotion boards, in which patronage networks play a key role, to central promotion boards focused more on merit (albeit with potential for political interference from central leaders);[13] and from an assignment system in which officers spend most their careers in a single location to a rotational system in which they gain experience across a broader range of commands (although some challenges, such as housing issues, could still stand in the way of a quick shift to this system).[14]

The effectiveness of these changes will depend on the PLA's ability to overcome several challenges. First, despite efforts to streamline the officer system, the PLA elected to keep both ranks and grades. Earlier PLA sources described a transition to a system of "one grade to one rank" ([PLA Daily](#), February 16, 2016), yet the more complex system of one grade to multiple ranks (and vice versa) remains in place. If the PLA intends to focus on rank, it will have to implement supporting changes such as formally aligning rank and grade promotion cycles; eliminating the few remaining divisions and regiments (which would be a prerequisite for a reduction in the number of possible grades); speeding up promotions in rank for "fast burners" who have been elevated in grade but not in rank; allowing officers to skip a grade and pegging retirement ages and benefits to rank rather than grade.

A related question for the PLA is defining what purpose grade will serve in a rank-centric system. PLA sources have described grade playing an "auxiliary" role in determining promotions and assignments, without much further elaboration ([MND](#), January 28). One possibility is that an officer's grade will become a

“tie-breaker” in determining seniority between officers at the same rank, much as job billet or service time sometimes influences authority between U.S. officers at the same rank.

Second is how effectively the PLA can manage officer career progression. One problem the PLA continues to face is maintaining an appropriate balance of officers at different career stages: excessively fast promotion of junior officers has thinned expertise at the company level while creating a surplus of senior officers, even after the recent 300,000-person downsizing and earlier reforms that permitted officers to leave active service before reaching the mandatory retirement age. This situation has led the PLA to both slow down promotions at the junior level while reducing mandatory retirement ages for officers above the rank of colonel ([PLA Daily](#), January 9). Yet instituting those changes could come at the expense of enhancing “motivation and vitality” in the officer corps if not well-managed through new incentives and a more effective officer management system: junior officers stuck at lower levels could be tempted to leave while senior officers with useful skills and experience may resent having to retire early.

Third is overcoming external competition for officer candidates with desired skills. Despite advantages such as relative job stability, social status, and various fringe benefits, the PLA still lags far behind the private sector for total compensation in some technical skill sets. For instance, while a new PLA cyber expert may earn total annual compensation of roughly 84,000 RMB (as of 2018),^[15] with a bonus for technical skills, the reported *monthly* starting salary for a cyber expert at Alibaba is more than 50,000 RMB.^[16] These disparities have resulted in concerns about how to both attract and retain talent. In short, the PLA has taken a step forward in professionalizing the officer system but will continue to face hard choices to build an officer corps which can, in Xi Jinping’s words, “fight and win battles.”

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Notes

[1] For useful background, see Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell, and Travis Tanner, *The “People in the PLA”: Recruitment, Training, and Education in the People’s Liberation Army* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2008).

[2] See: Dennis J. Blasko, “The Chinese Military Speaks to Itself, Revealing Doubts,” *War on the Rocks*, February 18, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/02/the-chinese-military-speaks-to-itself-revealing-doubts/>.

[3] For example, CMC vice-chairmen General Guo Boxiong and General Xu Caihou were arrested on corruption charges in 2016 and 2015, respectively, including for taking bribes in exchange for promotions and assignments ([PLA Daily](#), May 27, 2016).

[4] See: Phillip C. Saunders et al., eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019). On changes in military education, see Kenneth Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People’s Liberation Army’s 37 Academic Institutions* (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020).

[5] See: Marcus Clay and Dennis J. Blasko, “People Win Wars: The PLA Enlisted Force, and Other Related Matters,” *War on the Rocks*, July 31, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/people-win-wars-the-pla-enlisted-force-and-other-related-matters/>.

[6] See: Kenneth Allen, “China Announces Reform of Military Ranks,” *China Brief*, January 30, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/china-announces-reform-military-ranks/>. The post-reform system has 15 grades, but it is not clear if it retains these titles.

[7] Because a brigade is smaller than a division but larger than a regiment, it is typically commanded by a deputy-division leader with senior staff at the regiment-leader grade.

