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Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: Beijing's Blueprint for Foreign Relations or Sui Generis?

The triannual Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC, 中非合作论坛, *Zhongfei hezuo luntan*) convened in Dakar, Senegal this week ([Xinhua](#), November 29). This year's meeting was held at the ministerial level, a departure from the last two fora, which were leader-level summits. More African heads of state, 50, attended the 2018 FOCAC meeting in Beijing than the UN General Assembly that year. The summit was a particularly successful moment for President Xi Jinping's foreign policy as he welcomed three new participants — Gambia, Burkina Faso and Sao Tome and Principe that had recently switched their diplomatic recognition from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China (PRC) leaving Taiwan with only one diplomatic partner in Africa, Eswatini ([Xinhua](#), September 3, 2018; [FOCAC 2018](#)). This year's meeting occurs at a more

difficult juncture for China and many African states with countries in Southern Africa facing fresh travel bans following the emergence of the Omicron variant, and China limiting its foreign investment as it focuses on economic challenges, including ballooning debt, at home.

Despite the different atmospherics surrounding FOCAC 2021, the scaled-down version of the meeting is due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, and is not the result of any noticeable depreciation in relations between China and African states. Xi addressed the opening ceremony virtually, with many African leaders watching via videoconference, as Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with counterparts from 53 African countries in Dakar ([Xinhua](#), November 29). This continued high-level of official participation indicates that FOCAC still carries great significance for many African countries and China, where the China-Africa relationship is hailed as a “model for South-South cooperation” (南南合作典范, *nan nan hezou dianfang*) ([Guangming Daily](#), November 19).



(PRC President Xi Jinping addresses the opening ceremony of FOCAC via video link, source: [Xinhua](#))

A Framework for China-Africa Relations

The PRC uses FOCAC to institutionalize and provide a strategic framework for its engagement with Africa. At the 2018 summit, Xi launched eight major initiatives: industrial promotion, infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, green development, capacity building, health care, people-to-people exchange, and security ([Xinhua](#), September 3, 2018). Some of these efforts have weathered the impact of COVID-19. For example,

China-Africa trade volumes are at their highest level in history amounting to \$185.2 billion over the first three quarters of 2021 ([Xinhua](#), November 17). China has also pushed through with the establishment of ten Luban Workshops, which seek to boost local African capacity through technical and vocational education training programs ([China Brief](#), November 5).

Other areas, particularly people-to-people exchanges, have been stymied by the deleterious impact of COVID-19 on international travel. For example, in 2018, Xi stated “more African countries are welcome to become destinations for Chinese tour groups”, which is how many Chinese travel overseas, but tourism flows from China have largely dried up during the pandemic ([Xinhua](#), September 3, 2018). For example, in 2020, travel from China plunged by 87%, and has only recovered to a fraction of pre-pandemic levels ([Reuters](#), November 22).

China’s economic reorientation may also be affecting its investment in African countries through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China investment in energy and infrastructure projects in Africa has declined by around 70 percent from a peak of \$11 billion in 2017 to \$2.8 billion in 2019, and \$3.3 billion in 2020 ([Baker McKenzie](#), April 29). The decline, underway well before the pandemic, indicates China’s appetite for investment in Africa may be waning. China has also vigorously denied recent speculation that it might take possession of Entebbe airport in Uganda due to Kampala’s failure to meet stringent conditions for loans provided by the China Export-Import Bank, which if true, would contravene Beijing’s mantra that Western allegations of “debt trap diplomacy” are completely groundless ([VOA](#), November 29; [CGTN](#), November 30).

China-Africa Relations and Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy

China derives tangible diplomatic, economic and security benefits from its engagement with Africa, but there is also an important normative and global governance element to the relationship. The PRC State Council recently released a new white paper, which coincided with FOCAC, entitled “China and Africa in the New Era A Partnership of Equals” that lays out the core principles of China-Africa relations, highlights recent successes of the relationship, and provides a roadmap for future cooperation ([State Council Information Office \(SCIO\)](#), November 26). The principles that the PRC attaches to the China-Africa relationship are drawn from its emerging foreign policy canon-“Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy” (习近平外交思想, *Xi Jinping Waijiao Sixiang*), which is a synthesis of the principles advanced by Xi on the conduct of international diplomacy and global development since 2013 ([FMPRC](#), November 26). Taken together, these concepts present an alternative, Sinocentric model for the international system. For example, per the white paper, the first principle of China-Africa engagement is “amity, sincerity, mutual benefits and shared interests,” (真实亲诚, *zhen, shi, qin, cheng*). This term was originally used by Xi in his October 2013 address at a symposium on diplomatic work in neighboring countries, and has since been enshrined as a guideword for China’s preferred form of relationships with friendly countries in the near abroad and Global South ([China News](#), October 10, 2014).

Establishing strong relations with the Global South is a central pillar of Xi's emerging vision for a global order-centered on a "Community of Common Destiny" (人类命运共同体, *renlei mingyun gongtongti*), which China has sought to translate from aspiration to reality through BRI and corresponding programs ([Xinhua](#), March 24, 2020). In practice, the "Community of Common Destiny" provides a normative paradigm for China's efforts to bring about a loosely hegemonic, Sino-centric international sub-system that is largely centered in the Global South ([NBR](#), January 2020). In this emerging order, China's interests are afforded pride of place, and participating states are required to demonstrate at least pro forma obeisance to Beijing.

A China "Model for World Development and Cooperation"?

China has long celebrated its special relationship with African countries. In his FOCAC keynote, Xi stated that "over the past 65 years, China and Africa have forged unbreakable fraternity in our struggle against imperialism and colonialism, and embarked on a distinct path of cooperation in our journey toward development and revitalization" ([FMPRC](#), November 29). However, Xi has departed from his predecessors, in promoting China-Africa relations as "a shining example for building a new type of international relations", i.e., a model for China's relations with other regions and the world ([Xinhua](#), November 26, 2021). By contrast, in his 2006 FOCAC address, President Hu Jintao celebrated China and Africa's "major contribution to the advancement of human civilization", but did not explicitly cite the China-Africa relationship as a model for world affairs ([Xinhua](#), November 4, 2006). The new White Paper also cites China-Africa relations as "an Exemplary Model for World Development and Cooperation" that will set "an example by increasing the wellbeing of humanity, creating a new type of international relations, and building a global community of shared future" ([SCIO](#), November 26).

In recent years, China has sought to create new institutions, or revive old ones, along the lines of the FOCAC that could best be approximated as "China plus many" [with China in the center] in order to promote alternatives to traditional international institutions, which Beijing sees as dominated by the West ([National Interest](#), September 4, 2018). In contrast to formal US alliance systems, these regional groupings contain networks of strategic partnerships with titles that denote varying degrees of amity. For example, China-Russia relations, which amount to a de facto entente, are designated as a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era, the top tier of partnership in the PRC's hierarchy of foreign relations ([MERICS](#), August 24). A rung down are "all around strategic partnerships" with countries that China has cordial and productive relations, for example this term was applied to China-Germany relations in 2014 ([MFA](#), March 29, 2014). Finally, a strategic partnership, which is the most widely used designation, denotes relations with countries that China cooperates with, albeit sometimes selectively on international issues, and has been used for relations with a wide range of countries from Brazil to Sudan to Ukraine.

