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All Necessary Measures: China’s Shifting Approach to U.S.-Taiwan Relations

By John S. Van Oudenaren

Last month, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris spoke briefly with Taiwanese Vice President Lai Ching-te at the inauguration of President Xiaomara Castro in Honduras ([Taiwan News](#), January 28). When asked about the public interaction between Harris and Lai, People’s Republic of China (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) spokesperson Zhao Lijian responded curtly that “there is no Taiwanese ‘vice president’ since Taiwan is a province of China.” Zhao called on the U.S. to “abide by the one-China principle and stipulations in the three China-U.S. joint communiques, take China’s position and concerns seriously, stop all forms of official interactions with Taiwan and avoid sending wrong signals to ‘Taiwan independence’ forces” ([FMPRC](#), January 28). Despite Zhao’s rejoinder, China’s response was subdued. Beijing’s reactions to other recent engagements between top U.S. and Taiwanese officials have typically been more bark than bite. For example, neither then

President-elect Donald Trump's congratulatory phone call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in December 2016, nor U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar's Taiwan visit to Taiwan in August 2020, evoked the kind of furious reactions from Beijing that many in Washington predicted. Although China is currently much stronger than in the mid-1990s, at that time, lesser levels of U.S.-Taiwan interaction sparked far sharper reactions from Beijing. Following President Lee Teng Hui's visit to his alma mater- Cornell, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted large-scale, live-fire exercises that precipitated the 1995-1996 Taiwan Straits crisis. Changes in how Beijing responds to official U.S.-Taiwan engagement underscores China's expanding and evolving use of the military instrument in the Taiwan Straits, which now goes beyond reactively imposing costs on Washington and Taipei for perceived transgressions of the One China Principle. China's burgeoning military power still serves this purpose, but coupled with other instruments of national power, is now developing into a means to deter U.S. intervention and proactively compel Taiwan's unification with the PRC.



(Image: U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris speaks with Taiwanese counterpart Lai Ching-te during the inauguration of new Honduras President Xiomara Castro on January 27, source: Office of the President, ROC)

Over the past several years, China has applied sustained military pressure on Taiwan, with the PLA regularly flying warplanes into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), and conducting joint exercises and naval patrols in the island's vicinity. China's ADIZ sorties have continued largely independent of fluctuations in international politics. For example, during the first week of the Beijing Olympics, which President Xi Jinping has called an inspiration for global peace and solidarity, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) conducted *five* incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ ([ROC MND](#), February 10; [FMPRC](#), February 5). In October, despite no immediate

provocations by either Taipei or Washington, the PLAAF undertook a series of mass ADIZ incursions with the largest probe involving over 50 warplanes ([Focus Taiwan](#), October 4). In response to U.S. concerns over this aerial intimidation of Taiwan, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying cited the actions as legitimate countermeasures to intensifying U.S.-Taiwan security cooperation, and called on Washington to “stop supporting and emboldening separatist forces” ([FMRPC](#), October 4). Over the past several years, Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council has repeatedly averred that the PLA’s actions are necessary to defend China’s national sovereignty, and deter the Democratic People’s Party (DPP) from “secessionist” efforts to achieve Taiwanese independence in collusion with external forces” (i.e., the U.S.) ([Xinhua](#), April 14, 2021; [China Daily](#), September 16, 2020)

Communiques that Bind?

For four decades, the Three Communiques issued in 1972, 1979 and 1982 have provided a framework for sustaining U.S.-China relations despite irreconcilable differences over Taiwan. The authors of the initial 1972 Communique worked around the “Taiwan problem” by crafting the document as a series of parallel statements. The Chinese position was that the PRC is “the sole legal government of China; Taiwan is a province of China which has long been returned to the motherland; the liberation of Taiwan is China’s internal affair in which no other country has the right to interfere; and all U.S. forces and military installations must be withdrawn from Taiwan.” The U.S. position was more ambivalent, acknowledging “that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China”, and reaffirming its commitment to a peaceful settlement of Taiwan’s status ([U.S. State Department](#)).

In the 1979 Communique, which coincided with the normalization of U.S.-PRC relations and derecognition of the Republic of China (ROC), the U.S. recognized the PRC as the “sole legal government of China”, but also stipulated that the American people “will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan” ([AIT](#)). Concurrently, the National People’s Congress Standing Committee issued its “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan”, which pledged to seek the “peaceful reunification of the motherland”, a commitment later reaffirmed by Beijing in the 1982 U.S.-China joint communique ([CGTN](#), January 1, 2019; [AIT](#)). In order to achieve normalization and deepen cooperation on matters of shared interest (developing economic relations and strategic collaboration against the Soviet Union), the U.S. endorsed China’s proscription against “two Chinas”, which thrust Taiwan into an ambiguous international position. In order to preserve what it viewed as an important strategic and normative relationship with Taiwan, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). The TRA threaded the needle by making it U.S. policy to maintain a robust “unofficial” relationship with Taiwan, thereby casting the ROC a lifeline without contravening the U.S.’s One China policy ([U.S. Congress](#)).

Beijing and Washington continue to cite the Three Communiques as foundational to bilateral relations, but four decades removed from the final communique, the situation is greatly changed. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Washington and Beijing effectively imposed a new framework on Taiwan. Now, China is seeking to remake the current paradigm, while the U.S. and Taiwan strive to preserve the status quo. As a result, the role of the Three

Communiqués in U.S.-China relations has shifted from a roadmap to address bilateral differences to a set of guardrails for both sides vis-à-vis Taiwan. The commitments made therein provide limited assurances to Washington that Beijing will desist from using force, and to China that the U.S. will not support Taiwanese independence. For example, in his November 16 call with President Biden, Xi cited U.S. recognition of Taiwan as a part of China in the Three Communiqués, and called on the U.S. to change course to win the trust of the Chinese people ([FMPRC](#), November 16, 2021). While China has urged the U.S. to uphold the commitments it has made through the Three Communiqués, Beijing has simultaneously hedged against its own pledge to pursue peaceful reunification by developing and deploying a range of military and other coercive instruments to compel Taiwan's unification with the PRC ([China Brief](#), November 5, 2021). Under Xi, China has intensified these efforts as hopes for unification through non-military, political means fade.



(image: Still of 2020 Taiwan presidential election campaign ad for Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP juxtaposing images of ordinary life in Taiwan with police brutality in Hong Kong, source: Youtube)

One Country, One System

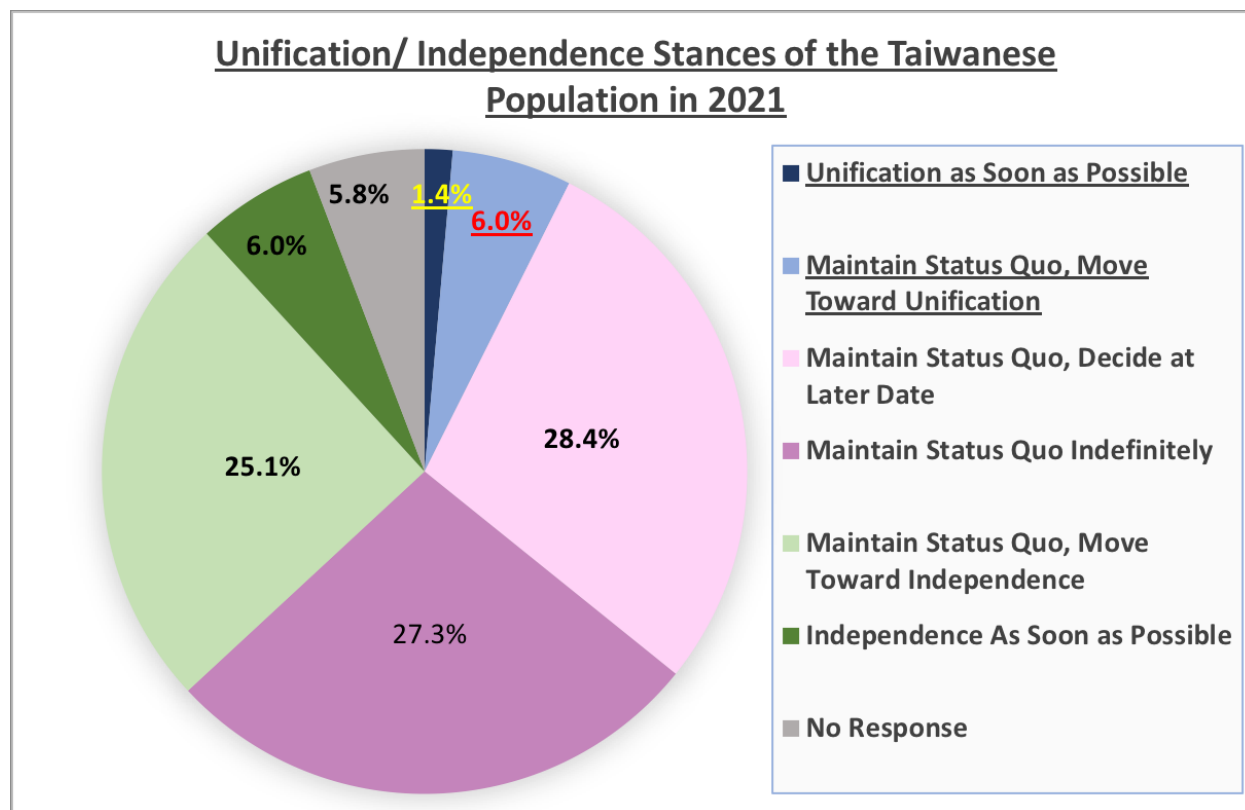
Xi has established Taiwan's unification with the PRC as central to achieving China's long-sought goal of national rejuvenation ([China Leadership Monitor](#), December 1, 2021). In his October address on the 100th anniversary of China's 1911 Nanchang uprising, Xi called "Taiwan independence secessionists" ("台独" 分裂, *Taidu Fenlie*) the greatest obstacle to the unity of the motherland and a "severe hidden danger to national rejuvenation." (民族复兴的严重隐患, *Minzhu fuxing de yanzhong yunhuang*). ([Gov.cn](#), October 9, 2021)