[8] It is also worth noting that the PLA decided to keep the field grade rank of “senior colonel/senior captain” despite earlier speculation that this might be replaced by a “brigadier general/rear admiral” general officer rank (otherwise, the PLA’s general officer, field-grade, and company-grade rank structure is identical to the U.S. system).

[9] The five areas are education and teaching, scientific research, engineering and technical, medical and health service, and specialized business positions.

[10] Under the 2015 reforms, the PLA's chain of command was bifurcated into an operational track, running from the CMC's Joint Staff Department to the five theater commands to operational units, and an administrative track from the CMC to service headquarters to units.

[11] Accession to those programs was affected by the 2017 cancellation of the ROTC-like "national defense students program" and subsequent shift to direct recruitment of graduates of civilian institutions. "National Defense Students Enrollment Policy Switches to Embracing More College Graduates," Ministry of National Defense, May 26, 2017, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2017-05/26/content_4781508.htm.

[12] On PLA pay and welfare benefits, see Marcus Clay, *Understanding the "People" of the People's Liberation Army* (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2019).

[13] In the current system, the PLA only uses central promotion boards at the level of corps commander and above. Below that level, promotions are approved by the next-highest party committee. See Peng Wang, "Military Corruption in China: The Role of Guanxi in the Buying and Selling of Military Positions," *The China Quarterly*, No. 228 (2016), 970-991.

[14] The PLA has not announced plans to shift to a rotation system, but there is some evidence of support for such a transformation. For instance, Jin Yanan of the PLA National Defense University has spoken favorably of a U.S.-style system, in which officers rotate frequently between assignments to expand their knowledge base. "Have PLA Active Duty Officers Finally Reached the Road of Professionalization? (解放军现役军官终于也要走职业化道路了?)," *The Observer* (观察者), January 13, 2021, <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/china/2021-01-13/doc-ikftpnrx6433764.shtml>.

[15] Clay, *Understanding the "People" of the People's Liberation Army*, 49.

[16] https://www.glassdoor.com/Monthly-Pay/Alibaba-Group-Cyber-Security-Expert-Beijing-Monthly-Pay-EJI_IE225974.0,13_KO14,35_IL36,43_IM997.htm.

China's Xinjiang Propaganda and United Front Work in Turkey: Part Two

By Ondřej Klimeš

Introduction

The accelerated repression of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities inside and outside of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) since 2016 has highlighted the Chinese state's extreme methods of governance and power projection abroad. The crisis in Xinjiang has become a liability for the People's Republic of China (PRC), tarnishing its national image and triggering increased backlash from the international community and advocacy by the global Uyghur diaspora. In Turkey, China has sought to curb such activity through the securitization of its foreign relations and pandemic diplomacy, while simultaneously employing direct coercive tactics to incapacitate the sizeable Uyghur émigré community—apparently with the tolerance or assistance of local organs (China Brief: [February 26](#); [November 1, 2019](#)). In addition to leveraging the Chinese state's foreign affairs apparatus, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also carries out Xinjiang-related work (涉疆工作, *shejiang gongzuo*) in Turkey, which consists of both propaganda and thought work (思想宣传工作, *sixiang xuanchuan gongzuo*) and united front work (统一战线工作, *tongyi zhanxian gongzuo*). The CCP uses these tools to influence public debate in Turkey and legitimate anti-Uyghur policies in Xinjiang.



Image: The Turkey-China Peaceful Reunification Promotion Association, an organization connected with the CCP's united front work, donated 50,000 masks to the Istanbul city government on July 29. The donation was heavily publicized via both Chinese and Turkish media outlets (Image source: [CCPPNR](#)).

Coopting the Xinjiang Diaspora

Turkish messaging on Xinjiang is disseminated by both foreign affairs and propaganda organs via the websites of the Ankara embassy and the Istanbul consulate; China Radio International; and the *Xinjiang.cn* website, which is produced by the China International Communication Center (五洲传播中心, *wuzhou chuanbo zhongxin*). Through these channels, Xinjiang-related themes often appear alongside content designed to further related political objectives such as alleged benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); common interests in a multilateral system of international relations; and shared battle against the Covid-19 pandemic.

