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Human Rights Showdown Strains Believability of Chinese Diplomacy

By Elizabeth Chen

On June 22, the Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) delivered a joint statement to the 47th session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on behalf of 44 countries expressing grave concern about the “repression of religious and ethnic minorities” by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The statement urged “immediate, meaningful and unfettered access to Xinjiang for independent observers” and also noted continuing concern about the deterioration of freedoms in Hong Kong and Tibet ([Government of Canada](#), June 22).[1]

A press release by Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian (赵丽江) noted that Belarus had delivered a joint statement on behalf of 65 countries that supported China and stressed “respect for the

sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all countries” and “oppos[ed] interference in China’s internal affairs under the pretext of human rights” ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(MFA\)](#), June 22).



Image: Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian gives a press briefing on June 22, 2021. As one of China’s most vocal “wolf warrior” diplomats, Zhao plays a key role in implementing “Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy” (Source: [PRC MFA](#)).

The exchange has brought China’s alleged human rights abuses into the spotlight again, as well as highlighting the hidden politicking behind such tiffs. Chinese diplomats reportedly pressured Ukraine into withdrawing its support after it became the 45th country to sign on to the Canada-led letter by threatening to withhold the delivery of Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccines, which one anonymous Western diplomat described as “bare-knuckles” diplomacy ([AP](#), June 25). Other media reports said that Israel’s support for the Canada-led statement came after significant pressure from the U.S., marking a shift from Jerusalem’s previous unwillingness to criticize Beijing on human rights issues ([Times of Israel](#), June 23).

Background

Such diplomatic fights over the Xinjiang issue have been perennial after the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) first received credible reports on the Chinese state’s systemic oppression, extralegal detention and mass surveillance of ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang in 2018 ([CERD](#), September 19, 2018). China (through proxy countries such as Belarus and Cuba) and mostly western democratic countries have issued dueling statements at the 41st UNHRC session in July 2019, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) Third Committee in October 2019, the 44th UNHRC session in July 2020, and the October 2020 UNGA Third Committee ([SupChina](#), October 7, 2020). They will likely repeat this at the 76th session of the UNGA Third Committee in October. Each time, both sides have been bolstered by growing numbers, although support has shifted slightly over time (see map below).

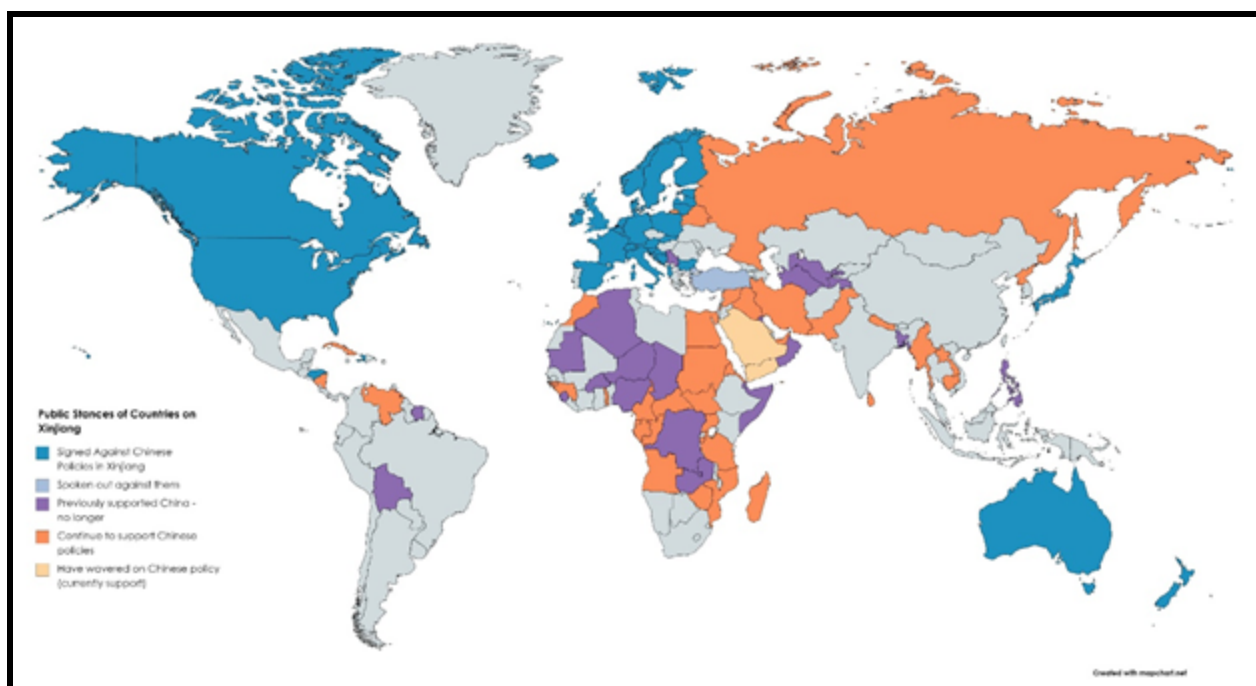


Image: An October 2020 map shows the geographic breakdown of support for China's Xinjiang policies over time (i.e., blue=against, orange=for). More than 90 countries, mostly developing, reportedly supported China's policies at the UNHRC in 2021, but some (demonstrated by the purple) have changed their stances (Source: [Nathan Ruser via Twitter](#)).[2]

This March, a number of UN human rights experts raised “serious concerns” about the alleged detention and forced labor of Muslim Uyghurs and encouraged China to “respond positively” to several UN mandates’ long-standing requests to conduct official visits to China ([OHCHR](#), March 29). In May, 152 countries took part in a virtual hearing that demanded China grant “immediate, meaningful and unfettered access” to Xinjiang. The UN special rapporteur on minority issues, Fernand de Varennes, notably said that the UN’s failure to more strongly criticize China in the past was “timid” ([South China Morning Post](#), May 13, 2021).[3] A Chinese spokesperson hit back, calling the meeting “a political farce” and complaining that “while the U.S. and some other Western countries talk about ‘human rights in Xinjiang,’ they are actually thinking about using Xinjiang to contain China” ([PRC Permanent Mission to the UN](#), May 12).

The UN High Commissioner on Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said on June 21 that she hoped to agree on terms for a visit to Xinjiang to investigate human rights abuses before the end of the year, laying out an explicit deadline for the first time since negotiations began in September 2018. A Chinese spokesperson warned that Bachelet should not make “erroneous remarks” about the alleged human rights abuses, which China has consistently denied ([Reuters](#), June 21). At a foreign ministry press briefing, spokesperson Zhao Lijian (赵立坚) said that China welcomes the High Commissioner for “a friendly visit with the purpose of promoting exchanges and cooperation, but not a “so-called ‘investigation’ with presumption of guilt,” and that

it remains opposed to “anyone using this issue for political manipulation and to exert pressure on China” ([PRC MFA](#), June 22).

Alongside the semi-annual escalating exchanges on human rights, Chinese diplomats have also increasingly engaged in blatant whataboutism to distract from criticisms, echoed by state media. In one example of the genre, a Global Times report complained that the UK, U.S. and Canada were a “cartel of killers” hypocritically whipping up global “hysteria” on Xinjiang despite having committed human rights violations themselves ([Global Times](#), June 20).

How China Subverts Human Rights Norms at the United Nations

Since Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping took power in 2012, China has substantially increased its financial and peacekeeping contributions to the UN, although its overall contributions remain a distant second to the U.S. According to Jeffrey Feltman, a former UN under-secretary-general for political affairs, China has more recently increased the use of its UN Security Council veto power, “downplaying human rights norms, playing up sovereign rights, and vexing the United States”—often in tactical coordination with Russia ([Brookings](#), September 14, 2020). China has generally worked to increase its influence on developing issues such as technology standards, climate change, healthcare and agriculture.[4] It has also sought to reform the standard concept of multilateralism to privilege states’ sovereign rights, promoting itself as a leader against “Western hegemony” for the developing world, and argued for a narrow definition of human rights that seeks to absolve states of the responsibility to protect citizens’ freedoms.

The watchdog group Human Rights Watch argues that since China first proposed a so-called “win-win” (合作共赢, *hezuo gongying*) resolution on human rights at the UNHRC in 2018 ([PRC Permanent Mission to the UN](#), March 1, 2018), it has waged a steady campaign of “slowly undermining norms through established procedures and rhetoric, which have had significant consequences on accountability for human rights violations” ([Human Rights Watch](#), September 14, 2020).

An updated resolution to promote “mutually beneficial cooperation” (互利合作, *huli hezuo*) in the field of human rights, which appeared to reframe the human rights conversation around dialogue and cooperation instead of accountability, was adopted by the UNHRC in June 2020 ([Xinhua](#), June 23, 2020). Although such resolutions may seem abstract, once passed by the UN they lend critical legitimacy to Chinese leaders’ statements that the PRC has made “historic and pioneering contributions to the development of multilateralism theory” and offered uniquely Chinese solutions for the “building of a community with a shared future for mankind” that are “practicable for most developing countries” ([People’s Daily](#), February 21; [Global Times](#), June 24). This past March, China once again proposed a resolution on “mutually beneficial cooperation” at the UNHRC ([Xinhua](#), March 24).

Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy in the New Era

Propaganda celebrating the PRC's diplomacy "with Chinese characteristics" has been abundant in the lead up to the CCP's centennial. In late June, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central Propaganda Department jointly unveiled a new website dedicated to promoting "Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and Chinese Diplomacy in the New Era" (习近平外交思想和新时代中国外交, *Xi Jinping waijiao sixiang he xin shidai zhongguo waijiao*). In addition to serving as a repository of diplomacy-related quotes and speeches from Xi, many articles archived on the site stress maintaining the CCP's role as the core of China's foreign relations work and promoting "major-power diplomacy" to realize the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (chinadiplomacy.org.cn, accessed July 1). A press release summarized additional goals (more palatable to foreign audiences): "safeguard national sovereignty, security, and development interests, and build a network of partnerships around the world," and use the BRI as a platform for the "reform and construction of the global governance system and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind" ([Chinanews.com](http://chinanews.com), June 30).

A recent speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Lanting Forum, titled "A New Journey Ahead After 50 Extraordinary Years," marked highlights in China's cooperation with the UN since the UNGA shifted its official recognition from Taiwan to China in October 1971. Wang focused on the positives, noting China's commitment to "upholding the international system with the UN at its core" and stating that "China has shared its wisdom and solution [sic] for world peace and development at every historical moment" ([PRC MFA](#), June 25). Xi Jinping's July 1 remarks on the anniversary of the CCP centennial were a little harsher on the topic of foreign relations. During an hour-long speech that mostly celebrated the ruling CCP's achievements, Xi also warned that "the Chinese people will never allow any foreign forces to bully, oppress, or enslave us. Whoever wants to do so will surely break their heads and bleed against the Great Wall of steel built from the blood and flesh of more than 1.4 billion Chinese people" ([Xinhua](#), July 1).

Conclusion

The diplomatic war over China's human rights policies at the UN demonstrates the growing strain between China's efforts to present itself as a benign, positive partner for global development and an increasingly strident and nationalistic diplomacy that more closely aligns with Xi's policy priorities to centralize power and promote China as a rising superpower ([South China Morning Post](#), June 27).

Amid such "wolf warrior" diplomacy, China's propaganda narratives of international cooperation remain ineffective abroad. A June 30 Pew Research Center poll found that large majorities across advanced economies believe that China does not respect the personal freedoms of its people ([Pew Research Center](#), June 30). Observers might extrapolate that the PRC has similarly little respect for the universal freedoms enshrined in the UN Human Rights Charter. Instead, Chinese diplomats have proven adroit at undermining and reinterpreting long-standing norms on human rights and multilateralism. Under Xi, the PRC has grown

bold in pursuing its security-focused developmental goals, with only the lightest veneer of presenting a more “loveable” image to the world ([Xinhua](#), June 1; [Nikkei Asia](#), June 10).

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Notes

[1] Countries can add their names to statements or resolutions up to two weeks after the end of a UNHRC session, with the current session scheduled to run until July 13. Although the author was unable to find a full list of the signatories to the Belarus statement, which has not been published as of the time of writing, they reportedly included Belarus, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Sri Lanka, Syria and Venezuela ([Aljazeera](#), June 22).

[2] Note, for example, that Turkey, which is marked orange on the October 2020 map, has since come out with several official statements supporting a UN investigation in Xinjiang ([Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), October 6, 2020). But it has also cracked down on Uyghur diaspora members that criticize China at home, and the government has not made a definitive statement condemning China’s detention of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang ([Uyghur Human Rights Project](#), June 24), demonstrating the difficulty that developing nations face in taking a stance on the Xinjiang issue.

[3] Western media reported that Chinese diplomats had sent notes to many of the UN’s 193 member states in the lead up to the event, urging them not to participate in the “anti-China event” ([AP](#), May 12).

[4] Specifically, Kristine Lee has described how China has leveraged UN initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals to promote its Belt and Road Initiative; institutionalize cyber-sovereignty norms that restrict the free flow of information; and used its leadership of specific agencies to ostracize Taiwan ([USCC](#), June 24, 2020).

The PLA's Military Diplomacy Under COVID-19

By Kenneth W. Allen

Introduction

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been responsible for conducting military diplomacy since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. In the 1950s, military cooperation was limited almost entirely to other communist nations and insurgent movements in Southeast Asia. In the late 1970s, the scope and tenor of China's foreign military cooperation changed with the shift to commercial arms sales, attempts to gain some influence in Eastern Europe, and improvement in relations with the United States (U.S.) and Western Europe. By the 1980s, China had also developed close military ties with Egypt, Tanzania, Sudan, Somalia, Zaire, and Zambia in Africa. The change reflected China's desire to counter Soviet influence, especially in Europe, as well as to develop relations with modern armed forces. Chinese military ties with Western European countries were strongest with Britain, France, and Italy. Chinese military relations with the U.S. developed rapidly in the 1980s and included exchanges of high-level military officials and working-level delegations in training, logistics, and education, as well as four foreign military sales (FMS) projects.[1]

At first, these ties were mostly driven by the Army; the PLA Navy (PLAN) did not make its first foreign port call until 1985, when it visited Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.[2] Its first port call visit to the U.S. (Hawaii) was in 1989. Since 2008, the PLAN has deployed 38 escort task forces (ETF) to the Gulf of Aden. Until COVID-19, each ETF averaged 4-6 months at sea from the time they departed until they returned and spent an average of three months conducting their Gulf of Aden escort duties ([China Military Online \(CMO\)](#), June 9; [CGTN](#), January 17). They then conducted port calls on the way home. However, since COVID-19 began, none have conducted port calls. The PLA began conducting bilateral and multilateral "combined exercises" with other countries in 2002,[3] and it first became involved in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKO) in 1990, when it sent five military observers to the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) ([State Council Information Office \(SCIO\)](#), April 16, 2013). By the end of 2020, China had become the largest provider of peacekeepers among the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council ([China Brief](#), October 30, 2020).



Image: A screenshot from state media shows the supply ship Dongpinghu (Hull 960) from the PLAN's 36th ETF to the Gulf of Aden conducting in-port replenishment at the Port of Djibouti in December 2020. Official reports emphasized that the supplies were purchased through domestic channels and transported under rigorous sterilization, inspection and quarantine measures due to the ongoing pandemic. (Source: [China Military Online](#)).

Military Diplomacy Objectives and Activities

The PRC has the following four military diplomacy objectives:

1. Supporting PRC diplomacy
2. Shaping the security environment
3. Collecting intelligence
4. Learning new skills, tactics, and procedures.

The PRC conducts its military diplomacy through the following six categories:

1. Senior-level visits
2. Dialogues
3. Naval port calls
4. Military exercises
5. Functional exchanges
6. Non-traditional security operations.

Activities Under COVID-19

Following the World Health Organization (WHO)'s classification of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020 ([WHO](#), March 11, 2020), the PLA has continued to engage in each category of military diplomacy, but the amount and types of engagements have decreased in some cases.

Senior-level Visits

The Chinese military views high-level visits as an important aspect of military diplomacy, and senior PLA leaders devote a significant amount of time to interacting with foreign counterparts. However, senior-level meetings and visits are subject to the constraints and unique characteristics of the PLA. Generally, all senior PLA leaders aside from the Defense Minister and the Central Military Commission's (CMC) Chief of the Joint Staff (former Chief of the General Staff) are limited to one trip abroad per year by regulation, although not every leader takes advantage of the opportunity and exceptions sometimes occur.^[4] Senior PLA leaders rarely, if ever, visit the same country twice except to attend multilateral meetings, and rarely, if ever, host the same foreign military leader twice. The Defense Minister does not necessarily host or meet with all of his foreign counterparts, who are often hosted by one of the CMC Vice Chairmen. Since COVID-19 began, the Defense Minister has been the only senior leader to travel abroad, and no senior PLA leaders have hosted any counterparts.

From 2001-2018, travel by four successive Defense Ministers increased as they attended various Defense Ministers' meetings, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) annual Defense Ministers' Conferences; the China-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting; and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+). Chinese Defense Ministers typically visit two or three other countries for bilateral talks before or after each multilateral meeting. Since March 2020, General Wei Fenghe (维凤和)—who became Defense Minister since 2018 and a Member of the CMC in 2017—has traveled abroad only three times for meetings with the presidents and military leaders of eight countries, as shown in the following bullet points. Each visit included discussions about PLA involvement in providing COVID-19 supplies. Although the Defense Minister usually hosts over 10 counterparts each year, no information was found concerning Wei hosting any counterparts since the start of the pandemic.

- September 9-12, 2020: Indonesia ([CMO](#), September 9, 2020) and the Philippines ([CMO](#), September 13, 2020),
- March 25-30, 2021: Hungary ([CMO](#), March 25), Serbia ([CMO](#), March 27), Greece ([CMO](#), March 30), and North Macedonia ([CMO](#), March 31),
- April 23-27, 2021: Vietnam ([CMO](#), April 26) and Bangladesh ([CMO](#), April 27).

