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China and Russia: Shackled to a Corpse?

By John S. Van Oudenaren

Almost as soon as Russian tanks began their bloody crawl toward Kyiv, debate ensued over whether Chinese leaders had advance knowledge of the Kremlin’s war plans. The broader Chinese foreign policy community was certainly dumbstruck as U.S. warnings of an imminent Russian attack on Ukraine were discounted as geopolitical ploys ([Global Times](#), February 18; [Stimson](#), February 28). However, given the highly personalized nature of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership— President Xi Jinping has met with his counterpart Vladimir Putin 38 times since 2013 — the top leadership was assuredly not entirely in the dark ([FMPRC](#), December 15, 2021). As competition with the U.S. has intensified under Xi, Russia has consolidated its position as China’s most consequential strategic partner. However, China is increasingly concerned that Putin’s war and the resultant international backlash are severely damaging Russia. Some elites have also condemned Russia’s brutality and unilateral aggression, which underscores mounting anxiety that China is tied to a partner that is

both weaker and more belligerent than it had previously realized ([China Times](#), March 1). In the current situation, Xi comes off poorly regardless of how much foreknowledge he possessed. If he was naïve about Putin's designs, he looks weak for allowing a lesser partner to drag China into a confrontation with the West. If Xi cut Putin a blank check for aggression, this may intensify muted but pointed domestic criticism of his foreign policy acumen including his decision to privilege ties with Russia over relations with the West, which are more integral to China's economic and technological development.

As Russian troops massed on Ukraine's borders in early February, Xi emboldened Putin by elevating the already close Sino-Russian partnership. At their pre-Olympic summit, both leaders signed a Joint Statement, which offers a blueprint for deepening bilateral cooperation in a "new era" of international relations, while also reaffirming mutual support for one another's "core interests" ([President of Russia](#), February 4). On Monday, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said Russia is China's "most important close neighbor and strategic partner" and averred that both sides will "steadily advance our comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era" ([People's Daily](#), March 7, 2022). Beijing's reaffirmation of the Sino-Russian partnership during Russia's assault on Ukraine, reflects Xi's view that the partnership remains essential. Consequently, China will hang tough with Russia, but due to its mounting anxiety over its primary strategic partner's vulnerability, Beijing is also keeping diplomatic avenues open that might provide Putin with a face-saving off-ramp. Such anxieties were surely in mind on Tuesday, when Xi held a virtual meeting with French President Emanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz wherein he reiterated China's previous calls for peace talks and urged all parties to "exercise maximum restraint" ([FMPRC](#), March 8).



(Image: Chinese and Russian officers review maps during the joint 2013 peace exercise, source: [China Daily](#))

Still Great?

Since the 1990s, China's primary interest in Russia has been its position as a fellow great power, which can help balance the U.S. to bring about a more multipolar world order. As Yun Sun notes, "In China, Russia is regarded as one of only three world powers with global influence, alongside the United States and China", which is due to its "comprehensive national power" versus its modest economy and military outlays ([War on the Rocks](#), March 4).

Putin's move on Ukraine was partially driven by a perceived need to ensure that Russia remains a leading world power alongside the U.S. and China. Fyodor Lukyanov, Research Director of the Valdai Discussion Club, asserts that "Moscow has positioned itself to 'become an agent of cardinal change for the whole world'" challenging US hegemony "in favor of a much more distributed model." ([Russia in Global Affairs](#), March 1). Ironically then, Russia's unexpected struggles in Ukraine and sanctions-driven economic implosion have aggravated Chinese concerns that Russia has neither the economic nor demographic strength to remain a world power over the long-rung. The Chinese blogosphere is filled with articles such as: "If Russia can't handle Ukraine, its status as a great power will be shaken" ([Tencent](#), March 2).

Chinese observers note that Russia lacks the economic base to sustain itself as a world power with a nominal GDP that is one tenth that of China's economy (\$1.6 trillion versus \$16.6 trillion), and a GDP (PPP) that is one sixth in size (\$4.3 trillion versus \$26.6 trillion) ([NetEase](#), March 7; [IMF World Economic Outlook](#)). International sanctions, which are wreaking havoc on Russia's economy, will only deepen this imbalance. Goldman Sachs recently predicted that Russia's economy will suffer a seven percent contraction in 2022 ([The Guardian](#), March 2). The value of the Ruble has tanked 40%, and *weekly* inflation rates in Russia are at 2.2%, the highest since the 1998 currency crisis ([Moscow Times](#), March 10).