The CCP's united front work—which can be broadly described as “the process of building a ‘united front’ coalition around the CCP in order to serve the Party’s objectives, subordinating targeted groups both domestically and abroad” ([China Brief](#), May 9, 2019)—specifically targets Turkey’s Uyghur community. For example, Sabir Boghda, a PRC-born chairman of the Uyghur Industrialists and Entrepreneurs’ Association (*Uygur Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği*; [UYSİD](#), accessed November 26, 2020), has strong ties to the Chinese party-state and previously served as a non-voting delegate to the national and Xinjiang committees of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference ([Xinhua](#), March 3, 2015; [CCP Central Committee United Front Work Department](#), January 13, 2016). In both Turkish and Chinese media, he has frequently promoted business opportunities presented by Xinjiang and the BRI for Turkey, disregarding controversies surrounding China’s treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims ([Ulakçı](#), June 12, 2020; [Yön Haber](#), June 12, 2020; [CRI Türk](#), June 12, 2020; [Ulakçı](#), October 2, 2020).

Boghda has spread disinformation that benefits China, claiming, for example, that connections between Uyghurs in Turkey and Xinjiang have been severed due to the Covid-19 pandemic (and not the Chinese state’s internal crackdown on communications and travel) ([Ulusal Kanal](#), July 12, 2020). Boghda also previously partnered with the Turkish chapter of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR, 中国和平统一促进会 *zhongguo heping tongyi cujin hui*) to support the CCP’s position on the 2019 Hong Kong protests ([CRI](#), August 19, 2019; [CRI Türk](#), August 19, 2019).

Chinese propaganda and united front work target and coopt students from Xinjiang studying in Turkey, perceiving them as “people’s diplomats” (民间外交官, *minjian waijiao guan*) and “important new troops to implement the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (实现中华民族伟大复兴中国梦的重要生力军, *shixian zhonghua minzu weida fuxin zhongguo mengde zhongyao shenglijun*) ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), January 24, 2016). Since 2011, the Xinjiang government’s Department of Education has cooperated with the PRC’s overseas missions to award scholarships to Xinjiang students in Turkey and other countries. One goal was to encourage awardees to return and “serve the motherland and serve Xinjiang” (为国为疆服务, *wei guo wei jiang fuwu*) ([Service Site for Overseas Students in Singapore](#), April 6, 2012; [CRI](#), December 27, 2012). For example, the “Love Xinjiang Scholarship” (爱疆助学金, *ai jiang zhuxuejin*) was awarded to outstanding and politically reliable students ([PRC Embassy in Turkey](#), February

15, 2018; [PRC Consulate in Istanbul](#), August 19, 2017; [China Cultural Centre](#); August 30, 2017). The PRC's Istanbul Consul General Cui Wei (崔巍) awarded similar scholarships to Chinese overseas students in 2019 and 2020 ([Xinhua](#), May 10, 2019; [PRC Consulate in Istanbul](#), May 21, 2020).

Involving Local Politicians, Businessmen, and Media

The CCP's closest political ally in Turkey is the Patriotic Party (*Vatan Partisi*, VP). The chairman of VP is Doğu Perinçek, a nationalist opponent of liberal democracy and a vocal supporter of China's Xinjiang policy. The VP has established long-term cooperation links with the CCP Central Committee's International Liaison Department (ILD, 对外联络部, *duiwai lianluobu*) and Chinese state media. As a result, the VP's own or partner media outlets—including the daily *Aydınlık* (*Enlightenment*), the radio station Yön (*Direction*), Ulusal Kanal TV station, and Oda TV station—are the main transmitters of CCP ideological tenets to Turkish audiences. For instance, themes such as “core interests and major key issues” (核心利益与重大关切问题, *hexin liyi yu zhongda guanqie wenti*) and cooperation on Turkish-Chinese “common counter-terrorist security” (*teröre karşı ortak güvenlik*)—to include opposing the activities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement—featured in an online seminar held by the VP and the ILD on September 23–24, 2020 ([CCP ILD](#), September 24, 2020; [Vatan Partisi](#), September 24, 2020).