Apart from FOCAC, China's success in creating, viable Sinocentric multilateral institutions in other regions has been marginal. The 16+1 initiative between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries has lost momentum. Enthusiasm among CEE states for deepening ties with China has waned as Chinese investment pledges have not fully materialized, and concerns over China's political interference, and human rights record have heightened. Lithuania left the group in May calling it divisive, and to Beijing's chagrin, has subsequently

deepened its ties with Taiwan ([Politico EU](#), May 21) As China has lost ground in the region, Taiwan has found willing partners in its quest for greater international space, which was highlighted by Foreign Minister Joseph Wu's visits to the Czech Republic and Slovakia in October ([Taiwan News](#), October 28).

The Shanghai Cooperative Organization is an important vehicle for China's engagement with South and Central Asia, but lacks the Sino-centricity of FOCAC or 16+1 due to the presence of Russia, which is still a major player in the region, and now India. Likewise, the ASEAN-plus China dialogue is a key part of China's engagement with Southeast Asia. China certainly has influence in ASEAN, including through proxies such as Cambodia, but Beijing has no hope of formal membership to say nothing of advancing a Chinese alternative, which would fall flat given the centrality of ASEAN to regional diplomacy.

These limitations indicate that for Beijing replicating the success of FOCAC outside the African context is increasingly unlikely. Nevertheless, under Xi, China is likely to remain undaunted in its push for a "new type international relations."

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A New Chinese National Security Bureaucracy Emerges

By Joel Wuthnow



(Local officials attend the first county-level NSC meeting in Dingnan, Jiangxi province, source: [Sohu](https://www.sohu.com), July 19, 2019)

Introduction

An intriguing aspect of General Secretary Xi Jinping's political consolidation was the establishment of a Central National Security Commission (CNSC; 中央国家安全委员会, *Zhongyang guojia anquan weiyuanhui*) at the end of 2013. The CNSC seemingly empowered Xi, who was put in charge of the new body, and through a permanent staff structure, perhaps set the stage for more effective strategic planning and crisis response [1]. Over the last few years, subordinate National Security Commissions (NSCs) have been installed at all tiers of the party structure down to the county level. The CNSC thus sits atop a new organizational hierarchy that strengthens Xi's ability to set the agenda and improves the party's ability to coordinate national security affairs. While the system's political utility for Xi is clear, its role in improving crisis response at the local level could be constrained by several factors.

Revisiting the CNSC

The CNSC fits into a larger construct known as the “national security system” (国家安全体系, *Guojia anquan tixi*) that has been developed during the Xi era to protect the party from domestic and foreign threats. The ideational core of the system is the “holistic national security concept” (总体国家安全观, *zongti guojia anquan guan*) that Xi outlined at the first CNSC meeting in April 2014 ([Xinhua](#), 2014). The concept’s key characteristic is that the party cannot think of security in narrow, traditional terms ([China Brief](#), 2015). Rather, the concept must be defined more broadly to encompass diverse areas such as cybersecurity, biosecurity, energy security, and counterterrorism, many of which involve interactions between domestic security and the outside world—Xi mentioned 11 areas in total. Other changes complemented the implementation of this emerging security system, including reforms to the People’s Armed Police (PAP), new laws on espionage, NGOs, and cybersecurity [2], and a formal “national security strategy” (国家安全战略, *Guojia anquan zhanlüe*). In November 2021, the Politburo deliberated the second such “strategy,” which will cover 2021-2035; an earlier document was approved in 2015 ([Xinhua](#), 2021).

As the organizational face of the “national security system,” the CNSC was intended to improve high-level coordination of national security work. In the past, excessive bureaucratic stove-piping and limited information sharing constrained strategic planning and crisis response [3]. The CNSC would alleviate those problems by ensuring the involvement of Xi, who could presumably compel the bureaucracy to cooperate. This was accompanied by the establishment of a permanent CNSC staff in the Central Committee General Office, which is led by a top party official (previously Li Zhanshu and now Ding Xuexiang; the current deputy head has been reported as Minister of State Security Chen Wenqing) ([The Paper](#), May 7). The staff also included representatives from civilian ministries and the military. The CNSC would thus be more cohesive than a previous ad-hoc National Security Leading Small Group set up in 2000 under Jiang Zemin [4].

The 19th Party Congress in October 2017 laid the basis for further developments by writing the “holistic national security concept” into the party’s platform and granting Xi another five-year term as party general-secretary ([Xinhua](#), 2017). In April 2018, Xi once again addressed the CNSC, stating that the body had become the “main framework for the national security system” and a “coordination mechanism for national security work” under the party’s leadership ([Xinhua](#), 2018). In a sign of impending changes, Xi also cited new regulations that “clarified the main responsibilities of party committees at all levels to strengthen supervision and inspection... to ensure that the central party’s decisions on national security work have been implemented” ([Xinhua](#), 2018).

A Proliferation of NSCs

Xi’s invocation of “party committees at all levels” raised the question of how lower tiers of the party hierarchy would fit into the “national security system.” Answers came in early 2019 when subordinate NSCs began to appear throughout the party structure—provinces, prefectures, municipalities, city districts, and counties now

all have NSCs within their party committees, forming a vertical system culminating in the CNSC (see example below).

Example: National Security Commission Hierarchy



Some details on the broader NSC system have come to light. Mirroring the CNSC, the lower level NSCs are chaired by the relevant party committee secretary, with deputy party secretaries (one of whom also serves as state administrative leader, such as governor or mayor) serving as NSC vice chairs. These officials sit on an NSC standing committee (常务委员会, *Changwu weiyuanhui*) while others are NSC “members” (委员, *weiyuan*). Like the CNSC, lower level NSCs are managed by “offices” (办公室, *bangongshi*) led by a director and deputy director. The NSC offices are one of several supporting the party committees, alongside foreign affairs, cyber security, military-civilian fusion, economic reform, and other offices, but NSC offices are unique in that they are located within the party committee general offices (办公厅, *bangongting*)[5]. This puts NSC offices at the center of the daily management of party affairs and underscoring the sensitivity of their duties [6]. Information from the provincial party committees suggests that the NSCs are meant to serve as “discussion and coordination organs” (议事协调结构, *yishi jietao jiegou*), replacing existing “national security leading small groups” (国家安全工作领导小组, *guojia anquan gongzuo lingdao xiaozu*). (Information from the Shanxi provincial party committee is available at [Shanxi Daily](#), October 29, 2018; information from the Anhui committee is at [Discipline, Inspection and Supervision of Anhui](#)). In order to facilitate discussion, the NSCs hold plenary meetings that are frequently publicized in local media. The first provincial plenaries were convened in March 2019, with city and county-level meetings held several months later. By February 2021, the Hunan provincial NSC had held its fourth plenum, indicating that these meetings occur about one or two times per

year ([Hunan Government](#), 2021). The timing indicates that CNSC plenaries take place first (with at least four having taken place since the 19th Party Congress, but only one that has been publicized), followed by provincial plenaries, and then lower-level meetings, each informing the agenda for the next session.