Wei has also had phone conversations with the following counterparts:

- May 9, 2020: Russia and Cambodia (separate calls) ([CMO](#), May 9, 2020),
- May 13, 2020: Republic of Korea ([CMO](#), May 13, 2020),
- August 7, 2020: United States ([Xinhua](#), August 7, 2020).

Dialogues

The following dialogues were held during 2020 and 2021:

- In July 2020, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defense Senior Officials' Meeting Plus and the ASEAN Regional Forum Security Policy Conference (ASPC) held video conferences, and Chinese military's representatives participated in the video conferences in Beijing ([CMO](#), July 30, 2020).
- In December 2020, the Xiangshan Forum, which is linked to the PLA's Academy of Military Science (AMS), held its 10th Forum in person and by video link.[5] The theme was "Trends of Major Power Relations" with a focus on predictions about China-U.S. relations (CMO, [December 1, 2020](#), [December 2, 2020](#), [December 3, 2020](#)).
- In December 2020, the 11th China-European Union (EU) defense and security policy dialogue was held via video link. The dialogue was co-chaired by heads of the Office for International Military Cooperation of China's Central Military Commission and the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy and Crisis Response at the European External Action Service ([CMO](#), December 11, 2020).
- In January 2021, China and India held the 9th round of China-India Corps Commander Level Meeting on the Chinese side of the Moldo-Chushul border meeting point, where the two sides agreed to push for an early disengagement of frontline troops ([CMO](#), January 25).[6]
- In February 2021, China and Japan held the 12th round of high-level consultations on maritime affairs via video link. They reached a consensus on maritime search cooperation between the China Maritime Search and Rescue Center and the Japan Coast Guard, combating maritime crimes and promoting exchanges between law enforcement officers ([CMO](#), February 4).
- In April 2021, the PLA and its Vietnam counterparts held the 6th China-Vietnam Border Defense Friendship Exchange and the 10th Defense and Defense and Security Consultation (CMO, [April 25](#), [April 23](#)).

Naval Port Calls

Since the PLAN began sending ETFs to the Gulf of Aden in 2008, each task force had at least one port call on their way home.[7] However, no information was found about port calls by any of the three ETFs (34th to 36th) that have left the Gulf of Aden since early 2020.[8]

Military Exercises

The PLA has held multiple bilateral and multilateral exercises since the early 2000s, which are also used to build partner capacity. Bilateral exercises have included the Sino-Pakistani *Shaheen (Xiongying/Eagle)* Air Force exercise series and multilateral exercises have included the roughly biennial "Peace Mission" exercises held with SCO nations that are intended to build partner counter-terrorism capabilities. No information was

found concerning any SCO exercises since March 2020. However, the PLA has been involved in the following exercises:

- From August 23 to September 5, 2020, the PLA Army (PLAA) and PLA Air Force (PLAAF) participated in the International Army Games (IAG) 2020 in Russia (CMO, [July 30, 2020](#), [August 5, 2020](#), [August 11, 2020](#)). The PLAA troops participated in five competitions, namely the “Tank Biathlon,” “Safe Environment,” “Masters of Armored Vehicles,” “Army Scout Masters,” and the “Open Water” competitions, while the PLAAF’s airborne troops took part in the “Airborne Platoon” competition. There were 31 competitions for IAG 2020, of which Tank Biathlon was considered the highlight. This was the seventh time since 2014 that the PLAA’s armored force participated in the competition. It has won second place three times. The 2020 contestants were assigned to a brigade under the PLA 78th Group Army in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province.
- In December 2020, the PLAAF participated in the ninth *Shaheen* combined exercise in Pakistan (CMO, December 8, 2020). The first exercise took place in 2011 and since then has taken place every other year in China.[9] The eighth exercise in 2019 was hosted by China and involved 50 aircraft.
- Although no information was found concerning actual port calls by any of the three ETFs that have left the Gulf of Aden since early 2020, the 36th ETF did participate in the multinational exercise *AMAN-21*, aka *Peace-21*, in the waters off Karachi, Pakistan, on its way home in mid-February 2021. The exercise, which also included Pakistan, Russia, the U.S., and the United Kingdom, involved vessels and aircraft that carried out various drills, including formation maneuver, maritime search and rescue, helicopter formation flying, underway replenishment, anti-piracy, and live-firing at sea. The exercise concluded with a fleet review at sea (CMO, February 18). The ETF then conducted an eight-hour naval drill with Singapore’s Navy off Singapore’s coast while en route home. This mainly involved such subjects as communications, formation movement, and joint search and rescue (CMO, February 26).

Of note, no PLA Rocket Force (formerly the Second Artillery Force) units have ever participated in any international exercises.

Functional Exchanges

Functional exchanges are professional exchanges between PLA and foreign military personnel, including academic and educational exchanges. No information was found for any exchanges in this category since March 2020; however, the PLA has rarely reported this type of activity.

Non-Traditional Security Operations

Non-traditional security operations include a wide variety of military activities that assist foreign partners or provide public goods to the international community. These include non-combatant evacuations; UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKO); humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts and anti-piracy operations. The PLA continues to be involved in each of these categories.

The PLA first became involved in UNPKO in 1990, when it sent five military observers to the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) ([SCIO](#), April 16, 2013). In September 2020, the PRC published its first “White Paper on U.N. Peacekeeping Operations” ([Xinhua](#), September 18, 2020). According to the white paper, China has been the largest provider of peacekeepers among the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, having had 40,000 peacekeepers assigned to more than 30 missions since the beginning.^[10] The China-U.N. Peace and Development Fund has provided \$67.7 million for 80 projects related to peacekeeping operations since President Xi Jinping announced the fund in 2015. According to U.N. statistics, China had 2,408 troops assigned to UNPKO missions as of April 30 ([UN Peacekeeping](#), accessed June 10). For comparison purposes, the U.S. had only 33 people assigned as of August 31, 2020 ([UN Peacekeeping](#), August 31, 2020); however, the U.S. is the single largest financial contributor to UNPKO, providing 27.89 percent of the total budget. China, which is the second largest contributor, funded 15.22 percent of the UNPKO budget ([Fas.org](#), February 26).

The PLA's involvement in providing COVID-19 relief supplies to foreign countries has also been recognized. According to the China military analyst Meia Nouwens, “Publicly available data shows that COVID-19 military diplomacy began in March 2020, when the PLA sent protective equipment and clothing to Iran. In February 2021, the PLA began to donate COVID-19 vaccines to overseas militaries. The PLA's initial vaccine assistance to 13 countries globally fit within a wider vaccine-centric diplomatic effort by the Chinese government. Between March 2020 and April 2021, the PLA provided military medical assistance or donations to 56 countries around the world, and a UNPKO mission. In all but two cases, the PLA's medical diplomatic activities were directed at countries belonging to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Geographically, the PLA has mostly engaged with countries in the Asia–Pacific and Africa. The focus on the BRI and South–South diplomacy also reflects China's wider diplomatic narrative and foreign policy objectives” ([IISS](#), May 10).

The PRC Ministry of National Defense's website has published more than 70 articles since March 2020 identifying each country that has received Chinese COVID-19 vaccines and supplies. A typical article states, in full, “For the implementation of President Xi Jinping's important declaration on making China's COVID-19 vaccine a global public good, with the approval of the CMC and at the request of the military of Country X, a batch of COVID-19 vaccines assisted by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) was delivered to the military of Country X on Date Y” ([CMO](#), May 17). Vaccine delivery appears to have varied between a mix of PRC civil aircraft, PLAAF transport aircraft, and foreign civil and military aircraft.^[11] For example, in April 2020, a Bangladesh Air Force transport aircraft carried the medical aids from China in Dhaka, Bangladesh

([CMO](#), April 20, 2020), and a Russian military aircraft carried medical supplies and experts to Russia ([CMO](#), April 14, 2020). According to one article, “Approved by China’s CMC and at the request of armed forces of relevant countries, the PLA dispatched Air Force planes from June 2 to June 5, 2020, to deliver COVID-19 prevention and control supplies including protective clothing and surgical face masks to the armed forces of 20 counties, including Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tunisia, Angola, Egypt, Morocco, Tanzania, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Cameroon, Rwanda, Argentina, Laos, Cambodia, Saudi Arabia, and Bangladesh” ([CMO](#), June 5, 2020).

Finally, in May 2021, two salvage vessels assigned to the PLAN’s Southern Theater Command Navy and one vessel assigned to the Chinese Academy of Sciences assisted in the recovery of a wrecked Indonesian submarine ([CMO](#), May 19).

Conclusion

The PLA has continued to be actively engaged in military diplomacy since the first COVID-19 cases were confirmed in March 2020. Although the Defense Minister has traveled abroad three times, it does not appear that he has hosted any counterparts. He will most likely begin to host some counterparts as the COVID-19 challenge decreases. No other PLA leaders have traveled abroad or hosted counterparts since the pandemic began. The PLAN has continued to deploy its ETFs to the Gulf of Aden on the normal cycle, but no vessels have apparently conducted any port calls on the way home even though one ETF did conduct some drills with other countries on the way home. The PLAA, PLAN, and PLAAF have continued to be engaged in bilateral and multilateral exercises and may increase their participation as the COVID-19 challenge decreases. Finally, the PLA has become actively involved in providing COVID-19 relief supplies to multiple countries, especially those along the BRI. The PRC and PLA have and will continue to be involved in UNPKO.