In December 2019, the VP's *Aydınlık* forged a partnership with media organizations in China, Russia, Iran, Cuba, Vietnam, Laos, and five other countries to promote “connectivity of people's hearts” (民心相通, *minxin xiangtong*) and form a “wide circle of friendly media to build the community of human destiny” (在构建人类命运共同体中扩大媒体朋友圈, *zai goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti zhong kuoda meiti pengyouquan*). The initiative was organized by several CCP propaganda system institutions that included the Beijing municipal government's information office (市政府新闻办公室, *shizhengfu xinwen bangongshi*), the All-China Journalists Association (中华全国新闻工作者协会, *zhonghua quanguo xinwen gongzuozhe xiehui*), the China Public Diplomacy Association (中国公共外交协会, *zhongguo gonggong waijiao xiehui*), and the Beijing Media Network (北京广播电视台, *beijing guangbo dianshi tai*) ([Beijing Municipal People's Congress](#), December 14, 2019). The China Public Diplomacy Association previously briefed a group of Turkish media and think tank representatives on Chinese ethnic and religious policy, the BRI, and related issues during a visit to China in May 2018 ([China Public Diplomacy Association](#), May 30, 2018).

After Sino-Turkish relations deteriorated following Turkey's criticism of China's Xinjiang policy in February 2019, Perinçek travelled to China to participate in meetings organized by the ILD. In Xinjiang's capital Urumchi, he attended a meeting titled “China's Ethnic Policy and Ethnic Unity—Praxis in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region” (中国的民族政策和民族团结—新疆维吾尔自治区的实践, *zhongguode minzu zhengce he minzu tuanjie—xinjiang weiwuer zizhiqude shijian*). The event was organized by the ILD and the Xinjiang Communist Party Committee and attended by ILD head Song Tao (宋涛) and XUAR Communist Party Secretary Chen Quanguo (陈全国), along with over 200 international delegates. Perinçek's

endorsements of China's Xinjiang policy were subsequently disseminated across both Turkish and Chinese media ([CCP ILD](#), February 22, 2019; [Aydınlık](#), February 22, 2019; [Ardınlık](#), February 27, 2019; [Xinjiang Daily](#), February 28, 2019).

In Turkey, the VP organizes networking events that disseminate VP and CCP ideology. Three Turkish-China business forums held in Izmir, Istanbul, and Ankara in May 2019 were attended by Turkey's business elite and the PRC's highest diplomats. As a keynote speaker, Chinese Ambassador Deng Li (邓励) promoted the potential for cooperation between the two "natural partners" within the framework of the BRI. For his part, Perinçek touted talking points bolstering Turkey and China's mutual economic and security interests: that both share an interest in fighting against East Turkestan and Kurdish separatist and terrorist organizations supported by the U.S.; that the "Atlantic Age" of global politics is over and humankind is entering an "Asian Age" pioneered by Turkey and China and that both countries shared a post-imperial legacy of "making nationalities coexist while protecting the safety of trade routes." Participating Turkish tycoons such as VP member Ethem Sancak and Murat Ülker declared their support for China's politics. Also attending was Bekir Okan, a billionaire who funds the private Okan University in Tuzla, Istanbul, which hosts one of four Confucius Institutes in Turkey ([Oda TV](#), May 30, 2019; [Vatan Partisi](#), June 15, 2019).



Image: The Chinese Ambassador to Turkey Deng Li addresses a Turkey-China bilateral trade and investment seminar in Istanbul on March 28, 2019. A Chinese business delegation comprising 28 enterprises and more than 40 entrepreneurs also attended the seminar. (Image source: [Xinhua/Xu Suhui](#)).

The VP-organized gathering was also covered by the Russian media organization *Sputnik*, which commonly features articles supporting Chinese policies in Xinjiang. *Sputnik Turkey*'s Editor Erkin Öncan has also written articles on Xinjiang for Chinese state media ([Sputnik Türkiye](#), May 30, 2019; [Sputnik Türkiye](#), February 25, 2019; [Global Times](#), January 10, 2019). At a December 2020 meeting with Liu Shaobin (刘少宾), China's new ambassador to Turkey, Perinçek again underlined the overlapping security interests of Turkey and China ([Vatan Partisi](#), December 18, 2020). Whitewashing the Chinese state's repression of Xinjiang Muslims as a campaign against terrorism and separatism and other tropes disseminated by the VP influence cluster in Turkey have also been circulated by CCP propaganda proxies elsewhere—such as the Czech platform Sinoskop (renamed Asiaskop in September 2020), which has received support from a subdivision of the PPF, a local corporation with extensive interests in China and throughout Asia more broadly ([Hlidací pes](#), March 26, 2020; [China Brief](#), January 17, 2020).

