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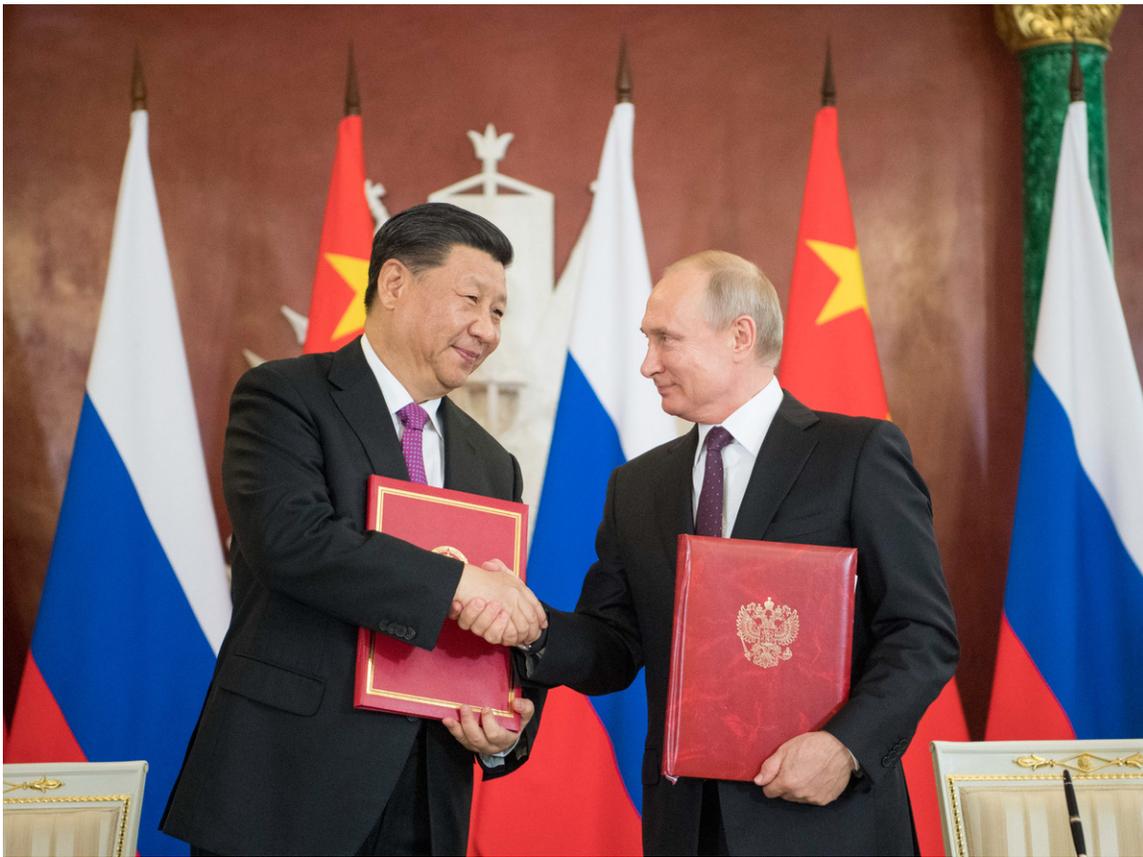
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Vladimir Putin's Mission to Beijing

By John S. Van Oudenaren

When the 2022 Winter Olympics open in Beijing on February 4, Russian President Vladimir Putin will be a guest of honor. Russia remains technically banned from Olympic participation due to doping violations, but as with the 2021 (2020) Tokyo games, Russian athletes will compete as “neutrals” under the “Russian Olympic Committee” banner. Unsurprisingly, Putin acts as if Russia is a full Olympic participant. This week, he held a videoconference with Russian athletes to wish them “triumphant performances” in Beijing ([Moscow Times](#), January 25). Putin also decried the “politicization of sport” echoing the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) criticisms of the U.S. and other democracies for their diplomatic boycotts of the Olympics ([Xinhua](#), January 25). During his visit, Putin and President Xi Jinping will hold bilateral talks, which will be their first in-person interaction in over two years ([TASS](#), January 14). For Putin, the discussions will be an important opportunity to

assess the extent that he can rely on support from China, before wading deeper into his confrontation with the West over Ukraine and NATO's presence in Central and Eastern Europe.



(Image: Xi and Putin shake hands after holding talks in Moscow on June 5, 2019, source: [China Daily](#))

As Russian troops mass on the Ukraine border and the odds of a major war in Eastern Europe mount, Xi faces a complex dilemma. On the one hand, he has an immediate interest in avoiding a major international crisis that could destabilize the global economy, and undermine his domestic political position in a critical year. However, he also recognizes an abiding strategic interest in sustaining and deepening the Sino-Russian partnership, which is far more viable if Russia and the West remain at permanent loggerheads. In order to reconcile these two conflicting interests, Beijing has advocated for a diplomatic solution to the ongoing crisis, while simultaneously supporting Moscow's assertion of privileged security interests in Eastern Europe. Official Chinese sources have also plied the narrative that the U.S. and its "cold war mentality" (冷战思维, *lengzhan siwei*) bear primary responsibility for the current crisis, while largely casting Ukraine as a victim of geopolitical power games ([Xinhua](#), January 27; [Global Times](#), December 28).

Immediate Risk

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On Ukraine, Chinese media and official statements have generally sympathized with Russia, but Beijing has also consistently promoted a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine situation. For example, when Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin was queried on Ukraine in December, he emphasized that China calls “for the resolution of the Ukraine crisis through peaceful means and political dialogue” and “hopes all parties can work together, earnestly follow the Minsk-2 agreement and realize peace and security in Ukraine” ([FMPRC](#), December 9, 2021). Over a month later, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian stated that “China’s position on the Ukraine issue is consistent and clear, and remains unchanged” and noted that Beijing calls on all parties to “resolve differences through dialogue and consultation” ([FMPRC](#), January 17, 2022). In his phone conversation with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on January 27, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi urged a “return to the 2015 Minsk Agreements” but sided with Moscow in chiding NATO for the current impasse and calling for a revision of the current European security architecture. Per Xinhua, Wang told Blinken that “Russia’s legitimate security concerns should be taken seriously and addressed,” and that “all parties should completely abandon the Cold War mentality and form a balanced, effective and sustainable European security mechanism through negotiations” ([Xinhua](#), January 27). Wang’s remarks encapsulate Beijing’s approach to Ukraine, which is to promote a diplomatic resolution of the crisis, while rhetorically siding with Moscow against the U.S. and NATO.

2022 is a critical political year for Xi as he seeks to consolidate his hold on the top leadership positions at the upcoming 20th Party Congress this fall ([China Brief](#), January 25). In this context, Xi is seeking to minimize both economic and political risk, which is reflected in the PRC’s dogged adherence to a zero-COVID epidemic prevention approach, as well as the Central Economic Work Conference’s establishment of stability as China’s top economic priority for 2022 ([China Brief](#), January 14; [Xinhua](#), December 10, 2021). For China, the costs of a major Russian escalation in Ukraine would be indirect, but still substantial in terms of their economic and diplomatic ramifications. Economically, a major war between Russia and Ukraine would be a drag on the global economy, which coupled with continued zero-COVID restrictions and regulatory uncertainty, likely render Beijing’s probable 5.5-6% yearly economic growth target unattainable ([Nikkei](#), December 24, 2021).

