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Military Operations Other Than War: Antidote to the PLA’s “Peace Disease”?

By John S. Van Oudenaren

On January 31, the eve of the Chinese New Year national holiday, two People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels departed Guangzhou province to provide Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) to Tonga, which was struck by a massive tsunami earlier in the month ([Xinhua Net](#), January 31). The relief efforts, which involved the *Wuzhishan*- a Type 071 amphibious transport dock ship and the *Chaganhu*- a supply ship, provided mobile homes, construction equipment, food and medical supplies to the Pacific Island nation. Days earlier, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) dispatched a Y-20 heavy transport plane to Tonga laden with drinking water, food, tents and other emergency supplies ([Global Times](#), January 31).

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Along with Australia and the U.S., China was among the leaders in aiding Tonga, a small island nation home to just over 100,000 people. At a February 11 handover ceremony for the donation of 119 pieces of construction machinery, Tongan Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni expressed his gratitude stating: “We are fortunate to have among our good friends countries like China to support us” ([FMPRC](#), February 14). This timely aid to Tonga followed Beijing’s agreement to provide security assistance to the nearby Solomon Islands in the wake of recent unrest (China Brief, February 25). Taken together, active military diplomacy, security and disaster assistance further bolster China’s position in the Pacific Islands, a region of growing strategic importance, where Beijing is vying for influence with Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., and Taiwan. For the PLA, however, the Tonga mission had another important role, which was the opportunity to test its improving long-range transportation and logistical support capabilities. This is hardly a new development. Ever since President Hu Jintao called on the Chinese military to undertake “new historic missions” in late 2004, the PLA has been developing its ability to project force beyond China’s borders through “non-war” military activities ranging from HADR to counterpiracy to peacekeeping ([Sina](#), March 13, 2005).



(Image: *The amphibious transport dock ship Wuzhizhan in Nuku'alofa Port, Tonga*, source: China Military Online)

MOOTW Points

Providing HADR to Tonga constitutes part of what the PLA classifies as Military Operations Other than War (MOOTW). Per the PLA’s 2013 Science of Military Strategy (SMS) textbook, in addition to HADR, MOOTW includes activities such as counterterrorism; antipiracy; stability maintenance (e.g., combatting mass unrest or

violent crime), protecting rights and interests-including evacuating nationals under threat; security monitoring and border patrols; and international peacekeeping (PLA SMS, [CASI Translation](#), February 8, 2021).

Based on analysis of the SMS, and articles in the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) journal- *China Military Science*, which is used as instructional material for the PLA officer corps, analysts identify MOOTW as serving the following strategic purposes for China: [1]

1. **Safeguarding and promoting international peace and stability**, which also promotes a more positive image of China abroad
2. **Management/control of security problems that could become more serious over time, and eventually necessitate a larger military response**
3. **Opportunity to strengthen operational and warfighting capabilities in an environment resembling actual combat experience.** Per Morgan Clemens, the PLA stresses that many “MOOTW tasks are essentially the same as those of war,” and therefore performing such operations “can test the capabilities of troops and equipment, making it possible to find gaps in doctrine, learn lessons and promote combat effectiveness general”.

This article focuses on the third purpose, which is the PLA’s effort to use MOOTW to help compensate for its lack of battlefield experience.

The “Peace Disease”

The PLA has not engaged in major combat operations in over four decades since the 1979 war with Vietnam. The force’s lack of warfighting experience, which is a major concern among the PLA brass, is often shorthanded as the “peace disease” (和平病, *heping bing*) and is perceived to exert a corrosive impact on China’s overall military preparedness. For example, a 2019 *PLA Daily* editorial observes that the “peace disease” debilitates soldiers in several ways including through: “faint awareness of the enemy, neglected military equipment and know-how, pleasure seeking and pursuit of personal wealth” ([81.cn](#), July 16, 2019) Lack of modern warfighting experience is a major contributor to doubts about the PLA’s ability to achieve President and Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman Xi Jinping’s stated goal of developing a strong “military that can fight and win wars” (军队要能打仗 打胜仗, *Jundui yao neng dazhang, da shengzhang*) ([People.cn](#), January 7). As Dennis Blasko observes, Xi has highlighted these critical shortcomings by resuscitating the Deng period maxim on the need to address the PLA’s “Two Inabilities” (两个能力不够, *liang ge nengli bugou*), which are insufficient capacity to wage modern war, and officers’ inadequate ability to command in modern warfare conditions ([War on the Rocks](#), February 18, 2019).

A particular challenge for the PLA is recruiting, retaining and training personnel that are capable of using and maintaining the military’s increasing array of advanced equipment ([China Brief](#), January 14). According to Xi, the PLA has sought to address this issue by “better combining training with combat operations” and

“strengthening systematic training and the use of technologies to develop an elite fighting force” ([China Brief](#), February 11). As CMC Chair, Xi also recently issued an order, which stipulates that military equipment testing and assessment must focus on meeting “actual combat requirements” ([People’s Daily](#), February 13).

Mitigating the Operational Experience Deficit

The PLA has sought to strengthen its training processes to create a force that is better prepared for modern military operations, but also grasps the need to take additional measures to compensate for its troops’ lack of warfighting experience. Undertaking MOOTW is no substitute for actual combat experience, but for the PLA, these operations nevertheless provide opportunities to test capabilities and gain experience in a “real world”, joint operational environment. Specialized training and exercises often precede MOOTW, which suggests such opportunities are reserved for key units. For example, many of the PLAN’s newer, more advanced surface combatants from the Eastern or Southern Theater Commands, guided missile destroyers and frigates, have been dispatched to participate in antipiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden ([China Military Online](#), December 27, 2021).

As the 2013 SMS observes, war activities and MOOTW contribute alike to “building strength”, “spiritual attainment,” “generation of capabilities”, “information support,” and “logistics support.” MOOTW also provide the opportunity to “test the organizational and command capabilities of leadership organs and the military’s command organizations; to examine the forms, levels, and effectiveness of military combat preparations; to test the composite quality of the military; to raise the level of preparations for war; and to enhance the military’s operational capabilities” (PLA SMS, [CASI Translation](#), February 8, 2021).

Apart from participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations, which expanded to include combat forces in 2012, the PLA’s longest running MOOTW is its counter-piracy task force deployments in the Gulf of Aden. The PLAN has rotated task forces through the region since 2008, and in January, the 40th PLAN task force set sail from China. The current task force includes a guided-missile destroyer, frigate, supply ship, and 700 service members including special operation forces ([China Military Online](#), January 16). Prior to departure, the escort force undertook anti-terrorism, anti-piracy and at-sea replenishment exercises. As the Pentagon’s most recent China Military power report observes, regular far seas anti-piracy deployments have contributed to the PLAN’s “modest but growing” capacity for extended range operations beyond the first island chain. These missions also supported the PLAN’s advancement as a blue water navy by developing long-distance seaborne replenishment and resupply capabilities ([OSD](#), November 2021).