The PRC's preferred policy option for Taiwan is "peaceful reunification," but if this route proves infeasible, Beijing reserves the right to resolve the situation by force. In his January 2019 speech on the 40th anniversary of the PRC's Message to Compatriots in Taiwan, Xi stated: "We Chinese should not fight each other. We will work with the greatest sincerity and exert utmost efforts to achieve peaceful reunification, because this works best for the people on both sides and for our whole nation." However, Xi then stated that "we do not renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures" ([State Council Taiwan Affairs Office](#), April 12, 2019). In the speech, Xi also cited the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, under which Hong

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Kong retroceded to China, as the optimal path for Taiwan's unification with the PRC. Xi explicitly linked peaceful reunification and "One Country, Two Systems" with the 1992 consensus, which is the platform of Taiwan's more-pro China party, the Kuomintang (KMT), for cross-straits relations. A year ahead of Taiwan's Presidential elections, Xi's remarks were politically ill-timed and along with the subsequent 2019-2020 Hong Kong protests and crackdown, severely damaged the KMT's electoral prospects.

In March 2019, Kaoshiung Mayor and future 2020 KMT Presidential candidate Han Kuo-yu visited Hong Kong, Macau and Shenzhen ([South China Morning Post](#), March 25, 2019). In Hong Kong, he met with Chief Executive Carrie Lam and made an unannounced visit to the Chinese government's liaison office. Photos of Han leaving the PRC office caused a furor on Taiwanese social media, and his visit was criticized for jeopardizing national security and self-determination ([New Bloom](#), March 23, 2019). Shortly thereafter, mass protests erupted in Hong Kong against China's imposition of a new extradition bill and the city's decreasing political autonomy. Despite early struggles, the Tsai campaign capitalized on China's harsh Hong Kong crackdown, which fostered a growing perception among Taiwanese voters that "One Country, Two Systems" is a Trojan Horse for conquest by China. A viral ad for Tsai juxtaposed pictures of young people in Taiwan peacefully enjoying life with images of police brutality in Hong Kong. The narrator notes that ordinary Taiwanese once took the tranquility of daily life for granted, but that "every day, only a few hundred kilometers away, countless young people are arrested, imprisoned, abused, and made to 'disappear.'" The ad uses Xi's invocation of the 1992 consensus against the KMT, casting the formula as a recipe for the destruction of Taiwanese democracy: "It turns out the '1992 consensus' is 'One Country Two Systems'; "It turns out 'One Country Two Systems' is autocracy" ([Taiwan News](#), January 8, 2020)



(Source: Election Study Center, [National Chengchi University](https://www.nccu.edu.tw/~ec/), January 10, 2022)

The Final Option

Two years since Tsai’s landslide election victory, support among Taiwanese for unification with the mainland remains small. Recent polling consistently indicates that only about 7.5% of Taiwanese favor unification with China at any point with only 1.4% supporting immediate unification (see above chart)

The KMT, China’s longtime hope for cross-strait accommodation is also in flux. In September, the KMT elected establishment heavyweight Eric Chu as party leader, but he soon faced calls to resign due to severe defeats in local by-elections ([Taiwan News](https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/352424), January 10). Chu has held on to his position, but still faces a host of challenges. The KMT is saddled with serious financial trouble, minuscule support among under-40 people, a reputation for corruption, and a “One China” ideology that is anathema to most voters ([Taiwan News](https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/352424), January 22). To make matters worse for Chu, the mercurial but charismatic Han has reemerged on the national political stage. Last month, Han held a book release and charity launch rally in Taipei that attracted 10,000 supporters ([Taiwan News](https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/352424), January 16). Han’s populist brand and fervent supporters increased turnout for the KMT in 2020, but his divisiveness and reputation for being pro-China also drove record support for the DPP. The current high-level of sustained PRC military pressure on Taiwan clearly harms the KMT’s efforts to recapture

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the Presidency. It bears remembering that when Taiwanese voters were focused on domestic issues in the November 2018 elections, the KMT did well.

China's military muscle flexing may be an effort to cow Taiwanese voters into "peaceful reunification", but this suggests extraordinary tone-deafness on Beijing's part. More likely, the PRC is seeking to develop military and other coercive options for unification while also communicating to Washington that intervention on Taiwan's behalf will be very costly. As China develops an increasingly viable set of military options, the U.S, and Taiwan will face an unenviable choice: accept growing exposure to the threat, or pay higher costs to maintain the status quo,

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China and Pakistan: Strains in the All-Weather Partnership?

By Sudha Ramachandran



(Image: Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on February 6, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

China and Pakistan have formally launched Phase II of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship venture in China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). During Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Beijing on February 3-6 for the Winter Olympics, the two sides signed a Framework Agreement on Industrial Cooperation to kick off the second phase of CPEC, which will focus on the development and industrialization of special economic zones (SEZs) ([Pakistan Today](#), February 4). The joint statement issued at the end of Khan's visit noted that "the two sides signed or concluded a number of agreements / MoUs, covering bilateral cooperation in areas of economic and technical, industry, investment, infrastructure, space, vaccine, digitalization, standardization, disaster management, culture, sports, and vocational education" (For the full text of the China-Pakistan joint statement see [People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), February 6).

According to Pakistan's Special Assistant to the Prime Minister (SAPM) on CPEC Affairs Khalid Mansoor, CPEC's second phase will attract multi-billion dollar investments to Pakistan. Representatives of around 500 Chinese companies met with Khan in Beijing, and per the Prime Minister's remarks to Pakistani media following

the visit, expressed interest in investing in industry, agriculture, information technology, infrastructure, housing and construction, mining and oil refining ([Business Recorder](#), February 8). The big question, however, is whether this ostensible interest from Chinese businesses will translate into hard cash commitments. China is concerned over the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan. In the run-up to Khan's visit, Pakistani militants carried out several major attacks in the country. On January 17, the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP), also known as Pakistani Taliban, opened fire on a security checkpoint in Islamabad ([Dawn](#), January 19). A few days later, the newly formed Baluch Nationalist Army (BNA) carried out a bomb attack in a busy market in Lahore ([Express Tribune](#), January 20). Hours before Khan left for China, Baluch militants struck again, this time attacking security forces' camps in Panjgur and Naushki in Baluchistan province in southwestern Pakistan ([Dawn](#), February 2). Then on February 5, the TTP killed five Frontier Corps personnel at a security checkpoint in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province ([Dawn](#), February 7).

Last year, Pakistan suffered 207 terrorist attacks, a 42% increase over 2020, according to a study by the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, an independent think-tank based in Islamabad. Fatalities from terror attacks increased by 51% over the previous year. [1] Worryingly for Beijing, Pakistani militant groups have increasingly threatened Chinese nationals. Four of the attacks in 2021 targeted Chinese nationals and at least 17 Chinese workers were killed in these attacks. As China and Pakistan move into Phase II of CPEC, the safety of Chinese projects and personnel in Pakistan will be a key concern.