Geostrategic Bonds

The official border settlement, which was concluded in 2008, remains the strategic foundation of the Sino-Russian partnership ([China Daily](#), July 22, 2008). Keeping their shared 2,700 mile border quiet, allows each side to focus on higher priority strategic theaters, which for China is its eastern littoral and southwestern land borders, and for Russia its western flank with Europe and the Middle East. Putin's lack of concern over any threat from the east has allowed Russia to direct much of its military power against Ukraine.

The close Sino-Russian partnership facilitates Russia's ability to focus on Europe but for Moscow shifting ever more resources to the west will further intensify the asymmetry in its relationship with Beijing. China stills plays an important role in Europe, but Russia's role in East Asian affairs is increasingly marginal. After seizing Crimea in 2014, Moscow cultivated economic ties with Japan and South Korea, which became key sources of technology, and drivers of export market growth, particularly in the commodities sector. For example, in 2019, Russia imported \$11 billion worth of automobiles- 25 percent from Japan, and 18 percent from South Korea ([MIT OEC](#)). However, this time around, both Seoul and especially Tokyo have more actively participated in

sanctioning Russia. In addition to complying with U.S. and European Union measures, Japan has placed unilateral sanctions on top Russian leaders, frozen assets, and imposed export bans on critical technologies ([Japan Times](#), March 1). Top carmakers, including Toyota, have ceased operations in Russia ([Toyota](#), March 3). In retaliation, the Russian Foreign Ministry placed both Japan and South Korea on its list of “unfriendly” countries ([TASS](#), March 7). Alienation from Tokyo and Seoul will reduce Moscow’s room for diplomatic maneuver in Asia and render it even more dependent on Beijing.

In Central Asia, China and Russia share an interest in developing connectivity, countering extremism and promoting political stability. However, Russia’s ability to fulfill its role as the region’s lead security actor has been jeopardized by its preoccupation with Ukraine, reduced resources, and mounting regional anxiety over Putin’s expansionist tendencies. In January, Russian forces played a key role in subduing mass protests in Kazakhstan, which both Xi and Putin labeled an attempted “color revolution” (颜色革命, *Yanse geming*) brought about by “external forces” i.e., the West ([XinhuaNet](#), January 7; [Moscow Times](#), January 10)

The subsequent Sino-Russian February 4 joint statement pledged joint security cooperation in Central Asia to oppose “attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext, [and] oppose color revolutions” ([President of Russia](#), February 4). However, since January, relations between Nur-Sultan and Moscow have cooled due to the Ukraine War and memories of Putin’s past remarks about Kazakhstan lacking a history of statehood. Kazakhstan cannot break openly from Russia but has signaled its frustration by abstaining from UN resolutions on Ukraine, opting not to send a token detachment to Ukraine as part of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, permitting pro-Ukraine demonstrations in Almaty, and declining to recognize the breakaway republics of Luhansk and Donetsk ([Euractiv](#), March 2).

The Specter of Color Revolution

Although the Russia-Ukraine War has not garnered extensive official coverage, the Chinese public has demonstrated great interest in the conflict. For example, books about Putin are the most searched item on e-commerce site Dangdang, which has struggled to keep up inventory ([Global Times](#), March 1). One Chinese TV station even embedded a correspondent with Russian forces near Mariupol ([ifeng news](#), March 9). In deference to Moscow’s line, media outlets have used the term “special military operations” (特殊军事行动, *tebie zhanshi xingdong*) to describe Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Another possible reason that Chinese media is echoing the Kremlin’s language is that Beijing perceives a need to help its partner navigate an increasingly challenging information environment, which could undermine Putin’s grip on power.

Over the last two weeks, anti-war protests have occurred in all major Russian cities resulting in 13,500 arrests ([Human Right Watch](#), March 9; [EDM](#), March 1). Despite the unrest, a majority of Russians, who are exposed to constant propaganda in a controlled media environment, support the war ([EDM](#), March 10). Nevertheless, Putin has shown signs of concern: Twitter and Facebook have been blocked, and the Duma passed a new law stipulating lengthy imprisonments for distributing “fake news” about the Russian military. China is likely also

assisting Russia in its efforts to control the online information environment. In a recent interview Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton noted that Huawei, which has deep links to the Chinese military, “is providing support to Russia to keep their internet up and running” ([Australia Department of Defence](#), March 7).