The U.S., EU, and other key financial actors such as the UK, Canada and Japan, would invariably respond to increased Russian aggression against Ukraine with a major scale-up of sanctions, which put Chinese entities doing business with Russia at risk of secondary sanctions. This has already occurred to a limited extent; in 2018, the U.S. sanctioned the Chinese Military’s Equipment Development Department for purchasing Russian SU-35 jets and S-400 missile systems in contravention of the Countering Americas Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) ([State.gov](#), September 18, 2018). Economic interaction between China and Russia is more vulnerable to punitive action by the U.S. and EU than is often realized. Although Beijing and Moscow have largely succeeded in their efforts to “de-dollarize” bilateral trade, this has not been accomplished through internationalization of the yuan, but by switching to the euro as a medium of exchange. Around 80% of transactions between China and Russia are now conducted in euros, which as some Russian experts note, hardly obviates the risk of sanctions ([Carnegie Moscow](#), August 2, 2021).

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Another economic consideration for China is that an escalation of the Ukraine conflict would likely induce price shocks in global oil and metal markets ([S&P Global](#), January 21). Although China's crude oil purchases have fallen from recent peaks, it remains the world's largest importer of crude. This week, benchmark Brent crude prices hit their highest level since 2014 breaking \$90 per barrel ([Oil Price](#), January 26).

The current crisis also imperils China's modest, but growing diplomatic and economic ties with Ukraine. Last year, Beijing and Kyiv celebrated the 10th anniversary of their strategic partnership, lauding intensifying cooperation in the fields of business, trade, technology, agriculture, energy, infrastructure, aerospace, education and culture. Both countries cited "non-interference in each other's internal affairs and mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence" as the foundations of their relationship ([Xinhua](#), June 25, 2021). This month, Xi praised the "profound friendship between the two peoples" in a congratulatory note to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Ukraine ([FMPRC](#), January 4). In a recent interview, China's Ambassador to Ukraine Fan Xianrong observed that economic cooperation has deepened through the Belt and Road Initiative, and that despite COVID-19-related impediments, bilateral trade grew 31.7% over the first 11 months of 2021 to 17.36 billion U.S. dollars ([Xinhua](#), January 15, 2021). As Beijing has sought to reduce its dependence on U.S. agricultural imports, China has turned to Ukraine to help make up the difference. For example, Ukrainian corn exports to China spiked from \$26 million in 2013 to \$896 million in 2019 ([Carnegie Moscow](#), December 31, 2020).

Diplomatically, Russia's revanchist turn has negative knock-on effects for China's already challenged outreach to Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Moscow has shifted to a maximalist position demanding not only guarantees that Ukraine and Georgia never be permitted to join NATO, but a drawdown of NATO deployments in all states that have joined the security bloc since 1997 (all CEE states except Greece and Turkey) ([TASS](#), January 21). Putin's efforts to dictate the defense policies and relationships of sovereign European nations only heightens most CEE countries' perceptions that their security interests are inextricably bound up with the Transatlantic alliance. For example, Bulgarian Prime Minister Kirill Petkov unequivocally rejected Moscow's position stating that "within the framework of its NATO membership, Bulgaria makes its own decisions on what policy to pursue" and there is "no category of second-class member state in the alliance" ([Bulgaria National Radio](#), January 21)

CEE states will continue to value China as an economic partner, but given the threat from Russian aggression, ensuring solid relations with Washington will take precedence over deepening ties with Beijing. As a result, countries in the region will likely continue to prove receptive to Washington's concerns over China's penetration of sensitive industries such as broadband networks. For example, Romania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Latvia and Estonia have all signed joint statements on 5G security with the U.S. ([The Guardian](#), July 13, 2020). The desire to maintain close ties with Washington will further dampen CEE countries' limited enthusiasm for joining China-led multilateral groupings such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the 16+1 forum between China and CEE countries

A Partnership of Necessity

Beijing has consistently advocated a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis, while also echoing Moscow's line that the U.S. and its NATO allies bear primary responsibility for the current situation. Certainly, a Russian military invasion of Ukraine would pose immediate challenges for China, but Beijing also recognizes that its relationship with Moscow is its most consequential international partnership. Should Moscow ever sour on the relationship and shift to a more equidistant position between China and the West, the PRC would be, although albeit much stronger today, as isolated in great power politics as it was under Mao Zedong in the late 1960s ([China Brief](#), November 19, 2021). As a result, regardless of what Russia opts to do in Ukraine, China will remain committed to sustaining a close strategic partnership with its northern neighbor.

The importance of the Sino-Russian relationship was underscored when a journalist asked Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao about a Bloomberg report that Xi had implored Putin not to invade Ukraine during the Olympics ([FMPRC](#), January 24). Zhao dismissed the report as “made up out of thin air” and intended “to smear and drive a wedge in China-Russia relations.” He then lauded the “mature, stable and resilient” partnership between China and Russia. Semi-official media outlets have gone further, and have castigated Washington for the current impasse. A *Global Times* editorial claims U.S. Foreign policy “profits from regional tensions” and that Washington uses “NATO as a tool to cannibalize and squeeze Russia's strategic space” ([Global Times](#), December 28, 2021).

Ultimately, the partnership between Russia and China is unlikely to wane any time soon, but the potential for coordinated, proactive Sino-Russian strategic cooperation remains limited. Given their respective interests in revising the status quo in Europe and East Asia, both Moscow and Beijing might benefit from forcing Washington to confront simultaneous foreign policy crises, perhaps at a moment of domestic political crisis in the U.S. However, the current situation underscores the intense difficulty in synchronizing Chinese and Russian strategies. For Xi, the 2024-2025 window appears more promising for a major escalation against Taiwan. At that point, Xi will be midway through his third-term, the U.S. will be in the midst of a divisive presidential election, and if the DPP defeats the KMT in Taiwan's January 2024 election, he may feel that the political route to “national reunification” is dead. By contrast, Putin may worry that Ukraine will be a much tougher nut to crack by mid-decade, and will be navigating a sensitive political period himself with presidential elections in both Russia and Ukraine slated for spring 2024. Clearly, Russia and China are stuck with one another, but whether their strategic partnership can shift from defense to offense, remains to be seen.

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As Rival Factions Gain Traction, Xi Seeks to Secure Support from the Military

By Willy Wo-Lap Lam



(Image: Xi and other members of the Central Military Commission (CMC) greet military officers at the PLA National Defense University in November 2019, source: PRC MND)

Introduction

Factional rivalry and internecine bickering within the 95 million-strong Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has become so apparent that usually circumspect propaganda outlets are no longer shy about airing dirty laundry in public. An article in the December 2021 issue of the official *China Discipline and Supervision Journal* entitled “The Party has Become Stronger Through Revolutionary Training,” candidly testifies to the high levels of antagonism among the disparate CCP cliques. “There are self-righteous cadres... who openly express views contrary to the *dangzhongyang* [central party authorities],” the *Journal* said, using a term that is synonymous with President Xi Jinping. “Some cadres refuse to obey orders,” the article continued. “They brush off and distort the decisions and policies of the *dangzhongyang*... Others even harbor inordinate ambitions and act contrary to the *dangzhongyang* either openly or surreptitiously” (Gmw.cn, November 26; CCDI.gov.cn,

November 25, 2021). Over the past few months, other official media pieces have decried disloyal and “two-faced officials” and even alluded to groups that are openly sabotaging Xi’s authority (CCDI.com, January 18; [China Youth Daily](http://ChinaYouthDaily.com), January 10).