Attacks on Chinese Nationals

In August 2021, the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad described the security situation in Pakistan as "severe." This assessment was prompted by "several terrorist attacks in succession" on Chinese nationals in the country.[2] On March 9, a Chinese national was injured in a "targeted attack" by the Baluchistan Liberation Front in Karachi ([The News](#), March 9, 2021). The TTP carried out a car bomb attack at the Serena Hotel in Quetta, Baluchistan on April 21 targeting the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan Nong Rong and other Chinese officials staying in the hotel ([Dawn](#), April 23, 2021). Then, on July 14, a bus carrying 30 workers to the Dasu hydropower plant, a CPEC project in the Upper Kohistan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, was attacked, killing 13 people including nine Chinese nationals. No group claimed responsibility, but Chinese sources identified the TTP and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)- a purported Uighur separatist group, as possible culprits ([Global Times](#), July 16, 2021). Five weeks later, a motorcade carrying Chinese personnel working at the East Bay Expressway project in Gwadar was hit by a suicide bomber and two Chinese workers were injured. The Baluch Liberation Army (BLA) claimed credit for the attack ([Dawn](#), July 29, 2021).

Heightened Chinese Concern

Attacks targeting CPEC and Chinese nationals in Pakistan are not new ([Terrorism Monitor](#), February 8, 2018). However, previous strikes on Chinese interests have not been as deadly as those of the past year. In previous years, the main threat to Chinese interests in Southwest Pakistan was posed by Baluch militants, who are

strongly opposed to CPEC. While Baluch militant groups continued to target Chinese nationals and projects in 2021, the TTP also emerged as a serious threat to CPEC.

A TTP faction killed a Chinese national in Peshawar in 2012, but thereafter, the group refrained from targeting Chinese workers or projects ([Express Tribune](#), March 2, 2012). However, the TTP changed course in April 2021, when it targeted the Chinese ambassador in Quetta. The Quetta attack signaled that the TTP has shifted back to targeting China. The group can be expected to step up attacks on Chinese nationals and CPEC projects as a way to undermine the Pakistani state and economy ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 7, 2021).

In the past, Uyghur fighters were known to be sheltering in TTP bases in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa ([Dawn](#), September 2, 2015). Now they appear to be collaborating with the TTP to target CPEC projects such as the Dasu hydropower construction. The TTP is also said to have collaborated with Baluch militants to carry out the Quetta attack ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 7, 2021). Tactical ties between a resurgent TTP (especially in the context of the support it is likely to be getting from the Taliban in Afghanistan) and Baluch groups would put CPEC projects in the crosshairs of an array of formidable militant and terror groups.

While not new, China's concern over the security situation in Pakistan was expressed more strongly and openly in 2021. Differences between Pakistani and Chinese officials played out in the media following the July 14 attack on the Dasu hydropower project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. While Pakistani officials described the incident as an accident caused by a gas leak, Chinese media reports asserted that it was terrorism ([Gandhara](#), July 14, 2021). China sent officials to Pakistan to probe the attack ([Times of India](#), July 18, 2021). Work on the project was suspended and China Gezhouba Group Company (CGGC), which was undertaking the Dasu project, terminated the employment of Pakistani workers. The Chinese government also demanded restitution payments of \$38 million to the kin of those killed as a condition for the project's resumption ([Business Standard](#), October 16, 2021). Senior Chinese officials told their Pakistani counterparts at the 10th CPEC Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) meeting on September 23 that high-level development of CPEC projects needed "high-level" security guarantees ([Global Times](#), September 23, 2021).

Chinese or Baluch Concerns?

For years, Beijing has pressed Islamabad on the question of securing Chinese nationals and CPEC projects. Successive governments have heeded Chinese demands on security. In 2016, Pakistan set up a Special Security Division comprising 9,000 soldiers and 6,000 paramilitary personnel to secure CPEC projects ([Dawn](#), August 12, 2016). Baluchistan has been a major focus of these efforts. Security forces and checkpoints are ubiquitous in the province and Gwadar, the site of a deep-sea port that is the gateway to CPEC, is heavily fortified.

In November-December last year, tens of thousands of Baluch women and men participated in mass sit-ins in Gwadar (see [China Brief](#), January 28). While they did not protest against CPEC per se, they put forward demands reflecting their deep anger with being excluded from the benefits of CPEC's development that have

long been promised by Islamabad. Among the demonstrators' grievances were "unnecessary check posts on major roads." In order to defuse the protest, Prime Minister Khan acceded to protesters' demands, including the removal of checkpoints ([Dawn](#), December 6, 2021). If, as expected, the Chinese press for more security forces and checkpoints in Gwadar, where they have invested many millions of dollars and propose to bring in around 500,000 Chinese nationals to work on projects, whose demand will Khan heed? That of China or the Baluch?

Delays in Project Implementation

Delays in CPEC project implementation are another issue of concern in China-Pakistan relations. "The Chinese are not happy with the current progress of CPEC projects," the Chairman of Pakistan's Senate Standing Committee on Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives Committee, Saleem H Mandviwala said last September ([Express Tribune](#), September 17, 2021). Chinese officials complain that bureaucratic red tape is delaying decisions with matters that require a month to be finalized taking around four months. Additionally, basic amenities are lacking at project sites. For example, the Rashakai SEZ located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was not provided with electricity or water, which delayed the start of the project ([Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry](#), September 14, 2019).

A major reason for CPEC's recent slowdown has been the COVID-19 pandemic, which has had "a particularly adverse impact" on the construction of SEZs in Pakistan ([China Brief](#), July 29, 2020). "The lack of a uniform policy framework" is also to blame for "delay in CPEC projects, particularly in the power sector," observed noted Pakistani journalist Syed Fazl-e-Haider. [3]

CPEC projects have been caught in Pakistan's domestic politics too. When in opposition, the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) opposed CPEC. The PTI "stalled several projects" and accused the then ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) of corruption. Upon coming to power in 2018, Prime Minister Imran Khan in a bid to "unearth corruption by PML-N politicians sought to audit and review projects, several of which were overpriced." These audit processes delayed several projects. However, when Khan sought to accelerate projects, the PML-N provincial government in Punjab has stood in his way, according to a Pakistani entrepreneur with interests in the Faisalabad SEZ. [4] In particular, CPEC agriculture projects have experienced lengthy delays ([The News](#), August 31, 2021).

Declining Investment, Difficult Terms

Many in Pakistan also have concerns with the present situation. Chinese investment in Pakistan is declining. According to the State Bank of Pakistan, Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in July-October 2021 was just \$116 million, compared with \$399 million in the same period the previous year ([The News](#), November 18, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit economies worldwide is partly to blame. Chinese overseas investment fell drastically in 2020, although the decline was somewhat less in BRI countries. While it fell by 70% in non-BRI countries between 2019 and 2020, Beijing's investment in BRI partners declined 54.5% in that

period ([Observer Research Foundation](#), September 3, 2021). China's pullback in Pakistan is also driven by political unrest, terrorism and violence as well as corruption, which deters Chinese companies from making investments in CPEC projects. [5]

China's reluctance to finance projects of crucial importance has evoked some resentment in Pakistan. Furthermore, Pakistan has not always unconditionally accepted China's investment terms. For example, China's conditions to finance the Diamer Bhasha Dam project included Chinese ownership of the project. Pakistani officials felt the conditions were "not doable and against our interests," concerns that culminated in the withdrawal of the CPEC framework in 2017 ([Express Tribune](#), November 15, 2017). China is reportedly reluctant to finance the ML-1 railway project and has stalled approval for around four years. The two sides differ on the cost of the project. Pakistan pegs the project at US\$ 6.8 billion, but China estimates it will cost between \$9.2 billion and \$9.5 billion ([Global Times](#), November 29, 2021). Financing terms have been a source of differences as well with Pakistan favoring concessional loans from China at low-interest rates.

Upgrading the Karachi-Peshawar ML-1 line will modernize Pakistan's dilapidated rail network and is key to improving connectivity and trade. China is aware of the project's importance to Pakistan; its "seeming reluctance to finance the project is aimed at getting Pakistan to accept its terms," said the Pakistani entrepreneur interviewed by the author. [6] The joint statement issued after Khan's visit was silent on the ML-1 project.

Going Forward

Pakistan has taken several steps to revive Chinese investment interest. Chinese investors will not have to secure approvals from Pakistan to invest in the country. Instead, they will have to only agree to comply with Pakistani rules ([Business Recorder](#), February 8). In order to mollify Beijing over attacks on Chinese personnel, Islamabad announced a payment of \$11.6 million as "a goodwill gesture" to compensate Chinese victims of the attack on the Dasu project ([Express Tribune](#), January 19).

