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A Bitter Winter: Omicron Tests the Limits of China's Zero-COVID Approach

By John S. Van Oudenaren

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has sought to achieve a “zero-infection” (零感染, *ling ganran*) rate among its population. The Chinese government has pursued this objective through the “dynamic clearance” (动态清零, *dongtai qing ling*) policy, which is predicated on keeping China's international borders largely closed, and rapidly detecting, isolating, and eliminating domestic outbreaks ([People's Daily](#), January 7). Dynamic clearance relies on digital monitoring, mass testing, and controlling population movement to achieve early detection and reduce of COVID-19 transmission. Responses to even

single-digit case clusters include mandatory lockdowns, and centralized quarantines in government health centers for potentially infected or exposed groups ([Xinhua](#), August 19, 2021).

The global proliferation of increasingly contagious COVID-19 variants, first Delta and now Omicron, has increased the cost and decreased the efficacy of China's "dynamic clearance" policy. Recent developments in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, underscore the downsides of China's zero-COVID approach. The ancient capital city of 13 million people has endured over three weeks of stringent lockdown. Residents are not permitted to leave their homes for any reason except testing, and must rely on delivery services for food and other essentials. Earlier this month, the situation became so dire that people shared accounts of their difficulties obtaining food, toiletries, or emergency medical treatment on social media. In a widely shared Weixin post that has since been deleted for "content violations", independent journalist Jiang Xue observed: "The market is closed, and the city's daily logistics and distribution have stopped. In a large city of 13 million people, is it possible to depend on grassroots staff/volunteers to deliver food to the door in short periods of time?" ([Weixin](#); [Victor Shih- Twitter](#), January 4, 2022).



(Image: People stand in line for mass testing in Xi'an, Shaanxi, province, source: Xinhua)

On January 3, one million citizens in Yuzhou, Henan province were placed under lockdown after three cases were detected ([South China Morning Post \(SCMP\)](#), January 4). This week, five million residents in Anyang, Henan, and 14 million in Tianjin underwent mass testing and partial lockdowns have been implemented in both cities ([HKFP](#), January 10). The situation in Tianjin is particularly sensitive for the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as the city is just over 100 kilometers from Beijing where the Winter Olympics will be held in February. According to the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Tianjin is also where Omicron

arrived from overseas before spreading to Guangzhou, Changsha, and Shenzhen (officials claim the Delta variant is responsible for the Xi'an outbreak) ([Central Commission for Discipline Inspection](#), January 10)

Despite the high economic costs and growing public frustration with life under zero-COVID mandates, General Secretary Xi Jinping has doubled down on the current approach, particularly given recent findings that Chinese vaccines are mostly ineffective against the Omicron variant ([Taiwan News](#), December 24, 2021). China has largely averted the virus surges that other countries have suffered, but the policy of quarantining millions to contain small outbreaks is a brute force approach to epidemic prevention. It is not only economically costly, in some areas such as Xi'an, quarantine restrictions have been implemented in a draconian fashion, which has created temporary deprivation and engendered popular resentment toward government authorities, particularly at the local level. In response to growing internal and external criticism, the CCP has sought to shape a positive narrative about China's zero-COVID strategy by emphasizing its collective benefits, controlling information about the domestic situation in China, and redefining success in the battle against the virus.

Season of Sacrifice

In his New Year's address, Xi reviewed China's accomplishments in 2021, including the strong and united national epidemic response. He praised the "hard work and dedication of countless unsung heroes" underscoring the sacrifices the CCP is asking the Chinese people to make to achieve zero-COVID ([Xinhua](#), January 1). As Xi addressed the nation, Xi'an had already been under lockdown for over a week. In order to curb community transmission, Xi'an Deputy Mayor Xu Mingfei stated that some residents had been placed in "centralized quarantine" (集中隔离, *Jizhong geli*) ([People's Daily](#), January 5). Centralized quarantine entails temporarily removing at-risk individuals from their homes, isolating, and testing them in government health centers. It is unclear exactly how many people have been through, or are in centralized quarantine in Xi'an at present. A recent *New York Times* investigation estimates around 45,000 people were interned, and anecdotal accounts from Chinese netizens include photos of long bus lines leaving the city for quarantine centers at night ([Twitter](#), January 2; [NYT](#), January 12).

In late December and early January, as logistics in Xi'an became increasingly strained, food prices skyrocketed. On Weibo, a Xi'an resident posted that normally a single Cabbage was around 8 RMB (\$1.30) but during lockdown cost 33 RMB (\$5.19) ([Weibo](#), December 30, 2021). Of course, most people had no choice but to pay exorbitant prices for whatever food was available. Early in the lockdown, jokes about cooking cabbage circulated on social media as it was the only procurable food for many people ([NPR](#), January 5). Lack of food drove some people to take even more drastic measures, Taiwanese broadcaster TVBS reported social media posts showing people killing a cat to eat ([TVBS](#), December 31, 2021).

Emergency medical services in Xi'an were also interrupted due to epidemic prevention restrictions. A woman posted online that her father suffered a heart attack, but was denied hospital entry by security guards, and eventually died ([Twitter](#), January 5). At least one woman also miscarried due to delayed childbirth treatment at a hospital ([SCMP](#), January 11). In a rare admission of official culpability, Vice Premier and Politburo member

Sun Chunlan expressed “deep shame” over the miscarriage incident, and promised to ensure peoples’ access to medical treatment, ([SCMP](#), January 7; [People.cn](#), January 6). Yesterday, operations at the two hospitals where these tragic incidents occurred were suspended and an official review was announced ([SCMP](#), January 13).

As part of its effort to get as close to COVID-zero as possible for the Olympics, the government is requiring tens of millions of citizens to quarantine through the January 31- February 6 Lunar New Year and Spring Festival holidays ([Sina](#), January 10). In December, China’s National Health Commission (NHC) released its “Work Plan for the Control of COVID-19 during the New Year’s and Spring Festival Holidays” ([NHC](#), December 20). In addition to enhancing measures to prevent overseas transmission, the plan stresses strengthening management of peoples’ movement. The NHC work plan bans people in high and medium risk areas from traveling during the holiday, and strongly discourages citizens in cities with any risk areas from leaving home. Temple fairs, theatrical performances, exhibitions and promotions are banned, and family gatherings limited to no more than ten people.

Promoting a Positive Narrative

The CCP consistently asserts that its “zero-COVID” approach is an exemplar of the Chinese system’s superiority. For example, a recent piece in the CCP’s theoretical journal *Qiushi* claims that China’s willingness to “hit pause” on economic growth during the pandemic underscores its commitment to the health and wellbeing of all people. The authors, experts in Marxist studies at Wuhan University, argue this demonstrates the superiority of China’s collectivist values over those of individualistic Western countries, which they assert privilege wealthy interests over the common good ([Qiushi](#), August 1). Contrasting the Chinese and U.S. epidemic responses is a regular theme in official media. In November 2021, a *Xinhua* article observed that the U.S. had lost more than 754,000 lives due to COVID-19, and claimed that “the Chinese mainland has not reported a single death since January” and that all “small-scale regional outbreaks in China over the past months were caused by imported cases” ([Xinhua](#), November 8).

In addition to promoting the success of China’s “zero-COVID” approach, the government has cracked down on online information that runs counter to the official account of the public health situation. For example, on Monday, in a widely reported arrest, police in Tianjin detained a 32 year old netizen for posting a video claiming that the city had 700 virus cases ([People.cn](#), January 10). Following the arrest, Public Security in Tianjin instructed the public to strictly adhere to counter-COVID-19 laws and to remain calm: “do not panic, do not spread rumors, do not believe rumors” ([Tianjin Municipal People’s Government](#), January 11).

Shifting the Goal Posts

As the highly-transmissible Omicron variant spread across the globe in December 2021, public health authorities in China began to lower the standard of success for the dynamic clearance policy. At a December 11 press conference of the State Council Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism, Liang Wannian, head of a

government expert group, stated that dynamic clearance and zero infection are not the same thing ([Gov.cn](#), December 12, 2021). Per Liang, prevention of every case is impossible but “timely and proactive public health and social interventions” undertaken through dynamic clearance, are critical to “rapidly identify case clusters and extinguish the epidemic.”