Factional Turmoil

In spite of Xi’s oft-repeated determination to “improve governance systems” and promote “intra-party democracy,” there are many signs that the supreme leader is personally involved in the recriminations and back-stabbing among CCP camarillas. The competing cliques include the Shanghai Faction led by ex-president Jiang Zemin and former vice-president Zeng Qinghong; the Communist Youth League Faction led by ex-president Hu Jintao; and other princelings (offspring of the founders of the People’s Republic of China [PRC]) who do not think highly of Xi – and oppose his bid for one or two additional terms in office at the 20th Party Congress scheduled for this autumn.

In their tussles with one another, Xi and his foes employ the same weapon – the “anti-corruption card.” As a result, cadres are often penalized for graft and dereliction of duty due to factional alignments. In his first five-year term, Xi mainly relied on the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), then headed by his confidante, Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member and fellow princeling Wang Qishan, to eliminate or rein in members of rival cliques by charging them with economic crimes and other illegal activities. However, possibly due to Xi’s jealousy over Wang’s influence, the two erstwhile cronies fell out with each other soon after Wang stepped down from the PBSC in 2017, whereupon he was given the honorary title of Vice President. The current head of the CCDI, Zhao Leji, however, is much closer to the Shanghai Faction and anti-Xi party elders such as Jiang Zemin and Zeng Qinghong. Earlier this month, Li Zhanshu, a PBSC member and Chairman of the National People’s Congress (NPC) Standing Committee who became Xi’s confidante in the early 1980s, disappeared from the official media for two weeks. As it turns out, former Guizhou vice-party secretary Wang Fuyu (王富玉) a key aide to Li when the latter was party secretary of Guizhou from 2010 to 2012, was detained by the CCDI and given a suspended life sentence for pocketing ill-gotten gains of more than 400 million yuan (approximately \$63 million) ([Radio French International](http://RadioFrenchInternational.com), January 18; [New Beijing Post](http://NewBeijingPost.com), January 16). No evidence indicates that Li was involved with Wang’s corrupt practices, but the latter’s downfall has become a big embarrassment for President Xi due to his close relationship with Li.

Other members of the Xi Jinping Faction – which consists mostly of Xi’s associates and underlings from the period that the 68-year-old princeling served in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces from 1985 to 2007 – have also fallen on hard times. Perhaps the most notable example is the former party secretary of Zhejiang’s provincial capital Hangzhou, Zhou Jiangyong (周江勇) who was placed under investigation last August ([Xinhua](http://Xinhua.com), August 21). A native of the coastal province and a well-known Xi protégé, Zhou (born 1967) rose to become party boss of the prosperous city of Wenzhou in 2017. One year later, he was promoted to Party Secretary of Hangzhou and became a member of the Standing Committee of the Zhejiang Party Committee. Xi, who served as the top official in Zhejiang from 2002 to 2007, has a reputation of looking after rising stars from the province where he

made a name for himself. Apart from accepting huge bribes, Zhou was being investigated for “collusion” with a handful of private entrepreneurs in the province.

Another discredited Xi crony from Zhejiang is Xu Liyi (徐立毅) who was penalized for his poor handling of severe flooding in Zhengzhou, capital of Henan province, last August ([Guancha](#), January 21). Xu was reprimanded for inadequate measures to prepare and respond to the disaster, which resulted in the death and disappearance of around 390 people. Punishment has yet to be announced, but it seems certain that the career of Xu (born 1964) has been dealt a frontal blow. Xu spent most of his career in Zhejiang province, and like Zhou Jianguo, held top positions in Wenzhou and Hangzhou ([Radio French International](#), January 21; [Radio Free Asia](#), July 27, 2021).

Targeted Purges

Xi's most bitter power struggle with his rivals is evidenced by his drawn-out purge of the *zhengfa* (political and legal) apparatus, which is headed by the Central Political-Legal Commission (CPLC or *zhengfa wei*). The CPLC is a policy-making committee at the apex of the CCP Central Committee, which controls the Ministry of Public Security (MPS, or police), the Ministry of State Security (often known as China's KGB), the People's Armed Police (PAP), the procuratorates and the courts. This month, a series of educational dramas on CCTV have exposed graft and other wrongdoing by a host of senior *zhengfa* officers including former MPS vice-ministers Sun Lijun (孙立军) and Fu Zhenghua (傅政华), as well as the provincial and municipal police chiefs of Jiangsu, Chongqing, Shanghai and Shanxi: Wang Like (王立科), Deng Huilin (邓恢林), Gong Dao'an (龚道安), and Liu Xinyun (刘新云) ([South China Morning Post](#), January 13; [Radio French International](#), October 10, 2020). Two semi-official media outlets even speculated that Sun, Wang, Deng and their cronies were involved in a failed attempt to “do damage” to Xi when the latter was on a provincial tour ([China Brief](#), September 23, 2021).

On the surface, Xi seemed to have clinched a victory earlier this month when he installed his long-term underling, former Fujian police officer Wang Xiaohong (王小洪) as the Party Secretary and an Executive-Vice Minister of the MPS. However, the MPS Minister remains Zhao Kezhi (赵克志), who is hardly a favorite of Xi. Furthermore, a number of middle and upper-echelon officials in the labyrinth *zhengfa* apparatus remain loyal to Minister Zhao, Secretary of the CPLC and Politburo member Guo Shengkun (郭声琨), as well as Guo's predecessor, retired Politburo member Meng Jianzhu (孟建柱). Zhao, Guo and Meng are considered important members of the Shanghai Faction and are associated with its top leaders such as Zeng Qinghong ([Timednews.com](#), January 21; [Radio Free Asia](#), December 16, 2021). At the January 15 national meeting on *zhengfa* issues, only four of the CPLC's 10 top cadres showed up, which is a clear indication of disrespect among Chinese officialdom, and indicates that Xi's hold over the political-legal hierarchy is less than secure ([Gov.cn](#), January 15).

Xi's Army?

At the same time that he targets his opponents in the party and state, Xi, who is also Chairman of the party's Central Military Commission (CMC) and commander-in-chief, has sought to consolidate his control over the top brass by promoting seven senior PLA lieutenant generals and one equally ranked PAP officer to full generals this month. The officers promoted to general are the Political Commissar of the Northern Theater Command Liu Qingsong (刘青松), Commander of the Central Theater Command (CTC) Wu Ya'nan (吴亚男), CTC Political Commissar Xu Deqing (徐德清), Political Commissar of the PLA Ground Forces Qin Shutong (秦树桐), Political Commissar of the PLA Navy Yuan Huazhi (袁华智), Commander of the PLA Rocket Force Li Yuchao (李玉超), and PAP Political Commissar Zhang Hongbing (张红兵) ([Xinhua](#), January 22; [81.cn](#), January 22). The elevation of officers is a traditional way for a commander-in-chief to gain the loyalty of rising stars in the defense establishment. Xi has broken the PLA record for promotions by elevating 38 officers to the rank of full generals since 2019.