As CPEC moves into its second phase, the Khan government will need to act robustly to improve the security situation in Pakistan. Beijing and Islamabad can be expected to press ahead with their military approach to securing CPEC. Both countries have conveyed "a loud and clear message" to the Taliban to sever ties with the TTP; and on the Taliban's suggestion, Pakistan even started talks with the TTP, which ended in failure in December. Since then, Pakistan has expedited its counterterrorism operations against the TTP, which was Beijing's preferred approach to begin with, said Haider. [7]

As in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Pakistan government, contrary to its pledge to the leaders of the recent protests in Gwadar, will increase its military presence and activity in Baluchistan. This is bound to increase Baluch disaffection and fuel the anti-Pakistan/ China militancy underway there. China can expect more attacks on its nationals from the TTP, Baluch and other militant groups.

Pakistani leaders and officials often tout CPEC as a “game changer” and the initiative has several achievements to its credit. Energy projects have been successful in addressing Pakistan’s severe power shortages, and road infrastructure in rural and urban Pakistan has also improved. However, CPEC projects are also benefitting Chinese banks, companies and labor. In Southwestern Pakistan, the people of Baluchistan have yet to gain from the promised ‘development’. Indeed, the Baluch people have suffered on its account, whether due to the heavy military presence to secure CPEC projects, or the diversion of basic amenities like water to project sites. Pakistan is the weaker partner in CPEC and is at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to negotiating project terms. However, it is in Islamabad’s interests to press the Chinese to employ Pakistani workers on projects in Pakistan. This will not only address an important grievance of groups such as those of the Baluch, but will also contribute to the security of CPEC.

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Notes

[1] Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, Pakistan Security Report 2021, Conflict and Peace Studies, volume 14, number 1, January-June 2022. <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Sr2021FinalWithTitles.pdf>

[2] Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Statement by the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan on the Suicide Attack on the Gwadar Eastbay Expressway Project, August 20, 2021. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cepk/eng/zbqx/t1900950.htm>

[3] Author’s Interview. Pakistani journalist Syed Fazl-e-Haider, Lahore, January 16, 2022.

[4] Author’s Interview, Pakistani entrepreneur with interests in the Faisalabad SEZ in the Punjab Province, Lahore, January 18, 2022.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Author’s Interview, Syed Fazl-e-Haider.

The Evolution of the PLA's Enlisted Force: Training (Part Two)

By Kenneth W. Allen



(Image: New Soldiers in Shanghai leaving via train for training, Source: Shanghai Observer)

Introduction

On January 4, 2022, Chinese President and Central Military Commission Chairman Xi Jinping issued a mobilization order for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to begin its annual training cycle. In the directive, Xi called on the PLA to “closely track the evolution of technology, warfare, and adversaries, to better combine training with combat operations, and to strengthen systematic training and the use of technologies to develop an elite fighting force” ([Gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn), January 4).

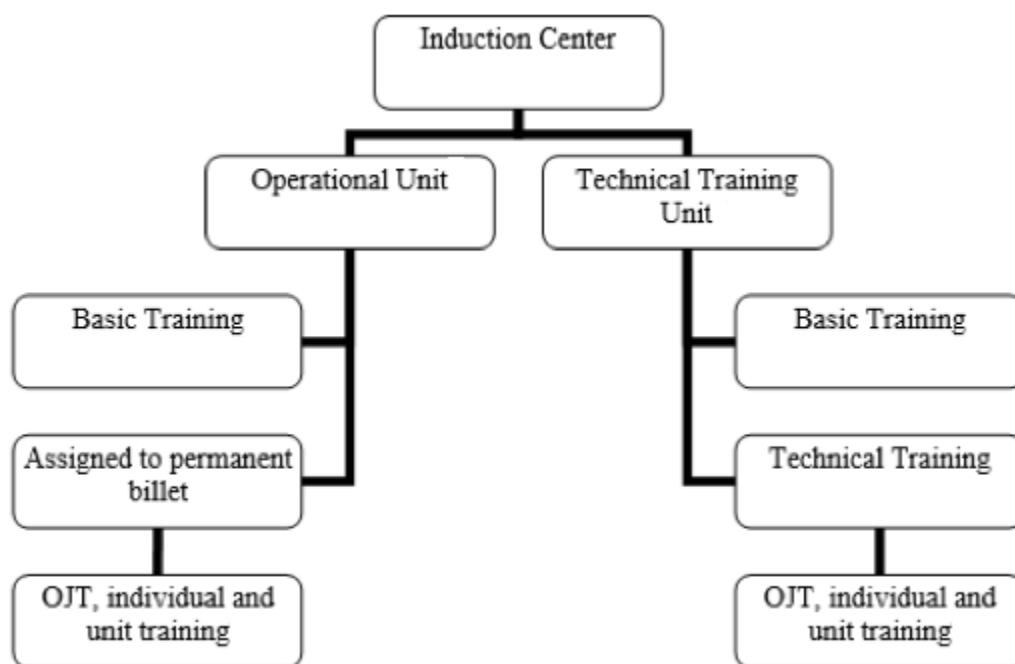
The PLA's annual training has always been closely tied to its enlisted force recruitment and conscription cycle. The first article in this series details China's efforts to develop a more educated and professional military, examining the PLA enlisted force's evolution from an all-volunteer force, to a conscript military, to a mixed force comprised of volunteers and conscripts ([China Brief](http://www.chinabrief.com), January 14). This article uses the PLA Air Force (PLAAF)

as a case study to examine the development of the PLA's training for new enlisted personnel and raises questions for consideration regarding the two-cycle enlisted force conscription process implemented last year.

New Soldier Training Before 2015

Prior to 2015, as shown in Figure 1, all newly enlisted personnel either went directly to a training base, where they received basic training and then their specialty training, or went directly to their operational bases, where they were assigned to a “new soldier company” and, depending on the number of new personnel, into “new soldier battalions,” each of which had at least three companies. [1] Junior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and officers from the operational unit were assigned to oversee their basic training. The PLA does not have any single training bases like the U.S. Air Force’s Lackland Air Force Base, the U.S. Army’s Fort Benning or Fort Jackson, or the U.S. Navy’s Great Lakes Recruit Training Command.

Figure 1: New Soldier Training Options



Conscripts who completed their basic training at an operational unit were then assigned to their permanent billet within an all-enlisted force squad, which are subordinate to a platoon. Each platoon is under a company, which, in turn is subordinate to a battalion. Once new soldiers assume their billet, they began to receive on-the-job training (OJT). The unit then began step-by-step training for the squads, platoons, companies, and battalions over the next few months. Once they assumed their operational billet, they are referred to as conscripts (义务兵, *yiwubing*), regardless of whether they were conscripted or joined voluntarily. All enlisted personnel are also identified as soldiers (士兵, *shibing*; 战士, *zhanshi*). Of note, the PLAAF does not have a term for airman as does the U.S. Air Force, and while the PLA Navy (PLAN) has a word for sailor (水兵, *shuibing*), it only applies to enlisted personnel. The PLAAF also had specific training units for several

specialties: aircraft maintenance, armament, aviation technical, cooking, communications, equipment, logistics, and driving. The personnel in charge of conducting basic training in operational or technical training units included some NCOs and junior officers.

The transition to a two-year conscription period in 1999 significantly affected the ways that conscripts were trained and employed during their service. Prior to 1999, when PLAAF conscripts served for four years, the PLAAF could provide up to eight months of technical training after basic training and still enable conscripts to serve on active duty for at least three more years. However, now that conscripts serve for only two years, the PLAAF has had to significantly reduce the amount of training at technical training units for incoming conscripts. In 2002, for example, a Jinan Military Region Air Force (MRAF) driver training unit shortened the training time for students from seven to five months. This change left conscripts with only about 17 months to practice their specialty before conscription obligations ended. [2]

Development of New Soldier Training Since 2015

In 2015, the PLAAF increased its basic training from about seven weeks to three months. Late that year, the PLAAF's Headquarters Department (now the Staff Department) created its first new-soldier training brigade, a practice that was then implemented across the PLAAF. The PLAAF began consolidating trainees into numerous "new-soldier brigades" each of which has about 1,000 new enlistees. Following their basic training, soldiers are sent to their operational units, where they are assigned to permanent billets and receive OJT. The PLAAF still has various new soldier training bases as well.