Press Tours

China's Xinjiang-related propaganda and united front work involves bringing foreign journalists to Xinjiang to “attest to the accomplishments in de-extremification” (认可去极端化成就, *renke qujiduanhua chengjiu*) and overall Xinjiang policy ([Xinjiang United Front](#), July 25, 2019). For instance, the reporter Erdal Kuruçay echoed CCP messages after a tour to Xinjiang in January 2019. Remarking that the visit had led him to realize how mistaken his understanding of the Xinjiang problem had been due to misleading Western reports, Kuruçay extolled the benefits of China's rule in Xinjiang, including the “education centers” for Uyghurs allegedly prone to crime ([CRI Online](#), January 15, 2019; [Oda TV](#), January 17, 2019).

The CCP also stages press tours in Turkey. One example involved a “cultural exchange delegation” (文化交流团, *wenhua jiaoliutuan*) organized by the State Council Information Office in October 2018. The delegation included officials from the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Philosophy and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Chinese Borderland Research Institute, two top-ranking Chinese academic institutions that publish on Xinjiang policies. At a press meeting in Ankara, the delegation briefed Turkey's media professionals along the main lines of Xinjiang-related propaganda: alleged economic development; the preservation of religious freedom; the struggle against terrorism, separatism, and extremism; social stability; people's support for the actions of regional and central government against terrorism; and Xinjiang's pivotal role in the BRI and Turkish-Chinese cooperation ([Guangming Daily](#), October 25, 2018).

Conclusion

Along with Part One of this series, the above illustrates the wide range of actors involved in China's Xinjiang-related work in Turkey, including entities from the foreign relations, military, propaganda, and united front systems (系统, *xitong*) of the party-state bureaucracy. This complexity reveals the high priority that China accords to mitigating the detrimental impact of its domestic Xinjiang policy on its image and interests abroad. Nevertheless, reputational blowback has so far not altered said policy in a substantial way. The Third

Central Xinjiang Work Forum, held in September 2020, confirmed the maintenance of “social stability” (社会稳定, *shehui wending*) and “permanent order” (长治久安, *changzhijiuan*) as the main “general objectives” (总目标, *zong mubiao*) of “the party’s strategy for Xinjiang governance in a new era” (新时代党的治疆方略, *xin shidai dangde zhijiang fanglüe*) (Gov.cn, September 26, 2020). If China maintains its current policy course, its Xinjiang-related work abroad can be expected to continue along the lines outlined in this article series. As Turkey and China commemorate 50 years of diplomatic ties and the CCP celebrates its centennial in 2021, it will be crucial to watch how the two governments’ common interests impact Turkey’s troubled Uyghur diaspora.

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Is the Growth of Sino-Nepal Relations Reducing Nepal's Autonomy?

By Dhanwati Yadav

Introduction

Commonly held economic theory generally suggests that foreign aid benefits the recipient. But so far, China's bilateral relations with Nepal—which are based upon generous pledges of foreign direct investment (FDI)—have created a power imbalance. China's outsized influence in Nepal was most recently highlighted by overt Chinese involvement in a recent constitutional crisis that split the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP). A week after Prime Minister Khagda Prasad Sharma Oli dissolved the Parliament on December 20, a delegation led by Guo Yezhou, vice minister of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) International Liaison Department visited Kathmandu to “assess the situation” and mediate discussions between conflicting factions within the NCP ([Firstpost](#), December 29, 2020). China's growing influence in Nepal and across the Himalayan region more broadly is closely tied to its wider economic, security, and foreign policy priorities ([China Brief](#), November 12, 2020). For Nepal, the unprecedented deepening of the bilateral relationship has raised serious concerns about its ability to maintain political and economic autonomy.