Xi's rapid promotion of so many generals is extraordinary in that it breaches long-standing military convention. In the past, the CMC chairman has normally presided over only one round of promotion of full generals a year – and this usually happened around Army Day on August 1. However, in late January, Xi undertook his third series of promotion of full generals in barely half a year. Moreover, it is a well-observed rule that lieutenant generals can qualify for elevation to full generals only after serving in their positions for at least 24 months. Several of the seven newly minted generals had not yet been lieutenant-generals for two years. Moreover, it is also a respected tradition that the head of a theater command (previously- military region) usually serves for at least two years. No reason was given for why Lieutenant General Lin Xiangyang (林向阳), who was named CTC Commander in September 2020 was pulled from that post after only 16 months, in contravention of this personnel rule. A major responsibility of the CTC, which has changed commanders four times in the past year, is to ensure the safety of party and government headquarters in the capital. The Western Theater Command (WTC), which oversees Tibet and Xinjiang, has also had four commanders in the past 12 months. PLA analysts have ascribed these unusual organizational movements to Xi's efforts to boost the number of full generals and to place only totally loyal officers in key posts ([Deutsche Welle Chinese](#) September 9, 2021; [Radio Free Asia](#), September 8, 2021; [HK01.com](#) September 6, 2021).

Conclusion

Xi, who allegedly began his reform of party conventions and procedures since coming to power at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, has mainly relied on *ziwogeming* ("self-revolution") or intra-party reform rather than turning to more liberal means such as boosting the supervisory powers of the press and the civil society to rectify errors made by the party and government. In his recent speech to a CCDI national conference, Xi repeated his mantra *ziwogeming* numerous times. He said that while the CCP respected popular opinion, it has for the past century mainly "relied on self-revolution to uphold truth and rectify mistakes." "We are brave in

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turning the knife inwards, cutting through bones to get rid of the poison so as to guarantee the longevity and ceaseless strengthening of the party,” Xi said (MOJ.gov.cn, January 20; Gov.cn, January 18). Due to the absence of checks and balances within major political institutions in China, the power struggle at the top echelons of the CCP is tipped to go on for the foreseeable future.

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China-Lithuania Tensions Boil Over Taiwan

By William Yuen Yee



(Image: Taiwanese Diplomats at the newly opened Taiwan Representative Office in Vilnius, source: Taiwan MFA)

Introduction

After Lithuania decided to open a Taiwanese Representative Office in July 2021, China responded with an all-out diplomatic and economic pressure campaign against the Baltic nation of 2.8 million people. The Chinese government expelled the Lithuanian ambassador, recalled its own ambassador from Vilnius in August, and downgraded Lithuania's overall diplomatic status in China ([Xinhua](#), August 10, 2021). In response, Lithuania announced a diplomatic boycott of the upcoming Beijing Winter Olympics in protest of China's human rights abuses, even before the United States, Australia, Canada, and Britain announced their own Olympic boycotts ([LRT](#), December 2, 2021).

"Anyone who would choose Lithuania as an enemy has also made an enemy of the United States of America," former U.S. President George W. Bush told a crowd of thousands gathered in the capital city of Vilnius in 2002 ([Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty](#), November 25, 2002). Back then, Bush lauded Lithuania's entry into NATO and pledged that its people would no longer stand alone against external aggression. Two decades later, rapidly intensifying tensions between Lithuania and China are putting Bush's famous words to the test. As Lithuania looks to its democratic partners in the EU and U.S. for support amid a firestorm of Chinese sanctions, the response has been mixed and somewhat uncertain.

Background

Lithuania's decision to open a Taiwanese Representative Office and China's subsequent sanctions against the Baltic state is the latest escalation in a series of high-profile disputes between Vilnius and Beijing. In September 2021, Lithuania's defense ministry advised consumers not to purchase Chinese smartphones after discovering a dormant censorship feature with a list of 449 terms banned by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ([Deutsche Welle](#), December 13, 2021). In May, the Baltic state became the first—and so far, only—country to leave the “17+1 economic cooperation forum” between China and Central and Eastern European countries. Lithuanian ambassador Diana Mickeviciene said the withdrawal was a result of the mechanism's failure to deliver improved access to the Chinese market, dismissing accusations that her country was adopting an “anti-China” stance. Nevertheless, according to the chairman of Lithuania's parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, the departure from the 17+1 enabled Vilnius to promote cooperation with democratic countries ([LRT](#), March 2, 2021). In 2019, Chinese diplomats organized a belligerent counter-protest against a rally in Vilnius supporting Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement, which provoked swift backlash from Lithuania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([LRT](#), September 2, 2019).

Clearly, Lithuania and China are a geopolitical mismatch. Lithuania's military has no tanks or fighter jets, and its economy boasts a total GDP of \$56 billion—1/270th the size of China's GDP ([World Bank](#), accessed January 24). Overall, Vilnius conducts relatively little direct trade with Beijing. In 2020, China was Lithuania's 22nd largest export market with a value of less than \$500 million. In 2010, Lithuania's exports to China were worth \$81 million ([South China Morning Post](#), June 1, 2021). However, the export-based Lithuanian economy houses hundreds of companies that make products like lasers, food, and clothing for multinational firms that sell goods to China.

The Taiwan Question

China's all-out pressure campaign against Lithuania stems from differing interpretations of the One-China principle, which is diplomatic recognition of Beijing's position that there is only one official Chinese government. The central government in Beijing views Taiwan as a wayward province, and actively seeks to isolate the island economically and diplomatically. Currently, only 14 countries recognize Taiwan, and Lithuania is not one of them ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(MOFA\) of Taiwan](#), accessed January 24).

Lithuania has affirmed its adherence to the One-China principle, but it has also declared a right to “expand cooperation with Taiwan and to accept and establish non-diplomatic missions to ensure the practical development of such relations.” According to a statement from the nation's foreign ministry, the establishment of a Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius was “based on economic interests” ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania](#), November 21, 2021). Countries like Germany and neighboring Latvia have similar Taiwanese representative offices, which function as de facto embassies. However, these offices use the moniker, “Taipei Representative Office,” whereas the new office in Vilnius is called “The Taiwanese

Representative Office,” which undoubtedly angered Beijing as it suggests that the self-governing island is a sovereign state ([MOFA Taiwan](#), accessed January 24).

China responded to the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius with outrage. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson charged that “this act creates the false impression of ‘one China, one Taiwan’ in the world, flagrantly violates the One-China principle, and renounces the political commitment made by Lithuania in the communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China” ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China](#), November 19, 2021). The nationalistic *Global Times* described Lithuania as “trampling” over the One-China principle ([Global Times](#), December 20, 2021). Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian warned that Lithuania must “stop undermining China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” and “come back to [its] commitment to the One-China principle” ([Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America](#), December 21, 2021).

Trade Sanctions and the WTO

China has blocked imports from European Union countries that contain Lithuanian components and rejected import applications from the Baltic state, according to EU officials ([Euronews](#), December 24, 2021). For example, Beijing has pressured multinational firms like German car part manufacturer Continental to either stop using Lithuanian components or lose access to China’s lucrative market ([LRT](#), December 17, 2021). The Lithuanian Confederation of Industrialists, which represents thousands of Lithuania-based companies, confirmed that China was targeting multinational firms that purchase goods from Lithuanian suppliers. Around 60 Lithuanian companies are currently struggling under Beijing’s unofficial sanctions. If the status quo persists, these companies could suffer over \$340 million in losses ([Baltic Times](#), January 4).