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Notes

[1] For more on the PLA’s military diplomacy see: Kenneth W. Allen and Eric A. McVadon, *China’s Foreign Military Relations*, (Washington, D.C.: The Henry L. Stimson Center, October 1999).

[2] See: Kenneth W. Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016*, (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), China Strategic Perspectives 11, July 2017). Heidi Holz and Kenneth W. Allen, “Military Exchanges with Chinese Characteristics: The People’s Liberation Army Experience with Military Relations” in Roy Kamphausen, David

Lai, and Andrew Scobell, eds., *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military*. (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, June 2010).

[3] Note that the international community uses the term “combined” for bilateral and multilateral exchanges, while the PLA uses the term “joint”.

[4] Although Chinese official media uses the terms Minister of National Defense and Defense Minister interchangeably, this article sticks to the title Defense Minister.

[5] The Xiangshan Forum is co-sponsored by the China Institute for International Studies (a Foreign Ministry think tank) and the China Association for Military Science (a nominally independent association headed by the President of the PLA's Academy of Military Sciences).

[6] This meeting is just one representative instance of high-level military talks between China and India, but the two sides have conducted occasional meetings during COVID-19, particularly after the outbreak of violence in Galwan valley in June 2020. The 21st meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs took place on March 12 ([MEA.gov.in](https://mea.gov.in), March 12), and the 11th round of post-Galwan Senior Commander talks took place on the Indian side of the Moldo-Chushul meeting point on April 9 ([South China Morning Post](https://www.southchinamorningpost.com), April 12).

[7] See: Allen, Saunders and Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016*, July 2017; and Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *No Substitute for Experience: Chinese Antipiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden*, (U.S. Naval War College China Maritime Studies Red Book Number 10, November 2013).

[8] The ETF changeovers took place as follows: 34th to 35th May 2020, 35th to 36th September 2020, and 36th to 37th February 2021. The 38th ETF departed home on 16 May 2021. See: Chen Lufan, ed., “38th Chinese naval escort taskforce sets sail from Zhoushan,” *China Military Online*, May 16, 2021, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/focus/2021-05/16/content_4885533.htm.

[9] See: Kenneth W. Allen and Cristina L. Garafola, *70 Years of the PLA Air Force*, Chapters 4 and 6, (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 4 May 2021).

[10] China became the largest provider among the Perm Five starting in 2005. Dennis Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 178.

[11] For an example, one article shows Ethiopian civil aircraft unloading the supplies from China. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20200323-china-africa-coronavirus-alibaba-health-medical-equipment>.

The CCP's Shifting Priorities: An Analysis of Politburo Group Study Sessions

By Brian Hart

Introduction

On June 25, the 19th Central Committee Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its 31st “group study” (集体学习, *jiti xuexi*) session on the topic of “Making Good Use of Red Resources and Continuing Red Blood” (用好红色资源、赓续红色血脉, *yong hao hongse ziyuan, gengxu hongse xuema*). The meeting—held in the runup to celebrations of the CCP’s centenary—saw General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平) lead Politburo members on a special visit to Peking University (北京大学, *Beijing Daxue*) and Fengzeyuan (丰泽园), the former residence of Mao Zedong (毛泽东), to discuss party history ([Xinhua](#), June 26).

Observers of Chinese politics have long paid attention to Politburo group study sessions, as the meetings provide unique insights into the interests and priorities of the CCP’s elite. When analyzed across time, they offer a useful body of evidence for identifying significant changes in the party leadership’s priorities. A close analysis of study sessions reveals that, under Xi Jinping, the Politburo has more heavily focused on party affairs, foreign affairs, and security and military affairs. This represents a dramatic departure from the Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) era, when Politburo study sessions were dominated by economic development and other domestic issues. The Politburo has also pursued innovations in the format of study sessions during Xi’s tenure. In some instances, these changes have attracted greater attention to the meetings and brought a level of spectacle to what may have otherwise been more staid affairs. Taken together, the changes in topic and format have provided Xi with an enhanced platform from which to shape the party’s priorities and convey them to the public.



Image: The CCP Central Committee Politburo holds a study session on “Strengthening the Construction of Our Country’s International Media Capabilities” on May 31. (Source: [163.com](#)).

The Importance of Politburo Group Study Sessions

The CCP Politburo has convened group study sessions since the start of the Hu Jintao administration in 2002. To date, the Politburo has held a total of 151 sessions, including 77 during the Hu administration and 74 so far during the Xi administration. This averages out to about eight per year. Study sessions take place on the sidelines of the Politburo's main monthly meetings, usually on the same day as the monthly meeting but sometimes the day after ([People's Daily Online](#), accessed June 16).[1]

Most study sessions follow an established format. They typically feature a lecture by subject matter experts who are often professors at major Chinese universities or scholars at important think tanks or research institutes. During the lecture, experts “explain” (讲解, *jiangjie*) the topic at hand and often offer “work recommendations” (工作建议, *gongzuo jianyi*). After the lecture, attendees ask questions and discuss the topic, and then the meeting is capped off with a speech by the General Secretary ([Xinhua](#), June 1).

Since their inception, Politburo group study sessions have been an important means of demonstrating that the party leadership is studious and serious about governing. According to Zhu Lingjun (祝灵君), Deputy Director of the Party Building Education and Research Department of the Central Party School, the study sessions “are a great innovation that shows that the [CCP] is a Marxist ruling party that is good at learning, knows how to learn, and loves to learn” ([People's Daily Online](#), October 26, 2019).

The study sessions also provide a platform for the General Secretary and broader leadership to convey preferences and priorities to lower-level officials and the general Chinese public. High-level cadres within government ministries often study the speeches made by the General Secretary at study sessions on topics relevant to their work.[2] References to the study sessions also make their way directly into policies. In one recent example, “Guiding Opinions” (指导意见, *zhidao yijian*) on blockchain technology issued by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) and Cyberspace Administration of China in June 2021 referenced Xi Jinping’s speech at an October 2019 study session on blockchain technology ([MIIT](#), June 7).

The Politburo Gets a New Curriculum

During Xi Jinping’s tenure as CCP General Secretary, the Politburo has dramatically shifted the focus of its studies. While the specific topics studied by the Politburo range significantly from meeting to meeting, they can generally be grouped into several major categories, covering agriculture and rural affairs, culture and society, economics and finance, energy and environment, foreign affairs, governance and administration, health and education, history, party affairs, science and technology, and security and military affairs. Some less common topics, such as the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, can be grouped into an “other” category (see table below).

Category	Description
<i>Agriculture & Rural Affairs</i>	Includes issues specifically related to rural economic development, as well as agriculture and land management
<i>Culture & Society</i>	Includes topics such as population and aging, ethnic relations, religion, and development of “cultural industries”
<i>Economics & Finance</i>	Includes domestic and international economic and financial issues, including “reform and opening,” but excluding rural development
<i>Energy & Environment</i>	Includes topics such as energy security, resource conservation, climate change, and constructing “ecological civilization”
<i>Foreign Affairs</i>	Includes issues such as international propaganda and messaging, international organizations, and global governance
<i>Governance & Administration</i>	Includes topics related to legal and administrative reforms and discussions of high-level plans such as “Five-Year Plans”
<i>Health & Education</i>	Includes healthcare system reform, as well as education reform and human resources issues
<i>History</i>	Includes studies of Chinese historical events, such as the May Fourth Movement, as well as archaeology and world history
<i>Party Affairs</i>	Includes topics related to party building and organization, propaganda, and ideology
<i>Science & Technology</i>	Includes topics on specific technologies, as well as science and innovation more broadly, but excludes military-civil fusion
<i>Security & Military Affairs</i>	Includes military building and reform and military-civil fusion, as well as issues overtly tied to national and public security
<i>Other</i>	Includes anything not covered elsewhere

Table: Descriptions of CCP Politburo Group Study Session Topic Categories (Source: Author).

Under Hu Jintao, study sessions were dominated by domestic economic and social issues. Of the 77 study sessions held during Hu’s administration, 18 sessions (about 23 percent of the total) focused on economics and finance and 14 sessions (about 18 percent) focused on governance and administration. Another 10 focused on party affairs, accounting for 13 percent. Most of the remaining sessions were split among domestic-oriented categories like agriculture and rural affairs, culture and society, and health and education. Only four sessions were devoted to security and military affairs, and no sessions focused explicitly on foreign affairs (See Figure 1).[3]

The tallies for Xi’s Politburo tell a very different story. So far, the Politburo under Xi Jinping has held only nine study sessions on topics related to economics and finance. This is half as many as were held under Hu and accounts for just 12 percent of the total sessions under Xi. Meanwhile, Xi’s Politburo has held 17 sessions on topics falling under the category of party affairs, amounting to 23 percent of the total and making it the top category under Xi (see figure below). Additionally, whereas Hu oversaw zero study sessions on foreign affairs and four on security and military affairs, Xi has presided over six sessions on foreign affairs and nine on security and military affairs.