Political themes are a consistent feature of these plenums. Areas of focus include studying Xi's speeches, such as his comments to recent Politburo study sessions focused on national security and his speeches to CNSC meetings; strengthening the "party's centralized and unified leadership" over national security work (党对国家安全工作的集中统一领导, *Dang dui guojia anquan gongzuo de jizhong tongyi lingdao*); and, following the 19th Party Congress Work Report, emphasizing ideas such as the "holistic national security concept" and "political security" as a "fundamental task" for national security work at all levels ([Xinhua](#), December 12, 2020; [Jilin Ribao](#), April 24; [Yunnan.cn](#), April 15). The NSCs thus reinforce Xi's status at the apex of the system, guarantee that the central party's priorities and views on the security environment are widely understood, and highlight the message that the party must ensure its own security, including through close supervision of security organs at all levels.

The plenums also allow leaders to discuss practical challenges. The span of issues covered in these meetings reflects the breadth of the "holistic national security concept," including topics such as epidemic control, supply chain security, financial security (including government debt), industrial safety, network security, energy security, and preparations for major events, such as the Spring Festival or the party centennial. As noted in a Wenzhou City NSC meeting, the intent is to manage challenges so that "small things do not get out of the villages and big things do not get out of the townships" (小事不出村、大事不出镇, *xiaoshi bu chu cun, dashi bu chu zhen*) ([Wenzhou Government](#), 2021). In some cases, the agenda also reflects local priorities, as with the Yunnan NSC's discussions of cross-border criminal activity ([Yunnan.cn](#), 2020).

How the lower-tier NSCs enhance coordination is less certain. At a minimum, the plenums provide opportunities for party leaders to listen to reports from national security-related party and state departments (though participant lists are typically not publicized) [7]. In April 2021, municipal NSC offices were also identified as working with other bureaucracies to implement National Security Education Days (国家安全教育日, *guojia anquan jiaoyu ri*), in one case involving education for party cadres and mass propaganda directed at the public ([Government of Jincheng City, Shanxi](#), 2021). The NSC offices also likely schedule ad-hoc meetings for party leaders on national security issues and manage the flow of information to party leaders and to higher and lower level NSCs.

Complications

Installing new NSCs throughout the party structure helps strengthen central supervision, but does not grant local party officials more power or flexibility to respond to crises. Party committees do not supervise military and paramilitary forces, which often play a critical role in domestic emergency response. Moreover, large-scale crises are sometimes handled at the national level. For instance, the military took the lead in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the July 2021 Zhengzhou flooding. Indeed, in December 2017, the party rescinded the ability

of local officials to mobilize PAP units without securing permission from central authorities ([Sina](#), 2017). Nevertheless, NSCs could still make a modest contribution to more effective crisis management by facilitating discussions between the party, military, and state departments. For instance, in July 2021, the Tibetan Military District commander participated in a Tibetan Autonomous Region NSC meeting which, among other things, touched on border security and social stability ([Coqen County Government](#), 2021).

Crisis response remains primarily a function of the state, not the party or the NSC system. A 2018 State Council reform established a new Ministry of Emergency Management to consolidate various emergency response forces ([Xinhua](#), 2018). China's emergency response plans (应急预案, *Yingji yusuan*), many of which were updated in 2020 and 2021, suggest that local emergency management departments play a key role in handling different contingencies, such as fires, earthquakes, industrial accidents, and internal unrest [8]. For instance, Jiangxi province's 2020 emergency plan for sudden geological disasters references an emergency command organ facilitated by the provincial emergency management office (江西应急厅, *Jiangxi yingji ting*) but says nothing of the provincial NSC ([Jiangxi Government](#), 2020). Hence, the party may have strengthened its oversight, but the state continues to plan and execute national security work.

Finally, deference to the center could inhibit local initiative. The content of provincial and lower NSC plenaries suggests that party leaders look to Xi and the central party through the CNSC for guidance on what they should be doing and thinking. This engenders familiarity with national priorities throughout the party structure, but is less likely to lead to local officials using the NSCs to develop innovative solutions to vexing problems. It is possible that the NSCs could devolve into another forum focused on demonstrating fealty to Xi with little of practical value accomplished.

Conclusion

China's CNSC is not a standalone body like the U.S. National Security Council, but rather the highest echelon in a nationwide system that includes subordinate NSCs down to the county level. This supports an interpretation of the CNSC as an inward-looking body primarily focused on supervising management of domestic security [9]. The creation of an NSC system within the party's organizational structure reinforces Xi's dominance of the national security architecture and creates new mechanisms for information sharing and coordination within the party. Yet it is unclear that the NSCs will promote more effective crisis response by local party committees. This is because local leaders lack control of key assets, emergency planning is handled by the state, and incentives for local initiative appear low. For now, the "national security system" is a fruitful avenue for further research and deserves to be more fully analyzed as China's leaders prepare for next year's 20th Party Congress.

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Notes

[1] See Joel Wuthnow, “China’s New ‘Black Box’: Prospects for the Central National Security Commission,” *China Quarterly* 232 (2017), 886-903; David M. Lampton, “Xi Jinping and the National Security Commission: Policy Coordination and Political Power,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24:95 (2015), 759-777; and You Ji, “China’s National Security Commission: Theory, Evolution, and Operations,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25:98 (2016), 178-196.

[2] For recent analysis of the “national security system,” see Tai Ming Cheung, “The Chinese National Security State Emerges from the Shadows to Center Stage,” *China Leadership Monitor*, September 1, 2020, <https://www.prcleader.org/cheung>; and Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Domestic Security in China under Xi Jinping,” *China Leadership Monitor*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.prcleader.org/greitens>.

[3] Wuthnow, “China’s New ‘Black Box’”; and Andrew S. Erickson and Adam P. Liff, “Installing a Safety on the ‘Loaded Gun’? China’s Institutional Reforms, National Security Commission, and Sino-Japanese Crisis (In)Stability,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25:98 (2016), 197-215.

[4] The National Security Leading Small Group had the same membership as an older Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group. This latter group continued to exist following the creation of the CNSC until it was replaced by a Central Foreign Affairs Work Commission in 2018.

[5] See, for example, the list of Party organs in the Henan provincial party committee structure: http://www.hasbb.gov.cn/sitesources/hnsbb/page_pc/sdgd/hnswbmjg/list1.html. Most references to the provincial national security LSGs dates from 2017-2018, though there are sporadic references back to 2006.

[6] It appears that the General Office directors serve concurrently as NSC office director. Ding Xuexing plays this role at the CNSC level.

[7] For instance, the Wenzhou City NSC’s June 2021 plenary featured reports from the municipal political and legal affairs commission, network information office, and municipal health commission. https://www.wenzhou.gov.cn/art/2021/6/17/art_1217828_59052738.html.

[8] For background on these plans, see Catherine Welch, “Civilian Authorities and Contingency Planning in China,” in Andrew Scobell et al., eds., *The People’s Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2015), 85-106.

[9] For an excellent analysis, Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Prepared Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee,” June 8, 2021, 1-4.

Borrowed Boats Capsizing: State Security Ties to CCP Propaganda Laundering Rile Czech Public

By Martin Hála, Ondřej Klimeš and Filip Jirouš



(Image: An invitation to Feng Zhongping's first online lecture as the Institute's director attended by Czech, Polish and other European scholars, source: China-CEE Institute).