According to the PLAAF-issued "Notice on 2017 New Soldier Replenishment, NCO Selection, and Soldier Demobilization," replenishment, selection, and dismissal processes in 2017 would continue to follow the guidelines of one replenishment, two selections, and two dismissals. The work to prepare for new soldier replenishment began in late July with the appointment and selection of personnel to liaise with new soldiers, the establishment of new soldier organizations, and the implementation of liaison personnel training. All training of new soldier liaisons was completed by early August, and new soldiers began reporting to their basic training locations by September 1. All soldiers must report prior to September 10 when full basic training begins. [3]

Mental health and wellness are now a significant part of new soldier training. Since September 2016, newly enlisted personnel were given mental health screenings as part of an experimental program by the Air Force Military Medical University Aviation Medical Research Institute. New soldiers also received a recitation of WeChat-delivered letters from their parents to encourage completion of basic training tasks.



(Figure 2: A newly enlisted PLA soldier in training)



(Figure 3: Shoulder stripes denoting private 1st and 2nd class ranks)

During basic training, newly enlisted personnel do not wear any rank insignia, as shown in figure 2. Upon completing basic training, new troops receive their first stripe and are promoted to the rank of private 2nd class (列兵, *liebing*), as shown in figure 3. At the beginning of their second year, enlisted personnel receive their second stripe and a rank promotion to private 1st class (上等兵, *shangdengbing*). As basic training ends in December, units in each Theater Command (TC) finalize new-soldier billet assignments. New soldiers begin arriving at their operational locations in early January, or they remain at their training base for specialty training. One Northern Theater Command Air Force (TCAF) airfield station's vehicle airfield service company held a welcoming ceremony for new soldiers, where NCOs discussed that "all billets provide opportunities for growth," especially with those soldiers not assigned to their preferred billets. An Eastern TCAF airfield station considered both the new soldiers' skills and college majors, as well as their preferred billet assignment. At this location, 87 percent of the new soldiers were assigned to billets that matched their majors. A Western TCAF surface-to-air missile (SAM) brigade used psychological assessments to help determine billet assignments.

The selected Air Force training bases perform concentrated training for higher-level backbone personnel and intensive training for new enlisted soldiers. One Southern TCAF SAM brigade determined that the training of new soldiers was rushed in order to replace demobilized veterans, who all depart at the same time in September or November, depending on which year they entered service. As a result, new soldiers could execute basic operations, but lacked deep understanding of military theory. To rectify this issue, the brigade instituted a gradual approach to training, which required new soldiers to understand how to operate equipment, as well as the underlying principles.

Concerning specialty training, in January 2018, soldiers in the PLAAF's Airborne Corps who enlisted in 2017 performed their first large-aircraft parachute training, and soldiers who enlisted in 2016 performed their final parachute training. One airborne brigade trained these soldiers in three types of aircraft and multiple day- and night-time drops, transitioning the 2016 enlistees from new soldiers into combat personnel. Most training for the entire PLA is put on hold during the Chinese New Year (Spring Festival) that occurs in late January or early February. New Airborne Corps soldiers continue to receive training through the spring, with one airborne mechanized regiment conducting automatic rifle live-ammunition evaluations in March. Basic military training continues even at these training bases, which includes executing basic boxing moves and shouting out military slogans. It was also revealed that because the conscript period has been shortened to two years, pre-billet training has been shortened from 1.5-2 years to nine months.

Unit Training and the Annual Training Cycle

After being assigned to their operational billets, all new conscripts receive OJT, individual training, and unit training, which includes conducting common training, tactical training, and campaign training in a step-by-step process. As such, it typically takes new conscripts several months to learn their specialties and to be fully integrated into their units. The PLA expects that, after the first six months of their two-year conscription period, conscripts will be sufficiently proficient in their job to take part in larger unit training. **[4]**

The bottom line is that units that are heavily conscript-oriented are not at 100 percent personnel levels all year long. The units must incorporate new conscripts gradually. Not only do units receive all of their new conscripts once they have completed their basic training, but they also lose the same number of conscripts who have served two years and are either demobilized or promoted to junior NCOs. As such, units are now short one half of their two-year conscripts for up to three to four months while they are receiving their basic training. In addition, all NCOs who are not promoted to the next level are also demobilized at the same time as conscripts who have served two years, and any new NCOs must receive their specialty training.

Although the PLA wanted to create a two-cycle enlisted force conscription process in 2020, implementation was pushed back to 2021 because of COVID-19. Under the new system, registration and screening took place for males between December 10, 2020, and February 20, 2021, with the final selection process occurring between February 20 and March 31 for the first cycle. Registration and screening took place between April 1

and August 15, 2021, and the final selection process took place between August 15 and September 30 for the second cycle ([The Paper](#), December 11, 2020). However, the registration and screening process was different for females, taking place from December 10, 2020 to February 15, 2021, for the first cycle and from June 26 to August 15 for the second cycle ([81.cn](#), January 21). Recruitment of males and females focused on upcoming high school and college graduates between the ages of 18-22 but could also be extended to age 23 for females and to age 24 males who are college seniors ([The Paper](#), December 11, 2020). Students from rural areas with only a ninth-grade education cannot join the PLA past the age of 20. In 2022, recruitment for the first half of the year will start on February 15 and end on March 31. Recruitment for the second half of the year will start on August 15 and end on September 30 ([PRC Ministry of National Defense](#), February 7). The military recruitment for 2022 mainly targets college students and graduates, and priority is given to students majoring in science and engineering and those with skills needed for war preparedness. Applicants can apply online via the website [www.gfbzb.gov.cn](#). New soldiers receive a monthly salary of more than 1,000 RMB (\$157). A one-time award of 10,000 RMB (\$1,575) is available to those who volunteer to serve in remote hardship areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet. New conscripts with a bachelor's degree will receive a one-time payment of 4,000 RMB (\$625) and those with a two- or three-year specialty degree will receive 2,000 RMB (\$315). In addition, their families will receive a preferential allowance of 53,539 RMB (\$8,470) from their hometown government for each year of their two-year conscription period. Upon finishing their two-year service, the government also pays them a separation allowance of 9,000 RMB (\$1,415). If they return to college, undergraduate students receive tuition compensation of 8,000 RMB (\$1,260) and graduates students receive 12,000 RMB (\$1,885) ([Sohu](#), January 26).

Concerning basic training in 2021, only a few examples were found. For example, on March 30, new Air Force enlisted personnel arrived at their training unit for three months of training ([81.cn](#), March 30, 2021). During the second cycle, new Army enlisted personnel arrived at their training base on September 16, where they were assigned to new-soldier training battalions and subordinate companies and received two to three months of basic training ([81.cn](#), July 21, 2021). After completing basic training, they received their first stripes and were assigned to their operational units.

Questions for Consideration

The below list includes some hypotheses and key questions about the new two-cycle system: [5]

- Given that this system does not completely overlap with the previous one-cycle system, conscripts who began their training in August 2019 and August 2020 most likely remained or will remain on active duty until the end of their two years, at which time they are demobilized, become an NCO, or are selected for officer education and training. However, once the first group of conscripts who began their training in February and August 2021 complete their two-year period, they will leave in February and August of 2023.

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- It appears that basic training has been consolidated at the corps/army/regional level, but can this be confirmed force-wide? How many training bases are there in total? Are all new-soldier training bases used during both conscription and basic training periods?
- Assuming that only half of the previous number of conscripts (400,000) begin their training at the same time now, has the number of training brigades and subordinate training battalions remained the same or been cut in half?
- No information was found concerning new soldiers being assigned to any technical training bases, where they receive their basic training and then their technical training; however, they most likely still exist.
- Are the officer/NCO trainers at the bases assigned to training bases full-time? If so, how are they selected and how long do they serve?
- Do all bases conduct basic training for both periods each year? After they graduate from basic training, do new soldiers go to all units twice a year, to half the units once a year, or to one-quarter of the units once every two years? The final option would allow units to have a single set of conscripts for the longest period of time.
- Once the new conscripts complete their basic training and are assigned to their operational unit, their next steps most likely remain the same, including OJT and specialty training.

Only time will tell how these developments will work out for the PLA. Most likely, however, further changes are on the horizon over the next few years.

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Notes

[1] Information on new soldier training prior to 2015 is derived from *People's Liberation Army Air Force 2010*, Chapter 4, (Dayton, OH: National Air and Space Intelligence Agency, August 1, 2010).

[2] Few officers in the PLAAF have driver's licenses. Almost all drivers are conscripts and junior NCOs and must undergo the lengthy drivers training process and can only serve for a total of 12 years before being demobilized. Yu Jianhai and Gao Yang, "Small Ideas Become Big Policy," *Air Force News*, October 26, 2002, p. 1.

[3] Information in this section is compiled from *Air Force News*; See *Air Force News*, August 14, 2017, 1; September 27, 2; November 22, 2017, 2; January 24, 2017, 1; January 8, 2018, 2; January 12, 2018, 2; January

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20, 2017, 1; February 22, 2017, 3; February 8, 2017, 2; March 28, 2017, 2; April 13, 2017, 1; September 26, 2017, 4.