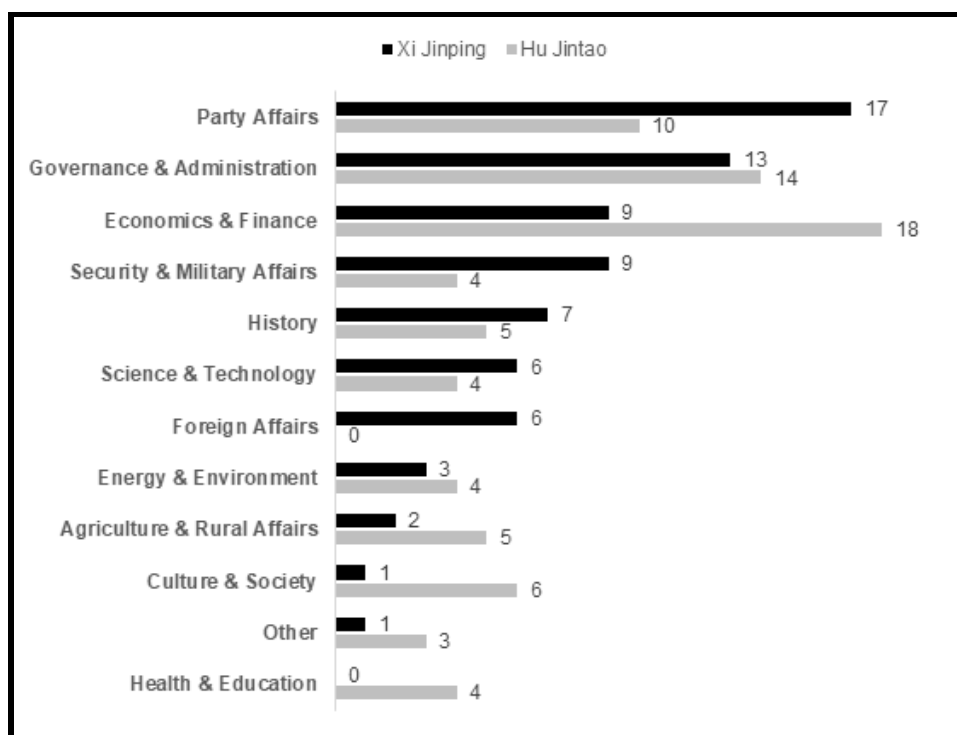


Figure: Comparison of CCP Politburo Group Study Session Topics under Xi Jinping and Hu Jintao
(Source: Compiled by author based on information from [People's Daily Online](http://www.people.com.cn)).

Certain topics have also become far more technical in recent years, especially within the science and technology (S&T) category. Under Hu, S&T topics were often broad in scope, including discussions on the 2020 S&T development strategy (2020年的中国科技发展战略, *2020 nian de zhongguo keji fazhan zhanlue*) and strategic emerging industries (战略性新兴产业, *zhanluexing xinxing chanye*). By comparison, Xi has presided over several discussions dedicated to specific technologies, including big data (大数据, *da shuju*), artificial intelligence (人工智能, *rengong zhineng*), blockchain technologies (区块链技术, *qukuailian jishu*), and quantum S&T (量子科技, *liangzi keji*). Notably, these technologies align closely with the industries prioritized under China's high-profile "Made in China 2025" (中国制造2025, *zhongguo zhizao 2025*) industrial plan that was announced in 2015 ([State Council](http://www.gov.cn), May 8, 2015).

Finally, the Politburo's new study session curriculum has been supplemented with occasional shake ups in format. Under Xi Jinping, the Politburo has ditched the halls of Zhongnanhai (中南海) three times in favor of going on a field trip—something that never happened under Hu. These unique sessions were far more visible and interesting than typical sessions, offering Xi and the rest of the Politburo a heightened opportunity to signal priorities and deliver important messages to the public.

The Politburo's first study session field trip came in September 2013 when the Politburo visited Zhongguancun (中关村), a major technology hub in Beijing, to talk with scientists ([Xinhua](http://www.xinhuanet.com), October 1, 2013). Then, in January 2019, the Politburo held a study session at the headquarters of *People's Daily* that focused

on the theme “The Age of Comprehensive Media and the Development of Media Fusion” (全媒体时代和媒体融合发展, *quan meiti shidai he meiti ronghe fazhan*). The study session received nine minutes of evening news coverage on state broadcaster China Central Television’s (CCTV) daily news program *Xinwen Lianbo* (新闻联播), and served as a striking demonstration of the CCP’s growing control over media ([Xinhua](#), January 25, 2019). The Politburo’s June 2021 trip to Peking University and Fengzeyuan was the third and most recent field trip. Like the visit to *People’s Daily* headquarters, it received significant attention—nearly 13 minutes of coverage on *Xinwen Lianbo* ([CCTV](#), June 26).

Xi Jinping Shapes the Politburo

Some of these shifts likely stem from a natural progression of the CCP’s priorities. As China has developed rapidly over the last two decades, the demands on the party to continue driving rapid economic growth have naturally slackened somewhat relative to other issues. Additionally, China’s rapid emergence as a major global power has increasingly compelled Beijing to grapple with its role in the world.

Still, many of the changes appear to be driven by Xi’s personal policy agenda. Compared to his predecessors, Xi has placed far greater emphasis on shoring up China’s international influence and military might. He has personally championed ambitious foreign policy projects such as the “Belt and Road Initiative” (一带一路倡议, *yidai yilu changyi*) and overseen China’s most sweeping military reforms in decades ([National Defense University](#), 2019). Similarly, Xi has put S&T issues at the forefront of his agenda for modernizing China, repeatedly calling for China to pursue “indigenous innovation” (自主创新, *zizhu chuangxin*) and achieve “self-reliance” (自力更生, *zili gengsheng*) ([Xinhua](#), October 13, 2020).

The available evidence suggests that Xi has significant personal influence over the selection of study session topics. According to an article published by China Social Science Net (a publication of the China Academy of Social Sciences), there are two main methods for selecting Politburo study session topics. One is for Politburo members to propose topics relevant to the policy areas under their purview. Another method allows for personnel within the CCP’s General Office (中共中央办公厅, *Zhong Gong Zhongyang Bangongting*), CCP leading small groups (LSGs, 领导小组, *lingdao xiaozu*) and commissions (委员会, *weiyuanhui*), and other policy institutions to submit topics ([China Social Science Net](#), July 3, 2011; [China Leadership Monitor](#), July 14, 2015).

This setup enables Xi Jinping to insert his preferences in two important ways. First, Xi has gained an unprecedented level of personal control over the LSGs and commissions that shape the CCP’s policies and plans. In addition to chairing the LSGs and commissions that have traditionally been led by the General Secretary, Xi has also established several new groups and anointed himself as their director.^[4] This provides Xi with critical influence over the bureaucratic pipeline that feeds topics onto the Politburo’s docket. Second, Xi likely gives final approval on which topics are ultimately selected, effectively giving him veto power ([China Leadership Monitor](#), July 14, 2015).

Conclusion

With 151 Politburo study sessions now on the books, it is possible to thoroughly analyze how issues and priorities have waxed and waned over time. The results are quite striking. There are clear signs that Xi Jinping has elevated the importance of party affairs, foreign affairs, and security and military affairs relative to his predecessor. Economic and social development still represents the core of the CCP's mission, but under Xi the party is clearly devoting more attention and resources to additional priorities. As Xi Jinping continues to spearhead efforts to modernize China, these trends are likely to continue and perhaps intensify. Going forward, analysts should continue to closely monitor Politburo group study sessions and make efforts to identify new emergent trends over time.

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[1] The analysis in this article draws heavily from the list of study sessions provided by People's Daily Online ([People's Daily Online](#), accessed June 16).

[2] For example, after the Politburo held a study session on intellectual property rights in November 2020, the Director and Party Secretary of the China National Intellectual Property Administration (CNIPA) led cadres in studying Xi's remarks during the study session ([CNIPA](#), February 3).

[3] Several sessions included discussions of international issues as a means of comparing them to China's domestic situation; however, there were no sessions explicitly dedicated to examining China's relations with other countries or the world more broadly.

[4] For more information on LSGs and commissions, see [Xinhua](#), October 22, 2018, and [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), October 17, 2017.

The PRC Leverages Taiwan's Water Crisis to Promote Cross-Strait Integrated Development

By Kristian McGuire

Introduction

The Republic of China (ROC or Taiwan) is emerging from its worst drought in more than half a century ([Focus Taiwan](#), June 2). Following the annual plenary sessions of the People's Republic of China's (PRC or China) National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC), which concluded in early March and are commonly referred to as the "Two Sessions," Chinese officials and party-state media outlets notably ramped up criticism of the Taiwan government's handling of the drought ([Taiwan Affairs Office](#), March 31). They pointed to the PRC's current provisioning of water to ROC-controlled islands and to its plans for other major cross-Strait infrastructure projects as evidence that Taiwan's future development is inherently dependent on China. Such commentary has brought into sharp relief the political motives that underlie China's designs for "cross-Strait integrated development" [两岸融合发展, *liangan ronghe fazhan*] ([Xinhua](#), March 5).