New revelations on the laundering of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda through local actors in the Czech Republic point to an underresearched aspect of influence operations. The CCP's tactic of "borrowing a boat to go out to sea" (借船出海, *jie chuan chu hai*), i.e., coopting local media outlets to serve as proxies, has long been known to involve organs in the party's propaganda system ([China Journalist](#), October 9, 2011; [CPI](#), July 2015). Further scrutiny of laundered propaganda operations now indicates the Ministry of State Security's (MSS, 国家安全部, *Guojia Anquan Bu*) role in efforts to coopt influential voices in media and academia abroad. In the Czech Republic, these operations involve former collaborators of the MSS's defunct Czechoslovak equivalent, a nexus that suggests the People's Republic of China's (PRC) intelligence apparatus is reactivating elements from communist-era security agencies.

Two influence operations that have recently come to light in the Czech Republic, one targeting the media, and the other academia, shed new light on the links between the PRC's security services and its external propaganda efforts.

Propaganda-by-Proxy

A series of scandals have turned Czech public opinion increasingly skeptical about the PRC in the last few years. The most high-profile incident was the collapse of the Chinese company CEFC, which had links to PLA intelligence, and the disappearance in early 2018 of its Chairman Ye Jianming, who was at that time an official advisor to the Czech Republic's pro-Beijing President Miloš Zeman ([China Brief](#), May 9, 2019).

As Czech public opinion on China has soured, CCP-friendly actors have mobilized in an apparent damage-control effort. For example, the Czech financial conglomerate Home Credit, which has major stakes in the Chinese market, orchestrated a public opinion campaign to “rationalize” the (mostly critical) debate on China. The company surreptitiously helped set up an “independent” China-focused think tank, called “Sinoskop”, and hired a public relations (PR) company to place its content in Czech media ([China Brief](#), January 17, 2020). According to leaked invoices, the PR company micromanaged Sinoskop's activities down to formulating its social-media posts ([Aktuálně](#), December 10, 2019).

Along with “positive-energy” (正能量, *zheng nengliang*) messaging, attacks on CCP critics have intensified, including legal threats ([Synopsis](#), September 12, 2019). In at least one case, united front groups organized a cross-border disinformation operation involving a smear campaign against a Czech politician who visited Taiwan, spreading the false claim that he had been paid off by Taipei ([Synopsis](#), December 18, 2020; [China Brief](#), April 12).

The Media Front: Borrowing a Venerable Boat

The CCP's most prominent Czech “borrowed boat” is *Literární noviny* (Literary News, *LN*). The paper boasts a fabled history as one of the main voices of the Czechoslovak reform movement in the 1960s. *LN*'s reputation makes it a perfect vehicle: many readers may vaguely remember its past glory, without necessarily understanding its more recent troubled history.

The paper fell on hard times economically in the early 2000s. In 2009, the paper was taken over, with some help from the wing in the Czech Social Democratic Party that would later spearhead the post-2013 turn toward Beijing, by Miroslav Pavel, a former spokesperson for the late-communist Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec. Pavel gradually turned the celebrated but cash-strapped paper into a platform for CCP propaganda.

Since 2017, *LN* has had an official agreement with *Guangming Ribao* (光明日报, *GMRB*) to run its syndication project “Reading CHINA +” (阅读中国+, *Yuedu Zhongguo Jia*) in the Czech Republic—a project that has also involved partner outlets in Thailand and Pakistan ([GMRB](#), November 7, 2018). Cooperation goes beyond just this one project. In coordination with *GMRB*, *LN* has prepared thematic “dossiers” on hot topics, such as Covid-19 or the upcoming Olympics, that present CCP-aligned viewpoints to an often unsuspecting Czech readership ([Aktuálně.cz](#), January 27, 2020). Most of the texts are produced by *GMRB* in Beijing, sent for translation to the Czech Republic, and then are returned back to China, where the translations receive final

authorization. *LN*, once the voice of enlightened reform, has been effectively turned into a localized extension of one of the party's main propaganda organs.

A commercial aspect to the cooperation between *LN* and *GMRB* exists as well, which, according to uncorroborated sources, is worth about \$34,000 a year. The sum was, however, well below the inserts' publishing costs, and did not suffice to prevent the paper's demise: the printed edition closed due to the lack of funds in 2020 ([Médiář](#), May 18, 2020). The "dossiers", however, have continued to be printed as stand-alone publications, or as inserts in other papers, such as *Haló noviny*, the organ of the unreformed Czech successor of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia [1]. The main motivation for Pavel's cooperation with *GMRB* may thus not be financial, but political.

The Academic Front: Less Venerable Connections

The *LN*'s propaganda-launders activities were once again spotlighted by a recent media investigation of one of its collaborators, Marek Hrubec, the then director of a research center affiliated with the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS) and also the coordinator of one of the CAS's research programs. Two articles revealed Hrubec's collaboration with PRC intelligence and propaganda organs, as well as with Ladislav Zemánek, an anti-Semitic, Czech academic ([Aktuálně.cz](#), [November 4](#), [November 11](#)).

Hrubec has on multiple occasions reproduced CCP talking points in PRC media. Commenting for the *People's Daily* in 2018, Hrubec lauded the promulgation of the National Supervision Law, which strengthened the CCP's hold over state functions by establishing the National Supervisory Commission ([People's Daily](#), March 21 2018). Hrubec also praised the PRC's "unique kind of modernization" on the eve of the CCP's centenary and China's role at the UN on the 50th anniversary of the PRC's accession (*China Daily*, [June 30](#); [October 22](#)). Hrubec's *LN* pieces are also heavy on CCP propaganda tropes, praising, e.g., China's allegedly positive role in handling the Covid-19 pandemic in a coauthored article ([LN](#), April 17, 2020).

In September, Hrubec initiated a new form of collaboration with the *LN* whereby the platform promoted the outcomes of the CAS research program he coordinated ([LN](#), 27 September). These outcomes were also shared with the online magazine *Argument* ([Argument](#), October 27). The CAS-*LN* institutional linkage effectively used publicly financed research to provide content to a platform that has been coopted by the CCP's propaganda system. Media investigations also revealed that Hrubec's CAS program had paid about \$1,840 of public funds to the CCP-coopted platform in October 2021 ([Aktuálně.cz](#), November 4). As a result of the coverage, CAS and its Institute of Philosophy removed Hrubec from his managerial functions ([Aktuálně.cz](#), November 16).

Behind Propaganda: PRC and Czechoslovak State-Security Networks

These developments involving *LN* and Hrubec were not the first episodes of propaganda laundering in the Czech Republic. However, these incidents highlight an underexamined aspect of CCP elite-cooption activity:

the involvement the PRC state security apparatus, which in this case leveraged the networks of its now defunct communist-era Czechoslovak counterpart.