Another area where MOOTW has helped the PLA fill key operational gaps is the development of strategic sea and airlift capabilities through HADR and noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs). In 2011, China confronted the challenge of evacuating about 35,000 of its nationals from war-torn Libya. The vast majority of Chinese nationals were evacuated on chartered civilian merchant vessels, aircraft and buses. The PLAN dispatched a frigate to evacuate some citizens, and four Soviet-made PLAAF Il-76 transport planes carried 1700 nationals to Sudan. Although the NEO was China’s first, the PLA ultimately played a secondary role

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(compared to other the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and state owned enterprises), which highlighted shortcomings in both air and seaborne military transportation logistics ([China Brief](#), March 11, 2011). Four years later, however, the PLAN task force in the Gulf of Aden successfully carried out a NEO to remove 590 Chinese nationals threatened by the escalating conflict in Yemen; the first time the PLA assumed sole responsibility for such an operation ([China Brief](#), April 3, 2015; [China Daily](#), March 20, 2015).

In its recently completed Tonga HADR mission, the PLA demonstrated its improving long-range air and sea transportation capabilities. The first batch of aid was provided by two Y-20 transport planes which have an operational range of over 5,000 miles (more than double the range of the Il-76), which since their entry in to service in 2016, have provided the PLAAF with a greatly enhanced strategic airlift capacity. The mission was notable as the planes traveled over 6,000 miles with lighter loads to increase range, ultimately providing 33 tons of assistance to Tonga ([Global Times](#), January 28). The PLA also used the Tonga HADR mission to showcase its expanding sealift capabilities with the amphibious transport ship *Wuzhishan* and supply ship *Chaganhu* traversing 5,000 nautical miles to provide 1,400 tons of Tsunami relief supplies. The involvement of the *Wuzhishan*, a large Type 071 amphibious transport dock is notable, as these ships provide much of the expeditionary warfare capability that the PLA could bring to bear in a Western Pacific contingency ([National Defense](#), June 25, 2021).

Long-distance logistics, resupply, replenishment, sea and air transportation provide examples of area where the PLA has made considerable progress in developing its capabilities through MOOTW. In the coming decade, the PLA is like to continue to leverage MOOTW to mitigate the force's deficit of operational experience, and to develop capabilities that are transferable to warfighting scenarios.

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Notes

[1] See Morgan Clemens, "PLA Thinking on Military Operations Other Than War," in *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, ed. Joe McReynolds (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation), 2017, <https://jamestown.org/product/chinas-evolving-military-strategy-edited-joe-mcreynolds/>

City of Vice: Macau, Gambling, and Organized Crime in China

By Martin Purbrick



(Image: *Casino Lights in Macau*, Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Introduction

In November 2021 and January 2022, the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR) Judiciary Police arrested 13 individuals involved in operating two separate casino VIP customer “junkets” for engaging in illegal gambling activities, running a criminal syndicate, and money laundering (Macau Judiciary Police, [November 29, 2021](#); [January 31](#)). The criminal groups used their VIP junket business in Macau casinos to recruit mainland Chinese residents to engage in illegal online gambling on overseas platforms, and illicit side-betting. The proceeds of the syndicate were then laundered and transferred through the junket accounts of the casinos using underground banks. These developments underscore how gambling in Macau has grown from small beginnings, as tolerant Portuguese administrators did not want to unduly antagonize local Chinese, to a multi-billion dollar business that has been infiltrated by organized crime groups for much of its modern history.

During Portuguese rule (1557–1999) Macau was described as the “city of the name God,” hosting the religious orders of St. Augustine, St. Dominic, and St. Francis, as well as convents and Catholic churches ([Cultural Affairs Bureau, Macau Government](#)). In the 20th century, Macau became a city of vice as casino gambling emerged as the dominant business, supported by related prostitution, money lending, and money laundering from mainland China. After the return of sovereignty and administration from Portugal to China in 1999, Macau has had extraordinary economic success and relative political stability compared to the neighboring Hong Kong SAR. Macau’s gross domestic product (GDP) rose from \$6.458 billion in 1999 to \$45,103 billion in 2016 at average annual growth rate of 12 percent. This economic growth, however, has been increasingly dominated by the gambling sector, which in 2013 accounted for over 60 percent of GDP. Casino “gross gambling revenue” in Macau has surpassed Las Vegas and the city is effectively the world’s largest gambling center. [1] However, as the gambling sector has grown, so has the organized crime long associated with that business that has become a domestic problem for China and has impacted other countries in Asia. A particular concern for Beijing is the Macau gambling industry’s role in facilitating capital flight.

Cross-Border Crackdown

The recent arrests in Macau followed warrants issued in November 2021 by the Wenzhou Public Security Bureau, Zhejiang Province, for Alvin Chau, the chairman of the Suncity junket (the largest in Macau) relating to the operating of cross border gambling on behalf of the Suncity Gaming Promotion Company ([Xinhua Net](#), November 26, 2021). The following week, Chau was arrested in Macau. This has given rise to speculation that the huge gambling revenue growth from Macau casinos is over, as the illegal casino junket operators, which the gaming industry relies on, cannot operate.

The criminal cases seem to be signals from the Macau and mainland China authorities for certain cross border gambling activity to be restructured, and is related to the long term problem that the Chinese government faces with capital flight, which is harmful to the Chinese economy. China has strict capital controls, which allow an annual purchase limit of the equivalent of \$50,000 in foreign currencies, but in 2015 an estimated \$676 billion flowed out of the country as Chinese people sought safe havens for their money ([Institute of International Finance](#), January 19, 2016). This caused the Central People’s Government great concern as to how this capital flight was taking place.

Macau gambling and related illegal online gambling activity is not the only channel for unauthorized capital flows out of China, but given authorities’ attention to the issue, it likely comprises a reasonable portion of the total funds being moved illicitly out of the country. In 2021, total annual gross revenue from casino games in Macau was 86.8 billion Patacas (around \$10 billion), which, based on the currency controls, indicates that a substantial portion of this is illicitly moved overseas ([Macau SAR Gaming Inspection and Coordination Directorate](#)). Underground banking and illegal gambling also likely facilitate huge amounts of capital outflow. The Council on Anti-Illegal Betting & Related Financial Crime of the Asian Racing Federation reported recently that around 1 trillion renminbi (\$145 billion) flows out of China via illegal online gambling websites each year ([Asian Racing Federation](#), September 21, 2021).

In July 2019, Zhao Kezhi, State Councilor and Minister of Public Security, announced that appropriate departments should take special action to crack down and destroy criminal organizations involved in illegal online gambling, underground banks, and network payment platforms ([State Council](#), July 13, 2019). The actions were swift and international in scope. In January 2021, the Ministry of Public Security announced that during 2020 over 600 suspects were repatriated by Chinese police in collaboration with counterparts in countries including the Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Vietnam ([State Council](#), January 6, 2021). According to Zhao, by April 2021, police investigated over 17,000 cross-border gambling and related cases, apprehended 110,000 suspects, and stopped over 3,400 online gambling platforms and over 2,800 illegal payment platforms and underground banks ([State Council](#), April 8, 2021).

Gambling in Macau

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) outlawed gambling upon taking power in 1949, but illegal gambling in China has remained widespread through the present day. Macau is the only territory in the People's Republic of China (PRC) where casino gambling is currently legal. [2]

Macau casinos have a long history dating back to its centuries as a Portuguese colony from 1557 to 1999. In 1810, Macau introduced a charitable lottery. In 1846, the colonial government legalized *Fan Tan* (a game involving a random number of counters placed under a bowl with people gambling on how many will remain as four at a time are removed), and in 1847 *Pai Gow* (a Chinese tile game). The Macau government introduced gambling house franchises for both games, which became a source of revenue. In 1930, the Macau government launched a monopoly system for gambling houses and by 1961 the Governor declared that Macau was a “permanent gambling region.” This led to a public tender for the monopoly casino operating license, which in 1961 was won by Stanley Ho and his Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau (“STDM”) company.