Image: On March 31, PRC State Council Taiwan Affairs Office spokesperson Zhu Fenglian expresses her "concerns and condolences to the Taiwanese people" about the ongoing drought situation, while also noting that Kinmen residents have benefited from water supply linkages with the mainland. (Source: [Sohu](#)).

Background

The PRC has long promoted increasing economic ties with the ROC in aid of broader unification goals. Historically, it has found strong support for economic development projects in the ROC-controlled offshore island groups of Kinmen (金门, *Jinmen*) and Matsu (马祖, *Mazu*) ([Commonwealth Magazine](#), December 17,

2019; [Taipei Times](#), July 29, 2012; [Taipei Times](#), July 6, 2019), which were the first ROC territories to establish limited postal, transportation and trade links with China in the 2000s—the Three Mini-Links (小三通, *xiao san tong*). County magistrates in Kinmen and Matsu have also supported establishing water, electricity, natural gas and bridge links—the “New Four Links” (新四通, *xin si tong*) or “Four Mini-Links” (小四通, *xiao si tong*)—with China ([China Brief](#), August 31, 2020; [China News](#), February 13, 2019).



Image: A map showing the position of the Kinmen and Matsu islands, which are ROC-controlled but located close to the PRC mainland. (Source: [osu.edu](#)).

In August 2018, the PRC’s Fujian Province began supplying fresh water to Kinmen via an undersea pipeline ([Xinhua](#), August 5, 2018). Kinmen aims to limit the proportion of water it derives from China to 30 percent of its total annual consumption, but Chinese media claimed that China met 68 percent of Kinmen’s water needs in March 2021 ([Taipei Times](#), July 29, 2018; [Guancha.cn](#), April 9). Although a water diversification plan approved by Taiwan’s Executive Yuan in 2013 was supposed to improve Kinmen’s local water resources to fulfill at least 75 percent of the territory’s water needs by 2031, a 2020 study by the Executive Yuan’s Economic Bureau found that Kinmen is set to miss that target ([ROC Executive Yuan](#), September 3, 2020).

A little over a year after Fujian commenced operation of a pipeline to Kinmen (financed mostly by the ROC), the province also started pumping up to 500 tons of fresh water per hour to a passenger terminal in Huangqi Town, Lianjiang County. Ships can quickly ferry this supply to the Matsu islands ([Fjsen.com](#), December 27, 2019). With a population approximately ten times smaller than Kinmen’s, Matsu has mostly been able to meet its water needs through investments in small reservoirs, desalination plants and limited shipments of fresh

water from Fujian ([ROC National Development Council](#), June 2020; [United Daily News](#), November 4, 2020). But Dongju, the only Matsu island that does not have a desalination plant, has notably had to rely on ROC military vessels for water supplies since March 2021 ([CNA](#), March 12; [United Daily News](#), June 14). China has stated its plans to eventually pump water directly to Matsu by way of a pipeline extending from Lianjiang County ([United Daily News](#), November 4, 2020).

In recent years, the Democratic Progress Party (DPP) government in Taipei has reasserted its authority over cross-strait interactions that might impact Taiwan's sovereignty ([Mainland Affairs Council](#), May 31, 2019; [China Brief](#), August 31, 2020). These moves have led Beijing to accuse the DPP of obstructing Taiwan's development and what Beijing maintains is a historical trend toward greater cross-strait economic and social integration that will ultimately lead to unification ([Xinhua](#), May 20, 2020; [Taiwan Affairs Office](#), January 1).

As Taiwan's Water Level Falls, Beijing's Political Motives Rise to the Surface

When Kinmen suffered a serious drought in 1996, Chen Guoliang, head of the Fujian Water Conservancy and Water and Electricity Department, offered to build water pipelines from coastal Fujian to Kinmen and Matsu. Chen insisted at the time that there was no political motive behind the proposed water projects ([UPI](#), June 24, 1996).

Nevertheless, during another severe drought in 2002 that impacted all ROC territories, Chinese officials and party-state media outlets used the opportunity to disparage the DPP administration in Taipei, which was reluctant to let Kinmen and Matsu purchase water from the PRC, and to promote the development of direct postal, transportation and trade links between China and Taiwan—the Three Links (三通, *san tong*) ([Xinhua](#), May 21, 2002; [China News](#), April 30, 2002).[1]

Taipei permitted Matsu to purchase a single boat-load of water from Fujian in May 2002. But Tsai Ing-wen, then head of the ROC's Mainland Affairs Council and now president of the ROC, stressed that the purchase was an experiment. She said that Taiwan needed to take into account the state of cross-strait relations and security concerns before purchasing more water from the PRC ([Kinmen Daily](#), April 25, 2002; [Liberty Times](#), April 25, 2002; [Kinmen Daily](#), May 8, 2002). Some in the ROC remained concerned about the political and national security implications of the projects when Taipei agreed to move forward with a pipeline to Kinmen in 2013 ([China Post](#), March 23, 2013; [Taipei Times](#), September 4, 2013).

Chinese media outlets have tracked the recent water crisis—which affected the main island of Taiwan more severely than the offshore islands—since last fall ([People's Daily](#), November 3, 2020). But their coverage intensified and became highly politicized amid the PRC's annual legislative Two Sessions (March 3-11). Party-state media picked up on a debate about the human and environmental factors behind the water shortage within Taiwan ([Xinhua](#), March 8). A March 9 editorial in the nationalist tabloid Global Times claimed that the drought's impact on Taiwan's semiconductor manufacturing industry reflected the “severe lack of

economic independence of the island.” It also highlighted that Kinmen, in contrast to the island of Taiwan, had overcome its long-running water issues by relying on China ([Global Times](#), March 9). The next day, Zhang Zhijun (张志军), head of China’s Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits and a former Minister of the PRC State Council Taiwan Affairs Office (国务院台湾事务办公室, *Guowuyuan Taiwan Shiwu Bangongshi*), called for the realization of the Four Mini-Links and the building up of Fujian as a demonstration area for cross-Strait integrated development ([China News](#), March 10).

On March 29, Zhu Fenglian (朱凤莲), a spokeswoman for the PRC Taiwan Affairs Office, accused DPP officials of defaming China by commenting on reports of systematic human rights abuses against China’s Uyghur ethnic minority and advised them to instead focus more on the hardships of the Taiwan people, such as the water shortage and ongoing drought ([Xinhua](#), March 29). Two days later, Zhu mentioned the drought again in reply to a question about Beijing’s response to recent proposals by Taipei. She noted that Kinmen had benefitted from its new water pipeline and that China had accepted its request to increase the water supply during the current drought. Zhu asserted that only when cross-Strait relations were good would the Taiwanese people’s well-being improve, and called for “compatriots” (同胞, *tongbao*) on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to work together to “remove obstacles” (排除障碍, *paichu zhangai*) and to promote their interests and well-being ([Taiwan Affairs Office](#), March 31).

Knock-On Media Blitz

After the Taiwan water crisis was elevated as a political topic by both the government and media in March, a number of party-state media outlets and commentators, including some with ties to organizations affiliated with Chinese united front work, continued to heavily promote Beijing’s narrative about Taiwan’s water crisis.[2] This narrative broadly consists of four main themes: 1) the DPP bears responsibility for Taiwan’s water shortage; 2) China’s provision of water to Kinmen demonstrates an inevitable trend towards greater cross-Strait integrated development; 3) the DPP is trying to obstruct cross-Strait integrated development, hurting the people of Taiwan; and 4) people in Taiwan and China need to push ahead with integrated development, especially the Four Mini-Links ([Taiwan Affairs Office](#), March 31; [China News](#), April 14).[3]

Chen Lili (陈丽丽), executive director of the Minnan Normal University Cross-Strait Family Research Institute, a Fujian-based think tank that contributes to Taiwan-related united front work, touched upon all four narrative themes in an April interview with Chinese state news agency Xinhua. She also argued that water is but one of Taiwan’s deficiencies, adding that the island also lacks electricity, people, professional talent, labor and land; this analysis is similar to what ROC industry associations and officials have called Taiwan’s “Five Shortages,” i.e., water, electricity, labor, professional talent and land ([Xinhua](#), April 13; [China Daily](#), April 15; [The News Lens](#), April 14, 2018).

Contributors to the “Sun Moon Talk” (日月谈, *Ri Yue Tan*) column in the overseas edition of People’s Daily which focuses on Taiwan affairs—have regularly blamed the DPP for mismanaging Taiwan’s water resources and blocking cross-Strait exchanges and development projects (Haiwainet.cn, April 22; [People’s Daily](http://People's Daily), April 30; Haiwainet.cn, May 10).



Image: As Taiwan and parts of southern China emerged from drought, Chinese state media published a series of photos on May 18 showing PRC President Xi Jinping “overlooking railings, observing water conditions, and thinking about governance” (凭栏眺望，察水情，思治道, pinglan tiaowang, cha shuiqing, si zhidao) (Source: CCTV.com)

Taiwan’s water problems eased somewhat in May with the arrival of the rainy season (Straits Times, June 7). A deadly train accident in April, major power outages and a surge in COVID-19 cases also became fresh fodder for Chinese news media to criticize the DPP’s governance ability and argue that Taiwan’s development depends on China (Ta Kung Pao, May 27; Huaxia.com, May 19). Chinese media outlets have continued to incorporate the water issue into their attacks against the DPP (Voice of the Strait, May 30; Taihainet.com, June 1). But by early June, their main focus was on Taiwan’s ban of Chinese-made vaccines (Global Times, June 11).