Sinopsis research, first used by local media in their coverage of Hrubec's activities, revealed Hrubec's affiliation with a Budapest think tank run by a long-term MSS officer. Hrubec is a member of the international academic committee of the China-CEE Institute (中国-中东欧研究院, *Zhongguo-Zhong-Dong-Ou Yanjiu Yuan*) in Budapest, which is officially run by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS, 中国社会科学院, *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Yuan*) ([China-CEE Institute](#)). The institute's president, Feng Zhongping (冯仲平), was, between no later than 2014 and 2021, a vice-president of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR, 中国现代国际关系研究院, *Zhongguo Xiandai Guoji Guanxi Yanjiu Yuan*), a unit of the MSS ([Gov.cn](#), June 17, 2014; China-CEE Institute, [n.d.](#); [n.d.](#); [DNI Open Source Center](#), August 25, 2011). CICIR is the MSS's Eleventh Bureau, engaged in intelligence and liaison work among foreign academic circles and think tanks, and in open-source research [2]. Hrubec's anti-Semitic colleague Zemánek has been writing weekly briefings on Czech politics for the Institute since 2019. Despite the media revelations, the Institute has not ceased cooperation with Zemánek: it continues to publish his briefings, and he recently attended a virtual lecture by Feng alongside Polish and other European scholars (China-CEE Institute, [November 5, 2019](#); [December 1](#); [November 12](#)). Days ago, the Institute condemned the media coverage in the Czech Republic and Hungary, claiming that "unfounded assumptions" about the "Institute's operations" were made and "erroneous conclusions were drawn" ([China-CEE Institute](#), December 1; for the Hungarian coverage, see [HVG](#), November 26). To add to the security-propaganda links, *GMRB* has itself long been known as a frequent cover used by the MSS, which often posts its officers to PRC media organs' offices abroad [3].

In laundering propaganda through *LN*, PRC organs may also benefit from old acquaintances of Czechoslovak State Security (*Státní bezpečnost*, StB), the communist regime's secret police. Pavel, *LN*'s owner, is the son of a 1968 reformist-communist politician, and as such, was ostracized for some time after the Soviet-led invasion. He was, however, readmitted into the party in 1984. Pavel's unusual welcome back to the fold may be explained by his collaboration with the StB. According to his now publicly available StB file, Pavel was recruited by state security in 1975 to spy on the West German embassy in Prague, and later to surveil journalists at a newspaper where he worked (Security Services Archives Collections, Secret Collaborator Files [SCF], [sig. TS 751727 MV 2 2](#), p. 23, file no. 5500, November 11, 1984). The security organs lost interest in Pavel when he rejoined the party, as he had become less trustworthy to the journalists he was supposed to spy on ([ibid.](#), p. 24).

The networks between MSS and ex-StB elements extend beyond *LN*'s owner. In 2018, an event on cooperation between the PRC and Central European left-wing parties, which was attended by CCP International Liaison Department cadres featured, apart from Hrubec, the academic Oskar Krejčí ([Haló noviny](#), December 2, 2018). Like Hrubec, Krejčí collaborates with *Argument*, and worked for the late communist-era PM Adamec ([Argument](#), n.d.). Like Pavel, Krejčí was a registered StB secret collaborator. Now lecturing at a private university in Prague ([Jan Amos Komenský University Prague](#), n.d.), Krejčí was—per StB records—recruited in 1971 to help purge

“rightists” from academic circles, including the predecessor of the CAS Institute of Philosophy that would later employ Hrubec (SCF, [TS 808756 MV 4 4](#), p. 23-25, file no. 8478, June 26, 1989) [4]. Despite his “ultra-leftist or even pro-Chinese views”, Krejčí kept rising up the StB ladder, finally getting promoted to a resident, handling his own agents, in 1980 (SCF, [TS 808756 MV 2 4](#), p. 29-30, Record no. 5, January 15, 1975; SCF, [TS 808756 MV 2 4](#), p. 109, Record of resident recruitment, May 28, 1980). The security service severed cooperation with Krejčí in 1989, when he became an advisor to the premier (SCF, [TS 808756 MV 4 4](#), p. 23-25, file no. 8478, June 26, 1989).

Conclusion

In projecting its influence into the former Eastern Bloc countries in Central and Eastern Europe (now grouped under the PRC’s “16+1” initiative), the CCP adjusts its tactics to these countries’ distinctive history. On the one hand, due to the region’s Marxist-Leninist past, large sections of the local population tend to be more skeptical of Beijing’s intentions than might be the case elsewhere. At the same time, there are natural allies for the CCP that extend beyond the local communist parties into the former security agencies. The conspicuous prevalence of former StB collaborators in CCP propaganda efforts in the Czech Republic, which themselves have links to PRC state security, suggests that Beijing has been quite capable at tapping into these legacy networks.

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Acknowledgement

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Notes

[1] The LN website also continues to operate the “Reading CHINA +” virtual dossier ([LN](#), n.d.).

[2] Peter Mattis and Matthew Brazil, *Chinese Communist Espionage: An Intelligence Primer*, Naval Institute Press, 2019, ch. 1.

[3] A journalist working for GMRB became MSS Second Bureau deputy director after leaving the newspaper (Xuezhi Guo, *China’s Security State: Philosophy, Evolution, and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2012,

p. 367). Second Bureau officers use diplomatic, media, or government cover for espionage (Mattis and Brazil, p. 69).

[4] Krejčí's StB profile was previously covered by a Czech newspaper ([Deník N](#), October 31, 2019).

Sri Lanka's Balancing Act Between China and India

By Rup Narayan Das



(Image: Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa meets with PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Colombo in January 2020, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

The tiny island nation of Sri Lanka has sought to navigate complex bilateral relationships between the two nearby great powers, China and India. India enjoys both geographic convergence with Sri Lanka, which is in its immediate Indian Ocean periphery, as well as historical, linguistic and cultural connections. New Delhi views the region as within its traditional sphere of influence, while Beijing has highlighted the naval expeditions of the Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng He to the Indian Ocean in the early fifteenth century to legitimize its growing presence west of the Malacca Strait [1]. The growing geopolitical centrality of the Indo-Pacific region, which is increasingly defined by the intensifying security dilemma between China and India, contributes to complex triangular relations among China, India and Sri Lanka.

Sandwiched politically between India and China, the government in Colombo has sought to maximize its national interests, while the opposition political parties have espoused popular resentment toward the ruling party's alleged compromise of national sovereignty to foreign powers. In its outreach to Sri Lanka, China has derided external interference in Sri Lanka's domestic affairs by an outside power—an allusion to India's alleged past influence. India engages with the government of Sri Lanka, but also vicariously watches the opposition parties' criticism of the ruling regime for its proximity to China.

The Legacy of Internecine Civil War and India-Sri Lanka estrangement

Among the Tamil populace of Sri Lanka, a seamless ethnic connection remains with India's littoral state of Tamil Nadu, which is separated from the island by the Palk Strait. In the internecine civil war between the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils, India initially supported various militant Tamil groups ([The Hindu](#), April 21, 2016). In 1987, India and Sri Lanka signed an accord providing the deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) under then-Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of the Congress Party. The deployment was a strategic and military disaster, as the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) turned against India. In 1990, the IPKF had to leave Sri Lanka, leading to the estrangement of relations between the two countries. In 1991, the LTTE assassinated then-PM Gandhi during his re-election campaign in Tamil Nadu ([Hindustan Times](#), August 1, 2014). India welcomed the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009 but criticized the large number of civilian casualties in the war's final phase [2].