Stanley Ho brought huge growth to Macau and transformed the city into the only Chinese gambling center for Chinese customers, who came from the mainland, Hong Kong, and the wider Chinese diaspora to gamble. STDM operated eight casinos in Macau, as well as a horse racing track, greyhound racing, and the only ferry service between Hong Kong and Macau. This monopoly made Stanley Ho and his associates astoundingly rich, but the involvement of organized crime groups caused doubt regarding the sustainability of the gambling business after triad societies (criminal syndicates) came into violent conflict in 1997.

STDM's long established monopoly over the Macau gambling industry ended in 2002 when the local authorities allowed U.S. and other overseas corporate gambling operators to enter the market. However, organized crime involvement in the gambling business did not end, but instead criminal groups increased their revenue as they expanded their gambling marketing, money laundering, and debt collection activities into Mainland China. The U.S. gambling operators quickly learned that they could not legally either conduct marketing to customers in Mainland China or collect gambling debts, which are not legally enforceable in the PRC. The result has been

20 years of massive revenue for those triad groups that transformed themselves into “junket operators” to bring Mainland Chinese to Macau to enjoy the city of vice.

Organized Crime in Macau

The violent conflict between triad societies (organized crime groups based in southeastern China) in 1997 illustrated how extensive they had become in the casino gambling industry and how powerless both the Portuguese authorities as well as the monopoly gambling operator were to control them. The triad conflict only ended when a key protagonist, Wan Kuok Kui (also known as “broken tooth”) was arrested, convicted, and imprisoned ([BBC](#), October 11, 1999). However, the real driver of the cessation of triad violence was the imminent resumption of sovereignty by the PRC and the fear among triad groups that Beijing would put an end to their gambling-related businesses.

In 1997, the Macau 14K and the *Wo On Lok* triad societies were in open violent conflict, leading in the first five months of the year to over a dozen murders, following 21 murders in 1996. Wan Kuok Kui destabilized the balance of power in the Macau underworld and caused the conflict by trying to capture market share from rival triad factions. The violent conflict only ended when the Portuguese led Macau Judiciary Police arrested Wan Kuok Kui in May 1998, leading to his conviction on charges of criminal association, loan sharking, and illegal gambling, which resulted in a 15-year prison sentence. [3]

The triad conflict stemmed from competition for control of the lucrative casino VIP rooms and vice (prostitution was often included in VIP packages provided to wealthy gamblers). VIP Rooms were introduced by STDM and Stanley Ho to bring high rollers into Macau’s casinos. The VIP Rooms were leased to “junket” groups that were responsible for bringing customers from the PRC to Macau to gamble, as well as managing the illegal aspects of this business such as giving credit and recovering debts. The need for credit came from the PRC’s law preventing anyone from taking more than around 20,000 renminbi (around \$3,000) out of the country. Debt collection was complex as gambling debts are not legally enforceable in mainland China, where almost all gambling has remained illegal. “Junket” operators solved these problems for Stanley Ho and STDM, but as they were all involved with or operated by triad societies, these arrangements facilitated organized crime groups’ access to the casino business.

The end of the casino monopoly in Macau in 2002, when the government granted three operating concessions and later increased to six, led many observers to predict that triad and organized crime involvement in Macau casinos would end. In reality, the growth of casino revenue in Macau fueled huge income for the triad society factions that dominated the major junkets.

Since the 2018 crackdown by the Chinese authorities against illegal gambling, it was clear that Macau, the junkets, and the triad leaders involved in the largest operators were deeply involved in cross-border organized crime. In July 2019, a state-owned news agency report denounced Suncity, the biggest Macau junket operator, for facilitating online gambling; Suncity denied the accusation. The report said that the practice had caused

“great harm to China’s social-economic order,” and that the annual amount wagered by Suncity mainland clients in the online casinos it operates from Southeast Asia was over trillion yuan, equivalent to a staggering \$150 billion ([Economic Information Daily](#), July 8, 2019).

The PRC government has struggled with periodic capital outflows during the peak years of economic growth, which can weaken the Yuan currency. A key channel for capital outflows from China has been Macau casinos, facilitated by junkets arranging credit in the Mainland, providing underground banking facilities and assisting in the laundering of the proceeds of crime from the PRC. This problem illustrates the continued existence of organized crime groups in China, as well as their success in diversifying their business outside of the country and across Asia. It remains to be seen whether the crackdown by the Chinese authorities on cross border illegal gambling, related underground banking, and money laundering will succeed

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Notes

[1] Mingjie Sheng and Chaolin Gu, *Economic Growth in Macau (1999–2016): The role of the booming gaming industry*, *Cities* Vol.75, May 2018 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2018.01.003>)

[2] Sonny Shiu-Hing Lo, *The Politics of Controlling Organized Crime in Greater China*, Routledge, 2018, 145.

[3] *Ibid*, 131-133.

Gay in the PLA: Chinese Military Views on Homosexuals Serving in the Armed Forces

By Brian Waidelich



(Image: A PLA training course on engine repair, source: China Military)

Introduction

Chinese President Xi Jinping has identified the recruitment and retention of top-notch human capital as key to the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) transformation into a "world-class military" by mid-century. In late January 2022, under Xi's guidance as chairman, China's Central Military Commission (CMC) issued its "Decision on Strengthening Military Talent Work in the New Era" (关于加强新时代军队人才工作的决定, *Guanyu jiaqiang xin shidai jundui rencai gongzuo jue ding*), which calls human talent "a key element driving the Chinese military's high-quality development and for winning the initiative in military competition and future warfare." The decision calls on the PLA to develop high quality, professional talent in key areas—joint operations command, new-type combat forces, science and technology innovation, and strategic management—and for these individuals to provide "firm support" for achieving the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) military-strengthening goal and building the PLA into a world-class military ([Xinhua](#), January 26).

The CMC's decision echoes similar past statements by Chinese leaders who have emphasized the need for the "right" kind of people to lead and support China's armed forces ([US Army War College](#), July 23, 2021). A

common thread is the requirement for PLA personnel to fill increasingly specialized billets as the force receives and operates new, high-tech information systems, weapons, and equipment ([China Brief](#), January 14). Apart from pronouncements of desired education and experience levels for incoming service members, the PLA also publicizes certain exclusion criteria. The PLA's official conscription and recruitment website, for example, specifies several physical requirements including minimum height and passable body mass index ([Zhongguo Zhengbing Wang](#), January 14, 2021). However, evidence indicates other potential exclusion criteria for Chinese service members that are less clearly stated.

This article offers a preliminary analysis of PLA views on homosexuals—in most cases, gay men specifically—serving in China's armed forces. [1] The analysis draws upon 12 academic papers published by PLA-affiliated authors between 2009 and 2019 whose research focused on issues related to homosexuality and/or homosexuals serving in China's armed forces. Ten of the 12 studies involved test subjects. This topic was difficult to explore due to the paucity of primary source material (PLA authorities may deem content on sexual minorities sensitive and unfit for public consumption). Yet it remains an important issue, as it has implications for the talent pool the PLA can draw from and for homosexual service members' ability to survive, thrive, and contribute to China's objective of developing a world-class military force.