Conclusion

The Chinese leadership's decision to once again exploit a drought in Taiwan to attack the DPP and promote deeper cross-strait integration has likely confirmed the suspicions of Taipei, already wary that Beijing would use the Four Mini-Links to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty ([ROC Mainland Affairs Council](#), June 21, 2019). Taipei has criticized Beijing for its use of united front tactics related to the Kinmen water project even before the recent drought ([ROC Mainland Affairs Council](#), August 5, 2018).

Beijing's targeting of the DPP appears to have resonated with some of the party's domestic political rivals. On May 19, Johnny Chiang, chairman of the KMT, remarked that the fifth anniversary of President Tsai Ing-wen's DPP administration the next day would be notable for Taiwan's "lack of water, lack of electricity and lack of vaccines" (缺水, 缺电, 缺疫苗, *queshui, quedian, quebingmiao*) ([Central News Agency](#), May 19).

Commentators in Kinmen and Matsu who believe that engagement with China will benefit their territories have been receptive to Beijing's calls to remove barriers to cross-strait social and economic engagement ([Kinmen Daily News](#), March 6; [Fjsen.com](#), March 31). But even in the offshore islands, which regularly vote for pro-engagement KMT politicians, support for increasing economic ties does not translate to support for becoming politically closer to Beijing ([ROC Mainland Affairs Council](#), October 2020). Many of the major cross-strait development projects that Beijing promotes, such as the Four Mini-Links, are targeted at real, acknowledged development challenges facing Taiwan ([The News Lens](#), April 14, 2018). In some cases, such as the offshore water projects, China is uniquely positioned to help meet these challenges due to geographical or other factors. But, as demonstrated by its messaging on the recent water crisis, Beijing also leverages these projects as proof of its performance legitimacy and evidence that Taiwan is inherently dependent on China for essential resources and economic growth.

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Notes

[1] Chinese news coverage of the 2002 drought sometimes amplified the voices of Taipei's domestic critics ([China News](#), May 10, 2002). One Chinese state media outlet reported on Lien Chan (连战), the chairman of Taiwan's main opposition party the Kuomintang (KMT), criticizing the DPP administration for its supposed shortcomings in preparing for and managing the drought ([China News](#), April 24, 2002).

[2] The CCP's united front work broadly speaking can be defined as its efforts to influence and leverage non-party institutions both at home and abroad in order to serve the party's goals. Following a recent reorganization of the CCP United Front Work Department (UFWD), the CCP has increased its united front

work targeting overseas Chinese and religious groups, in addition to its longstanding historic focuses on sensitive peripheral populations in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong/Macao, and Taiwan. For more on the UFWD's recent reorganization, see [China Brief](#), May 19, 2019.

[3] For more examples, see: "Taiwan's Water Shortage Stems from the DPP Administration's 'Lack of Moral' Governance" ([台湾缺水源于民进党当局“缺德”的施政], *Taiwan Que Shui Yuanyu Minjindang Dangju 'Que De' De Shizheng*, cross-posted to [CCTV.com](#), April 11; [Global Times](#), April 11; [China News](#), April 12; [People's Daily](#), April 13; "Fujian Jin River Increases Water Supply to Kinmen 'Quenches Thirst' Kinmen Compatriots Hope Cross-Strait 'New Four Links' Soon Realized" ([福建晋江加大供水量为金门“解渴”金胞盼两岸“新四通”早日实现], *Fujian Jinjiang Jiada Gong Shui Liang Wei 'Jieke' Jinbao Pan Liangan 'Xin Si Tong' Zaori Shixian*), published on a variety of national and regional Chinese party-state media websites, including [China News](#), April 15; [Fjsen.com](#), April 15; [Wen Wei Po](#), April 16; [Taiwan.cn](#), April 16.

The head of the united front-linked Kinmen Compatriots Association of Fujian Province (福建省金门同胞联谊会, *Fujian Sheng Jinmen Tongbao Lianyihui*), Chen Dubin (陈笃彬), has also argued that the Kinmen water pipeline's success proves that Kinmen and Matsu should realize the Four Mini-Links ([Fjsen.com](#), March 31; [China News](#), April 15).

Giving Precision Munitions ‘Eyes’ and a ‘Brain’: The State of PLA Research on Military Target Recognition

By Alex Barker

Introduction

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has identified artificial intelligence (AI) as an economic and security developmental priority. The State Council’s National AI Development Plan, released in July of 2017, calls AI “the new focus of world competition” and the 14th Five Year Plan, adopted in March 2021, promotes the “deep integration of internet, big data and artificial intelligence in industries” ([State Council](#), July 8, 2017; [Xinhua](#), November 3, 2020). China’s emphasis on AI can be considered a “whole of government” approach, which has important ramifications for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Specifically, China’s “military-civil fusion” (军民融合, *jun min ronghe*) strategy is intended to facilitate transfers of technology and expertise between the commercial and military sectors, including in the field of AI.

This article examines writings by PLA-affiliated authors and private sector researchers leveraging open-source research—much of which is developed in the U.S.—to improve China’s automatic military target recognition capabilities. Sources were drawn from the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and ultimately focused on 16 research papers. Where possible, articles were chosen based on their number of citations, though the slow pace of the academic publishing cycle means that many valuable recent articles have yet to be cited.

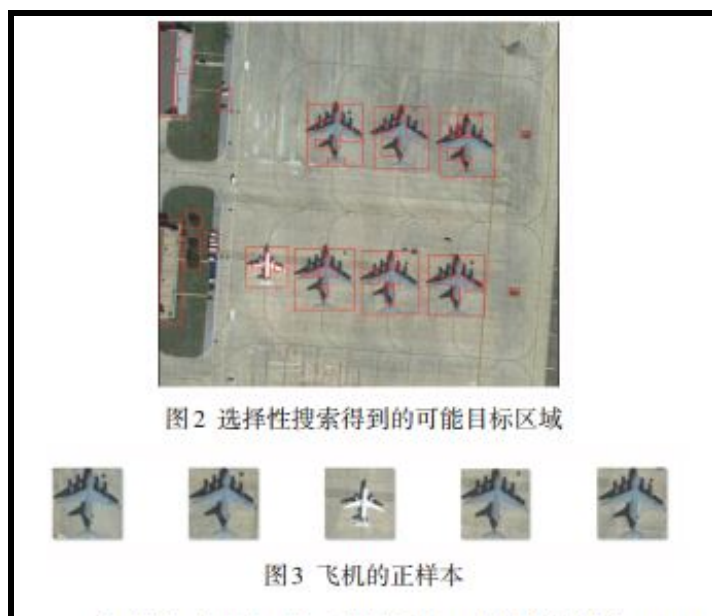


Image: Pictures from one 2020 article demonstrate the ability of computer vision-assisted target recognition to identify aircraft on a tarmac (Source: Song et al., see note [10]).

The PLA's Interest in AI

Since the early 2000s, PLA doctrine has focused on enabling “informationized” (信息化, *xinxi hua*) warfare, a model of network-centric operations derived from the U.S. military. Over the past five years, PLA writings have progressively discussed the idea that military AI, or “intelligentization” (智能化, *zhineng hua*) is “the development and inheritance of military informationization” and the likely form of future warfare.[1] In his 2017 report to the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping called on the military to “prepare for war” by, among other things, “accelerating the process of military intelligentization” and “improving the ability for joint operations based on internet and information systems.”[2]

One of the most active fields of PLA AI research is applying machine learning to computer vision—teaching computers how to interpret the visual world ([CSET](#), March 2021). Machine learning uses advanced pattern recognition in which an algorithm draws inferences from large datasets, improving its ability to do so with increased exposure to data. Deep learning (深度学习, *shendu xuexi*) is a form of “unsupervised” machine learning that allows a program to use layered algorithms, called a neural network, to train itself on how to make conclusions from datasets. For image recognition, software engineers allow programs to train on a set of sample images that include the target object.

According to a rough count of publicly available Chinese journal publications, papers on deep learning for military image recognition, usually called “military target recognition” (军事目标识别, *junshi mubiao zhi bie*) increased by an average of 20 percent from 2016 to 2019.[3] Although many of these papers assess the current state of research and do not themselves add substantively to the field, the number reflects the high attention that the field receives in PLA circles.