Conclusion

Despite growing international and domestic concern, the CCP appears to perceive its zero-COVID approach as its only viable short-term option to counter Omicron’s spread. Consequently, China’s borders will remain largely closed off to international travel throughout 2022. In order to sustain China’s low death rates against the more transmissible variant, the state will sustain or increase restrictions, limit population movements and place increasing numbers of people in centralized quarantine. As the rare expression of official regret from Vice Premier Sun Chunlan and official investigations of recent incidents in Xian underscores, the current policies carry domestic legitimacy costs for the CCP.

Over the last month, an increasing number of outbreaks in large urban areas have led to partial shutdowns of major manufacturing and infrastructure centers. Several large factories producing smartphone chips and auto parts have shuttered in Xi’an, and sections of Ningbo, Zhejiang, one of the world’s biggest ports, have closed ([Samsung](#), December 29, 2021; [NPR](#), January 7). Due to the probable continuation of a zero-COVID strategy through 2022, Goldman Sachs recently downgraded its projection for China’s 2022 growth from 4.8 to 4.3 percent ([CNBC](#), January 11). Nevertheless, Xi is likely to prioritize stability above all else as he seeks to lock in another 5-year leadership term at the 20th party congress this fall, and hence is unlikely to loosen restrictions and risk a major COVID-surge.

John S. Van Oudenaren is Editor-in-Chief of China Brief. For any comments, queries, or submissions, please reach out to him at: cbeditor@jamestown.org.

The Evolution of the PLA's Enlisted Force: Conscription and Recruitment (Part One)

By Kenneth W. Allen



(Image: New PLA recruits departing for their army units, source: People's Daily)

Introduction

This article is the first in a two-part series on the evolution of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) enlisted force. Part one provides background and examines key issues in the PLA's conscription and recruitment of enlisted personnel. Part two overviews the role of the enlisted force in the annual training cycle. The PLA's yearly training cycle has always revolved around the annual conscription cycle, but each service and subordinate branch has been affected differently based on the size of the conscript force within the service/branch. Four major reforms have directly affected the conscript force: 1) the number and percentage of conscripts within the overall enlisted force; 2) the transition from an illiterate conscript force to a more educated force; 3) the creation of a two-year conscript force and a 28-year noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps; and 4) the change from a one to two-cycle annual conscription process.

The article addresses the following issues: key terms, guidance documents, force size and composition, gender, health issues, management and quotas, the annual conscription cycle, and compensation. Although

the information applies to all PLA services, forces, and branches, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is used for specific examples:

Key Terms [1]

(Note: all PLA enlisted personnel use Army terminology).

- **Canjun** (参军): The PLA translates this word as “join” or “enlist in the army.”
- **Junshi** (军士): Generic term for sergeant.
- **Shibing** (士兵): Generic term for the enlisted force. The *Military Service Law* defines this term as comprising both conscripts (义务兵, *yiwubing*) and volunteers (志愿兵, *zhiyuanbing*). Depending on context, *Shibing* can be translated as “enlisted personnel,” “enlisted corps,” “enlisted soldier,” and “soldier.”
- **Shiguan** (士官): Noncommissioned officer.
- **Xinbing** (新兵): “New soldiers”, troops in basic training.
- **Xuebing** (学兵): Enlisted personnel who are students in technical training units.
- **Yingzheng baoming** (应征报名): Conscript/recruit registration.
- **Yiwubing** (义务兵): Conscript or compulsory serviceman, refers to all two-year enlisted personnel regardless of whether they were conscripted, recruited, or joined voluntarily.
- **Zhanshi** (战士): “Soldier”, generic term for enlisted personnel.
- **Zhengbing** (征兵) and **Zhengji** (征集): The most confusing terms are *zhengbing* and *zhengji*, which are translated as “conscription,” “enlistment,” and “recruitment,” but have completely different meanings in English. Whereas the terms previously meant conscription, the PLA now uses the terms to include both conscription and recruitment.
- **Zhiyuan** (志愿): Enlisted personnel who volunteer to join the PLA or new enlisted personnel who have completed their initial service and opted to continue active duty as NCOs.

Guidance Documents

Since the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, the PLA has followed two primary guidance documents concerning the enlisted force:

- *PRC Military Service Law* (中华人民共和国兵役法, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo bingyifa*) issued by the National People’s Congress (NPC) in 1955. A new law was issued in 1984, and amended in 1998, 2009, 2011, and 2021(NPC, [December 10, 2000](#), [June 29, 2021](#); [Xinhua](#), August 20, 2021;).
- *PRC Conscription Regulations* (中华人民共和国征兵工作条例, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhengbing gongzuo tiaoli*) issued by the Central Military Commission (CMC) in 1985 and amended in 2001, 2005, and 2021 ([Gov.cn](#), September 15, 2005).

Force Size and Composition

Unfortunately, the PLA has never provided detailed information about its force size, number of personnel by service/branch, gender, or rank/grade. In 1949, the PLA had 5.5 million troops. The bulk of the force was Army infantry and the enlisted force consisted primarily of illiterate peasant volunteers. The officer-to-enlisted member ratio was about 1:1 [2]. Since the PRC's founding, the PLA has undergone 11 force reductions in 1950, 1952, 1953, 1957, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1997, 2003, and 2016, going from a force of 4.6 million in May 1950 to 2.0 million in January 2016 (China Brief, February 4, 23, 2016).

Today, the two million-person PLA consists of three active-duty components: officers/cadres, enlisted personnel (NCOs and conscripts), and civil cadres. Although the PLA has not provided a numerical breakdown, Clay and Blasko “estimate that officers and civil cadres now number approximately 450,000 personnel (23 percent), NCOs 850,000 (42 percent), and conscripts about 700,000 (35 percent)” ([War on the Rocks](#), July 20, 2020). This means that half of conscripts, between 350,000-400,000, arrive and depart simultaneously, which clearly impacts the PLA's training cycle ([Lowy Institute](#), July 14, 2021).

The PLA's approximately 700,000 conscripts are unevenly divided among services, forces, and branches. For example, the Army's infantry, the Navy's Marine Corps, and the Air Force's airborne and ground air defense branches have a much higher percentage of conscripts versus NCOs than the Navy's surface, submarine, and naval aviation branches and the Air Force's aviation branch.

Although the percentage of NCOs and conscripts within the PLA's overall enlisted force is about equal, the 2006 *Air Force Enlisted Force Handbook* stated that about 60 percent of the PLAAF's enlisted force were NCOs [3]. This discrepancy is primarily because the PLAAF, like the PLA Navy (PLAN) and Rocket Force, has a higher percentage of billets for enlisted personnel with technical skills than the ground force. However, not all PLAAF branches have the same conscript-to-NCO ratios. For example, the airborne and ground air defense branches have a higher percentage of conscripts than the aviation branch, where NCOs have been replacing junior officers in several technical billets, including aircraft maintenance [4]. In addition, until the late 2000s, naval vessels rarely conducted large at-sea training from November to February because of the turnover of conscripts and NCOs who were not promoted ([ONI](#), 2007). However, as the PLAN has increased its NCO numbers and reduced conscripts onboard key combat vessels, major training events are now conducted year-round.

Gender

The 1984 *Military Service Law* and its amended versions noted above state that both males and females can be conscripted as enlisted personnel, but only males have ever been conscripted. Female recruits have only joined the PLA as volunteers, but the term *zhengji* (征集) is still used.

Health

Health issues are a major concern for the PLA's recruitment of qualified enlisted personnel ([China Military Online](#), September 6, 2018). For example, some surveys show a continuous decline in Chinese students' physical fitness, which has reduced the number of military recruits that can pass a physical. According to the 2018 conscription physical exam in one major city, the proportion of candidates who were eliminated was as high as 52.98 percent, with poor eyesight and obesity the top two disqualifying conditions.

Management and Quotas

Historically, the former General Staff Department's Mobilization Department (总参动员部, *zongcan dongyuan bu*) was responsible for enlisted force conscription; however, in 2016, the PLA created the CMC National Defense Mobilization Department (NDMD, 国防动员部, *guofang dongyuan bu*) with a subordinate Soldier and Civilian Personnel Division (兵员和文职人员处, *bingyuan he wenzhi ren yuan chu*) to oversee enlisted force conscription/recruitment. In addition, the Ministry of National Defense has a subordinate [Enlisted Force] Recruitment Office (征兵办公室, *zhengbing bangongshi*), which is dual-hatted under the NDMD [5].