China's Strategic Footprint in Sri Lanka

China has maintained positive relations with Sri Lanka since the two nations established bilateral relations in 1957, but Beijing has also used these ties to balance India in South Asia and in the Indian Ocean. Beijing reinforced its strategic footprints in Sri Lanka during and after the Sri Lankan Civil War when India-Sri Lanka relations were at their lowest point ([The Hindu](#), July 20, 2016).

Sri Lanka's decision to lease out the Hambantota Port to China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, is a matter of anxiety for India [3]. Ever since the concept of a Chinese "string of pearls" gained currency in the early 2000s, Indian strategic analysts and observers have been concerned that China's support for the construction of Hambantota port will strengthen its position in the Indian Ocean ([The Wire \(India\)](#), July 30, 2017). The harbor is an engineering marvel; and analysts view it as a symbol of the growing nexus between the two countries. China lent \$360 million for the first phase of the project and total Chinese involvement is estimated to cost over \$1 billion for four phases of construction to take place over 15 years ([The Diplomat](#), January 1, 2020).

The Hambantota project, which includes oil and gas terminals, berths and port facilities, has dual use potential like Gwadar port in Pakistan. The Hambantota port which is deeper than the one at Colombo, is used as a refueling and docking station for the Sri Lankan Navy ([Xinhua](#), June 29, 2018). Although China and Sri Lanka

claim that the Hambantota port is merely a commercial venture, its future utility as a strategic asset for China is clear. Prior to China's control, the port failed financially despite "tens of thousands of ships passing by along one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, the port drew only 34 ships in 2012" ([The New York Times](#), June 25, 2018). This failure, combined with heavy pressure from Beijing, forced the Sri Lankan government to hand over control of the port to China, which was finalized through a 99-year lease ([The Hindu](#), December 2017). The deal has contributed to mounting concern over Colombo's outstanding debts to China for several large-scale infrastructural projects.

China has also enhanced its maritime footprint in Sri Lankan waters as part of President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Colombo Port City (CPC), which is another important element of these efforts, was built by the China Harbor Engineering Company (CHEC) on approximately 665 acres of land that were reclaimed from the sea ([The Financial Express](#), June 2).

An even more worrisome development for India is China's submarine deployments in to the Indian Ocean, specifically in Sri Lanka's territorial waters. In October 2014, Sri Lanka allowed a Chinese submarine and a warship to dock at Colombo Port, despite Indian concerns ([The Times of India](#), November 4, 2014). The submarine *Changzheng-2* and warship *Chang Xing Dao* arrived at the Colombo port seven weeks after another Chinese submarine on a long range deployment patrol had called at the same port prior to Xi's visit to the Maldives, Sri Lanka and India in September 2014 ([India TV](#), November 3, 2014). In May 2017, however, Colombo refused permission for a Chinese submarine to make a port call shortly after Indian PM Narendra Modi's visit to Sri Lanka, indicating the impact of New Delhi's robust foreign policy engagement with Colombo ([South China Morning Post](#), May 12, 2017).

The growing strategic nexus between Sri Lanka and China was reiterated during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to the island nation in January 2020. In an oblique reference to India, Wang pledged not to allow "any outside influences" to interfere with Sri Lanka's internal matters. He stated, "as Sri Lanka's strategic partner China will continue to stand by Sri Lanka's interests. China stands by the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence. We will not allow any outside influences to interfere with matters that are essentially internal concerns of Sri Lanka" ([The Hindu](#), January 14, 2020).

The increasing penetration of Chinese influence in Sri Lanka is also a matter of concern to Sri Lanka's Tamil diaspora. A Central agency of India referred to a conclave of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora held in London, stating "the delegates felt that India had not taken seriously to safeguard the interests of the Sri Lankan Tamils and even lost its influence over the island nation. The conclave was convinced that the fate of the Sri Lankans would be in jeopardy if the Chinese established their presence in northern Sri Lanka" ([The Hindu](#), October 11).

Sri Lanka's Calibrated Response to Mitigate India's Concerns

Despite China's growing influence and presence in Sri Lanka, Colombo has been recalibrating its foreign policy postures in deference to India's sensitivities. The Sri Lankan government is now trying to balance the two Asian

giants and has offered a slice of the integrated port projects to India. The Colombo Port presently has five terminals—South Asia Gateway Terminal (SAGT), Jaya International Terminal (JCT), Colombo International Container Terminal (CICT) in which China Merchants Port Holdings Company holds 85 percent stake, Unity Container Terminal (UCT) and the East Container Terminal (ECT). In 2019, Sri Lanka signed a memorandum of understanding with Japan and India to jointly develop the ECT. However, in February 2021, Sri Lanka, due to domestic resistance, canceled the offer, and instead offered the proposed West Container Terminal (WCT) to India ([The Hindu](#), April 15). An agreement to develop and operate the WCT for 35 years was signed by India's Adani Group in October ([The Hindu](#), October 2).

India's Proactive Outreach to Sri Lanka to Counter China

Ever since Modi came to power in May 2014, New Delhi has reached out to Colombo in a proactive manner as part of its “neighborhood first policy” ([Hindustan Times](#), March 13). Modi invited Sri Lankan PM Mahinda Rajapaksa, along with other leaders from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), to his swearing in ceremony in May 2014 ([The Hindu](#), May 23, 2014). During his first term as PM, he visited Sri Lanka twice, first in March 2015 and again in May 2017. In his first visit, Modi announced a fresh Line of Credit of up to \$318 million to develop the railway sector in Sri Lanka as well as a currency swap between the Reserve Bank of India and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka to help keep the Sri Lankan rupee stable ([India Ministry of External Affairs](#), March 2015). Modi also met Rajapaksa on the side-lines of the 69th UN General Assembly session in New York in September 2014 ([The Hindu](#), April 20, 2016), and later at the 18th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu on November 26, 2014 ([The Economic Times](#), November 26, 2014). He invited then-Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena, along with the other Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) leaders, for his second swearing in ceremony in May 2019. The results were evident when Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa chose India, and not China, as his first port of call after his electoral victory in November 2019 ([Times of India](#), November 29, 2019).

In a thoughtful show of soft power that boosted India-Sri Lanka relations, Modi warmly received a Sri Lankan delegation of Buddhist monks during the inauguration of the Kushinagar International Airport, which received its first direct flight from Sri Lanka on October 20 ([The Times of India](#), October 20). Kushinagar is a major pilgrimage site that attracts a large number of Buddhist pilgrims including from Sri Lanka every year. It is believed that Gautama Buddha attained Mahaparinirvana (salvation after death) in Kushinagar after his death ([The Hindu](#), July 8, 2013).

In a clever and swift diplomatic move in early November, India transported 100 kilograms of nano nitrogen to Sri Lanka ([High Commission of India](#), November 4). The deployment was essential to support Sri Lanka's organic farming initiatives and to expedite availability of nano nitrogen fertilizer to local farmers. The delivery was timely, as it came in the middle of a row between China and Sri Lanka over the supply of contaminated fertilizer by Chinese companies and China's blacklisting of a Sri Lankan bank for credit default. A Chinese firm has demanded \$8 million from Sri Lanka for “negligence” in testing its fertilizer sample, escalating tensions since Sri Lanka rejected the contaminated consignment from the Chinese firm ([The Hindu](#), November 8).