Unclear Policy

The PLA's official stance on homosexuals serving in the military is unclear. There appears to be no explicit legal foundation for including or excluding them in China's armed forces. Certainly, sexual minorities are not granted equal rights under Chinese law as heterosexuals (including the right to marry), but China's Military Service Law does not expressly forbid homosexuals from joining the force. The Military Service Law is very expansive in indicating who has an obligation to serve and only exempts citizens with serious physical defects and disabilities and those who have lost their political rights ([Xinhua](#), August 20, 2021).

One PLA study suggests that the PLA's approach may be similar to the U.S. military's previous "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy (repealed in 2011), which allowed homosexuals to serve provided they did not disclose their sexual orientation. In a study published in 2013, researchers from the PLA's Second Military Medical University and 102nd Hospital claim that: "China currently does not have a written law or policy that allows or prohibits homosexuals from serving in the military. However, those who publicly declare their homosexual orientation are often dismissed from their posts." [2] Since the 2013 study's publication, evidence of the PLA establishing a related policy—public or military-internal—is lacking.

The PLA's apparent policy gap should not be interpreted as an indication that few or no homosexuals serve in China's armed forces. It is highly likely that a significant number of gay Chinese men serve in the PLA in a "closeted" fashion, i.e., without disclosing their sexual orientation to colleagues. Hundreds of thousands of male Chinese youths are conscripted or recruited each year, and, statistically speaking, thousands are likely homosexual. Although estimates vary, researchers believe that China is home to the world's largest population of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals: potentially as many as 70 million, or about 5

percent of the population ([BMC Public Health](#), May 12, 2020; [Reuters](#), February 20, 2020). If gay men entering the PLA choose to keep their sexual orientation a secret, then they would be completely in line with broader national trends. A 2016 United Nations-commissioned report found that only 5 percent of gay men and other sexual minorities in China reveal their sexual orientation in the workplace ([UNDP](#), May 16, 2016).

Focus of PLA Research

Since 2009, PLA researchers have conducted studies of active service members’ views toward homosexuality and homosexuals serving in the armed forces. Some of these studies were modeled on analogous research conducted in the U.S. prior to the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” For example, PLA researchers translated and adapted the Attitudes Toward Lesbian and Gay Men (ATLG) Scale and Attitudes Toward Homosexuals in the Military Scale (ATHM). Other studies adopted methods such as self-made questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and small group discussions. The table below summarizes related PLA survey research.

Table 1. Studies by PLA-Affiliated Authors on Chinese Service Members’ Views of Homosexuality) [3]

Year	Lead Author	Affiliation(s) of researchers	Method(s) used	Test subjects
2009	Yan Tongjun	Graduate School, Second Military Medical University; All-Military Mental Health Center, PLA 102 nd Hospital	ATHM; ATLG; self-made questionnaire	1,362 male service members of an unidentified ground force unit of the Nanjing Military Region
2011	He Hong	Urumqi General Hospital, Lanzhou Military Region; Joint Logistics Department, Xinjiang Military District	Questionnaire designed by All-Military HIV Test Center	268 troops in an unidentified “high-altitude border defense company”
2013	Cheng Qi	Second Military Medical University; All-Military Mental Health Center, PLA 102 nd Hospital; Brain Science Center, Changzhou Municipal First People’s Hospital	ATLG; ATHM	1,285 male service members from an unspecified ground force regiment
2013	Zhang Yili	Brain Science Center, Changzhou Municipal First People’s Hospital	ATHM	1,362 male service members of an unidentified ground force unit
2013	Zhu Yunwu	Shanghai Campus, PLA Nanjing Political Academy	One-on-one interviews	Three homosexual college students (educational institution unspecified)
2014	Yan Tongjun	Mental Health Department, PLA 102 nd Hospital	Self-made questionnaire	1,500 male ground force service members from an unidentified unit based in Jiangsu province
2015	Zeng Liping	PLA 261 st Hospital	Small-group discussion	30 randomly selected PLA personnel
2016	Jin Xiaohong	Disease Prevention and Control Center, Joint Logistics Department, Jinan Military Region	Self-made questionnaire	885 military personnel (mix of officers, enlisted, medical workers; included male and female service members)
2018	Zhang Tao	NCO School, Army Military Medical University; Affiliated Children’s	Self-made questionnaire	980 students at an unspecified military educational institution

		Hospital of Capital Institute of Pediatrics		
2018	Song Mi	PLA Air Force Military Medical University	ATLG	260 medical students (173 male, 73 female) from an unspecified military medical university

PLA authors’ overriding motivation for researching issues related to homosexuality is concerns about HIV transmission, based on the sample of writings reviewed for this article. In 2009, Yan Tongjun and Wang Huanlin of the PLA 102nd Hospital observed a worrying trend of rising HIV case numbers among Chinese service members. [4] A 2016 paper by Jin Xiaohong observes that “the spreading trend of HIV in China is gradually extending from high-risk groups” to everyday people. Jin, a researcher at the former Jinan Military Region’s Disease Prevention and Control Center, states that “following its prevalence and expansion, the influence of HIV on the military is becoming increasingly severe.”

PLA writings assert that male homosexuals are a particularly “high-risk” group prone to spread HIV. For example, Zhang Tao (2018), summarizing results of a survey of students at an unspecified PLA educational institution, expresses dismay that respondents were unable to “correctly” identify that male homosexuals spread HIV “more easily” than heterosexuals. Cheng Qi of the PLA’s Second Military Medical University asserts that male homosexuals pass not just HIV, but sexually transmitted infections in general, with “relative ease.” Xu Li, an assistant researcher at the PLA Academy of Military Medical Sciences, identifies sex between males as “high-risk behavior” and states that all sex other than “normal sex between husband and wife” is “high-risk.” [5]

To a more limited degree, PLA authors also discuss mental health risks that they perceive as associated with homosexuality. China’s psychiatric guidelines issued in 2001 removed homosexuality from the list of mental disorders. However, the guidelines still classify homosexuality as a symptom of ego-dystonic sexual orientation, a disorder in which one’s sexual orientation runs counter to one’s idealized self-image. [6] Therefore, per Yan and Wang (2009), there remains “an attitude in China’s scholarly community that views homosexuality as a type of illness.” Although several PLA studies make passing references to mental health—and indeed, a number of authors are affiliated with psychological research institutions—these references are eclipsed by concerns over HIV transmission risk.

Secondary motivations for PLA researchers’ work on homosexuality include filling a prior research lacuna and responding to the growing national acceptance of homosexuality in China. As Yan Tongjun (2009) states, “We were unable to find any [previous] study on the attitudes of Chinese servicemen toward homosexuals, based on a search of the China Biomedical Literature Database from 1978 to February 2009.” Cheng Qi (2013) attests that “In recent years, the degree to which homosexuals are accepted within Chinese society has increasingly risen, and against this trend, military servicemen’s understanding and acceptance of homosexuals will also change.”

PLA Researchers’ Recommendations

PLA studies on homosexuality are not uniform in their conclusions and recommendations. A few young PLA researchers assert that having sexual minorities in the military is inescapable and recommend steps to ensure they are not impediments to organizational efficiency. For example, Zhu Yunwu (2013), a master's student at the PLA Nanjing Political Academy, argues that homosexuals experience higher psychological pressure from their families and society and should be "provided better environments for working, living, and studying." Song Mi (2018), a PLA Air Force Medical University undergraduate, states that military medical students have the important responsibility of treating diverse groups—homosexuals included. Song expresses hopes that her research will help "eradicate discrimination against homosexuality and provide reference for relevant education at military educational institutions."