Since formal conscription began in the 1950s, the PLA has provided quotas by service to each province, autonomous region (AR), and municipality. Until the *2011 Military Service Law*, all registration and screening occurred in person through the People's Armed Forces Departments (PAFD), which are under prefectural military commands. Once conscripts were selected, they were assigned to operational units for basic training and then to operational billets in the same unit. Typically, they were replaced by conscripts selected by the same PAFD two years later.

All this changed in 2009 when the PLA began recruiting college students as conscripts. The PLA established a website for online registration, which is also managed by the relevant PAFDs ([National Recruitment Network](#)). Although the percentage of newly enlisted high school students who have volunteered has increased dramatically, each PAFD still must meet a quota, which is accomplished by conscripting personnel to fill gaps. Of late, most, if not all college PAFDs have met their quotas through attracting volunteers, however, it is unclear if this remains the case under the new two-cycle system.

Conscription Cycle

Prior to 1955, nearly all enlisted personnel in the PLA (or Red Army before 1949) were undereducated or illiterate volunteers. In 1955, as part of efforts to modernize the PLA, the NPC issued the first *Military Service Law* that created the compulsory military service system (义务兵役制, *yiwu bingyi zhi*), stipulated length of

service, and established enlisted force grades and ranks, which lasted ten years until the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) [6].

Following the setback of the Cultural Revolution, in the late 1970s, the PLA embarked on an ambitious program to modernize many aspects of the military, including education, training, and recruitment. Conscripts and volunteers were combined into a single system that allowed conscripts who fulfilled their service obligation to stay in the military as volunteer soldiers for a total of 16 years [7]. According to the 1984 *Military Service Law*, “the term of active service for conscripts is three years in the army or four years in the Navy or Air Force. After completion of the term of active service, the conscripts may serve an extra term of active service according to the needs of the armed forces and the free choice of the servicemen. The extra term of active service shall be one to two years in the army, or one year in the Navy or in the Air Force. Conscripts who have become specialized technical personnel after five years of active service, including the extra term of active service, may change their service status into one of volunteer” ([Xinhua](#), August 20, 2021).

By law, two-thirds of conscripts had to come from rural areas, where ninth grade was the highest education level ([CASI](#), May 4, 2021, chapter 4). The remainder of conscripts were high school students or graduates. As the PLA acquired high-tech weapon systems in the late 1990s, it determined that it had to make changes to its enlisted force but faced several challenges. For example, during the 1990s, only about 8 percent of high school graduates in China attended college. As of 2013, 26.2 percent of high school graduates were attending college. However, by late 2017, that number had increased to 42.7 percent. Although males received conscription notices at age 18, the 21-year age cap for conscription decreased the pool of eligible high school graduates as greater numbers attended college and exceeded the age limit.

By the end of the 1990s, the PLA attempted to address multiple problems, including lack of qualified personnel to operate and maintain more technologically sophisticated weapon systems purchased from Russia, Sovremenny submarines and Su-27 fighters, by amending two earlier key regulations that went into effect in 1999, the *Military Service Law* and the *PRC Conscription Regulations*. The revised law and regulations sought to restore the appeal of military service to young people [8].

The amended 1998 *Military Service Law* addressed conscription difficulties by shortening the mandatory service period to two years for everyone and creating a 30-year enlisted force system ([NPC](#), December 29, 1998). Prior to the end of their second year of service, a conscript would be permitted to apply to become an NCO or take exams to enter a military academy and become an officer. Conscripts not accepted as either NCOs or officers were demobilized following their two-year conscription periods.

Although the 1998 law and regulations focused on improving the enlisted force and NCO corps, several factors hampered the PLA's ability to recruit and retain talent. For example, the PLA started enlisting college graduates in 2001, but by mid-2009, had recruited only 2,000 as two-year enlisted personnel. In 2009, the PLA actively recruited 130,000 college graduates and students; however, it only recruited 100,000 in 2010, although its goal was 150,000. To help solve the problem, the PLA doubled everyone's salary [8].

In addition to the two-third quota for rural conscripts with a ninth-grade education, another issue hindering recruitment and conscription of college students and graduates was the age limit of 21, which resulted in many graduates being too old for conscription. Therefore, in the early 2000s, the PLA increased the maximum ages of conscription to 21 years old for high school graduates, 23 for students receiving a senior technical or vocational degree, and 24 for college graduates ([Hanbin](#), May 25, 2017).

In December 2009, the CMC implemented a “Plan for Reforming the NCO System” along with three revised regulations for NCO active-duty service periods, management, and education and training. The new measures sought to maintain the overall size of the enlisted force and to increase the NCO corps while reducing the conscript force ([Xinhua](#), July 15, 2009).

In 2011, the PRC passed a *Military Service Law* that sought to actively recruit college students and graduates as enlisted personnel ([NPC](#), October 31, 2011). In 2013, the requirement that two-thirds of conscripts be from rural areas was abolished. Whereas high school students received a conscription notice by mail, college students could now register as volunteers online ([National Recruitment Network](#)). To recruit college-educated civilians as two-year enlistees, the PLA and the Ministry of Education established several lucrative financial incentives: 1) tuition debt write-offs; 2) allowing students who had not graduated to return to school and change their major; 3) providing a one-time post-departure compensation to enlisted personnel seeking to start their own businesses; and 4) requiring that 5 percent of new hires at state-owned enterprises consist of retired military personnel [9]. Until 2013, potential enlisted personnel received conscription notices in August and then underwent a six-week selection, induction, and training process starting on November 1, which included physical, political, and psychological examinations. Conscripts departed for their units around mid-December with most serving outside their home provinces.

Although the PLA tried to increase the number of college students and graduates in its ranks, it realized a gap existed between the end of the academic year and beginning of the new training cycle in November. As a result, in 2013, the PLA moved the entire process forward three months shifting from a winter to a summer/fall conscription cycle. Therefore, the first day of the two-year cycle was August 1, when all new enlisted personnel underwent the conscription process. New conscripts only arrive for basic training around September 10. The last day of their two-year cycle was July 31. Over the past few years, college students and graduates have made up approximately half of new personnel. Although the PLA wanted to create a two-cycle enlisted force conscription process in 2020, due to COVID-19 challenges, implementation of the new system was delayed until early 2021.

Salary and Compensation

Conscripts receive a monthly salary, allowances, and compensation, which includes clothes, food, housing, travel, and medical treatment [10]. In addition, local governments of conscripts’ place of origin also pay a

commensurate amount of their salary to families. Conscripts who serve in remote hardship areas, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, also receive a one-time compensation.

Restrictions on Assignments in Enlisted Personnel's Home Location

As a general rule, since the 1989 Tiananmen crisis and military crackdown in Beijing, the PLA does not allow enlisted personnel to serve in their province of origin. For example, in 2014, more than 20,000 people from Guangdong became two-year enlistees and 20 percent were university students or graduates ([Zhengbing](#), September 6, 2014). These new enlistees were divided into over 300 groups, and sent to 44 corps-level organizations, including the Lanzhou Military Region (MR), Nanjing MR, Guangzhou MR, PLAN, PLAAF, and People's Armed Police (PAP). They traveled by rail, road, and air to their units in 19 provinces, ARs, and municipalities. In July 2019, 15,000 individuals began their pre-selection process as two-year enlisted personnel in Quzhou, Zhejiang Province ([Quzhou Daily News](#), September 18, 2019). Of these, 900 were eventually selected for assignments in the Army, Air Force, Rocket Force, Hong Kong Garrison, and Strategic Support Force. Of the 900, 80 percent were college students and 17.5 percent were college graduates, a record high for the city. In September, Quzhou held two ceremonies to bid farewell to enlistees before their departure to assignments around China.