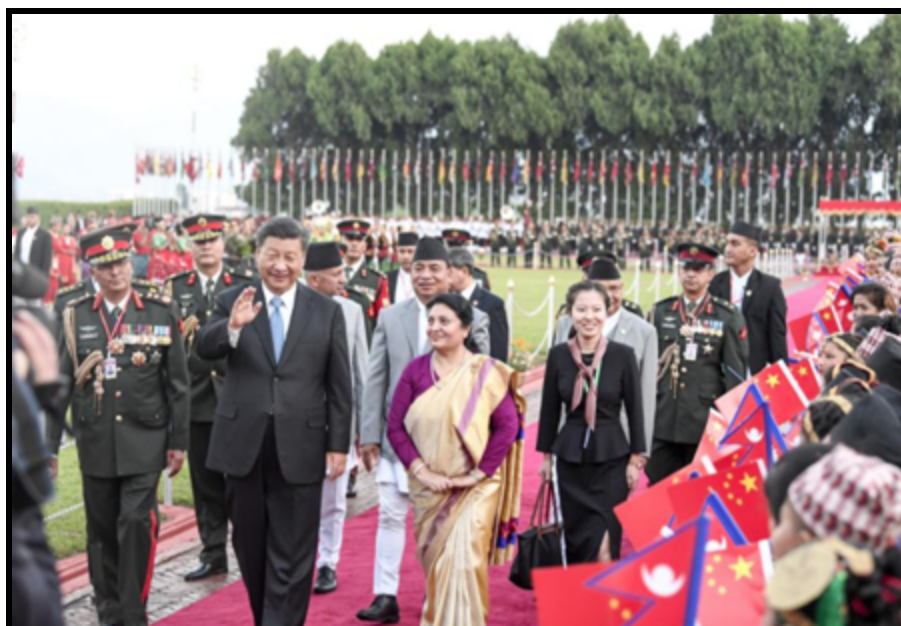


Image: Chinese President Xi Jinping attends a welcome ceremony held by Nepalese President Bidya Devi Bhandari upon arriving in Kathmandu for a state visit on Nepal 12, 2019. Xi was the first Chinese president to visit Nepal in over 20 years. (Image source: [Xinhua](#))

Beijing's Progressive Inroads and Influence Strategies in Nepal

The Sino-Nepalese relationship has been predicated upon foreign direct investment deals, capacity-building measures and diplomatic support in international forums. A 2019 report by AidData highlighted “financial diplomacy,” including infrastructure financing, budget support, debt relief, and humanitarian assistance as being a key element of China’s public diplomacy toolkit in the South and Central Asian region.[1] China has led FDI pledges to Nepal for the last five years. In October 2019, a top U.S. diplomat warned, “As Chinese influence has grown in Nepal, so has the government of Nepal’s restrictions on the Tibetan community,” signaling growing international concerns over the China-Nepal relationship ([Kathmandu Post](#), October 23, 2019). Just as border tensions between China and India turned violent last June, Nepal rekindled a longstanding cartographic dispute with India that some on the Indian side saw as a signal of its growing closeness with China. The Nepalese government passed a new political map that marked the Indian territories of Kalapani, Lipulekh and Limpiyadhura as Nepalese territory. One Indian government official described the act as drawing “red lines on the map to serve [Nepal’s] domestic and foreign interests” ([Hindustan Times](#), June 10, 2020).

China and Nepal signed their first bilateral agreement on economic aid in 1956, and the Nepalese Foreign Ministry has said that Chinese financial and technical aid to Nepal dates back to the mid-1980s ([Nepal Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), February 2019). The Kathmandu-based political analyst Chandra Dev Bhatta has argued that China began scaling up its influence efforts in a notable way after 2008, when Nepal transitioned from a monarchy to a federal democratic republic. “Reality is such that after the political change...China has strongly positioned itself in Nepal and scaled up its engagement in more than one way. In the past, one could notice China’s involvement in the development of infrastructure but not in soft areas. Of late, China has been penetrating in[sic] Nepali politics as well as in society,” Bhatta said ([The Diplomat](#), May 22, 2020).