[4] Dennis Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, London: Routledge, 2006, 51.

[5] Issues and questions for consideration are based on the author's conversation with Dennis Blasko.

Chinese Security Narratives in the New Afghan Context: Xinjiang and the Recycling of the “ETIM” Threat

By Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino



(Image: A People’s Armed Police Counterterrorism Exercise in Xinjiang, source: Global Times)

Introduction

In its latest report on the global terrorism threat, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) indicates that, following the Taliban takeover of power in Afghanistan, “terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom there than at any time in recent history” ([UN Security Council](#), February 3). In the assessment, one member state warns that “ETIM/TIP members,” in reference to Uyghur militants in the region, have frequently visited the Wakhan corridor, calling for a “return to Xinjiang for jihad.” This claim, closely aligned with recent Chinese official narratives, raises the spectrum of a Uyghur terrorist threat across the border and draws attention to how China is recycling post-9/11 narratives in the neo-Taliban context to justify its actions in Xinjiang.

Following 9/11, the Chinese government reframed contemporary ethnic conflict in Xinjiang as “terrorism,” situating the Uyghur region as China’s front in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Chinese officials then accused “East Turkistan terrorist forces” of threatening national security and international stability. Shortly thereafter, Uyghur-related ethnic unrest, which Beijing framed as “counter-revolution” or “violent separatism” in the 1980s and 1990s, became China’s “terrorism” problem. Crucial to this narrative shift, which sought the international legitimization of China’s crackdown in Xinjiang, was the projection of a hitherto unknown group,

the so-called East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), as a capable militant organization that threatened China from Afghanistan and had connections to Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and the global jihadi movement. Despite the lack of credible evidence on ETIM's existence and capabilities, the U.S. and the UNSC designated the group as a terrorist organization ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), April 22, 2004; [Federal Register](#), September 6, 2002), lending credibility to China's claim and facilitating an intensified repression of the Turkic Muslim ethnic minorities under the banner of counter-terrorism.

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) framing of the ETIM as an international terrorist force with the capacity to infiltrate and strike in China has served to legitimize the "people's war on terror," recently epitomized by the massive internment of hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in re-education camps in Xinjiang. Twenty years after 9/11, with the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban to power, China continues to invoke the image of the ETIM to justify a counter-terrorism emergency in Xinjiang based on the threat that the group poses from Afghanistan.

Recycling the ETIM narrative

In light of the new Afghan context, Chinese authorities have promulgated the representation of the ETIM as a direct threat to China's national security and territorial integrity and a danger to regional peace and global stability ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), August 16, 2021; [Ministry of Public Security](#), July 14, 2021; [China Daily](#), August 31, 2021; [Global Times](#), September 16, 2021). Reproducing core themes of the post-9/11 narrative, Chinese officials have described the group as an "international terrorist organization capable of transnational terrorist activities" or as "one of the most harmful terrorist organizations among terrorist forces" ([Ministry of Public Security](#), July 14, 2021). Official reports have underscored the "close ties" of the ETIM with leading "international terrorist organizations" ([Global Times](#), September 16, 2021). As they did during the early stages of the GWOT, Beijing has placed the ETIM at the forefront of the global jihadi movement, this time alongside ISIS and Al Qaeda ([Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN](#), August 16, 2021). As Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian put it, the ETIM "is a direct threat to China's national security and territorial integrity, a scourge affecting regional security and stability" ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), September 10, 2021). According to Wu Xin, deputy director of the National Anti-Terrorism Office, the group "continues to send its members to the country in an attempt to cause sabotage" ([Ministry of Public Security](#), July 14, 2021).

In their latest narratives concerning Afghanistan, Chinese officials and state media have connected Uyghur militants living in China to the ETIM—the group that was first formally established as a threat back in 2001. In doing so, they have projected the ETIM as a resilient actor with a 20-year uninterrupted presence in Afghanistan, while asserting that the group is responsible for "violent and terrorist incidents in Xinjiang" ([Huanqiu Shibao](#), September 16, 2021; [Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN](#), August 16, 2021). Chinese state media and some experts reproduced the tropes that followed 9/11, including references to the Uyghur militant Hasan Mahsum, killed in 2003, or the white paper, "'East Turkistan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away With Impunity," released in 2002 and which retrospectively reframed past unrest in

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Xinjiang as “terrorist attacks” ([Global Times](#), September 16, 2021; [State Council Information Office](#), January 21, 2002). China continues to use this document, widely criticized for its inconsistencies and lack of evidence, to justify its repressive policies and human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

In articulating the existence of a linear and resilient Uyghur militant threat to China that has been based in Afghanistan since the 1990s, Chinese official narratives have equated the ETIM to the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) ([Huanqiu Shibao](#), September 16, 2021). Despite the spatial, organizational, and historical gap between the Uyghur individuals based in Afghanistan at the time of 9/11 and the armed group that operates in Syria under the umbrella of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the ETIM and the TIP are often used interchangeably in security analysis and political discourse. Some member states in the UNSC routinely use the ETIM label to refer to Uyghur militants in Afghanistan. In a recent report, these states “identify this group as the Turkistan Islamic Party, which is a widely accepted alias of ETIM” ([UN Security Council](#), June 1, 2021). Their inputs into UNSC reports broadly replicate the Chinese official narrative about the ETIM, which subsequently turns to these reports to demonstrate the ETIM threat ([Renmin Ribao](#), October 7, 2021). These states claim that the ETIM has a “transnational agenda to target Xinjiang, China, and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor” and “seeks to establish a Uighur state in Xinjiang,” for which it “facilitates the movement of fighters from Afghanistan to China” (UN Security Council, [May 27, 2020](#), [July 21, 2021](#)). They also suggest that the group maintains relationships with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIS-K) ([UN Security Council](#), June 1, 2021).

U.S. government narratives have rendered the Chinese official narrative credible by referring to Uyghur militants in Afghanistan as part of the ETIM. A 2018 report by the Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations described the group as “an Islamist Uighur separatist movement from China that operates along the border with Afghanistan” and equated it to the TIP ([Lead Inspector General](#), January–March, 2018). Meanwhile, the Lead Inspector General Report to the U.S. Congress determined in 2019 that the “Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement” had an estimated one hundred members in Afghanistan ([Lead Inspector General](#), July–September, 2019). In February 2018, the Pentagon announced that U.S. forces “conducted air operations to strike Taliban and East Turkestan Islamic Movement, or ETIM, training facilities in Badakhshan province” ([U.S. Department of Defense](#), February 7, 2018). It described the ETIM as “a terrorist organization that operates in China and the border regions of Afghanistan.” The U.S. adoption of the ETIM label to refer to Uyghur militants in Afghanistan proved to be erratic when, in November 2020, the Trump administration revoked the ETIM’s designation as a “terrorist organization” ([Federal Register](#), May 11, 2020). This decision was made on the basis that “for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist,” prompting the question of how U.S. forces could have cited in 2018 an organization as a threat, which had ceased to exist a decade earlier ([Congressional Research Service](#), January 4, 2021).

As it happened in 2002, the Chinese government capitalized on the international acceptance of the ETIM as a credible threat and the unclear U.S. position regarding the group’s existence and capabilities. Examining the new Afghan context, Chinese officials have observed the inconsistent U.S. position on the ETIM ([Ministry of Public Security](#), July 14, 2021; [Global Times](#), September 16, 2021). Subsequently, the Chinese government

has systematically reproduced the UNSC listing of the group as a terrorist organization in 2004 to sustain their claims around the threat of Uyghur terrorism ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), September 10, 2021; [Huanqiu Shibao](#), August 17, 2021). As they did following 9/11, Chinese officials have also called for the international community to “share the responsibility to firmly reject, curb, crack down on and eradicate the ETIM,” which they see as “an important part of international counterterrorism efforts” and “in the world’s interest” ([Renmin Ribao](#), October 7, 2021; [Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), September 10, 2021).

Presence and Scope of Uyghur Militants in Afghanistan

The presence of Uyghur militants in Afghanistan has been confirmed by multiple sources, including from the deposed Afghan national government as well as by member states in the UNSC that have estimated the presence of several hundred Uyghur militants in Badakhshan and the neighboring Afghan provinces of Kunduz and Takhar ([Gandhara RFE/RL](#), February 12, 2018; [Twitter](#), July 5, 2021; [UN Security Council](#), June 1, 2021; [UN Security Council](#), May 27, 2020). Chinese experts have also acknowledged that “ETIM members” or “ETIM militants” operate in Afghanistan, noting their participation in attacks against the Afghan government forces before the Taliban rose to power in mid-2021 ([Renmin Ribao](#), January 11, 2021; [Global Times](#), September 16, 2021).