Many Chinese nationalists originally cheered Putin’s attack on Ukraine as a blow against the US and NATO, but are now growing increasingly concerned over where Russia’s struggles might lead ([SCMP](#), February, 26). Former *Global Times* Editor Hu Xijin posits that the outcome of the current conflict is most uncertain in a blog post entitled “How will the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine War impact China and the world” ([Guancha](#), March 3). He notes that if Putin wins, he will block the former Soviet countries from joining the Western system and weaken “US hegemony” (美国的霸权, *Meiguo de baquan*), but his victory will be limited as a fearful Europe will further align with US. However, if Putin loses, Hu predicts the war will drag him down, precipitate political turmoil, and potentially lead to a Color Revolution in Russia.

Another Way?

Since Russia’s invasion, there have been flickers of hope in the West that Beijing would somehow act as a restraining influence on Putin. This largely unfounded optimism has been buoyed by the assessments of more liberal Chinese foreign policy elites, who see the Russia-Ukraine war as a potential opening to improve relations with the West (see [Tong Zhao Twitter](#), March 2). Jia Qingguo, a government advisor and former dean of Peking University’s School of International Studies, has even called for a “fake news” law against jingoistic online rhetoric that polarizes people and encourages hostility to foreign countries ([SCMP](#), March 7).

Despite the frustrations of some elites, Xi ultimately calls the shots on foreign policy. He has a long history of subordinating economic development to what he perceives as broader national interests, and China’s relationship with Russia is unlikely to prove the exception. Given his Leninist and Chinese nationalist worldview, Xi likely shares the view, recently encapsulated by a prominent nationalist commentator that “If the west cripples Russia, China could be next” ([Financial Times](#), March 10). As a result, he is likely to support Putin until the bitter end, preferring to prop up an authoritarian Russia as a sort of zombie great power, rather than risking a shift towards a more pluralistic Russia that is oriented toward the West.

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At National People’s Congress, Strong Emphasis on Stability Militates Against Reform

By Willy Wo-Lap Lam



(Image: Premier Li Keqiang delivers the government work report at the opening of the National People’s Congress in Beijing on March 5, 2022 (Source: Xinhua)

Introduction

In The slogan “seeking progress in the midst of stability” sums up Premier Li Keqiang’s annual Government Work Report (henceforward- the Report) to the National People’s Congress (NPC), which opened in Beijing on Saturday, March 5. The major thrust of the Report centers on maintaining a growth rate of around 5.5 percent in 2022, while keeping the urban unemployment rate – which does not include migrant workers or village laborers – within 5.5 percent ([Xinhua](#), March 5; [China Daily](#), March 5). Although Li has stuck to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) longstanding emphasis on playing up the positive, his worries about weak links in China’s economy are palpable. Li is clearly number two in the CCP’s hierarchy, but the disparities between the two top cadres’ approach to the economy in key areas such as the treatment of private enterprises are obvious.

While Li heaped eulogies on President Xi Jinping, referring to him 13 times as the “core of the party leadership,” he only made three references to formulating policies under the “guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era.” For example, “common prosperity,” one of Xi’s most frequently cited dictums, appears only once, and very briefly, in the Report. Li’s stress on the imperative of stability and low unemployment, however, tallies with Xi’s anxiety to maintain a steady pace of growth in the run-up to the key 20th Party Congress in the autumn, during which the so-called “lifelong core leader” is expected to seek one to two more five-year terms ([China Brief](#), November 12, 2021).

With Ukraine in Background, Defense Spending Ticks Up

Perhaps because Premier Li’s portfolio does not include foreign or military affairs, he has steered clear of elaborating on China’s reaction to the Ukrainian crisis. Li, who is also Head of the State Council, or cabinet, has merely reiterated that the Chinese government would “together with the international community, make greater contributions to implement world peace and stability.” In his NPC press conference on March 7, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed China’s respect for the “sovereignty and territorial integrity” of all countries. He also vowed to play an active role to solve the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. Instead of blaming Russia, however, Wang repeated the standard line that the U.S. was involved in a “zero-sum game” of building “anti-China coalitions” that resembled an “Indo-Pacific NATO” ([CCTV.com](#), March 7; [HK01.com](#), March 7).

In his Report, Li unveils a 7.1 percent budget increase for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), which is just 0.3 percent higher than last year’s increase. The official *Global Times* noted that the slight uptick was mainly due to inflation and that the outlay was determined before the recent events in Ukraine ([Global Times](#), March 5; [India Times](#), March 5). However, Li says in his report that the armed forces must “comprehensively deepen training and preparation for war,” which is consistent with the messages delivered in the past few years by President Xi, who is also the Chairman of the party’s Central Military Commission. The speeches made at the NPC by senior cadre such as Wang Yi leave strongly portend even closer military cooperation with Russia.