China has repeatedly denied claims that it is targeting Lithuania in retaliation for its engagement with Taiwan. “The claim that China’s authorities ‘are not clearing Lithuanian shipments’ and that ‘they are rejecting import applications from Lithuania’ is not true,” Zhao told reporters. However, Zhao also added that Lithuania should “face the crux of the difficulties in the relations with China, reflect upon itself, and admit and seriously correct mistakes, instead of soliciting U.S. support” ([Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America](#), December 22, 2021).

Lithuanian officials are working with the EU’s European Commission to bring the case before the World Trade Organization (WTO), although the Commission continues to investigate the matter. “We’re exploring steps at the WTO and an official complaint to the WTO,” a spokesperson for the Commission told reporters. “In order to build a case in the WTO, we need to have enough evidence, so that’s actually what we [are doing] now” ([Reuters](#), December 17, 2021). In December, the EU raised concerns about China’s application of “unannounced sanctions” on products from member state Lithuania with WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala ([LRT](#), December 10, 2021). The WTO chief then raised the issue with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang at a recent “1+6 roundtable” video call, an annual dialogue between China and major financial organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. However, any formal dispute at the WTO would likely

take years to resolve. And since the WTO's appellate body—which hears appeals from dispute settlements—still lacks enough judges to function, China could simply appeal the case into oblivion.

EU and U.S. Responses

Lithuania has appealed to the EU for assistance in dealing with China, but the response has been somewhat equivocal. On the one hand, EU Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis stated the bloc was “concerned” over China’s restrictions on goods from Lithuania. In a recent strategic dialogue with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell defended Lithuania but also repeatedly reassured Beijing of the bloc’s steadfast commitment to the One-China principle. This echoes the top EU diplomat’s comments from a July 2021 meeting with Wang, when Borrell said that “the EU believes it should respect China, does not want to confront China and will not participate in any form of new Cold War” ([Xinhua](#), July 16, 2021).

On the other hand, the EU has also considered—and, in some cases, adopted—more aggressive measures to counter China’s economic coercion. In December, the bloc instituted a new “anti-coercion” mechanism that would allow the European Commission to sanction individuals, companies, and countries like China who weaponize trade. The policy achieved some early success: four days after being unable to send shipments due to technical problems, Lithuanian exporters reported renewed market access to China ([South China Morning Post](#), December 7, 2021). Ongoing tensions between Vilnius and Beijing also likely factored into the EU’s decision to postpone its annual summit with China. The summit, which was initially slated for late 2021, has since been delayed over concerns that the chances of substantive progress on critical issues like human rights and trade are slim ([South China Morning Post](#), December 16, 2021).

Vilnius has also turned to Washington for assistance in dealing with pressure from China. Overall, the U.S. has offered strong words of support but few concrete actions. In an earlier phone call, U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai told Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis that both countries would maintain regular contact to strengthen their economic ties ([South China Morning Post](#), January 6). In December, Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte spoke with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken about the row with China. During the call, Blinken “noted troubling public reports that People’s Republic of China (PRC) customs authorities are not clearing Lithuanian shipments or shipments with Lithuanian components” and “reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to work with like-minded countries to push back against the PRC’s coercive diplomatic and economic behavior in response to Chinese economic pressure” ([U.S. Department of State](#), December 21, 2021). More recently, reports surfaced that some American diplomats raised the idea of changing the name of the representative office in Vilnius to ease tensions and avoid offending Beijing, although the White House has vehemently denied such claims ([Financial Times](#), January 20).

Conclusion

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So far, Lithuania has remained committed to its defiant stand against the world's second-largest economy. Moreover, Vilnius is not alone. Slovenia recently announced plans to establish a representative office for Taiwan on its soil, a move that reportedly “deeply shocked” Beijing ([South China Morning Post](#), January 18). This opens yet another fissure China's coercive efforts to deter countries from strengthening ties with Taiwan.

Vilnius will adapt to the “short-term” economic pain as it seeks to diversify domestic supply chains away from China in the long term, according to foreign minister Gabrielius Landsbergis ([Brussels Morning](#), November 25, 2021). Undeterred by Chinese pressure, Lithuania has also moved forward with expanding its overall economic and security ties with Taiwan. For example, 25 domestic food retailers showcased their products at a recent Taiwan International Food Industry Show ([Taipei Times](#), December 23, 2021). In December, Lithuania's State Border Guard Service said on Twitter that it was using unmanned aerial vehicles donated by Taiwan to bolster the EU's eastern border with Belarus. In the post, the Baltic state described the island with the hashtag “#FriendInNeedFriendInDeed” ([Twitter](#), December 20, 2021).

As China-Lithuania relations continue to deteriorate across the board from trade to diplomacy, no immediate end appears in sight for this dispute. Until then, two critical questions remain unresolved—to what lengths China is willing to go to punish Lithuania over its embrace of Taiwan, and perhaps more importantly, to what extent the European Union and United States are willing to defend it.

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The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Hits Bottom in Balochistan

By Kiyya Baloch and Akbar Notezai



(Image: An aerial view of Gwadar in Balochistan, Southwest Pakistan, source: Global Times)

Introduction

In early January, several hours of heavy rain exposed poor infrastructure and exaggerated claims of massive development in Gwadar. The largely deserted port city sits on the Iranian border in Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province, which is wracked by poverty, militancy, and violence. Despite its challenging location, Gwadar has long been touted as the crown jewel of the much heralded China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the \$62 billion megaproject connecting western China with the Arabian sea ([China Brief](#), January 17, 2020). On January 4, heavy rains disrupted routine activities, forcing schools, restaurants, and shops to shut down. The town's main streets and roads, as well as its tiny airport, were flooded ([Twitter/KiyyaBaloch](#), January 4). Cars floated down roads and people used small wooden dhows to navigate flooded streets. Local reports claimed that in the remote southern parts of Gwadar, thousands of people fled their homes ([Dawn](#), January 5). In the city center, which is about three miles from the seaport where the China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC) is building a \$250 million coastal port, officials from the Pakistan Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) said floodwaters had reached heights of four to six feet. ([ARY News](#), January 4; [Balochistan Times](#), January 4).

As Gwadar has fallen on hard times, residents have blamed Beijing and Islamabad for ignoring them in their CPEC megaproject plans. The governments of both China and Pakistan claim that they are modernizing Gwadar by building a well-equipped hospital, parks, technical colleges, modern roads, an industrial park, and a seaport. For years, Chinese and Pakistani officials have claimed that this coastal backwater would soon compete with Dubai, Singapore, and Shenzhen to attract huge foreign investment. However, the currently poor state of Gwadar's infrastructure underscores that this narrative remains illusory. The rain and flooding have wreaked havoc in Gwadar as it grapples with huge protests demanding better civic facilities and an end to economic injustices. Some have called the recent protests a struggle for civil rights, while others have labeled the movement — the “Baloch Spring” ([Dawn](#), January 2). In December, the protests, which lasted for more than a month, became a heated topic of discussion on Pakistani social media. However, the protests attracted only modest international media attention, and were officially called off on December 16. While it is too early to determine the full impact of the protests, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and the Chief Minister of Balochistan province have formed a committee to address protesters' concerns.