Other Chinese scholars, however, have estimated that Uyghur militants in Afghanistan pose a much lesser threat than suggested in the PRC’s official narratives. Specifically, they argue that it is highly unlikely that extremist and terrorist groups could enter China through the Wakhan corridor ([Global Times](#), July 13, 2021). Zhu Yongbiao, director of the Afghanistan Research Center at Lanzhou University, pointed out that the “physical impact” of the new Afghan scenario on China, in the sense of Afghan-based “extreme terrorist forces” crossing the Chinese border, is “extremely small” ([Pengpai Xinwen](#), August 16, 2021). This casts doubt on PRC claims that the ETIM uses the Wakhan Corridor to train and send militants from Afghanistan into China to plan and execute terrorist attacks ([Ministry of Public Security](#), July 14, 2021). As per the nature and level of organization of Uyghur militants in Afghanistan, Chinese scholars such as Li Wei have underscored that they are in a “dispersed state” to the extent that “it cannot be said that an armed or paramilitary force has been formed” ([Huanqiu Shibao](#), September 16, 2021). According to Fudan University Professor Zhang Jiadong, the ETIM has such a small sphere of influence in Afghanistan and other countries that it makes it almost “invisible” and hence difficult to eliminate ([Global Times](#), September 16, 2021). Both experts believe that the ETIM has maintained a low profile in recent years.

Chinese scholarly analysis coincides with assessments from Afghanistan that suggest that Uyghur militants in Badakhshan have formed no separate unit and have primarily served as trainers for other insurgents ([Afghanistan Analyst Network](#), March 19, 2018). According to these sources, “Uyghur combat power” is not a “decisive factor on the battlefield” in Afghanistan. Chinese scholarly analysis and alternative assessments thus erode the credibility of assertions of the existence of an Afghan-based Uyghur insurgent outlet threatening China with cross-border terrorist attacks, noting instead the fragmented, weak, and indirect nature of Uyghur militants in the country.

The Political Drivers of the ETIM's Portrayal in China's Counter-Terrorism Narrative

As it happened following 9/11, the representation of the ETIM as a capable Uyghur militant group threatening China from Afghanistan has proved crucial for Beijing to legitimize its crackdown in Xinjiang. Facing a novel Afghan context, Chinese state narratives have articulated a two-decade linear history of uniformity, endurance, and strength of the group in Afghanistan. By invoking the ETIM cross-border threat, the PRC can claim that China is “still facing the real threat of terrorism” and that “a high degree of vigilance” continues to be required ([Ministry of Public Security](#), July 14, 2021). As one Chinese expert puts it, “as long as they [the ETIM] exists, the unstable factor for terrorist activities exist” ([Global Times](#), September 16, 2021).

By drawing attention to “the ETIM’s nature as a terrorist organization and its grave danger,” Chinese officials sustain the case that the issue of Uyghur violent unrest is about “counter-terrorism, anti-filtration, anti-separatism, and anti-interference” as opposed to “ethnicity, religion, or human rights ([Global Times](#), November 15, 2021; [China Daily](#), October 8, 2021). This, in turn, facilitates calls to perpetuate the repressive measures underway in Xinjiang. As Xu Guixiang, spokesperson of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region Government, emphasizes the “policy measures” adopted in the region have obtained “remarkable results” toward eliminating “the threats of terrorism and extremism” ([Dongfang Ribao](#), August 30, 2021). For some Chinese experts, the threat stemming from Afghanistan calls for adhering to “the current domestic anti-terrorism and de-radicalization policy unswervingly” ([Huanqiu Shibao](#), September 16, 2021).

Finally, the figure of the ETIM and the UNSC sanctioning of the group as an anti-China international terrorist outlet with the capacity to infiltrate the country allows Beijing to project itself as a responsible international counter-terrorism actor that calls for a global “counterterrorism united front” under “the central coordinating role of the UN” ([China Daily](#), October 7, 2021). In these and other forums, the PRC also exploits the ETIM to delegitimize Uyghur political activism as “terrorism.” By connecting the World Uyghur Congress or Uyghur-related human rights organizations to the ETIM, Chinese officials, experts, and state media attach a violent terrorist character to Uyghur peaceful activism ([CGTN](#), September 17, 2021; [Global Times](#), September 16, 2021).

Conclusion

In the context of the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban’s return to power, Chinese authorities have moved swiftly to recreate the same discursive conditions they established after 9/11. Chinese state narratives have reproduced some of the core themes that then situated Afghan-based Uyghur-related “terrorism” as a threat to China and the world. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement continues to play a fundamental role in Chinese official assessments of Afghanistan. China’s projected image of the ETIM provides a linear, compact, and capable nature to what independent assessments describe as a weak, fragmented, and discontinued Uyghur militancy detached from the realities of political violence inside Xinjiang. In these efforts, the Chinese government has benefited from the erratic, imprecise, or politicized use of the ETIM label and, by

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recycling past problematic analysis of the nature and scope of Uyghur-related political violence, the Chinese authorities continue to deploy the discourse of “terrorism” to legitimize an extreme counter-terrorism agenda in Xinjiang that is increasingly understood as a “genocidal” effort in Western legislatures and scholarship.

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What is at Stake in China-Bhutan Boundary Negotiations?

By Jagannath Panda



(Image: A Chinese sign for Pangong Lake in the Himalayas, Source: Global Times)

Introduction

Satellite imagery reveals that China has recently accelerated construction along its border with Bhutan. Underway since 2020, the project includes over 200 structures, with several two-story buildings in six locations ([Times of India](#), January 13). Bhutan has not commented on the situation in keeping with its policy to refrain from public discussion of border issues, whereas Beijing has framed the development as “normal construction activities on its own territory” ([The Hindu](#), January 13). India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has acknowledged that it is monitoring China’s bridge-building activities over the Pangong Tso lake ([India MEA](#), January 6). In late December, China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs announced the “standardization” of the names of 15 places (eight residential areas, four mountains, two rivers, and one mountain pass) in the Northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh that China also claims and calls “Southern Tibet” (藏南, *Zangnan*). This is the second instance of China renaming localities in Arunachal Pradesh; the first occurred in 2017 ([Global Times](#), December 30, 2021). India called it a “ridiculous exercise to support untenable territorial claims” ([Indian MEA](#), January 6).

Though 2022 has only begun, China’s various intimidation tactics against India are already in full swing: from renaming places and circulating videos of People’s Liberation Army soldiers raising the five-starred red flags

of China, supposedly, in the Galwan Valley as part of their New Year celebrations, to expanding its dual use infrastructure along the Himalayan border ([Global Times](#), January 1; [The Print](#), January 13). According to state media, China has been strengthening infrastructure-related projects in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Beijing claims its infrastructure push in Tibet is intended to support economic development, but the Indian side interprets the projects as serving dual use, or, military purposes ([China Brief](#), November 19, 2021). While Chinese sources claim that India was making a “fuss,” they did not, however, entirely deny these reports ([Global Times](#), January 19).

The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) mounting pressure against India, which includes creating psychological pressures through various mind games, are particularly significant to facilitate the implementation of China’s new land border law that came into effect on January 1. The new law authorizes China’s military and police forces to take all necessary measures to protect China’s sacred and inviolable sovereignty and land boundaries ([China Brief](#), December 17, 2021). To make matters worse, the 14th round of India–China Corps Commander Level Meeting collapsed yet again on January 12, and no date has been announced for the next round of talks ([India MEA](#), January 13).

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a Three-Step Roadmap for Expediting the China-Bhutan Boundary Negotiation signed between China and Bhutan in a virtual signing ceremony on October 14, 2021, must be considered in the context of this fragile and potentially explosive situation ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(FMPRC\)](#), October 15, 2021). With regard to this MoU, several questions arise: What is the future of China–Bhutan diplomatic ties? What implications a stronger Sino-Bhutanese ties leaves for India, and especially for China-India boundary negotiations?

The Three-Step Roadmap: An Overview

Bhutan is the only neighboring (Himalayan) country that does not have formal diplomatic ties with the PRC [and also with the Republic of China (ROC)/Taiwan]. Despite this, Bhutan voted for the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758, “Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations,” in 1971, which recognized the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China and expelled the ROC from the UN ([UN Digital Library](#), 1971). Bhutan supports the “One China Policy” and engages with China on a number of cultural exchanges, trade, and tourism. The two sides also cooperate on issues of common interest in the UN and other international forums and have maintained diplomat-level exchanges through the years, liaising via their respective embassies in Delhi ([Foreign Policy of the Kingdom of Bhutan](#); [China Daily](#), July 30, 2018).