China overtook India as Nepal’s largest FDI partner in 2014. Last year, Chinese state media reported that Chinese investors pledged more than \$220 million worth of FDI to Nepal during the fiscal year 2019-2020, which more than doubled the previous year’s figures (\$116 million) even during the Covid-19 pandemic. Chinese FDI accounted for two-thirds of Nepal’s total committed FDI during the reporting period ([China Daily](#), September 9, 2020). Part of this growth was due to the passing of a 2019 Foreign Investment and Technology Transfer Act designed to streamline the process for approving foreign investments in key sectors such as hydropower, construction, telecommunications, agriculture and mining. Foreign analysts have observed that although Chinese state investments have generally targeted hydropower and transportation, investments from the private sector have mostly targeted micro-enterprises—with a couple of notable exceptions in the cement industry ([Stimson Center](#), November 12, 2020).

Following Nepal’s official joining of China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) in 2017, the BRI has also emerged as a new instrument for deepening bilateral ties between Beijing and Kathmandu. Initial agreements for a Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network—to encompass both infrastructure projects and cultural exchanges—were signed. ([Nepal Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), June 21, 2018). In 2019, Xi Jinping paid a state visit to Nepal, marking the first time that a Chinese president visited the country in 23 years. During

Xi's visit, the two countries elevated their relationship to a "strategic partnership," creating the impetus to prepare work on projects such as a cross-border railway linking the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) with Kathmandu and a China-Nepal Friendship Industrial Park in Jhapa, eastern Nepal ([China Daily](#), December 24, 2020).

Expanding railway ties between China and Nepal would promote trade and increase Nepal's economic capacity (see image below). China has promised to allow Nepal access to six dedicated border transit points—Rasuwagadhi, Kodari, Yari, Kimathanka, Olangchungola and Nechung—and access to sea ports in Tianjin, Shenzhen, Lianyungang and Zhanjiang and land ports in Lanzhou, Lhasa and Shigatse, which could help to balance landlocked Nepal's economic reliance on India ([My República](#), March 7). In 2015, the Nepalese blamed trade disruptions that impacted food and energy supplies on an Indian "blockade," which had later influenced the leadership's shift towards China ([The Diplomat](#), February 1, 2017). Local analysts have also observed that, alongside the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), such investments could also aid in either increasing access to or circumventing the massive Indian economy, depending on how bilateral China-India relations develop ([Kathmandu Post](#), August 6, 2020).

Nepal and China have also increased security cooperation, with China opening up a training academy for the Armed Police Force (APF) that guards border districts with Tibet in 2014 and holding counterterrorism drills between the Nepal Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) in for the first time in 2016 ([Reuters](#), December 26, 2014; [My República](#), December 29, 2016).



Image: A map of a proposed railway link between the Tibet Autonomous Region and Nepal, which could create major economic opportunities between Nepal and China and potentially even link into India (Image source: [Nepali Times](#)).

Bilateral cooperation in fields such as construction, education, agriculture and hydropower has chipped away at India's traditional sphere of influence in Tibet as ongoing border and water disputes have also soured the

India-Nepal relationship. In light of this, Nepal has prioritized developing economic ties with China ([ORF](#), October 3, 2018). But closer China-Nepal ties have also had benefits in the international realm. For the past two years, Nepal has supported China's position on Xinjiang at the United Nations Human Rights Council ([China Brief](#), December 31, 2019; [The Diplomat](#), October 9, 2020). Nepal also supported China on the status of Hong Kong last year ([PRC Embassy in Nepal](#), June 20, 2020).

China's Geo-Strategic Goals in Nepal

Weaken Indian Influence

China seeks to fade away India's traditional close ties with Nepal. This strategy has received some pushback inside Nepal. Most recently, the former Nepalese Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai told Indian media "we have historical relations, closest economic interactions, cultural and social affinity, [and] geographically also our people's movement is towards India [rather] than China. So, in that sense, China can never be a replacement of India for Nepal" ([The Print](#), March 3). This is reflected in trade numbers: Nepal imports more than two-thirds of its trade goods from India, and only around 14 percent from China. India also receives 60 percent of total exports from Nepal, compared to China's 2 percent. ([Economic Times](#), June 16, 2020).

The revitalization of border tensions between China and India last year also prompted Beijing's interest in Nepal's historic military ties with India: a legacy of colonialism has meant that around 30,000 Nepalese Gurkha troops currently serve in the Indian army and are often deployed to frontline positions along the border. More than one million Gurkha veterans live in Nepal. Last year, Indian intelligence reported that Beijing allegedly funded a report from the China Study Center in Nepal, which one former Indian army officer called an "attempt by China to fish in troubled waters" ([India Today](#), August 17, 2020). Nepalese media noted that China has not lodged any formal objection to India's use of Gurkha soldiers ([The Annapurna Express](#), June 23, 2020).