Emphasis on Economic Stability

The most important theme of the NPC – and the accompanying plenary session of the advisory Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) – is that the central government will pull out all the stops to uphold economic, and by extension, political stability. The intensity of the measures introduced at this NPC reflects big cracks in the country’s economic foundation. While it has been customary for the government to indicate that it will stick to a “prudent monetary policy,” the figures this year show that Beijing is proactively injecting liquidity into the economy so as to prop up sagging economic sectors as well as the huge numbers of insolvent regional – including provincial and county-level – administrations. The country’s total social debt – particularly borrowings by local governments, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and gigantic private conglomerates such as the Evergrande Group – accounts for more than 300 percent of GDP. China’s aggregate foreign-exchange debt amounted to some \$2.7 trillion by September 2021. Debt sustained by local

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administrations is estimated at more than 50 trillion yuan (about \$7.9 trillion) (SAFE.gov.cn, December 31, 2021; Radio Free Asia, November 23, 2021; Radio French International, September 29, 2021).

In theory, the Premier says Beijing will continue to pursue a “stable and healthy monetary policy which should be flexible and appropriate”, but this is likely a euphemism for a significant loosening of credit.

Li discloses in the Report that spending by central coffers would be up by 3.9 percent, and that transfer payments to localities would increase by 18 percent to a record 1.5 trillion yuan (\$240 billion). Such enormous expenditures follow repeated reductions of the loan prime rates and the reserve requirement ratios mandated by China’s central bank, the People’s Bank of China (PBOC). In January alone, official banks (not including those in the sprawling shadow banking system) issued 3.98 trillion yuan of new loans, representing a year-on-year increase of 11.5 percent. Parts of these loans will be used to finance 102 major infrastructure projects in the next few years. For example, China’s network of high-speed railways, which is already the most extensive in the world, will be increased by 32 percent to 50,000 kilometers by 2025 (South China Morning Post, February 18; China Daily, February 11). At the same time, Li says the government will continue to postpone a host of taxes, including property taxes. He revealed that last year, central coffers took in more than 1 trillion yuan (\$160 billion) less in revenue due to tax reductions for enterprises. The major beneficiaries of these tax concessions appear to be property companies. After all, the real-estate sector alone accounts for some 30 percent of GDP (Voxeu.org, September 21, 2021).

However, it is doubtful whether the extra spending will help local administrations and business conglomerates weather these difficult times. Independent Western economists agree that the bulk of regional governments – as well as huge property conglomerates such as Evergrande, Shimao and Fantasia – are borrowing money just to make interest payments on accumulated debt. A large number of provincial- and county-level governments as well as huge public and private firms appear to be on the point of default or bankruptcy (Sohu.com, January 6; Fangchan.com, December 29, 2021; News.com.au, December 7, 2021).

The CCP administration is therefore merely repeating the old formula that was responsible for the so-called Chinese economic miracle, which practically ended when Xi and Li entered the all-powerful Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) in November 2012. China has always relied on three drivers to generate high economic output: trade; government-originated and other investments in infrastructure and the real-estate sector; and, consumer spending. For the past ten years, the CCP leadership has put increased emphasis on high-tech manufacturing and consumption as the major locomotives of growth. This effort to reorient the economy has gained urgency due to the negative impact of trade disputes with the U.S. – one of China’s largest markets – as well as the wholesale migration of China-based foreign factories to lower-cost competitors in Asia and even Africa. Consumer spending has been depressed as debt accumulated by middle-class households to pay mortgage charges and other expenses has risen to an astounding 60 percent of GDP (South China Morning Post, August 7, 2021).

Li’s actions to bolster the competitiveness of Chinese industry include consolidating the tech sector, particularly the self-sufficiency of essential components many of which have been denied to the PRC due to the perceived

“supply chain decoupling” engineered by the U.S.-led Western coalition. “The primary status of boosting the innovation of enterprises must be strengthened,” Li says, adding that breakthroughs in critical technologies must be realized in addition to speeding up the application of tech results to the market. While Li does not repeat his famous slogan of “Made in China 2025” – meaning that the technological gap with the U.S. and other advanced nations should be closed in three years’ time – R&D spending is set to soon advance to more than 2.5 percent of GDP ([Ta Kung Pao](#), March 6; [Legal Daily](#), March 5). Li also lays emphasis on lowering the taxation and other levies on private small-and-medium sized enterprises (SMEs). For example, tech-oriented SMEs will have their overall taxes curtailed by 100 percent compared to just 75 percent last year. And total R&D outlay as a percentage of GDP – which was \$2.44 trillion last year – will substantially increase during the 14th Five-Year Plan period of 2011 to 2015. Last year, non-state firms’ investment in a number of tech sectors already increased by a stunning 15.5 percent ([Ming Pao](#), March 6; [People’s Daily](#), March 5; [Stats.gov.cn](#), January 26).