Past record suggests that China and Bhutan only began bilateral boundary demarcation talks in the 1980s. Prior to that time, Bhutan was somewhat subsumed under the umbrella of China-India diplomacy. Following the first China-Bhutan boundary talks in 1984, the two sides signed the “Guiding Principles on the Settlement of the Boundary Issues” in 1988 and the “Agreement on Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Sino–Bhutanese Border Areas” in 1998. These two agreements form the basis for the ongoing boundary negotiations

between Beijing and Thimphu ([Bhutan News Online](#), January 30, 2005; [PRC Embassy in India](#), April 10, 2021). Between 1984 and 2016, the two sides conducted 24 rounds of boundary talks and nine expert group meetings (EGMs), which focused on the disputed India–China–Bhutan tri-junction (about 269 sq. km) and the valleys in Bhutan’s northern region (near Tibet; about 495 sq. km). However, the dialogues were halted following the Doklam standoff between China and India that involved Bhutan too, which started in June 2017 when the Chinese Army started constructing a “road from Dokola in the Doklam area toward the Bhutan Army camp at Zompelri” ([The Hindu](#), October 14, 2021; [Bhutan Ministry of Foreign Affairs \(MFA\)](#), June 2017). During the crisis, India was concerned with China making inroads into the tri-junction area, which is strategically important due to its proximity to the Siliguri Corridor, also called “Chicken’s Neck,” a vulnerable point for India. In April 2021, talks resumed with the 10th EGM in Kunming. The two sides agreed on a Three-Step Roadmap that would build on the 1988 Guiding Principles, as well as to hold the 25th round of talks and 11th EGM at the earliest possible juncture ([PRC Embassy in India](#), April 10, 2021). In October 2021, China and Bhutan signed the MoU on the Roadmap, however the full details of the agreement have yet to be made public ([Bhutan MFA](#), October 14, 2021). Implementation of the agreement is expected not only to provide a “successful conclusion” to boundary talks but also boost the prospects for China-Bhutan diplomatic ties. India has reacted cautiously by officially stating it has “noted” the development ([Bhutan MFA](#), October 14, 2021; [India’s MEA](#), October 14, 2021).

Will Improved China-Bhutan Ties Cost India?

For China, the signing of the Three-Step Roadmap with Bhutan is of “historic significance” and a diplomatic victory over India, which was largely excluded from the negotiation process. The outcome is particularly satisfying for Beijing, which had taken the 2017 Doklam crisis as a loss of face to New Delhi and the “reason for the delay” in Sino–Bhutanese border negotiations ([China Daily](#), October 15, 2021). The Chinese side has already indicated that the MoU will promote the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Bhutan. However, Bhutan has not mentioned diplomatic normalization, but has called for strengthening bilateral relations ([PRC MFA](#), October 15, 2021). Beijing’s push for official diplomatic relations with Bhutan is not new. In 2012, China and Bhutan expressed willingness to establish formal diplomatic ties, which expectedly created a strategic fissure in India–Bhutan relations ([The Bhutanese](#), June 2012).

Furthermore, the MoU will be “exchanged between the two sides through diplomatic channel;” in the absence of direct diplomatic ties and with the liaison offices based in New Delhi, it is unclear whether the protocol would require India’s inclusion ([Bhutan MFA](#), October 2021). “Sacred” Bhutan–India ties are based on the 1949 Perpetual Peace and Friendship Treaty. However, the treaty was revised in 2007, and among the revisions was the exclusion of Article II, wherein Bhutan was bound by India’s guidance in regard to its external relations ([India MEA](#), August 1949; [MEA](#), March 2007; [The Times of India](#), July 11, 2013). Bhutan has so far chosen a policy of neutrality concerning its two powerful neighbors, and any change in its present stance would not bode well for India at a time when Beijing is looking to apply its recent land border law and establish new settlements in border areas ([Xinhua](#), October 23, 2021).

China's Bhutan Calculus: Limiting India's Negotiating Power?

Undoubtedly, China's advances in the border areas and its growing amity with Bhutan are both directed at India. Even as it was pursuing the MoU, China was also busy claiming Bhutan's eastern Sakteng region. Bhutan issued a demarche to the Chinese Embassy in India over the PRC's claim, stating that "Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary is an integral and sovereign territory of Bhutan" ([The Week](#), July 7, 2020). This is an extension of Beijing's recent border politics with India, namely seeking to strengthen its military presence and logistical support while continuing to engage via economic and diplomatic channels. China's use of such tactics, however, undermine the border resolution negotiation processes that India and China have been engaged in since the Galwan crisis in 2020. For instance, even as the two countries held the 23rd Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India–China Border Affairs, Beijing was reportedly expanding military and civilian facilities in TAR ([India's MEA](#), January 17, 2012; [Hindustan Times](#), February 8, 2021; [India's MEA](#), November 18, 2021).

Indian media reports that China's new map includes Arunachal Pradesh, the Barahoti Plains in Uttarakhand, and regions in Ladakh. According to its new land border law, these places are now deemed Chinese sovereign territory ([The Print](#), November 11, 2021). Clearly, India's middle sector in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh also faces an imminent threat. In August 2021, more than 100 Chinese troops transgressed into Indian territory through the Barahoti border area, despite India and China having exchanged Line of Actual Control (LAC) maps for the middle sector almost two decades ago ([The Economic Times](#), September 28, 2021; [India's MEA](#), June 29, 2001). Such renewed land-grabbing attempts negate "the principles of equality, peaceful coexistence, and win-win results" that the MoU is meant to honor and strive to re-balance the status quo in the Himalayan region ([China's MFA](#), October 15, 2021).

Implications for Bhutan–China–India Tripartite Border Negotiations in 2022

India and Bhutan have maintained a strong, decades-long relationship. India is Bhutan's largest trading partner. In 2020, bilateral trade with India accounted for 82.6 percent of Bhutan's total trade and the two countries revised their ten-year Bilateral Agreement on Trade, Commerce, and Transit last year ([India's MEA](#), 2021). Both India and Bhutan have sought to strengthen their relationship through multilateral regional frameworks as well as hydropower and connectivity projects. However, traditional ties have not brought about sufficiently close bilateral coordination on strategic issues—an area of concern for India amid the current geopolitical volatility.

During the 2017 Doklam standoff, India underscored a written agreement it had reached with China in 2012, which was finalized between Indian representative Shivshankar Menon and Chinese representative Dai Bunguo. The agreement states that the tri-junction boundary between India, China, and third countries would be "finalized in consultation with the concerned countries. Any attempt, therefore, to unilaterally determine tri-junction points is in violation of this understanding" ([India's MEA](#), June 30, 2017; [The Wire](#), June 30, 2017). In light of this statement, India's exclusion from the China–Bhutan boundary demarcation process is a violation of the 2012 agreement, especially as it impacts India's northeastern border states. China has repeatedly

blamed the unrest in these states on “years of neglect by the Indian government,” stating that India’s “source of fear” lies in its “soft underbelly,” a reference to India’s northeastern territory ([Xinhua](#), April 2014; [The Hindu](#), April 7, 2014; [Cnhubei](#), October 15, 2021).

When viewed in the evolving political context, including the new Chinese land border law and the China-Bhutan MoU, Beijing’s decision to rename places in Arunachal Pradesh, which could offer a connectivity base with Bhutan and access to Southeast Asian markets, is a definite concern for India that goes beyond idle speculation. In its 1996 “package deal” offer to Bhutan, Beijing promised to exchange territory in central Bhutan for Doklam. China reiterated the “package solution” in 2020, which most likely included similar conditions ([The Economic Times](#), July 21, 2020; [China Brief](#), April 20, 2017). So far, Bhutan has not accepted the Chinese offer. However, Bhutan may find it difficult to maintain its neutral stance, which traditionally has tilted toward India, given the new, promising MoU development, China’s continued military buildup along the Himalayan border, and India’s hard-pressed position along the LAC that limits its ability to protect Bhutanese interests. Thus, looking ahead, the China-Bhutan MoU will have significant implications for the China–India boundary issues particularly considering the ongoing stalemate between the two over the LAC deadlock in the western sector, and China’s continuation of assertive tactics. In order for India to respond China’s strategic play in the Himalayas, it will be important for New Delhi to carefully recalibrate its policy toward Bhutan. Will the China-India boundary talks face potential repercussions if the China-Bhutan talks have a positive outcome? The answer will depend both on India’s diplomatic approach to ties with Bhutan and its ability to limit China’s attempts to reshape the regional status quo.

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