Conclusion

The PLA enlisted force predates the PRC's establishment in 1949. It began as an all-volunteer force, then became a pure conscription force, and is now a combination of conscripts and volunteers. In 1999, the conscription period was reduced to two years for all conscripts. A formal NCO system was also implemented that allowed enlisted personnel to serve for a total of 30 years, assuming they received the requisite promotions. Over the past two decades, the PLA has sought to develop a more educated enlisted force by recruiting, rather than conscripting, college students. For example, the PLA implemented an incentive system to attract college-educated recruits in 2009 but had to shift the entire cycle forward by three months to entice them to join the PLA shortly after the school year ended. It is not clear if the PLA has met its goal of recruiting a large number of college students during the first cycle of the year.

As the PLA brings in and loses about 400,000 conscripts at the same time each year, the overall annual training cycle is affected. To help reduce the negative impact on readiness, the PLA shifted from a one-cycle to a two-cycle conscription structure in 2020. Unfortunately, no official PLA information was found that discussed impact of the new system. Finally, if the current shift to the two-cycle system is not as effective as the PLA anticipates, further changes are likely by the end of this decade.

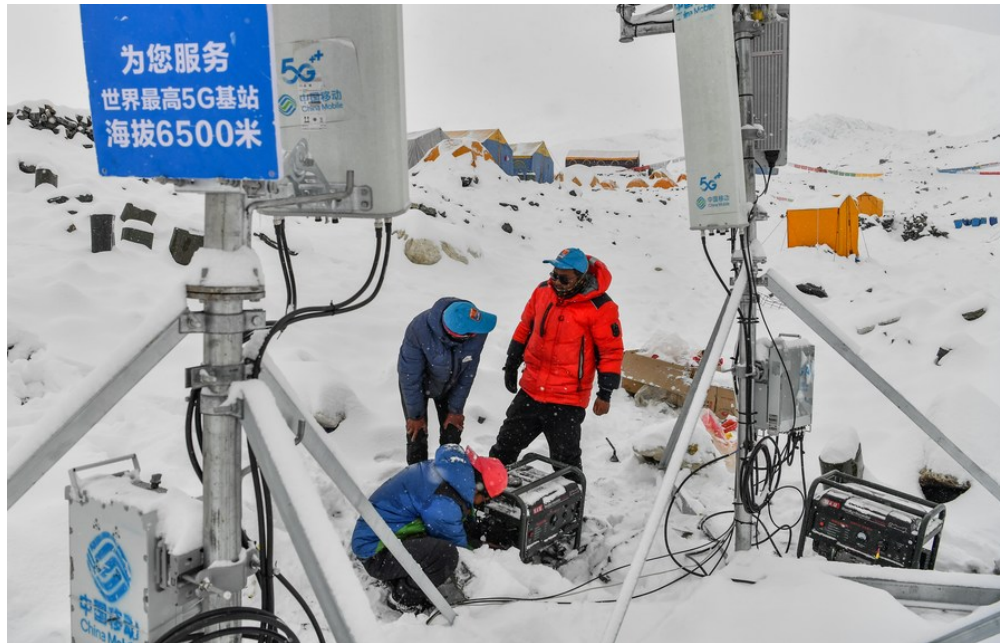
Kenneth W. Allen is a retired U.S. Air Force officer, whose extensive service abroad includes a tour in China as the Assistant Air Attaché. He has written numerous articles on Chinese military affairs, the PLA's organizational structure, and the PLA Air Force.

Notes

- [1] Information in list is from the following sources: Zhang Qiliang, ed., *A Chinese-English Dictionary of Military Terms* (汉英军事词典), (Beijing: Naval Press, December 2001); *PLA Military Terminology dictionary*, 2nd ed., 2011.
- [2] "PLA Downsizing History," *Renmin Haijun*, 13 September 2003, 3; "Reduction of 200,000 Troops is Aimed at Paving the Way for Informatization of the Armed Forces," *Hong Kong Tzu Ching*, Number 156, 1 October 2003, 64-65.
- [3] *PLA Air Force Enlisted Handbook* (中国人民解放军空军士兵手册), (Beijing: Blue Sky Publishing House, November 2006), p. 252.
- [4] Based on analysis of information from *Air Force News*, January 24, February 14, February 26, 2006, 3.
- [5] Information in section from Kenneth W. Allen, et al, "China's Defense Minister and Ministry of National Defense" and Mark Stokes, "The Chinese People's Liberation Army General Staff Department: Evolving Organization and Missions" in Kevin Pollpeter and Kenneth W. Allen, eds. *The PLA as Organization v2.0*. Vienna, VA: Defense Group Inc., 2013; Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, Second Edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2012.
- [6] Harlan W. Jencks, *From Muskets to Missiles: Politics and Professionalism in the Chinese Army 1945-1981*, Westview Press, 1 Jan 1982, p. 227.
- [7] *Military Science*, Vol. 2, *Chinese Military Encyclopedia*, Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences Publishing House, July 1997, p. 563.
- [8] Cong Wensheng, "China's Military Service System," *China Armed Forces*, Number 12, Volume 4, 2011, 25-27.
- [9] See Li Shanshan, "China's Military Service System," (Beijing: China Armed Forces, Number 12, Volume 4, 2011), 31-33.
- [10] information in this subsection from multiple articles on the (Conscription/Recruitment Dynamics) (征兵动态) tab on the University/college Student Conscription (Recruitment) Information Network (大学生征兵信息网) (www.0730hao.cn/index.html) for 2012-2016.

China's Next Generation Infrastructure Development in Tibet: Implications for India

By Suyash Desai



(Image: A 5G base station in Tibet, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

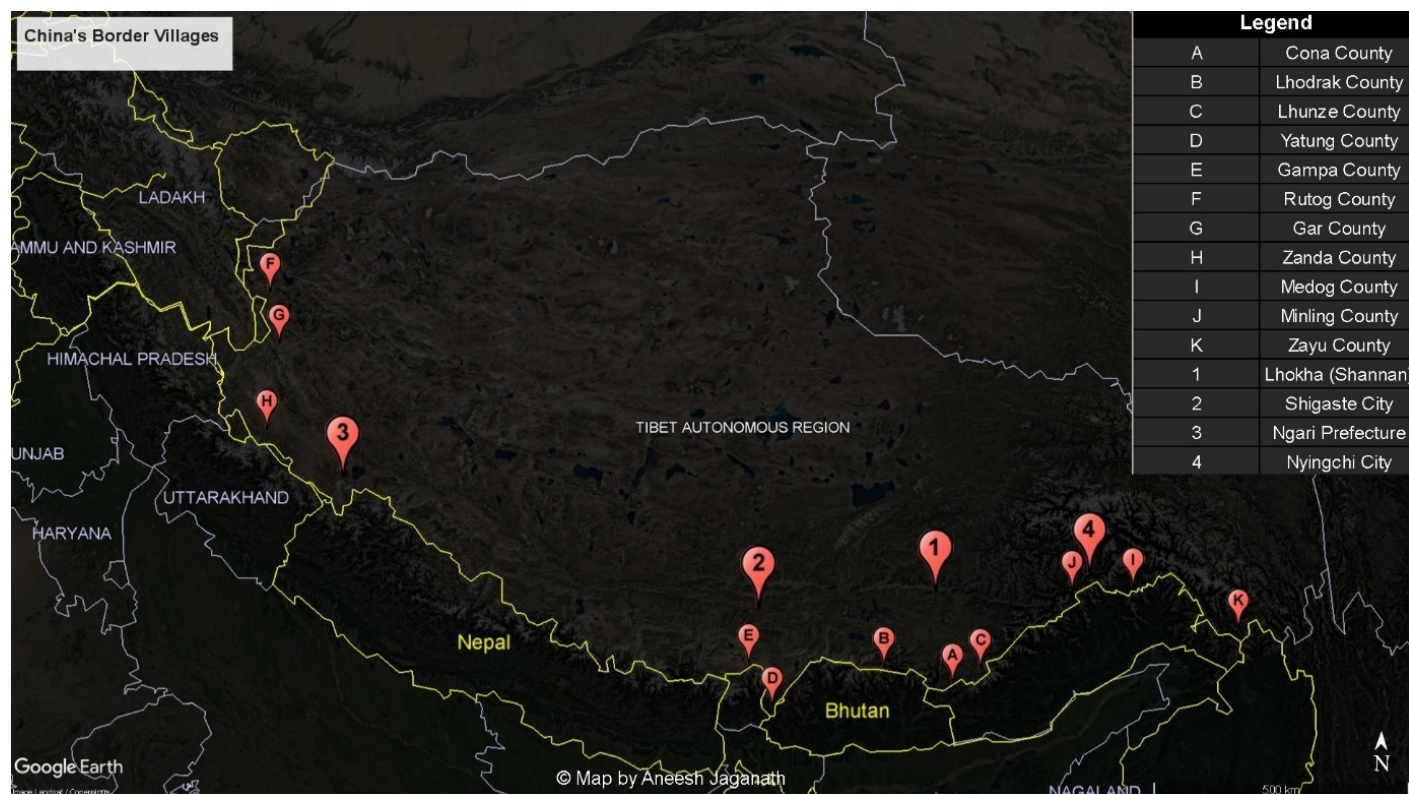
It has been 71 years since the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the local government of Tibet signed a 17-point agreement on "the peaceful liberation of Tibet" ([Central Tibetan Administration](#), May 23, 2019). Nevertheless, the region remains a major source of insecurity and vulnerability for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The PRC considers Tibet an integral part of China and since 1999, has invested heavily in the region's dual-use infrastructure under its western development strategy (西部大开发, *xibu da kaifa*) ([China Brief](#), November 19, 2021). Under General Secretary Xi Jinping, emphasis on infrastructure development in Tibet has continued. China has not only invested in conventional infrastructure development such as roads, railways and airports, but also in border defense villages, and next generation infrastructure including internet connectivity projects (for a discussion of the PRC's construction of transportation infrastructure in Tibet, see part one of this series, [China Brief](#), November 19, 2021))