Gwadar Residents Confront Beijing and Islamabad

In mid-November, thousands of people staged a sit-in in Gwadar to protest water and energy shortages as well as a lack of quality employment opportunities ([Dawn](#), November 19, 2021). The protests persisted for 32 days with civil society activists, politicians, fishermen, and ordinary Gwadar residents all joining in. In addition to joblessness and inadequate utilities, protesters cited additional grievances including excessive security checkpoints, and deep-sea trawling by Chinese fishing boats ([Arab News](#), December 10, 2021). The protests have posed a major challenge for both Beijing and Islamabad. Videos and photos of the demonstrations went viral on social media, forcing PM Khan to finally respond on December 12, which was 28 days in to the protests ([Twitter/ImranKhan](#), December 12, 2021).

Khan, other leading Pakistani politicians, and the press, drew severe public criticism for their silence, while Gwadar residents' peaceful struggle for basic rights earned popular support. After her videos were widely shared on social media, a 70-year-old woman was hailed as a hero for mobilizing the public in chilly weather ([Friday Times](#), December 13, 2021). Clad in traditional Shalwar and Kameez with a white dupatta on her head, each day, Masi Zainab (a term referring to older women in Balochistan) baked more than 300 pieces of naan bread, in a traditional wood-fired Tandoor oven, to give to the protesters. Although her age makes it challenging to sit in front of the Tandoor oven, which can reach 400 °C, Zainab persisted. After finishing baking, she walked more than one kilometer to distribute the naan bread among the sit-in participants. “The so-called development in this small city is crushing us,” said Zainab, a housewife, and widow of a fisherman. [1] Zainab was one of hundreds of women who took to the streets on November 15.

Another Gwadar citizen who has emerged as a leader during the protests is Maulana Hidayat Ur Rahman. A charismatic 50-year-old religious leader with a long black and white beard, Rahman wears a locally made skull cap. He was born in Surbandan village, locally known as Sur, a cluster of villages located 25 kilometers southwest of Gwadar. He began his political career with Islami Jamiat-i-Tulaba, the students' wing of the

conservative Islamist political party—Jamaat-e-Islami. When asked about his sudden rise, Rahman claims he has been involved in politics since 2003 and had previously contested elections in Gwadar. Today, he has become the face of Gwadar’s protests, empathizing with residents’ pain and suffering, Rahman is also unafraid to publicly criticize Pakistan’s powerful military establishment, which largely controls the coastal town. “I am the son of the soil. I am the son of a fisherman. Nobody can understand the problems of the fishing community better than me,” he proudly told the author, Notezai.

During the protests, which evolved into a peaceful civil rights movement called “Give Rights to Gwadar,” Rahman accused Pakistani law enforcement agencies of creating hurdles for the local fishing community in order to secure Chinese investment. He successfully mobilized thousands of young people on the streets to fight for better civic rights. While not a traditional or radical religious cleric, Rahman’s bold views have made him a sort of national hero, who is particularly popular among Pakistani’s liberal elites and on social media. When the Gwadar protests were trending on Twitter in December, some users wrote songs and poems in his name and others painted his portrait.

Rahman has shaken Islamabad and Beijing with his withering commentary on Pakistan’s powerful military and Beijing’s exploitative plans, eventually forcing China’s Foreign Ministry to respond. Despite the large demonstrations, spokesperson Zhao Lijian called the Gwadar protests “fake news” ([Global Times](#), November 30, 2021). When the authors contacted the Chinese Counsel General in Karachi for comment on the Gwadar protests, he refused to speak on the phone and said he would only meet and communicate directly in person out of safety concerns, presumably fearing recording or location tracking. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing and Chinese Embassy in Islamabad did not respond to requests for comment.

Rahman accuses Islamabad of issuing licenses to Chinese and other foreign fishing trawlers. According to Rahman, deep-sea trawling has harmed Gwadar’s maritime environment. He also criticizes Pakistan’s powerful army for setting up large numbers of security pickets where he says ethnic Baloch minorities regularly face humiliation. “We need teachers and doctors, not soldiers. We need hospitals and schools, not military pickets,” he told a charged crowd on December 2 ([Twitter/MHidayatRehman](#), December 2, 2021).

After a month of mass protests, Rahman called off the demonstrations on December 16, when the Balochistan government agreed to address his demands. “We will review the situation after a month,” Rahman told protesters that day. On December 19 in Gwadar, Notezai met Rahman, who expressed his plans to renew protests against the economic injustices, but this time aims to direct his efforts against Islamabad. Since then, Rahman has renewed protests in a number of towns. He organized a large rally in the neighboring town of Turbat on January 16, and similar protests occurred in Gwadar district. In Turbat, people chanted “Give Rights to Balochistan” as Rahman took the stage. His movement, “Give Rights to Gwadar” has transformed into “Give Rights to Balochistan.” Rahman recently announced an indefinite strike starting on March 1 after he said the government has failed to implement the agreement signed on December 16.

CPEC in Gwadar

Six years ago, when the much-anticipated China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was launched, Pakistani and Chinese officials described Gwadar as the crown jewel of the multi-billion-dollar infrastructure project. “Gwadar has the potential to turn into Dubai and Singapore, and the port could be given a special status like Hong Kong to attract foreign investment and boost the national economy,” Pakistan’s former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said in 2013 after meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing ([Express Tribune](#), August 24, 2013). The officials promised to build Pakistan’s second largest airport in the city for \$256 million, a 300-megawatt coal-fired power plant, a modern 300-seat hospital estimated at \$100 million, free economic zones, roads, and a port ([Gandhara](#), January 26, 2021). Six years later, little has changed in Gwadar. “CPEC does not exist in Balochistan,” said Rahman during a meeting with the authors in Gwadar in late December. “The road we see in Gwadar was constructed when former military dictator General Retired Pervez Musharraf was in power. The only thing we have got under CPEC is an increasing number of military check-posts in this small town,” explained Rahman. [2]

Gwadar residents share similar views. The fishing community complains that their livelihoods are imperiled due to China’s deep-sea trawling. “We have already lost our livelihood due to increasing security in the town,” said Qadir Bakhsh, a local leader in the Gwadar fishing community. “Now Chinese trawlers have been intruding our coast. In recent months we spotted five Chinese trawlers in the waters of Gwadar, which as a result is depleting fish stock.” [3]

China’s Foreign Ministry has denied these reports claiming that “our investigation revealed that no Chinese trawler has gone to the Gwadar Port area for fishing or docking purposes” ([Asia Times](#), December 7, 2021). Reports of Chinese fishing trawlers off Balochistan’s coast have been rare, but local concerns over deep-sea trawling, especially by Chinese vessels have been rising of late. A Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) official said such reports should not be wholly rejected. “To me, these are legitimate concerns,” he told the authors, wishing to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the subject. “Islamabad approved deep Sea Fishing Licensing Policy in 2018, which is actually in violation of the Constitution. Under this policy, Islamabad has issued licenses to retired army officers, including various multinational companies among which Koreans and Chinese are included,” the GPA official said. [4]

Andrew Small, a senior transatlantic fellow with the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. Asia program, says the Belt and Road (BRI) has been an externalization of the Chinese development model, which is adept in mobilizing resources and moving at speed and scale but pays little attention to local concerns over transparency, environmental costs, political sensitivities, debt, etc. “That ‘worked’ in one sense, or was at least possible, in China itself—even if it came at tremendous cost—but it’s much harder to replicate outside Chinese borders without running into resistance,” said Small. “It also tends to reinforce existing power structures in countries. When there’s dissatisfaction with those structures, that tends to translate into a backlash that’s ultimately directed at China itself,” he told the authors. [5] More than \$1 billion Chinese projects in Gwadar have been delayed due to militant attacks by Baloch insurgents seeking separation from Pakistan, and little of

the promised investment, including the \$100 million Gwadar hospital project and 300-megawatt coal power project, has materialized on the ground ([The Diplomat](#), February 16, 2021; [Arab News](#), October 24, 2021). Small says Gwadar was not a top priority for the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) government during its 2013-2018 tenure, which was mostly focused on getting the energy projects in motion. He noted that “it’s an intrinsically difficult location, much harder than to do this in an already well-developed and economically-integrated part of the country; the security conditions created obstacles.”