Conclusion

Discernible differences exist in the way India engages with Sri Lanka. While China engages in capital intensive projects that it has the requisite resources to undertake, India's engagement in Sri Lanka is based on humanitarian and developmental needs, people-to-people ties and the welfare of ordinary people. Through his proactive engagement with Sri Lanka, including thoughtful use of Buddhism as an effective tool of soft power, Modi has made up for lost ground in India-Sri Lanka relations. While China has been like a big brother to Sri Lanka, India projects itself like an elder brother in its engagement with Sri Lanka.

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Notes

[1] Vijay Gokhale, *The Long Game: How the Chinese Negotiate with India*, Vintage, 2021, p x

[2] Christian Wagner, "India's Bilateral Security Relationship in South Asia," *Strategic Analysis*, March 2018, 42:1, 15-28.

[3] Abhijit Singh, "Sino-Indian Dynamics in Littoral Asia – The View from New Delhi," *Strategic Analysis*, June 2019, 43:3, 199-213.

End of the Golden Era: Sino-British Relations Enter Difficult Period

Patrick Triglavcanin



(Image: Chinese President Xi Jinping delivers a speech in the British Parliament during his 2015 state visit to the UK. Xi's 2015 visit marked a 'golden era' of Sino-British relations; however, the relationship has become decisively chilly in recent years, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

In May, the United Kingdom's (UK) Carrier Strike Group (CSG) led by the HMS Queen Elizabeth set off for the Indo-Pacific region on a seven-month deployment, which is the first of its kind ([UK Ministry of Defence](#), May 22). The CSG has so far conducted a series of engagements with nations in the region such as Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam, and in July, navigated the South China Sea with aircraft and ships from Australia, Japan, Canada, the U.S. and New Zealand. The group is set to return home at the beginning of December. Chinese media has repeatedly condemned this renewed British naval presence in the Indo-Pacific region, labelling it as intended "to provoke China" and even to "contain" it (*Global Times*, [July 26](#); [July 29](#)).

Sino-British relations have steadily declined in recent years. Britain's negative reaction to the implementation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong and condemnation of the situation in Xinjiang has complicated the relationship and indicates a widening gap in world views between Zhongnanhai and Westminster. Post-Brexit Britain's desire to be more closely aligned with the U.S. on security issues is a main point of friction; Beijing sees Washington's China consensus as a containment strategy that is driven by "Cold War thinking" (冷战思维, *lengzhan siwei*) ([China Brief](#), October 22). As a result, China perceives the UK's expanding security ties with the U.S. as implicit adherence by London to the view from Washington ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), September 16). Britain has subsequently been labelled in China's media as a U.S. "toady," and ridiculed for trying to "revive its dream of an empire" (*Global Times*, [July 26](#); [March 16](#)). The decline in relations between Beijing and London is driven in part by Britain's renewed Indo-Pacific naval presence – a manifestation of the UK's desire for closer security ties with the U.S. and its increasing tendency to view China as a geopolitical threat.

Despite growing bilateral frictions, the UK and China still maintain a working relationship driven by rising bilateral trade, people-to-people exchange, and a shared interest in cooperation on international issues such as tackling climate change and the global economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of Brexit has also left China as the UK's largest import market, an important element of the relationship as Britain is still trying to find its feet in the international market as an independent trading nation in the aftermath of its departure from the European Union ([The Guardian](#), May 25).

Background

In 2015, Sino-British relations were, as then-UK finance minister George Osborne proclaimed, in a "golden era" ([UK HM Treasury](#), September 22, 2015; [BBC News](#), October 23, 2015). The UK welcomed Chinese President Xi Jinping on a state visit, where he and then Prime Minister David Cameron announced a landmark deal to build a nuclear plant in Somerset and warmed to one another over fish and chips and pints of ale ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), October 23, 2015; [Prime Minister's Office](#), October 21, 2015). At that time, bilateral trade was soaring, and the UK was a trailblazer within the European Union (EU) for fostering better relations with China, regularly advocating for an economic approach that satisfied Chinese interests, and touting the benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative. The UK was hailed as China's "best partner in the West", and served as an important financial hub for China. For example, the UK was the first Western country to issue RMB sovereign bonds, and to apply for full membership in the China Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank ([Xinhua](#), March 21, 2019; [BBC News](#), October 23, 2015). This "golden era" is long over now, and the relationship has entered a difficult period.

Hong Kong and Human Rights

The situation in Hong Kong has been the catalyst for the recent decline in relations. China's quashing of protests and implementation of the National Security Law was of great concern to the UK, as it infringes upon

the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 and Hong Kong's independent judicial process ([Joint Declaration on the question of Hong Kong](#), December 19, 1984). Britain was the first nation to take concrete steps to counter the National Security Law by introducing a new visa for Hong Kong nationals holding a British National Overseas Passport, allowing them to work and live in the UK for five years with the future prospect of acquiring citizenship ([UK Visas and Immigration](#), July 22, 2020). As a result, Britain is somewhat of a “safe haven” for dissenters wanting to flee Hong Kong. Foreign Minister Wang Yi told then-British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab that China “firmly opposed this act, which “violated the basic norm of non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs” ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), July 28, 2020). So far, 65,000 people from Hong Kong have applied for UK visas under this scheme ([UK Government](#), August 26).

The UK's reaction to the ongoing situation in Xinjiang has further complicated Sino-British relations. The UK imposed asset freezes and travel bans against four Chinese officials and a Xinjiang Security body in March for alleged human rights violations against Uyghurs ([UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office](#), March 22). Beijing responded immediately by sanctioning ten British organizations and individuals for spreading “lies and disinformation” about the situation in Xinjiang ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), March 26). This is the first-time that Britain and China have levied sanctions of this nature against one another. In response to Britain's concerns over the human rights situation in Xinjiang, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has accused London of spreading “fake news” (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [February 4](#); [August 31, 2020](#)). The situation in Xinjiang has become a normative obstacle to Sino-British relations, with the UK finding it difficult to navigate between its desire to cooperate with China on economic issues and transnational challenges, and its commitment to defending human rights and liberal norms.

Britain's Indo-Pacific “Tilt”

In March, the UK drew a clear line with the release of its foreign policy paper - *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (hereafter the Integrated Review) ([The Integrated Review](#), March 16). The policy paper stresses the UK's desire to be “deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific [by 2030]” in supporting “open societies and economies” with “allies and partners – in particular the United States,” and labels China a “systematic competitor” ([The Integrated Review](#), March 16).

The Integrated Review includes an economic element, which is highlighted by Britain's bid to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and its new status as an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) dialogue member. However, the main thrust of the paper focuses on addressing China's growing power and the perceived threat it presents to the international norms that Britain adheres to and upholds. The Integrated Review stresses Britain's desire to deal with this challenge by deepening ties to the U.S. Britain's decision to send the CSG into the Indo-Pacific and South China Sea is indicative of this new approach as it further entrenches the UK in Washington's Indo-Pacific security architecture.

The September 15 announcement of the AUKUS pact between Australia, the UK and the U.S., which is a key element of Britain's Indo-Pacific "tilt", confirms the UK's acknowledgment of China as a competitor, and alignment with the U.S. on Indo-Pacific security matters. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian responded to AUKUS by urging "relevant countries [to] abandon the[ir] outdated Cold War zero-sum mentality" ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), September 16). AUKUS has been overtly labelled as a pact designed to "counter China" in Western media, and Beijing now seemingly views it, and Britain's renewed Indo-Pacific presence, as such ([BBC News](#), 16 September).