This article reviews the next generation infrastructure that China is building and developing in Tibet, which includes *xiaogong* villages on the borders with India, Nepal and Bhutan, a new all-weather oil pipeline, and power, and internet connectivity infrastructure across the restive Tibetan plateau. The subsequent section considers the implications of these developments for China's unresolved border dispute with India.

Next Generation Infrastructure Development in Tibet

Since late 2016, Chinese central leadership has pursued a policy of developing “well-off villages in border areas” (边境地区小康村建设规划, *bianjing diqu xiaokang cun jianshe guihua*) in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) as part of its rural revitalization program. The TAR government’s 2017 Work Report mentioned for the first time “the construction of well-off villages and simultaneous relocation of Tibetans in these villages” [1]. However, this process only accelerated after the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, when Xi called for “Chinese people with talent to work in remote poor areas, border areas with the ethnic minority population, as well as in communities and on the frontlines” ([Xinhua](#), November 3, 2017).

In July 2017, the TAR government issued the “Plan for the Construction of Well-off Villages in the Border Areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region (2017-2020)” ([Tibet.cn](#), May 11, 2019). The plan involves building 628 villages in the TAR’s 112 border towns across 21 border counties in Shigatse, Lhokha, Nyingchi and Ngari prefecture-level cities ([56-China.com](#), December 18, 2020).



(Map by Aneesh Jaganath, Researcher at The Takshashila Institution (see table 1 for the detailed data on China's border villages)

Of these 628 administrative border villages, 427 are first-line villages and 201 are second-line villages. Of these 427 first-line villages, Shigatse city is building 354 villages along the borders with Bhutan, Nepal and the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh [2]. Through this initiative, the PRC plans to move 62,000 border residents and 241,835 people into 62,160 households across 628 villages ([Huangjiu](#), August 12, 2020). The Central government has allocated around RMB 30.1 billion (approximately \$4.6 billion) for this initiative, which was

expected to be completed by 2020 (56-China.com, December 18, 2020). The recent TAR government's Autonomous Region Strong Frontier Work Conference noted that 94% of the project had been completed by December 2020 [3]. A recent *People's Daily* article also highlighted that China had completed construction of 604 well-off border villages by mid-2021 (People's Daily, August 13, 2021). All 628 planned border villages will likely be constructed before the 20th National Party Congress in fall 2022.

Table: China's Border Villages [4]

No	Prefecture-level City	County	Villages
1	Lhokha City	Cona County	Quna Village, Yama Rong Village, Khatak Village
		Lhodrak County	Lhakhang Township, Gongzu Village, Sangyul Village, Lagyab Township
		Lhunze County	Zhongna Village, Yumai Border Well-off Village, Dakri Township, Douyu Lopa Township, Sanlin Township, Jielluobu (Gyalaphug) Village
2	Shigaste City	Yatung (Dromo) County	Guru Village, Pangda Village
		Gampa County	Jiru Village
3	Ngari Prefecture	Rutog County	Jagan Village - Risom Township
		Gar County	Dianjiao village (Demchok) - Zhaxigang township
		Zanda County	Chusong Village - Chulu Songjie Township
4	Nyingchi City	Medog County	Dhamo Village - Lopa Ethnic Township, Guthang Township
		Minling (Mainling) County	Dekyi New Village - Linlong Township, Bangzhong Village, Qionglin Village
		Zayu County	Zhala Village - Zhuwagen Town, Shama Village - Xiayu Township, Kyoto Village, Jingdu Village - Zayu township,

Note: The above table is not a comprehensive list of all 628 villages but broadly representative of development on the India-China, China-Bhutan and China-Nepal borders.

Furthermore, China is also trying to connect these border villages and the entire Tibetan plateau to internet and power facilities. The Lanzhou-Xining-Lhasa optical cable communication line (兰州-西宁-拉萨”光缆通信专线, *Lanzhou-Xining-Lasa guanglan tongxin zhuanxian*) connects Tibet with the rest of the country ([Sohu](#), July 24, 2021). By the end of 2019, Tibet had complete access to the [optical fiber network](#), and even border defense villages reportedly had a 4G access rate of around 98% ([Tibet.cn](#), January 24, 2019). Some Tibetan towns even have 5G network access, and under the current 14th Five-Year Plan (FYP), China aims to increase 5G access across the region ([Gov.cn](#), March 13, 2021). Similarly, by December 2020, China had connected all 66 counties and eight districts in the TAR to the central power grid ([People's Daily](#), February 26, 2021). The 2021 TAR Work Report calls for electrification of all villages along the borders with India, Bhutan and Nepal [5]. Moreover, the PRC is also reconstructing the “Snow Mountain Oil Dragon” (雪山油龙, *xueshan you long*) pipeline, as the old pipeline is scheduled to be decommissioned due to corrosion of pipes ([Guangming Daily](#), July 21, 2021). The newer line will be 1,076 km long, over 150 mm larger in diameter and will run parallel to the existing line from Golmund to Lhasa [6]. Furthermore, the 13th FYP stipulated that China would also increase the number of oil depots in Tibet to ten. It is unclear if this target was met during the plan period ([China News Network](#), January 8, 2016).

Implications for the Border Dispute with India

Article VII of the *Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the Boundary Question*, a pact that the Indian and Chinese governments signed in April 2005, stipulates that “the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas” [7]. Furthermore, Article 10 from Chapter 1 of China’s recently passed border law charges the state with adopting effective measures to strengthen border defense construction, support economic and social development along the border, and enhance public services and infrastructure construction to improve living conditions of residents in these areas (for further details see [NPC Observer](#), October 23, 2021). Although village construction is part of China’s domestic agenda of “developing the border regions [and] enriching the local people” (兴边富民, *xìng biān fù mǐn*) highlighted in 1999, it should also be interpreted as efforts by China to legitimize a land version of the kind of “salami-slicing” tactics, which the PRC has employed in the South China Sea [8]. Raising permanent infrastructure like electric grids and providing internet connectivity to these villages supplements these efforts by making these areas more conducive to permanent settlement. In doing so, China aims to reaffirm its claims to disputed territory along the India-China border. Upon completion, these villages would also act as border watch posts for the PLA and help the PRC limit cross-border Tibetan migration.

Moreover, improved internet and power connectivity help the PLA and China’s border defense units sustain a presence in the region for longer durations. For instance, during the 2020 India-China stand-offs at five disputed

locations in eastern Ladakh, Chinese troops were reportedly laying optical fiber cables near the Himalayan border. Such lines are militarily important as they provide forward-deployed troops with a secure line of communication with the rear and inland bases.