PLA officers and academic researchers alike are bullish on deep learning’s value for military applications. According to researchers at the PLA Army Academy of Armored Forces, deep learning offers advantages over traditional machine learning because it avoids the need for manual extraction of target features in the training dataset, an onerous chore when accurate programs demand tens of thousands of image samples.[4]

Many PLA researchers explicitly state that their research goal is to aid the development of intelligent precision guided munitions (PGMs). Authors repeatedly stress the need to “install ‘eyes’ and a ‘brain’ in weapons,” or “to give weapons a human-like ability to recognize military targets.”[5] In addition to developing guidance systems, some researchers also state that computer vision could be useful in processing satellite or other reconnaissance imagery. The PLA believes it is not alone in weaponizing AI. Researchers frequently compare their own results to perceived U.S. progress in AI. One highly cited paper from an author at a state-owned enterprise in the technology sector argues that the U.S. “sees advanced missiles and AI as key to dealing with anti-access, area-denial threats.”[6]

Does AI Image Recognition Work?

Image recognition for military applications requires a higher degree of accuracy for target detection than civilian applications of image processing, but early research is promising.[7] While the deep learning tests described in the literature can correctly identify military equipment more than 85 percent of the time, PLA authors stress the need for further development to improve accuracy.

PLA research on deep learning applications for image recognition broadly fall into two categories: object detection and classification. Object recognition algorithms can detect things that exist in an image but cannot properly classify them without the aid of another trained neural network. PRC literature emphasizes several open-source object detection platforms, all of which were originally developed for civilian applications. In the last two years, Single Shot Detector 300 (SSD300) and “You Only Look Once” (YOLO) have become commonly cited algorithms. Both can detect multiple object boxes within a single image frame and can process at high framerates, which is necessary for real time applications ([Jonathan Hui](#), March 13, 2018).[8] In PLA tests, these algorithms can accurately detect military objects with greater than 80 percent accuracy, though the accuracy for small targets or “dense” targets—objects clustered closely together—is lower. Older PLA research also mentions other algorithms, including variations on Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) such as Faster RCNN or R-FCN. Many of these other algorithms suffer from an inability to process images in real time but could be of value for tasks where high framerate is not a requirement ([towardsdatascience.com](#), August 3, 2018).

PLA researchers must design their own sets of training data to develop object classifiers and correctly categorize objects like tanks and fighter aircraft in both live video and still imagery. To do this, they use a variety of algorithms including CNNs and supervised learning processes such as Support Vector Machines (SVMs). One paper attempting to develop image processing for cruise missile ground target detection restricts the training database to aerial views of military vehicles.[9] Another research group attempting to parse “long range reconnaissance data” uses satellite and aerial imagery to train a neural network to correctly identify U.S. military aircraft in parked positions on runways alongside civilian aircraft, achieving an accuracy of roughly 92 percent.[10] A not-insignificant body of research focuses entirely on detecting naval targets, a field described as being an excellent fit for image recognition studies due to the challenges associated with infrared and other sensors in maritime conditions.[11]

Finally, some PLA researchers are attempting to classify objects by “threat.” A dissertation from 2020 uses a CNN to sort image objects by type, distance, mobility and “attack” factors, creating a threat categorization that weights certain types of military platforms over others, depending on situational guidelines. This algorithm correctly identified threats with an average accuracy in the low 90s.[12]

Challenges for Future Development

Throughout the literature, authors are quick to moderate expectations, often referring to the fact that combat conditions introduce challenges that may not be reflected in their tests. Deep learning is still considered an “immature” technology by many researchers, though one with strong potential for further development. Research in the field is expensive, however, due to the high cost of acquiring graphical processing units (GPUs) necessary for computer vision computation.

Another issue is the PLA’s reliance on outside sources for image recognition algorithms. Both SSD300 and YOLO are open source, as are most CNN algorithms referenced by researchers. The codebase of SSD300 is developed and maintained by the NVIDIA corporation, while YOLO is developed by Joseph Redmon, a computer science graduate student at the University of Washington in Seattle.

At least some authors note that they have difficulty acquiring enough samples to develop satisfactory models for target recognition, especially when it comes to image classification. Analysts at the PLA’s Naval Research Academy note the issue of sample quality is a problem given deep learning models must be robust enough to function under “uncertain information conditions.”^[13] Images of military equipment, vehicles, or personnel, especially in realistic settings, are far less available on the internet than comparable civilian objects. Many CNNs already have difficulty recognizing small targets or long-range targets, something that is exacerbated by the lack of availability of these types of military images.^[14]

Building a database of sample images is particularly challenging when using “supervised learning”—in which developers must classify the object of interest in each sample for an algorithm—instead of deep learning. An MA student in Military Engineering using YOLO v3 notes that a military internal training database of images does not provide “enough quantity and types of targets,” and necessitates supplementary images gathered from open sources and painstakingly annotated. The same author suggests that additional work be carried out on unsupervised learning for target recognition, underscoring the PLA’s strong interest in deep learning.^[15]

Conclusion

The PLA sees significant military applications for AI and is actively developing “intelligentized” weapons designed to detect and attack U.S. aircraft, ships, and armored vehicles. While this article focuses on the PLA’s development of computer vision, Chinese researchers are also employing deep learning in adjacent fields such as in-flight course correction for cruise missiles.

The PLA’s progress in adapting deep learning for image recognition is an example of the need for U.S. policymakers and developers alike to consider how open-source technology can be utilized by opponents. Indeed, development of YOLO is partially funded by the Office of Naval Research, a detail that may have

drawn the attention of Chinese researchers interested in emulating U.S. advancements in AI. Reliance upon open architecture is a fundamental tenet of the American innovation ecosystem and should not be restricted to compete with the PRC. Rather, the defense community should see this as an advantage. Knowledge of which algorithms the PLA will rely upon allows the United States to determine possible weaknesses, exploit opportunities for data poisoning, and train against these algorithms in exercises.

Moreover, the challenges reported in gathering sufficient samples for image classification underscore the need to consider how military systems imagery in the public domain will assist the PLA. While the PLA will undoubtedly train neural networks off its own classified imagery, commercial satellite and UAV imagery will likely assist this effort, no matter whether it is first acquired by the PRC's military or private sector. Algorithms can become accurate by training off civilian imagery, then be turned over to the PLA for further development. A strong case is emerging for restricting export of imagery in the same way as critical dual-use technologies.

The state of public access literature suggests that significant obstacles remain before the PLA will be capable of using AI as a guidance system for PGMs. But the direction of research is disturbing given that tests already indicate a high degree of accuracy, which is enough to aid imagery analysts and ensure continued PLA attempts at weaponization. In the near future, an emerging threat is the PLA's potential to field "fire and forget" PGMs that can independently assess targets, especially if linked with the ability to loiter until targets become available. This type of stand-off munition would enhance the PLA's already formidable combat capabilities in the Western Pacific.

Finally, this study of open-source literature suggests that the conversations surrounding AI's use in the military are far different in China than in the United States. The PLA appears to adopt an approach of rapidly "failing forward" in attempts to exploit AI regardless of its maturity, in part motivated by a perception that the U.S. military still retains a large technological lead over it. Even if Americans are unwilling to use AI in weapons, policymakers and engineers should not expect that the same legal and ethical limitations on AI that apply in the U.S. will guide its development in the PRC.

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Notes

[1] Wang Li (王莉), “人工智能在军事领域的渗透与应用思考 [Thinking on the Penetration and Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Military Field].” *Science and Technology Review* 35 no. 15 (2017): 17.

[2] “中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会开幕会：直播摘要 [Opening Meeting of the Nineteenth Congress of Communist Party of China: Livestream Summary].” Web, 2017. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/19th/GB/414745/414754/index.html>

[3] Based on papers available through the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI.net).

[4] Yang Chaohong (杨朝红), “基于优化SSD300的小尺度典型军事目标识别方法研究 [Research on a Recognition Algorithm for Typical Small-Sale Military Targets Based on Optimized SSD300].” *Computer and Information Technology* no. 4 (2020): 19.

[5] Zhu Jia (朱家), “复杂环境下军事目标检测与威胁度评估 [Threat Assessment and Detection of Military Targets in Complex Environments].” MA diss., (North University of China, 2020), 76; Ma Qifeng (马奇锋), “基于深度学习的军事目标检测技术研究 [Research on Military Target Detection Technology Based on Deep Learning].” MA diss., (North University of China, 2020), 4.

[6] Wang, “Penetration and Use of Artificial Intelligence,” 15.

[7] Yang, “Research on a Recognition Algorithm,” 19.

[8] See a demonstration of YOLO v3 here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPU2HistivI>

[9] Zhang Ben (张奔), Jia Jing (贾婧) and Wang Fei (王伟). “基于YOLOv3的军事目标检测算法改进 [Improvements on Military Target Detection Algorithm Based on YOLOv3].” *Internet Security Technology and Use* no. 1 (2021): 44.

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[11] Zhou Yao (周瑶), “基于深度学习的舰船目标检测与识别 [Ship Target Detection and Recognition Based on Deep Learning].” MA Diss., (Harbin Institute of Technology, 2018), 3.

[12] Zhu, "Threat Assessment and Detection of Military Targets," 57.

[13] Luo Rong (罗荣), Wang Liang (王亮), Xiao Yujie (肖玉杰) et al, "深度学习技术在军事领域应用 [Applications of Deep Learning Technology in the Military Field]." *Command Control and Simulation* no. 1 (2020): 3.

[14] Zhu, "Threat Assessment and Detection of Military Targets," 56.

[15] Ma, "Research on Military Target Detection," 68.