These two authors aside, a larger body of researchers interpret service members' positive views of homosexuals as a failing of the PLA health education system and recommend "strengthening" education to instill "correct" views of love, marriage, and sex. Addressing results of a survey distributed to male service members in which 58 percent agreed that "state laws should recognize the legality of female homosexual behavior," Yan (2014) concluded that such results demonstrated the need "to carry out health education and help [service members] establish a correct understanding of sex." Zhang (2018), who found that 29.8 percent of military student respondents to a questionnaire expressed "understanding or empathy" toward homosexuals, recommended "strengthening education and propaganda" on "ethical factors related to sex." The study by Zhang (2013), which surveyed 1,362 ground force personnel, states that their research can generate more "targeted education and guidance" that helps military personnel understand the "correct views" of love and marriage. Another study by He Hong (2011), which found that some border troops did not even know what homosexuality was, stresses the importance of "timely education and guidance on the *correct* sexual orientation" (emphasis added).

Conclusion

The PLA's ambiguous public stance toward sexual minorities and the lack of published data on this topic make it difficult to draw definite conclusions about how homosexuals are viewed and treated in China's armed forces. Available data suggests that active duty gay men must conceal their sexual orientation or face dismissal, despite the lack of a legal basis for termination. Furthermore, the linkages drawn by PLA researchers between homosexuals, HIV transmission, and mental health suggest that gay and lesbian individuals face a toxic atmosphere in China's military. Propaganda and education designed to reinforce views of homosexuals as sexually promiscuous and mentally unstable could increase homosexual service members' anxiety and decrease their ability to contribute to the force.

The Chinese military's views of homosexuals could change over time as the composition of active service members changes. PLA studies identify influential factors that are likely to make Chinese military personnel view homosexual service members more positively or negatively (see Table 2 below). Some of these factors, such as childhood environment and level of education, suggest that the PLA as a whole may view gay military

personnel more positively in the future. More than 60 percent of China’s population is now urban—a number which could increase to 75 percent by 2030 ([Bloomberg](#), July 19, 2021), and the PLA has long sought to increase the ratio of service members with advanced education degrees ([CASI](#), 2020).

Table 2. Influential Factors of Chinese Service Members’ Views of Homosexuality Identified by PLA Researchers [7]

Factor	More positive views	More negative views
Childhood environment	Service members raised in urban environments	Service members raised in rural environments
Marriage status	Married service members	Unmarried service members
Level of education	More educated (undergraduate education and above)	Less educated
Sex	Female	Male
Time in the military	Less time	More time

On the other hand, purportedly influential factors such as sex and time in the military could act as countervailing forces to positive views of homosexuality within China’s armed forces. The PLA remains composed almost entirely of male service members, and the fact that additional years of service correlates to more negative views of sexual minorities suggest that China’s military culture writ large could be an obstacle to change.

In the future, how the PLA approaches the issue of homosexuals serving in the military will be shaped by multiple factors, including broader societal views of sexual minorities and the military’s efforts to recruit talented individuals. Over time, increased levels of acceptance by the Chinese public and government could lead to greater rights for sexual minorities and could eventually create pressure on the PLA to allow homosexuals to serve openly. This seems unlikely in the near term, however, given China’s recent regulatory crackdown on the LGBT community ([South China Morning Post](#), October 7, 2021). Barring external pressure, the PLA could still find it beneficial to adjust its internal policies and education to forge an environment more positive to gays and lesbians serving in the “closet.” Whether the PLA does so will depend on whether it views homosexual service members as a liability or an asset.

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Notes

[1] The author was unable to find papers by PLA-affiliated authors with detailed discussions of bisexual or transgender individuals, and therefore limited the scope of this article to PLA views on homosexuality. PLA writings cited in this article generally employed the term “*tongxinglian*” (同性恋), the most official and academic term for “homosexuality” in mainland China. Although “*tongxinglian*” may refer to both male and female

homosexuality, the majority of the PLA writings reviewed focused mostly on gay men, perhaps due to the fact that the majority of PLA service members are male.

[2] Cheng Qi, et al, “Attitudes of Servicemen toward Homosexuals and Their Serving in the Military” (军人对同性恋者及其在军队中服役的态度), *China Journal of Health Psychology* 21, no. 12 (2013): 1801-1803.

[3] Data in Table 1 is compiled from the following sources:

- Yan Tongjun, et al, “Attitudes of Young Chinese Male Servicemen Toward Homosexuals and Toward Homosexuals Serving in the Military” (中国男性青年军人对同性恋者及其服兵役的态度), *Chinese Journal of Behavioral Medicine and Brain Science* 18, no. 11 (Nov. 2009): 1034-1036.
- He Hong, Qian Kuiguo, and Liu Xianchao, “Survey on the Conditions of HIV-Related Knowledge and Understanding Among Unidentified High-Altitude Border-Defense Officers and Men” (某高原边防官兵艾滋病相关知识认知状况调查), *Journal of Preventive Medicine of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army* 29, no. 4 (2011): 279-280.
- Cheng Qi, et al, “Attitudes of Servicemen toward Homosexuals and Their Serving in the Military” (军人对同性恋者及其在军队中服役的态度), *China Journal of Health Psychology* 21, no. 12 (2013): 1801-1803.
- Zhang Yili, et al, “Attitudes of Chinese Servicemen Toward Homosexuals Serving in the Military and Influential Factors” (中国军人对同性恋者在军队中服役的态度及影响因素), *Chinese Journal of Behavioral Medicine and Brain Science* 22, no. 1 (Jan. 2013): 40-42.
- Zhu Yunwu, “Qualitative Research on Changes in the Psychological Conditions of College Student Homosexuals” (大学生同性恋心理状况的质化研究), *Journal of Campus Life and Mental Health* 11, no. 5 (2013): 333-335.
- Yan Tongjun, et al, “Preliminary Survey and Analysis of 1,450 Young Male Military Servicemen’s Views on Sex” (1450名男性青年军人性观念的初步调查与分析), *The Chinese Journal of Human Sexuality* 23, no. 3 (March 2014): 110-112.
- Zeng Liping, et al, “Small Group Discussion on the Application of Sexual Health Needs Evaluations among Young Military Officers and Men” (小组访谈法在部队青年官兵性教育健康需求评估中的应用), Chinese Society of Psychiatry, Chinese Medical Association, Conference held on September 17, 2015.
- Jin Xiaohong, et al, “Analysis of a Survey on the Current Understanding of AIDS Among Military Officers and Men” (部队官兵艾滋病认知现状调查分析), *The Journal of Practical Medicine* 33, no. 6 (2016): 533-535.

- Zhang Tao, et al, “Survey on the Knowledge, Attitudes, Behaviors, and Needs Related to Reproductive Health of Students at an Unidentified Military School” (某军校学员生殖健康知识、态度、行为及需求调查), *China Journal of Health Education* 34, no. 8 (2018): 727-731.
- Song Mi, et al, “Investigation of Military Medical Students’ Attitudes Toward Homosexuality and Relevant Influential Factors” (军校医学生对同性恋的态度及其相关影响因素调查), *Medical Journal of National Defending Forces in Northwest China* 39, no. 6 (Jun. 2018): 394-397.