Chinese Investment and Involvement in UK Domestic Affairs

The UK's growing perception of China as a geopolitical threat has intensified scrutiny of Chinese investment in Britain. The UK's *National Security and Investment Bill*, which was issued in November 2020, gives the government increased powers to "scrutinize and intervene in investment to protect national security" ([UK Parliament](#), May 5). Members of parliament (MPs) have regularly expressed anxiety over Chinese investment, citing the detrimental impact of large Chinese stakes in key UK infrastructure projects and companies, and the bill is an attempt to combat this concern ([Financial Times](#), May 23, 2020). The U-turn last year in the policy toward Huawei, whose equipment was used and then banned from the UK's development of 5G networks, is a manifestation of this anxiety. The ban on Huawei equipment was rebuked by Wang Yi as "discriminat[ion] against Chinese companies" ([UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and UK National Cyber Security Centre](#), July 14, 2020; [PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), July 28, 2020).

British concerns are also growing over Chinese influence in the UK's domestic affairs. Liu Xiaoming, China's former ambassador to the UK, was heavily criticized for claiming images of constrained Uyghurs were "fake" and defending the imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong ([The Guardian](#), December 27, 2020). Liu stood down at the end of 2020, after having served as Ambassador in London since 2010.

The UK has been one of China's top destinations for investment over the past few decades, however, the UK's crackdown on investment is now causing Chinese officials to question whether it is a safe and fair investment environment ([American Enterprise Institute](#), July 20). For Britain's part, disapproval of China's position on Xinjiang and Hong Kong has led to fears that the CCP is spreading disinformation in the UK, which is an unwanted interference in Britain's public life ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), July 28, 2020). These points of friction in Sino-British relations will likely worsen in the near future.

Down But Not Out

Despite the currently rocky relations, a working relationship between the UK and China endures. China considers the UK an important player in international affairs due to its economic strength, developed financial markets, and permanent position in the UN Security Council ([Xinhua](#), October 29). The UK is also an important trade partner of China, particularly in providing manufactured goods such as machinery equipment and motor vehicles. According to the latest statistics from the PRC General Administration of Customs (GACC, 中华人

民共和国海关总署, *zhonghua renmin gongheguo haiguan zong shu*), bilateral trade between the two countries has increased dramatically in the first three quarters of 2021, with Chinese exports to the UK experiencing a year-on-year increase of 26 percent, and China's imports of goods from the UK achieving a year-on-year increase of 26.4 percent ([GACC](#), October 13). Some of this increase can be attributed to a low baseline resulting from complications in bilateral trade stemming from COVID-19; however, the value of trade between the UK and China has steadily increased since 2018, and recent trends forecast further future increases in trade flows ([GACC](#), [January 14](#); [January 22, 2020](#); [January 14, 2019](#)).

Conventional diplomatic exchange between the two countries also persists. After his appointment in July, Zheng Zeguang, the Chinese ambassador to the UK, met with a swath of important British individuals such as diplomat Lord Powell, Director of the University of Oxford China Centre Rana Mitter and banker Sir Douglas Flint. In September, protests over China sanctioning British MPs resulted in Zheng's invitation to deliver a speech at the Palace of Westminster being rescinded, and the ambassador being banned from Parliament. ([The Telegraph](#), September 15). Since then, however, Ambassador Zheng has continued to meet with influential British individuals and speak warmly of the Sino-British relationship ([Embassy of the PRC in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#), September 29). In an article published in *The Guardian* that coincided with the COP26 climate conference in Glasgow, Zheng also stressed that China would honor its pledges to reduce carbon emissions ([The Guardian](#), October 27). British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Xi also had a phone call on October 29 ([Xinhua](#), [Prime Minister's Office](#), October 29). Both leaders acknowledged recent difficulties in the bilateral relationship and expressed a desire to address these challenges and cooperate on global issues such as climate change, public health and the global economic recovery after COVID-19. Xi's comments on how China views the relationship "from a strategic and long-term perspective" shows China's continuing desire to engage with the UK ([Xinhua](#), October 29).

Cultural and people-to-people exchanges remain strong pillars of the bilateral relationship. Despite pandemic restrictions, there is continued interest in cultural exchange between China and Britain [1]. The new James Bond film has been widely viewed in China; and Chinese state-run television network- CGTN resumed UK broadcasts in August ([Xinhua](#), November 4; [CGTN](#), August 20). Chinese students still see British universities as among the best in the world as evidenced by a report issued this year by a Chinese education consultancy that shows the UK as the first choice for Chinese students (29.8 percent) for the third year in a row, followed by the U.S. and Australia (24.5 percent and 16.5 percent respectively) ([EIC Education](#), March 25). The Great Britain China Centre also launched a course designed to educate British policymakers and officials over two years on China, the Future Leaders Programme, in July ([Great Britain China Centre](#), October 8).

Conclusion

Despite the continuation of extensive economic, diplomatic, cultural and educational ties, clear points of friction in Sino-British relations persist, and are unlikely to subside anytime soon. Westminster will continue to condemn and combat the CCP's infringement on human rights and individual freedoms in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and elsewhere in China. Beijing will continue to rebuke such actions, and as time goes on, the persistence of

conflicting views will likely further preclude increased engagement. London will also continue looking to Washington to deepen cooperation on Indo-Pacific security matters, which will perpetuate Beijing's narrative that the U.S., and its main allies including the UK, intend to contain China's rise. The Royal Navy's CSG will return to the UK in December, but Beijing's perception of Britain's "Cold War mentality," and the UK's military presence in the Indo-Pacific, will remain [2].

To navigate this difficult period, the Sino-British relationship will need to be carefully managed, particularly on the UK side. If the UK adopts a more competitive approach toward China and continues to seek closer ties with the U.S., Beijing may curtail its trade and investment, and become more reluctant to cooperate on issues such as tackling climate change. If the UK takes an alternative approach and accommodates Chinese behavior in an effort to seek economic opportunities, it may find itself diplomatically and militarily isolated by the West – particularly the U.S. In this scenario, the UK would find it difficult to make new economic inroads around the globe; and due its relationship with China could even be perceived as a national security threat that lacks a solid commitment toward human rights.

The Sino-British relationship is ultimately transactional. Westminster sees access to Chinese markets and investment as integral to its economic recovery from COVID-19 and Brexit. Meanwhile, Beijing sees access to British markets, its financial system and universities as important to its economic, human and technological development. The endurance of the relationship, despite the many strains, indicates the importance of these areas of cooperation for China and the UK in today's multipolar world. However, both sides must undertake a precarious balancing act in order to navigate escalating geopolitical competition and deepening normative differences.

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Notes

[1] See: "2021 UK-China Connections through Culture Grants," The British Council, <https://www.britishcouncil.cn/en/programmes/arts/connections-culture>.

[2] The HMS Spey and HMS Tamar will remain deployed in the Indo-Pacific for the next five years. "Patrol ships bid farewell to Portsmouth as they begin Indo-Pacific deployment," Royal Navy, September 7, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/september/07/210907-spey-and-tamar-deploy>