Protect the Communist Establishment

Beijing's overt involvement in the Nepalese political crisis which began last spring has not gone without notice. The Chinese Ambassador acted as a mediator in an intra-party rift of the Nepal Communist Party after senior party leaders confronted Prime Minister Oli in April 2020. After Oli moved to dissolve parliament and call for fresh elections in April and May, a high-level team from Beijing was dispatched to meet with Nepal's fractured leadership and reportedly the opposition as well ([The Diplomat](#), December 28, 2020). While an official spokesperson from China's foreign ministry said only that China wanted the relevant parties to "properly handl[e] internal differences and [work] towards political stability and the country's development," one European diplomat put it more bluntly: "they are clearly concerned about the massive investments they have pledged...they are shocked as to how Oli could make a bold political move without prior consultations" ([Reuters](#), December 31, 2020).

Maintain the Geopolitical Imperative of the BRI

After partnering with Pakistan, President Xi Jinping is keen to utilize the strategic location of Kathmandu to serve BRI objectives, which range from developing infrastructure to creating deeper cultural and political connections. Newer BRI-linked programs such as the Health Silk Road and the Digital Silk Road could expand China-Nepal ties even more in the future; Beijing has been active in expanding its vaccine aid to Nepal even as land trade between the two countries has been effectively halted by the ongoing pandemic ([My República](#), March 2; [Kathmandu Post](#), February 1). It is clear that Beijing intends to make the best use of Nepal's geostrategic position to reach out to other parts of the region. Developments including Nepal's dispute with India over the redrawing of political maps and the halting of repair work on the Gandak dam are seemingly a part of Nepal's effort to woo China.

Cement Regional Strength

Following the U.S. signing of the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020 under President Donald Trump and the recent announcement that the Joseph Biden administration is committed to deepening relations with South Asian countries to maintain a "free and open" Indo-Pacific, geopolitical superpowers are increasingly focusing their attention on Nepal ([SCMP](#), January 13; [My República](#), March 11). In light of this, China may seek to press its advantage against its weaker neighbor. According to a report by the Nepalese government, China has encroached at 11 different locations—marking a total of approximately 33 hectares of land—belonging to Nepal as it builds up border infrastructure in the TAR and diverts river borders which have historically acted as a natural boundary ([Times of India](#), June 24, 2020).

Conclusion

In December 2019 undercover Chinese agents led by Wang Xiaohong, the Director of the Ministry of Public Security, cooperated with Nepalese police forces to arrest and extradite 122 Chinese nationals from Kathmandu to Beijing. The Nepalese side was reportedly sidelined during the joint action and not even given access to any seized evidence—and the alleged criminals, whom the Chinese side said were suspected of having committed cybercrimes, were deported without a formal investigation. One legal advocate complained that the incident made a "mockery of Nepal's legal system," and another analyst worried that it could preface or even signal the *de facto* implementation of a highly controversial extradition treaty that would endanger Tibetan refugees in Nepal ([Central Tibetan Administration](#), January 31, 2020). China's well-publicized investments in Nepalese infrastructure and energy sectors have been paralleled by an increasingly awkward silence from the Nepalese government on sensitive topics such as infrastructure build-ups and territorial transgressions or questions surrounding Tibet.

Despite regular criticisms of Beijing at the hands of local media, academics and economists, China's unchecked encroachment in the geopolitical affairs of Kathmandu has seemingly led to the gradual decline of

Nepal's political and economic autonomy. Nepal has so far avoided coming under the sway of foreign domination. Now the country's leaders must decide on whether they aspire to uphold this history or dismantle it.

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Notes

[1] See: Custer, S., Sethi, T., Solis, J., Lin, J., Ghose, S., Gupta, A., Knight, R., and A. Baehr, "Silk Road Diplomacy: Deconstructing Beijing's toolkit to influence South and Central Asia," AidData at William & Mary, December 10, 2019, accessed from https://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/Silk_Road_Diplomacy_Report.pdf.