[4] Yan Tongjun and Wang Huanlin, “An Investigation of Homosexuality—A Letter to the Editor” (关于同性恋的探讨--读者来信), *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (2009): 215-216.

[5] Xu Li, “Several Fundamental Issues that Must be Grasped in the Revision of the HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Regulation” (《艾滋病防治条例》修订应把握的若干原则性问题), *China Health Law* 27, no. 4 (2019): 47-51, 62.

[6] Chinese Medical Association Psychiatry Branch, eds., *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders (CCMD-3)* (中国精神障碍分类及诊断标准), Shandong Science & Technology Press, 2001.

[7] Table 2 summarizes influential factors identified in: Cheng Qi et al., “Attitudes of Servicemen toward Homosexuals and Their Serving in the Military”; Song Mi et al., “Investigation of Military Medical Students’ Attitudes Toward Homosexuality and Relevant Influential Factors”; Yan Tongjun et al., “Attitudes of Young Chinese Male Servicemen Toward Homosexuals and Toward Homosexuals Serving in the Military”; Zhang Yili, et al., “Attitudes of Chinese Servicemen Toward Homosexuals Serving in the Military and Influential Factors.”

Trouble in Paradise: China's Influence and Unrest in the Solomon Islands

By William Yuen Yee



(Image: Smoke rises from burning buildings in Honiara in November 2021 , source: Global Times)

Introduction

What began as a peaceful protest in the Solomon Islands against the government's decision to switch formal diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China turned deadly in late November. The demonstrations morphed into a violent expression of overall dissatisfaction with Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's government. Frustrated by high unemployment and crowded housing, rioters set buildings ablaze over three days of deadly unrest. In response, China dispatched six police officers to train the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force and provided equipment such as shields, helmets, and batons to "further enhance Police ability in confronting future threats" ([Global Times](#), December 23, 2021; [Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#), December 23, 2021). "China firmly supports the government of Solomon Islands in defending the country's stability, resolutely safeguards the relations between China and Solomon Islands and the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese citizens there, and strongly condemns any illegal and violent action," stated Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China \(FMPRC\)](#), December 23, 2021).

A disconnect soon emerged, however, in official statements from both sides regarding whether the Solomon Islands had explicitly asked China for help. Zhao said that China's anti-riot equipment came at "the request of the government of Solomon Islands" ([FMPRC](#), December 23, 2021). But statements from the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force implied that the Pacific nation had first asked Australia for help before it also accepted China's unsolicited support. "While I appreciate the PRC for the support rendered, I must thank the Australia Government for responding to Solomon Islands request for assistance," said police commissioner Mostyn Mangau ([Royal Solomon Islands Police Force](#), December 30, 2021).

The conflicting narratives and backlash against China's influence in the Solomon Islands highlight a complex bilateral relationship that has entered uncharted territory. While Beijing successfully convinced the Solomon Islands government in Honiara to abandon its diplomatic allegiance to Taiwan, it has yet to persuade many of the nation's 680,000 residents to follow suit.

Origins of Unrest

From November 24 to 27, hundreds of protesters looted shops and torched buildings, resulting in the deaths of four people ([Japan Times](#), November 26, 2021). Amid the turmoil, Honiara's Chinatown district was one of the hardest-hit locations. According to the PRC embassy, riots in the Solomon Islands left "hundreds" of Chinese citizens homeless ([South China Morning Post](#), December 6, 2021). Protesters also breached the National Parliament building in Honiara and set fire to a police station, among other buildings ([The Sydney Morning Herald](#), November 26, 2021).

The premier of Malaita, the Solomon Islands' most populous province, has been particularly outspoken against Sogavare's embrace of Beijing and previously threatened to hold a referendum on independence over the issue. Prime Minister Sogavare accused unnamed "other powers" of igniting domestic tensions—a likely reference to Taiwan and the United States—who have provided financial aid to Malaita for opposing the Solomon Islands' diplomatic switch. "These very countries that are now influencing Malaita are the countries that don't want ties with the People's Republic of China, and they are discouraging Solomon Islands to enter into diplomatic relations and to comply with international law and the United Nations resolution," Sogavare said ([Lowy Institute](#), November 26, 2021).

Chinese state-owned media outlets like the Global Times have pushed unsubstantiated theories about Taiwan's role in fomenting the riots. One article claimed that Taipei's ruling independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party sought to cultivate influence in the region by "showering island officials with bribes, which were distributed to electoral districts and then used in elections" ([Global Times](#), November 28, 2021). The Global Times also pushed an unfounded allegation that Taiwan sponsored the "premeditated" riots to "sabotage" Beijing's relations with Honiara ([Global Times](#), January 4).

Relations with Taiwan

The Solomon Islands and Taiwan established formal diplomatic relations in May 1983, and the Taiwanese consulate was upgraded to an embassy two years later (Solomon Star, [February 10, 2010](#), [April 9, 2012](#)). Since then, both states have built strong ties in the fields of medicine, education, and business. In 2006, Taiwan sent 24 “mobile medical groups” to South Pacific nations like the Solomon Islands and provided medical services to over 15,000 people ([Taipei Times](#), March 28, 2008). Taipei established the Taiwan Health Center at the National Referral Hospital in Honiara in 2007, and dispatches a senior nursing professional to lead the mission each year ([Office of the President of Republic of China](#), November 2, 2017). In 2010, Taiwan allocated \$1.24 million to subsidize attendance fees for primary and secondary students across the Solomon Islands ([Solomon Times](#), January 15, 2009). Recently, President Tsai Ing-wen’s administration donated supplies including masks, soap, thermometers, and rice to assist with COVID-19 pandemic relief.

Taiwan has previously been criticized for its use of so-called “checkbook diplomacy” and bribes to political officials in the Solomon Islands, particularly under President Chen Shui-bian’s administration (2000–2008) ([Taipei Times](#), March 28, 2008). Sogavare seemed to echo similar criticisms when he accused “Taiwan’s agents” of orchestrating the recent political unrest in November ([France24](#), December 6, 2021).

Relations with China

While Taiwan has been accused of “checkbook diplomacy,” China’s use of what some describe as “dollar diplomacy” does not seem all that different. Instead, it looks to be a flusher and swankier version of the same playbook. The government in Honiara reportedly elected to switch diplomatic recognition to China in exchange for \$500 million in aid ([Taiwan News](#), September 16, 2019). Upon establishing diplomatic relations with China, the Solomon Islands joined the Belt and Road Initiative and finalized plans to receive a 10,000-seat national stadium in Honiara outfitted with an aquatic center, six tennis courts, a full-sized training track, and soccer and rugby fields, among other amenities ([National Development and Reform Commission](#), July 27, 2021).

China’s wealth of resources certainly factored into the Sogavare government’s decision to cut ties with Taipei. “In terms of economics and geopolitics, we cannot flex our muscles. So they [Taiwan’s government] are completely useless to us in that sense,” the prime minister acknowledged in an earlier interview with Australian National University ([Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#), September 16, 2019). Geopolitics aside, the economy of the Solomon Islands relies heavily on China. In 2019, China was the Solomon Islands’ top import and export destination with a total value near \$515 million ([The Observatory of Economic Complexity](#), accessed February 22).