Despite promises made to residents at the launch of CPEC, life in Gwadar remains hard. More than 70 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, and youth unemployment is high. In six years, Beijing and Islamabad could barely create any job opportunities for Gwadar residents. “There are only two sources of employment: fishing or smuggling goods and diesel from neighboring Iran,” said Gwadar-based journalist Bahram Baloch. He claims that the “two only sources of employment [fishing and smuggling] are also at risk due to security concerns. That is why the public has taken up the issues on the streets now.” [6]

The town also continues to struggle with electricity supply, leaning on Iran to supply electricity to 10,000 of Gwadar’s inhabitants. In July, the entire city plunged into darkness for 18 days after power from Iran was cut ([Arab News](#), July 16, 2021). For Dr. Fiaz Ahmad Chaudhry, a professor at Syed Babar Ali School of Science and Engineering at LUMS University, Gwadar’s remoteness is one of many reasons that it has not been connected to the national grid. “Gwadar is on a large distance from the national grid station. In this way, it is not easy to supply electricity to Gwadar,” he says. “This is why it was decided to supply electricity to Gwadar from Iran. But it should be connected to the national grid and Iran simultaneously so that Gwadar could get an uninterrupted electricity supply.” [7]

Meanwhile, the small, deserted town relies exclusively on rainfall for water consumption as work on the Gwadar distillation plant to provide fresh water has not yet materialized. “Nature decides what inhabitants of Gwadar should nourish, drink and eat, not Beijing or Islamabad,” says a GPA official. “No rainfall means no water. That means a completely dry and thirsty city.” [8]

Gwadar’s fish market does not resemble modern markets in the developed world. The fishing community is extremely poor and cannot afford to use the latest technology. Fishermen still rely on the traditional methods of using locally weaved fishing nets. Furthermore, the colorful wooden dhows that locals use for fishing lack cold storage facility, which limits catch size. Fish are often stored in tins and boxes full of factory-made ice cubes prepared with contaminated water. Once ready, large tin boxes filled with ice cubes are sent to the local market for sale. No cold storage facility exists in the market. In the summer, when power outages are common, fish often rot due to high temperatures. In recent months, the fishing community has complained the business has been dwindling, and the job market has been ravaged. “There are no fishes in the sea now. Deep-sea trawling has destroyed the sea,” says Zainab, the older woman and housewife from Gwadar. [9] Fed up with deep-sea trawling and humiliation at the hands of security agencies, the fishing community of Gwadar decided has taken their concerns to the streets. The government has refrained from using force to disperse protestors.

However, several members of the movement have been charged with sedition and placed on a terror watch list.

Conclusion

Gwadar, the strategic yet impoverished coastal town located on the shores of the Arabian Sea, has been in the news for many years now due to massive Chinese investment. However, this investment has barely changed the poor fishing community's lifestyle and infrastructure and has not created many job opportunities. The city's poor infrastructure, mud hut houses, and debilitated roads with no proper local transportation speak to its limited development. The town's main road leading to its main market is in disrepair resulting in a bumpy ride. Even patients with common illnesses are referred to Karachi, Pakistan's largest commercial hub as Gwadar's main hospital lacks qualified doctors, modern machines, and medicines.

Late last year, the poor conditions in Gwadar precipitated mass protests led by Rahman. In Balochistan, Rahman's defining characteristic is that he belongs to the right-wing Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) party. Although Rahman has not invoked JI's political Islamist ideology during these protests, a fraction of ethnic Baloch nationalists fear Pakistan's powerful military might have positioned the JI leader to diminish Baloch nationalism. Nevertheless, with regards to China, Rahman may have already played a key role. A GPA official interviewed for this piece claims that under the banner of recent protests, Islamabad has forced Beijing to accept many of its demands. They claimed, "through a legitimate and peaceful protest, Islamabad managed to send a clear-cut message to Beijing exploiting local sentiments that Pakistan can't be held hostage like Sri Lanka or any other poor African States." [10]

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Notes

[1] The authors' interview with Masi Zainab, a housewife from Gwadar, involved mobilizing the public for protests against economic injustices.

[2] The authors' interview with Maulana Hidayat Rahman, leader of "Give Rights to Gwadar."

[3] The authors' interview with Qadir Bakhsh, leader of Gwadar fishing community.

[4] The authors' interview with an official of Gwadar Port Authority (GPA).

[5] The authors' interview with Andrew Small, an expert on China and a senior transatlantic fellow with the German Marshall Fund of the United States Asia program.

[6] The authors' interview with Bahram Baloch, a journalist based in Gwadar.

[7] The authors' interview with Dr. Fiaz Ahmad Chaudhry, a professor at Syed Babar Ali School of Science and Engineering at LUMS University Lahore.

[8] The authors' interview with an official of Gwadar Port Authority (GPA).

[9] The authors' interview with Masi Zainab, a housewife from Gwadar, involved mobilizing the public for protests against economic injustices.

[10] The authors' interview with an official of Gwadar Port Authority (GPA).

Warnings from PLA Ships in the Western Pacific Ocean

By Lu Li-Shih



(Image: *The PLA Navy's ChangbaiShan, a Type 071 Yuzhao-class amphibious transport dock ship*, Source: Wikipedia)

Introduction

In mid-November, two People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Type 071 Yuzhao-class amphibious transport dock ships traveled through the waters between Taiwan and Yonaguni, Japan, temporarily lingering off Hualien, Taiwan. Japanese media speculated that the PLAN ships not only took part in regular "joint combat readiness patrols" in the eastern waters of Taiwan, but also simulated a landing exercise ([Sankei Shimbun](#), November 24, 2021). In another recent development, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has built models shaped like American aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, and Arleigh Burke-class destroyers for target practice in the inland Xinjiang region ([USNI News](#), November 7, 2021). Although these episodes appear unconnected, they are actually related, and have significant implications for regional security.

A Growing Naval Presence

In recent years, the Type 071 landing dock has sailed east of the first island chain only a few times, almost exclusively as part of the annual "far-seas joint training formation." Instances include patrols by the

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Changbaishan (Hull Number 989) of the 174th Formation in 2019 and 161st Formation in 2020, and the *Wuzhishan* (Hull Number 987) of the 175th Formation last year, all of which belong to the Southern Theater Command ([Sino Weibo](#), February 26, 2021; [Sina Military News](#), February 20, 2020).