Similarly, the oil pipeline, one of the three major arteries (along with the Golmud-Lhasa oil pipeline and Qinghai-Tibet highway), which connects Tibet to China proper coupled with improved logistics and oil depot construction in the TAR, suggest that China is planning not only for rapid mobilization of forces to the border, but also for sustained deployments along the border areas [9].

Conclusion

China's extensive conventional and next generation infrastructure development in the TAR and areas close to its southern border with India enhances its operational capability in the region and also boosts the local economy. Such extensive conventional and new-age infrastructure development and ongoing military reforms including an intensified Military-Civil Fusion (MCF) national strategy could help China deploy forces to forward positions for extended periods and mobilize counter-attack units relatively quickly from inland if required. Put simply, such developments could provide the PRC with an operational advantage along the border with India in the future.

Suyash Desai is an Associate Fellow, China Studies Programme, The Takshashila Institution, India. He studies China's defense and foreign policies and writes a weekly newsletter on the Chinese armed forces called the PLA Insight. This article is inspired by his [research project](#) on China's civilian and military developments in Tibet and its implications on India.

Notes

[1] See "2017 Tibet Autonomous Region Government Work Report" [2017 年西藏自治区政府工作报告], General Office of the People's Government of Tibet Autonomous Region [西藏自治区人民政府办公厅], February 13, 2017. http://www.xizang.gov.cn/zwgk/xxfb/zfgzbq/201902/t20190223_62067.html

[2] For more on the PRC's border construction, see "The Tibet Insight News," *Centre for China Analysis and Strategy*, April 1-15, 2019. <https://www.ccasindia.org/Tibet-Insight-News-Report-1-15-Apr-2019.pdf>

[3] For more, see "Tibet Insight," *Centre for China Analysis and Strategy*, October-December 2020. <https://www.ccasindia.org/Tibet-Insight-News-Report-Oct-Dec-2020.pdf>

[4] Compiled based on multiple sources from the Chinese internet like cppc.gov.in, Tibet.cn, Tibet Daily, TAR Government Work Reports, Sohu, Huanqiu; Jayadeva Ranade, "China's Xiaogong (well-off) Border Defence Villages in the Tibet Autonomous Region, Vivekananda International Foundation, September 24, 2019.

<https://www.vifindia.org/article/2019/september/24/china-s-xiaokang-border-defence-villages-in-the-tibet-autonomous-region>

[5] See “2021 Tibet Autonomous Region Government Work Report” [2020 年西藏自治区政府工作报告], General Office of the People's Government of Tibet Autonomous Region [西藏自治区人民政府办公厅], March 24, 2021. http://www.xizang.gov.cn/zwgk/xxfb/zfgzbg/202103/t20210324_197174.html

[6] For details on the pipeline, read Wenbing Yu, Fenglei Han, Weibo Liu and Stuart Arthur Harris, “Geohazard and Thermal Regime Analysis of Oil Pipeline along the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Engineering Corridor,” *The Journal of the International Society for the Prevention and Migration of Natural Hazards* 83, no 1 (2016): 193-209.

[7] See “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, April 11, 2005. <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/6534/Agreement+between+the+Government+of+the+Republic+of+India+and+the+Government+of+the+Peoples+Republic+of+China+on+the+Political+Parameters+and+Guiding+Principles+for+the+Settlement+of+the+IndiaChina+Boundary+Question>

[8] See Shuxian Luo, “China Land Border Law: A Preliminary Assessment,” *Brookings Blog*, November 4, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/11/04/chinas-land-border-law-a-preliminary-assessment/>

[9] See Rajeshwari Pillai Rajagopalan and Pulkit Mohan, “PLA Joint Exercises in Tibet: Implications for India,” *ORF Occasional Paper*, February 26, 2020. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/pla-joint-exercises-in-tibet-implications-for-india-61735/>

The U.S.-China Perception Gap: A Recipe for Disaster?

By Harry He and Eduardo Jaramillo



(Image: Foreign Minister Wang Yi listens as Politburo Member and director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the CPC Central Committee Yang Jiechi addresses U.S. diplomats in March, 2021 at the strategic dialogue in Anchorage, Alaska, source: news.cn)

Introduction

In December, a war of words raged across the Pacific over the very meaning of the word “democracy” ([China Brief](#), December 14, 2021). The United States held its Summit for Democracy, inviting other democracies of various stripes, while China convened its own competing “Dialogue on Democracy,” calling out the U.S. for fomenting a cold war-style global geopolitical split ([CGTN](#), December 2, 2021; [U.S. Department of State](#)).

This discourse battle exemplifies a trend in Chinese views of the U.S. that has been gradually forming over the past 15 years. The 2008 global financial crisis, ill-fated American military campaigns, and mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic have led Chinese leaders to doubt U.S. power and capabilities. Yet, Washington has held on to the belief that it is capable of shaping China’s behaviors, either through inducement or deterrence. Even as the U.S. recognizes the limits of its influence and the recent relative decline in prestige, it still sees tremendous strengths in its military and economic prowess, alliance networks, democratic values, and soft power.

The perception gap between China and the U.S. concerning American power is a potential recipe for disaster. While this does not imply that conflict is imminent or unavoidable, it does make miscalculations and miscommunications in the U.S.-China relationship both more likely and more dangerous.

Chinese Perceptions of the U.S.: A Weakened Rival

China's perception of the U.S. has changed significantly over the past two decades. A recent *Global Times* survey reported that 96 percent of Chinese citizens harbor negative views toward the U.S. and even modest estimations put the number of Chinese with unfavorable views of the U.S. above 60 percent ([Global Times](#), August 11, 2020; [U.S. China Perception Monitor](#), 2021). Compared to a similar *Global Times* survey in 2005 in which 47.7 percent of Chinese viewed the U.S. as a role model, partner, or friend, there is little doubt that public favorability toward the U.S. has declined sharply in recent years ([Sina News](#), March 2, 2005).

Less attention has been paid, however, to how China perceives U.S. power. Nevertheless, available information reveals a general sense that U.S. power and prestige are in relative decline. The perception that China is rising as America is fading emerged after the 2008 global financial crisis when many Chinese saw a shift in the global balance of power in their favor, contributing to the gradual departure from Deng Xiaoping's strategic guidance of "hide and bide" (韬光养晦, *taoguang yanghui*) ([Brookings](#), January 22, 2019). Another recent poll revealed that over 75 percent of respondents who reportedly looked up to the West five years ago now view the Western countries as equal or inferior to China ([Global Times](#), April 19, 2021).

Although recent events have solidified China's perception of the U.S. as in decline, changes in how China interprets these shifts in the global balance of power merit closer examination. After the 2008 crisis, many Chinese began to feel that the opportunity to overtake the U.S. had arrived. Proponents of this view saw a shift in global order from unipolarity to multipolarity with a relative decline in U.S. economic power in terms of its share of global GDP, systemic problems in capitalist institutions, and military failures in Afghanistan and Iraq ([Global Times](#), June 15, 2015). Yet most scholars remained cautious, arguing that the U.S. remains the only superpower with unmatched capabilities and a shift in the balance of power will not occur overnight ([Global Times](#), December 12, 2008). Wang Jisi, for example, proposed the "March West" strategy to counterbalance Washington's "pivot to Asia" while avoiding confrontation with the U.S. ([Global Times](#), October 17, 2012).

Increasing U.S.-China friction since late 2017 and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic instigated another wave of criticism and skepticism of U.S. power and influence. More nationalist rhetoric from the Trump administration, America's turn to protectionist trade policies toward China, and Washington's difficulty managing the COVID-19 pandemic fueled perceptions of a sharp decline in U.S. comprehensive power ([Global Times](#), January 12, 2021; [The Paper](#), May 23, 2020). While the central message—that U.S. power is in decline and American citizens are becoming less confident—remained similar, criticisms from China evolved from focusing on Wall Street and U.S. foreign policy to U.S. capabilities, the Trump administration, and political and social divisions in the U.S.