Despite extensive economic ties, China’s influence has received significant pushback from other political leaders in Honiara. In November 2019, shortly after the decision to recognize China, the Solomon Islands Parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee submitted a report calling for the Sogavare government to “deepen its relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan) instead of severing its existing ties” ([National Parliament of Solomon Islands](#), November 26, 2019). Disapproval of the move to normalize ties with China at Taiwan’s expense prompted opposition leader Mathew Wale to seek Prime Minister Sogavare’s removal through a no-

confidence motion. While the move ultimately failed, it underscored the extent of domestic opposition to normalizing relations with Beijing. A Sydney-based news outlet reported that China promised payments of \$44,000 to each of the Members of Parliament who backed the current Prime Minister in the recent no-confidence vote ([The Australian](#), December 6, 2021).

Conclusion

Civil unrest and political violence are not new to the Solomon Islands. Between 1998 and 2003, tensions between different militant ethnic groups spurred the deployment of Australian and New Zealand peacekeeping forces ([Regional Assistance Mission for Solomon Islands](#), accessed February 22). In 2006, over 300 ethnic Chinese people were forced to flee the Pacific nation after two days of violence, arson, and looting overwhelmed Honiara's Chinatown district ([Al Jazeera](#), April 23, 2006). The Sogavare government's embrace of China has the potential to backfire and inflame such longstanding tensions, as demonstrated by the November 2021 riots.

The decision to switch allegiances also has significant geopolitical consequences. The Solomon Islands dealt a significant blow to Taiwan's international standing—leaving just 14 countries that still officially recognize the East Asian island—despite substantial influxes of U.S. aid to the pro-Taiwan government in Malaita ([Solomon Business Magazine](#), October 8, 2020).

As China's geopolitical power continues to increase, and its international assertiveness along with it, the trend of diplomatic defections from Taiwan will likely persist. With the skepticism that many citizens harbor toward Beijing, China will need to fulfill its promises of economic aid. In late January, China delivered 50,000 COVID-19 vaccine doses, 20,000 test kits, and 60,000 medical masks to Honiara, accompanied by 15 tons of police supplies to support the island's efforts to “uphold stability and stop violence” ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China](#), January 26). Yet Beijing must tread carefully to ensure that such inducements do not resemble another form of dollar diplomacy at best and outright graft at worst. Otherwise, another tragic uprising will be unfortunate but not unsurprising.

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Extensive China-EU Economic Linkages Persist Despite Growing Divide on Democracy and Human Rights

By Anita Inder Singh



(Image: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian in Paris, France, Aug. 29, 2020. , Source: Xinhua)

Introduction

Trade is the most important element of the relationship between China and the European Union (EU). Although the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened the global economy, the EU remains China's largest trading partner and China is the EU's second-largest trade partner. In 2021, bilateral trade reached \$828.1 billion, a 27.5 percent increase on the previous year ([China Org](#), February 2). However, the China-EU divide over democracy and human rights, as reflected in the increasingly open differences between European countries and China on Taiwan and the One-China principle, appears likely to endure.

The political divide between China and the EU cannot be covered up by diplomatic homilies. For example, Zhang Ming, China's ambassador to Brussels (2017-21), spoke of "win-win cooperation," "communication and mutual respect," and "splendid civilization of China and Europe" ([PRC Mission to EU](#), December 18, 2021). However, intensifying divisions were further clarified in mid-September 2021, with China's sharp riposte to the EU's criticism of its record on democracy and human rights in its most recent China strategy paper ([European Parliament](#), September 16, 2021). China is also furious at Lithuania's decision last year to allow a "Taiwan" Representative Office in its capital, Vilnius, which has resulted in retaliatory sanctions by China and further escalated tensions ([Global Times](#), August 10, 2021).

Following the EU's adoption of its new China strategy, Beijing alleged that "unwarranted comments" on China's political, economic, social, and foreign policies, and accusations against China on issues related to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan were "based on prejudice and lies." Beijing said they constituted "gross interference" in China's internal affairs and a violation of basic norms in international relations as well as the EU's commitment to relevant issues ([PRC Mission to EU](#), September 16, 2021). Beijing also denounced the EU for playing up ideological differences and highlighting "systemic rivalry"—a concept that the EU first invoked in [2019](#) ([European Commission](#), March 12, 2019; [PRC Mission to EU](#), November 15, 2021). The concept implies that the EU's political system, ideologies, and values are at variance with those of China ([European External Action Service](#) (EEAS), September 6, 2020). The PRC Mission to the EU pointed out that different political systems and development paths "did not and shall not" hinder bilateral cooperation, and stressed that shared interests between Europe and China "far outweigh their differences." The Chinese government advised that Brussels should ensure that China-EU relations "are not hijacked by ideologies and geopolitics" ([PRC Mission to EU](#), September 16, 2021). For its part, the EU described China as both a negotiating partner and an economic competitor. In response, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi sees Europe as having a "cognitive split" in its policy in simultaneously perceiving China as both partner and opponent ([South China Morning Post](#), December 30, 2021).

Shifting EU-China Ties

China's anger at Europe's stance on democracy and human rights indicates how the relationship has shifted since the EU published its first China strategy paper in 2003. At that time, the EU envisaged itself as having "a major political and economic stake in supporting China's successful transition to a stable, prosperous and open country that fully embraces democracy, free market principles and the rule of law" ([European Commission](#), September 10, 2003). Brussels even asserted that it had "much to offer" China, given its own experience in integrating former communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe into the EU.

By 2016, the unprecedented scale and speed of China's economic and military rise had astonished Brussels. Nevertheless, the 2016 EU China Strategy (EUCS) linked the EU's prosperity with sustainable growth in China, which was premised on China's role as Europe's biggest trading partner, and as an attractive investment destination. "China needs the EU as much as the EU needs China," claimed the strategy paper ([European](#)

[Commission](#), June 22, 2016). At that time, Brussels took the view that it should help “define an increased role for China in the international system” ([European Commission](#), June 22, 2016).

Since the publication of the 2003 EUCS, Brussels has continually affirmed that its approach is grounded in democracy and human rights, but has also taken pains to stress that it accepts the One-China principle. So why has the latest EUCS riled China to such an extent? The main reason is that it perceives limits to former strategies premised on engaging China, and clearly recognizes the PRC as a one-party communist state that does not share the Union’s “democratic values such as individual freedom, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion” ([European Parliament](#), September 16, 2021). The 2016 and 2019 strategies did not make such a definitive statement on China’s political system. The 2021 EUCS underscores that the long-term tradition of democracy in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan demonstrates that democracy is valued by the Chinese people and that China’s track record of human rights violations expose its failure to fulfill its bilateral and multilateral commitments in these areas ([European Parliament](#), September 16, 2021). EUCS 2021 also stresses that any change to cross-strait relations must not be made against the will of Taiwan’s citizens.

Insecurity in the Maritime Domain and Dependence on Trade

While the 2016 and 2019 strategy papers expressed concern about China’s unilateral revisionist military moves in the Taiwan Straits and the East and South China Seas, as late as 2019, the EUCS only referred to Taiwan in a footnote ([European Commission](#), March 12, 2019). However, now Brussels worries that insecurity in the Taiwan Straits and South China Sea could affect Europe’s trading ties with Asia. After meeting with the foreign and development ministers of G7 countries in January 2022, Josep Borrell, who took over as the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in December 2019, told journalists that China represented a strategic and ideological challenge. The EU must ensure freedom of navigation in the Sea through which 40 percent of its exports pass. “This part of the world is the aorta vein of the economics of Europe,” Borrell stated ([EEAS](#), December 11, 2021).