The PLA not only travels through the first and second island chains, but also into the Central Pacific for its annual joint far seas training exercises ([China Brief](#), May 7, 2021). However, the PLA's purpose for including Type 071 amphibious ships in exercises was unclear until last year when CCTV reporters visited the 175th Formation's command group. Video footage of the commanding officers' armbands, chest badges, and combat uniforms, indicate that the command group formation has apparently incorporated elements from the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) and Strategic Support Force (SSF) ([Sino Weibo](#), March 1, 2021). It is also notable that the 175th formation is part of realistic military training, including at a test range in northwest China's Taklamakan desert.

In late October, USNI News reported that the PLA had built models shaped like American aircraft carriers, amphibious assault ships, and Arleigh Burke-class destroyers for target practice in the Xinjiang region ([USNI News](#), November 7, 2021). Satellite photos from U.S. space technology company, Maxar Technologies, displayed the exact locations of the models in Ruoqiang County, Xinjiang. At first glance, the photos show sites that appear dusty and remote, but in reality, the locations are accessible to nearby transportation with National Highway 315 only four kilometers away. According to follow-up reports from USNI, the Minfeng County target area on the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert and the Hotan City target area are under air control from Notice to Airmen (NOTAM), but have not been made public by satellite photos.

The PLA has long maintained target practice areas for ballistic missiles in inland deserts. A decade ago, some netizens shared a photo in an Argentine military forum that displayed a white 200 meter-long platform, which is similar in size to the flight deck of a U.S. aircraft carrier located 6 kilometers southeast of the Dingxin Test and Training Base in the Badain Jaran Desert ([Sohu](#), September 2011). In 2017, reports confirmed that the PLA had constructed models of U.S. bases in Japan with Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, Patriot air defense missile positions, and simulated bomb-proof aircraft shelters in the Kumtag Desert, which is 535 kilometers west of the Dingxin Test and Training Base ([War on the Rocks](#), February 6, 2017; [Stars and Stripes](#), March 21, 2017).

Surprisingly, the satellite photos released by USNI reveal that the mockups are scaled down models and not fixed platforms. As a result, they can be moved via rail to accompany fixed models of the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer. The anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) has always faced challenges in developing the capability to target moving ships. The PLA has carried out similar "actual combat" simulations in the desert range. The so-called actual combat means that an ASBM can correctly identify an aircraft carrier in a carrier battle group and hit that model under steering avoidance movements.

Preparing for Naval Warfare in the Desert

The real questions are why has the PLA built a shooting range for ASBMs in the desert, and do these missiles have the ability to kill aircraft carriers? Prior to 2010, Chinese academic journals produced substantial research on radar backscatter coefficient in desert and marine environments ([CNKI](#), 2004). Notably, most of this research resulted from the “State High-Tech Research and Development Program,” or the “863 Program.” In various studies, Inverse Synthetic Aperture Radar (ISAS) found that the radar backscatter of evenly distributed small particles of dry sand in the inland desert is similar to that of a smooth open water surface.

As for the ability of DF-21D or DF-26 missiles to destroy aircraft carriers, PLA tests and statements concerning the U.S. military provide some insight. In April 2017, mobile phone footage posted online showed missile wreckage that was discovered near Dorbod Banner in Inner Mongolia. The wreckage was clearly printed with the words “E/ADF-26B,” and is suspected to be the latest model of the DF-26 missile. French military observer Henri Kenhmann determined that the wreckage were the first and second propulsion rockets of the DF-26B ([East Pendulum](#), May 8, 2017). The missile was likely destined for the Minfeng County target area in southwestern Xinjiang, which is within range, about 3,700 kilometers away.

USNI News noted that the Ruoqiang County target area was constructed between March and April 2019 and was demolished in December. However, local flight announcements, indicate the area may have been used as early as March 18 of that year. Thereafter, the airspace around the target area was cleared one to two times a month until December, which indicates that it was frequently in use.

Ballistic Threats

After the desert tests, the Hainan Maritime Safety Administration issued notice “HN0078” declaring that military training activities would take place in waters southeast of Hainan Island from August 24–29, 2020 ([Sina](#), August 22, 2020). Air navigation notices were also issued in restricted waters. In late August 2020, a video showing the trajectory of a ballistic missile in the coastal area of Zhejiang circulated on China’s Weibo (Twitter, [August 26, 2020](#); [August 25, 2020](#)). At the same time, the South China Morning Post (SCMP) reported that a DF-26 had been launched from Qinghai in to the South China Sea as well as a DF-21D from Zhejiang province ([SCMP](#), August 26, 2020). Three months later, in an interview at the Halifax International Security Forum, Admiral Philip Davidson, then commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, confirmed that the PLA’s tests of DF-21D and DF-26 ASBM had been successful ([National Defense Magazine](#), November 21, 2020).

The PLA tests ASBMs on “Ships in the Desert” in order to circumvent monitoring and ballistic analysis by the U.S. military Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems stationed in South Korea, Japan’s land-based J/FPS-5 active electronically scanned array radar, Taiwan’s Leshan long-range warning radar, and Arleigh Burke-class missile defense detachments in the destroyers in the East and South China Seas. Another advantage for the PLA is that it can unhurriedly conduct dynamic actual combat tests in inland areas. Following successful inland, tests, ASBM are tested in the South China Sea , which has a deterrent effect on neighboring countries.

In this context; why has the Type 071 landing dock recently appeared in the East China Sea? The ship's overall length and width are second only to the PLA's aircraft carriers and Type 901 supply ship, so it may be used to simulate aircraft carriers in order to implement the "kill chain" verification outside the first island chain. During these exercises, the SSF carries out Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) of the Rocket Forces' simulated open sea strikes. Both the Sovremenny-class, 052C and 052D missile destroyer formations traversing the eastern waters between Taiwan and Yonaguni in early September, or the two Type 071 landing docks off Hualien in December, were likely involved in "kill chain" verification" in the eastern waters of Taiwan.

The SSF operates key systems including satellites, high-frequency ground-wave radars, sky-wave over-the-horizon radars, submerged buoys of a depth of 400 meters, and intellectualized submarine cables. Although the eastern sea area has the Central Mountain Range as a natural barrier and the average warning radars and high-frequency ground-wave radar cannot scan out for surface ships, sky-wave over-the-horizon radars, submerged buoys, and submarine cables in conjunction with the early warning aircraft KJ-500 and signals intelligence aircraft Y-9JB can still provide Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR).

The real purpose of the PLA's land-based testing and development of ASBMs is to implement its Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy to counter advantages of the U.S. carrier strike groups within the Second Island Chains and to reverse the U.S. sea power dominance in the Central Pacific.

However, following the principle of PLA manufacturing that "one breakthrough at one point brings about universal use for all types," shortly after mass production of the DF-21D began, a longer-range version of DF-26 immediately appeared. Observation of the DF-15B with its "bionic vehicle with flaps" design confirm that it could potentially have the ability for use as an ASBM([Facebook](#), April 10, 2021).

Conclusion

The Type 071 landing dock that recently lingered off Hualien, Taiwan clearly belongs to the Eastern Theater Command, and was likely involved in "kill chain verification" for the PLA's ASBMs ([Sankei Shimbun](#), November 24, 2021). Therefore, the navies of Taiwan, Japan, or Australia, which often cruise the second island Chain, with ships equivalent in size or bigger than the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, will not only face sea skimming anti-ship missiles, but also need to defend against threats from much higher up. Finally, these developments will surely impact the U.S. military's calculus as it weighs the risk of naval operations in the Western Pacific.

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