Finally, in recent months, a renewed, more aggressive perception of U.S. power in decline has gained popularity in China. Fueled by the Biden administration's emphasis on democratic values against the backdrop of America's unceremonious retreat from Afghanistan, the Chinese government, scholars and public have gone on the offensive, criticizing the frailty of the U.S. political system. In response to Washington's democracy summit, China hosted its own "Democracy Dialogue" and published *China: Democracy that Works* and *The State of Democracy in the United States*, charging the U.S. with being a fake democracy that values money and elites above all else ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), December 5, 2021). In fact, Chinese experts were already pointing fingers at the U.S. political system after the summit between Biden and President Xi Jinping. Even when the takeaways were generally positive, many Chinese pundits portrayed an image of a weak Biden presidency barely in charge of a dysfunctional system, citing examples such as Biden's refusal to address Xi as an "old friend" ([Phoenix News](#), November 16, 2021).

For China, U.S. power has been on a path of decline since 2008 as the global balance of power shifts in its favor. Yet behind this continuity in China's perception are several critical points. IN a range of areas, from relative U.S. power in the global order to the capability and reliability of a given administration, to the fragility of America's very own democratic system, China's perspective changed from seeing America as an overstretched superpower to viewing the U.S. as a declining and hypocritical hegemon. China's current perception of the U.S. echoes Mao Zedong's (毛泽东) famous slogan of "the East wind prevails over the West wind." Consequently, Beijing has shown greater willingness to adopt assertive policies and tolerate friction and competition with Washington.

U.S. Perceptions of China: A Hardened Resolve

When it comes to China policy, Washington is hardly stuck in neutral—on the contrary, over the past 15 years, a growing consensus has taken hold among American policymakers that the China challenge must be addressed head-on. Even as China's behavior, both inside and outside its borders, moved in new and unexpected directions after 2008, Washington's response continued based on the premise that its actions could affect China's trajectory. To be sure, there has been a shift away from striving to influence China to undertake domestic liberalization and to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system. More recently, U.S. policy has shifted toward balancing China's growing power and countering its expanding influence. However, , the primary feature defining U.S. policy towards China has been continuity in America's belief in its ability to shape its emerging challenger's behavior.

President Obama began his administration with a series of broad objectives in Asia, including deepening engagement with China, but he encountered uncompromising rigidity from Beijing. China's newfound defiance was exemplified by State Councilor Yang Jiechi's outburst at the 2010 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum. After Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in the South China Sea was an American national interest, Yang made a lengthy and caustic statement clearly directed at Clinton ([China Brief](#), December 17, 2010). This episode underscored the

emergence of a bolder and more risk-tolerant China than Obama, or Washington in general, had expected or seen in recent years.

Obama eventually formed a broad approach to the region with the “pivot” to Asia, which was at least partly a response to China’s growing power and ambitions. In practice, the pivot involved allocating increased military assets to the region, crafting an economic policy that reconciled the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free trade agreement with efforts to boost American employment, and showing American commitment to the Indo-Pacific through state visits and bolstered cooperation with allies and partners ([Foreign Policy](#), September 6, 2016). China, partly driven by perceptions that the pivot was meant to contain it, continued its expansive activities such as land reclamation in the South China Sea through Obama’s second term, which only set off further alarms in Washington.

However, it was Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump who tapped into a potent narrative about China that both found a response among many American voters in 2016 and catalyzed a sea change in the way American policymakers viewed China. As sociologist Richard Madsen has argued, in 2016 Trump successfully resurfaced fears about China that had proliferated in the 1990s, such as anxieties over Chinese influence in U.S. elections, suspicion of Chinese theft of national security secrets, and criticism of the Chinese Community Party’s (CCP) religious intolerance.^[1]

Once elected, Trump moved the U.S.-China relationship toward a more adversarial footing but maintained the goals of past administrations in seeking to shape China’s actions. On the campaign trail, Trump castigated the U.S.’s trade deficit with China, Chinese intellectual property (IP) theft, state subsidies for Chinese industry, and other unfair trade practices. As president, he placed tariffs on a host of Chinese imports, but still signed a trade agreement with China in January 2020, which aimed to return the trading relationship to some normalcy, reduce the trade deficit, and end practices like IP theft and forced tech transfer ([CNBC](#), January 15, 2020). After western media began reporting on mass internments of Muslim ethnic minorities in China’s Xinjiang region in 2017 ([International Consortium of Investigative Journalists](#), December 19, 2019), the administration eventually labeled the event a genocide. The Trump administration also increased American freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) in the South China Sea, used strong rhetoric on China’s crackdown on Hong Kong and revoked the city’s special trade status, and crafted a forceful narrative accusing China of botching the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic ([South China Morning Post](#), February 5, 2020; [DW](#), July 15, 2020; [Economic Times](#), July 5, 2020). These tough policies marked a different approach from the Obama administration, but they ultimately shared the goal of conditioning China to adhere to, rather than disrupt, a liberal, rules-based international order.

China’s reaction to all these measures was characterized by defiance or “wolf-warrior diplomacy,” confirming many of the suspicions of those in Washington who believed the CCP was beyond the point of hedging against confrontation with the U.S. In spring 2018, then former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell and former Deputy National Security Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden Ely Ratner (both of whom now serve in the Biden administration) argued that the Washington foreign policy

community had misjudged China's trajectory, vainly believing that increased international engagement and economic interdependence would lead it toward political liberalization and responsible participation in the U.S.-led global order ([Foreign Affairs](#), March/April 2018).

Conclusion

American actions do not bear out China's perception that the U.S., fraught with disunity and polarization, is unable to address its rise. China policy now is one arena where Democrats and Republicans can achieve meaningful cooperation. Last summer, the Senate passed the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act, which would boost funding for semiconductor manufacturing, tech security initiatives, and training for the American workforce ([Congress.gov](#), June 8, 2021). More recently, a bill that would ban the imports of products made in Xinjiang passed both chambers of Congress unanimously, showing bipartisan support for tough action on China's abuses ([Congress.gov](#), December 23, 2021).

Moreover, U.S. democracy, though imperfect and rife with unprecedented challenges, remains foundational to American power. It is America's commitment to a rules-based order and democratic values, rather than mere military and economic might, that appeal to U.S. partners and allies around the world. Democracy also provides the American political system with resilience, allows for new ideas to enter public discourse, and enables marginalized groups to voice their grievances, much more than in China's authoritarian system.

An unmistakable and widening perception gap on American power exists between China and the U.S. Yet the real problem does not lie in whether China's judgment of the U.S. as a "paper tiger" is accurate or if the East wind is really prevailing. Whether China's perceptions are driven by hubris, insecurity, or both, the mere existence of a perception gap between China and the U.S. is inherently dangerous. It limits the effectiveness of U.S. efforts to shape China's behavior, furthers bilateral distrust, and increases the risk of miscalculation.

Ultimately, although China's recent propaganda campaign to elevate itself as a model of democracy is not particularly persuasive, Beijing's criticisms of American democracy, cynical as they may be, reflect real flaws in the U.S. system. Cross-party consensus on China policy does exist, but that limited cooperation is constrained by major political divisions and economic and social challenges, all of which threaten to sap America's power and influence, domestically and abroad.

***Harry He** is an MA Candidate in Asian Studies at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. His research interests include China's local governance issues, state-society relations, and US-Japan-China trilateral relations.*

***Eduardo Jaramillo** is an MA Candidate in Asian Studies at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. His research interests include U.S.-China relations, Chinese elite politics, and state-society relations in China.*

Notes

[1] Richard Madsen, "The American Dream and the China Dream," in *Engaging China: Fifty Years of Sino-American Relations*, ed. Anne F. Thurston (Columbia University Press, New York, 2021), 120–145.

The China-India-Pakistan Triangle : China Strengthens Ties with Pakistan Amid Border Standoff with India

By Syed Fazl-e-Haider



(Image: Chinese and Pakistani troops participate in a joint exercise together, source: China Military Online)

Introduction

The failure of military talks in the fall to ease a one-and-half year border standoff between India and China could lead to further militarization of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto China-India boundary. The commanders from both armies held talks on October 10 after the Indian army chief expressed his frustration over the massive deployment of troops and weaponry by China along the border. Both sides have already deployed tens of thousands of soldiers with artillery, tanks and fighter jets along the LAC, which separates Chinese and Indian-held territories and runs from Ladakh in the west to India's eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh ([Dawn](#), October 11). China claims both Ladakh and the entire Arunachal Pradesh. Adding fuel to Sino-India border tensions is a new land boundary law approved by Chinese lawmakers in the standing committee meeting of the National People's Congress ([NPC](#), October 23, 2021)

Under the new law, which went into effect on January 1, China's territorial integrity is deemed sacred and inviolable, and China is bound to take all measures to safeguard its sovereignty and land boundaries. India has already raised concerns that the new land boundary law could impact the two countries' long-running border dispute. After all, it was the boundary dispute that drove the two countries to full-fledged war in 1962 ([Dawn](#), October 27). Presently, the China-India-Pakistan triangle of conflict has intensified as China and Pakistan continue to view India as a threat to their respective strategic interests, and India perceives its interests as increasingly challenged by China-Pakistan cooperation.