Despite the EU’s concerns for freedom and sovereignty in the maritime domain, trading ties remain the highest priority for both sides. Shortly before the EUCS 2021 was published, Ambassador [Zhang Ming](#) asserted that their economic interdependence made for amicable and stable ties ([EuropeanSting](#), August 9, 2021). Generally, since the publication of EUCS 2021, China’s indignation at the obvious political differences between them runs parallel to its wish to keep on good political terms and sustain relations with Brussels ([PRC Mission to EU](#), November 19, 2021).

In fact, since the EU and China first presented their policy papers on each other in 2003, disagreements over democracy and human rights and the fact that 21 out of the 27 EU countries are members of NATO have not restricted progress in deepening the trading relationships between China and Europe. Despite the EU’s concern about the imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong in June 2020 ([China Brief](#), July 29, 2020), Beijing and Brussels signed the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment in December 2020 ([European Commission](#), December 30, 2020; [Global Times](#), December 30, 2020).

Lithuania, Taiwan, and the One-China Principle

Another issue that has sparked China-EU tensions is the recent policy shift of the former communist country Lithuania, also a NATO member, on Taiwan. Last July, Lithuania allowed the opening of a “Taiwanese Representative Office” in Vilnius, the first of Taiwan’s de facto embassies to be called “Taiwan” rather than “Taipei,” which Beijing deemed a violation of the One-China principle ([China Brief](#), January 28). China thundered against this “flagrant violation” of the spirit of the communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Lithuania, which “severely undermines” its sovereignty and territorial integrity ([PRC Embassy in Lithuania](#), August 28, 2021).

Significantly, at the China-EU High Level Strategic Dialogue, which took place virtually on September 28, Wang confirmed China’s “principled position” on Taiwan-related issues, stressing that the One-China principle reflected the consensus of the international community and the political basis for the development of relations between China and the EU. “If the foundation is not firm, the ground is unsteady,” Wang stated. According to the official Chinese report, Borrell said that “the EU always adheres to the One-China policy, which is an important cornerstone of EU-China relations. The EU will not conduct official exchanges with Taiwan” ([PRC Embassy in Belgium](#), September 28, 2021).

In contrast, the EU press release of the Borrell-Wang meeting reported that the EU would continue to consistently apply its One-China policy. At the same time, the EU and its member states have expressed growing interest in developing unofficial cooperation with Taiwan, a like-minded and important regional economic partner ([EEAS](#), September 28, 2021). In January, Brussels backed Vilnius in its clash with Beijing, filing a complaint in the World Trade Organization (WTO) alleging that China has used trade restrictions as a form of economic coercion against Lithuania over the Taiwan dispute ([Euronews](#), January 14; [WTO](#), January 31).

Chinese and European Illusions Collide

These exchanges show why the China-EU relationship is under strain. Earlier, China’s papers on the EU all stressed the importance of the One-China principle, but none of them saw a fundamental conflict of interests between China and the EU. China’s 2003 paper averred that “neither side poses a threat to the other” ([China Org](#), October 2003). The 2014 document hailed the tie between China and the EU, “the world’s most representative emerging economy and group of developed countries respectively,” and “two major forces for world peace as they share important strategic consensus on building a multi-polar world” ([China Daily](#), April 2, 2014).

China’s 2018 paper on the EU envisaged both contributing to multi-polarity and economic globalization. China and the EU shared common interests in “upholding world peace and stability, promoting global prosperity and

sustainable development and advancing human civilization, making the two sides indispensable partners to each other's reform and development" ([China Daily](#), December 18, 2018).

Since publishing its first EU policy paper in October 2003, China has emphasized mutual respect, equality, and the [One-China principle](#) as the foundation of China-EU relations ([PRC's State Council Information Office](#), October 2003). The EU adheres to the One-China policy while continuing to develop its relations with Taiwan and supporting the constructive development of cross-strait relations ([European Commission](#), June 22, 2016). After meeting with Wang Yi in July 2021, 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).

Explaining the discord over democracy and human rights, Beijing has highlighted cultural differences between the EU and China as important representatives of Western culture and Asian culture respectively. Beijing's 1991 White Paper on human rights was the first official Chinese document to recognize the concept of human rights and to highlight the idea of state-steered development as a key tool in their advancement ([PRC's State Council Information Office](#), November 1991). Beijing's subordination of human rights to state interests has since long been clear. Addressing the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017, President Xi Jinping advocated development as the "master key to solving all problems" ([CGTN](#), May 15, 2017). In short, Beijing challenges the primacy and universality of individual human rights as asserted in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([United Nations](#)). In August 2021, China's new White Paper on human rights hailed the achievement of "moderate prosperity" in China as a "milestone in the history of global human rights" ([Xinhua](#), August 12, 2021). The EU's illusions about playing a potential role in introducing democracy to China have dissipated under Xi, who has reasserted the primacy of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP), centralized power, and pledged that China will become a global power by mid-century under the party's leadership ([China Daily](#), November 4, 2017). In highlighting that China is following "the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," China's 2018 EU paper of 2018 underscored the growing political divide between Brussels and Beijing ([China Daily](#), December 18, 2018).

Authoritarian China, a Global challenge, Threatens the EU

By 2016, the EU had noted China's emergence as an international power. In May 2020, Borrell warned that the Union must adopt a ["more robust" strategy](#) to deal with an increasingly assertive China ([Euractiv](#), May 25, 2020). On July 30, 2021 Borrell affirmed that despite differences with the U.S., the EU would always be closer to Washington than to Beijing: "We will always be closer to a country that has the same political system as ours, a market economy, a multi-party will always be closer to a country that has the same political system as ours, a market economy, a multi-party democracy with concurrence in elections, than a single-party country" ([South China Morning Post](#), July 30, 2021).

FM Wang tried to ease the tension at a [virtual meeting with Borrell](#) last July, and in August, on an official visit to France, claimed that common interests far outweighed differences ([Xinhua](#), August 30, 2021). Wang also emphasized that neither China nor the EU sought global hegemony and that both adhere to, and practice multilateralism ([PRC Embassy in Belgium](#), July 16, 2021). Two months later, during a visit to Italy, Wang

stressed that China and the EU should be “partners” and “collaborators,” rather than “rivals” and “competitors” ([China Daily](#), November 1, 2021).

However, as noted above, to Beijing’s annoyance, on January 27, the EU launched a case against China at the WTO over China’s “discriminatory practices” against Lithuania. It alleged that China had blocked imports from and exports to Lithuania since December 2021 in response to the opening of a Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius ([Euractiv](#), January 27). Dismissing China’s so-called “coercion” of Lithuania as “groundless,” China’s Foreign Ministry asserted that the “problem between China and Lithuania is a political not an economic one.” However, Beijing downplayed its importance as a sticking point in EU-China ties, by avowing that “they are issues between China and Lithuania, not China and the EU” ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), January 27).

Conclusion

Strong trading ties are likely to persist despite the growing political gap between the EU and China. Neither side wants to push their relationship to the breaking point, if only because of their all-important economic ties with one another.

All told, the war of words over systemic rivalry, democracy, human rights, Taiwan, and the One-China principle could represent a unique type of Cold War between China and the EU as major international trading partners but geopolitical rivals, trying to reshape the global order in accordance with their differing values, interests, and aspirations.

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