China-India Reset Remains a Distant Prospect

In 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met in Wuhan, China in an effort to improve ties and manage bilateral differences following the military standoff between the two nuclear powers at Doklam in 2017 ([Xinhua](#), April 29, 2018). The Wuhan summit was the first informal top-level bilateral contact between Xi and Modi following the Doklam clash. From a geopolitical angle, Beijing made a serious effort to prevent New Delhi from aligning more closely with the U.S., which sees India as a counterweight to rising China. The two countries reached an understanding at Wuhan to improve bilateral ties under the mantra of the "Wuhan Spirit" ([South Asian Voices](#), September 26, 2019).

A year later, in October 2019 Modi and Xi met again in Chennai, India to follow up on their talks at the Wuhan summit. During the meeting, Modi said, "We had decided to prudently manage differences and not to allow them to become disputes. We had decided that we will be sensitive towards each other's concerns" ([India Today](#), October 12, 2019). Beijing and New Delhi pledged at Wuhan and Chennai that they would not allow their differences to become disputes. Unfortunately, months after the Chennai Summit, differences not only deteriorated into disputes but devolved into bloody clashes, and in June 2020, at least 20 Indian soldiers were killed in a fight with the Chinese troops on the disputed Himalayan border ([Dawn](#), June 16, 2020).

Beijing sees India's membership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or "Quad" along with the U.S., Australia, and Japan—as a pawn on the U.S. strategic chessboard; part of a bloc formed to counter the rising influence of China in Asia ([Global Times](#), June 26, 2017). Some in India have echoed concerns about the utility of participation in the quad in making headway to resolve the border dispute with China. For example, in October, an Indian scholar tweeted: "Where is [the] Quad when China doesn't vacate the areas that it has captured? Where is [the] Quad when China is amassing troops at the border and turns LAC to LoC?" ([Twitter](#), October 11).

The CPEC Factor in the China-India Border Standoff

India has been a bitter critic of the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is the centerpiece of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In particular, India has vehemently opposed the execution of CPEC projects, which traverse the disputed territory of Kashmir ([India Today](#), December 1, 2020). Weeks after the bloody clash between the Chinese and Indian soldiers on the Himalayan border in 2020, Beijing and

Islamabad signed deals for construction of the Kohala hydropower generation project and the Azad Pattan hydropower project in Pakistan-administered Kashmir at an estimated total cost of \$3.9 billion ([China Brief](#), July 29, 2020).

A key reason for China's military buildup and confrontation on the border with India is the perceived threat to CPEC from some infrastructure projects led by India near the LAC. For example, consider the 225-km Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) road project. The Modi administration expedited the DBO road project in eastern Ladakh, where India's highest airstrip is located, allowing the project to provide greater access to this area around the LAC. The road gives India a strategic advantage in rapid military mobilization and an opening to the Karakoram Pass, which divides Ladakh from Xinjiang. This is proximate to CPEC, which enters China from Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region that borders Xinjiang. Gilgit-Baltistan is in the western region of the DBO, which connects Leh, the capital of Ladakh, to the Karakoram Pass ([The Print](#), September 15, 2020).

Beijing and Islamabad are on the same page in their efforts to curtail India's presence and influence in border areas adjacent to China, India and Pakistan. CPEC is not only a game-changer for both China and Pakistan, but it also reflects the convergence of interests of the two strategic partners. Hence, any threat to CPEC is perceived as a common threat by China and Pakistan. Both countries ultimately want to ward off the Indian challenge to CPEC once and for all by changing the status quo in the border areas.

Pakistan backs China in the China-India-Pakistan Triangle of Conflict

Since the Indo-China border standoff and clashes in spring 2020, Pakistan has thrown its weight behind China, as Islamabad's strategic interests increasingly converge with those of Beijing. During the 2020 Sino-Indian crisis, Pakistan deployed 20,000 troops along the Line of Control (LOC), the de facto India-Pakistan border in Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, which adjoins Ladakh in the north conflict ([Economic Times](#), July 2, 2020). Pakistan's deployment of troops occurred as China deployed thousands of troops along the LAC in eastern Ladakh amidst skyrocketing border tensions with India. This illustrates that Pakistan could open a second front against India from the Kashmir border in the event of an India-China conflict.

In 2019, India's BJP government led by Modi further embraced Hindu nationalism unilaterally abolished the special autonomous status of India-controlled Kashmir dividing it into two union territories, Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh ([Dawn](#), August 5, 2019). For both China and Pakistan, India's unilateral decision to alter the status of Kashmir was unacceptable. China reacted angrily as the change also affected the status of Ladakh, which is claimed by Beijing. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying asserted that "China is always opposed to India's inclusion of the Chinese territory in the western sector of the China-India boundary into its administrative jurisdiction. This firm and consistent position remains unchanged" ([CGTN](#), August 7, 2019).

The China-India border dispute has also provided Pakistan with an opportunity to settle scores with its archrival, India. For Islamabad, China's massive troop deployment backed by heavy weaponry in Ladakh strengthens Pakistan's position vis-à-vis India. In May 2021, China and Pakistan conducted a joint military exercise in Tibet

along LAC in the backdrop of a one-year military standoff between India and China in eastern Ladakh. The joint drill includes air- defense skills targeting warships, aircrafts, missiles and drones ([The Tribune](#) , June 1, 2021). India's unilateral change to Kashmir's status in August 2019 opened a door to China's entry into the Kashmir dispute. "India 'opened up new territory on the map,' incorporated part of the areas under the local jurisdiction of Xinjiang and Tibet into its Ladakh union territory and placed Pakistani-administered Kashmir within its so-called union territories of Jammu and Kashmir," argued Chinese scholar Wang Shida days before the violent Indo-China standoff in June 2020. "This forced China into the Kashmir dispute, stimulated China and Pakistan to take counter-actions, and dramatically increased the difficulty in resolving the border issue between China and India" ([Express Tribune](#), June 28, 2020).

Conclusion

In the triangle of conflict, any reset of ties by China with India are unlikely to come at the expense of growing and deepening ties between China and Pakistan. Strategically located Pakistan is vital to China's grand geopolitical and economic agenda, particularly in South Asia. Even Islamabad's post-9/11 frontline role in the U.S.-led war on terror did not affect the growth of Sino-Pakistan relations, which are termed an "all-weather friendship" by both sides. Moreover, China's plan to extend CPEC into Afghanistan is not possible without a friendly Islamabad. The China-India conflict in the Himalayas is the real test of the China-Pakistan strategic alliance and all-weather friendship, which the two countries claim is higher than the Himalayas.

Modi's Kashmir gambit in 2019 backfired, which provided China with an opportunity to emerge as a third party to the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan. The move also triggered a race to capture disputed territory in the mountain region at the confluence of the borders of India, China and Pakistan. Nestled in the Himalayas and divided among India, Pakistan and China, the Kashmir conflict has reemerged as the region's nuclear flashpoint.

The failure of CPEC would doom China's whole multi-trillion dollar infrastructure development initiative undertaken through BRI. Locked in a border standoff with India, China wants to convey to the anti-BRI forces that it will go to any extent to secure its mega infrastructure development program, and is likely to value continued strong ties with Pakistan as a means to achieve this goal.

Syed Fazl-e-Haider is a contributing analyst at the South Asia desk of Wikistrat. He is a freelance columnist and the author of several books including the Economic Development of Balochistan (2004). He has contributed articles and analysis to a range of publications including Dawn, The Express Tribune, Asia Times, The National (UAE), Foreign Affairs, Daily Beast, New York Times, Gulf News, South China Morning Post, and The Independent.