Political and Ideological Constraints

As is the case with the trajectory of the economy over the past decade or so, growth in selected sectors could be adversely affected by political and ideological imperatives. The recent crackdowns on industries ranging from tech and IT companies to private tutoring companies and taxi-hailing apps, which began with Beijing’s sudden decision to stop the IPO of Alibaba’s Ant Group in Hong Kong last October, reflects President Xi’s priority to ensure tighter party-state control over giant private conglomerates. There is also widespread talk that Xi is targeting firms including Alibaba/Ant Group, the HNA Group and Fantasia Holdings whose patrons include a slew of his political foes ([China Brief](#), September 23, 2021). It is therefore not surprising that in his Report, Li has given no assurance that the economy will be run mostly in accordance with market forces and not political considerations. The same logic is behind misgivings that the party-state apparatus might continue to at least indirectly favor the public over the private sector. In recent months, several companies including Ant Corporation have been nationalized to a significant degree. A major contributor to the closing of some 4.37 million small private firms last year is that the nations’ biggest commercial banks – all of which are state-owned – prefer lending to public rather than non-state-owned firms ([Liberty Times](#), December 31, 2021; [English.www.gov.cn](#), September 25, 2021).

Yet another area where political requirements – particularly the maintenance of stability – may trump economic logic is Beijing’s apparent failure to tighten control over the finances of localities. Although many districts and counties are on the verge of bankruptcy due to profligate spending coupled with excessive dependence on land sales, the Finance Ministry announced late last year that the “quota” for loans incurred by local government units in 2022 had been extended by 1.78 trillion yuan (\$280 billion). Yet the bulk of these new loans have already been earmarked for infrastructure and real-estate projects, which have for many years proven to be a formula for accruing losses and piling up debt ([Ming Pao](#), February 28; [Finance.sina.com](#), January 10).

Few observers in China doubt that the CCP administration can reach its goal of increasing national GDP by 5.5 percent. As Peking University senior economist Yu Miaojie (余淼傑) points out, “5.5 percent is a relatively

steady target.” “Beneficial factors for economic development include [Beijing’s] encouragement of innovation, augmenting the magnitude of reform, and continuing to expand the open door policy,” he added ([Ta Kung Pao](#), March 6). Despite, this optimism, whether Li’s blueprint can quicken the momentum of reform remains questionable, particularly given the Xi Jinping leadership’s insistence on control of the economy and further “decoupling” of the Chinese and Western economies, an issue that is not addressed in detail in the Report ([Deutsche Welle Chinese](#), March 1; [South China Morning Post](#), February 18). Soon after becoming premier in early 2013, Li vowed that his administration would “cut off [the government’s] arm” so as to free up market forces ([People’s Daily](#), April 5, 2013). Such expressions of pro-market sentiment, however, seem sourly missing these days as Li, whose two five-years’ term as head of government is ending in 12 months, gave what will be his second-to-last Report to the NPC.

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Why Beijing Wants the Dalai Lama to Reincarnate

By Tenzin Dorjee



(Image: A People's Armed Police guard outside the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet, source: [Share America](#))

Introduction

A strange battle is waiting to unfold at the center of the Sino-Tibetan conflict: the fight over the Dalai Lama's reincarnation. As the 86-year-old Tibetan leader, who has spent most of his life in exile, advances further in age, there is growing uncertainty about where, or *whether*, his reincarnation might appear. In a 2011 statement, he laid out several different succession scenarios, one of which was the possibility that he might bring the lineage to an end ([Office of his Holiness the Dalai Lama](#), September 24, 2011). The Chinese government was incensed; it vowed to install its own 15th Dalai Lama after the demise of the incumbent—with or without his consent ([Tibetan Review](#), December 3, 2015).

"The title of Dalai Lama is conferred by the central government, which has hundreds of years of history," said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying in 2014 ([China Daily](#), September 11, 2014). In 2017, Zhu Weiqun, Chair of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative, reaffirmed this position. He stated, "the reincarnation of living Buddhas is a religious and politic issue as Buddhism impacts Tibet's society and politics and the central government must have a determining say in the matter" ([Global Times](#), December 10, 2017). In 2019, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shaung reiterated Beijing's stance once again, stating "the reincarnation of living Buddhas, including the Dalai Lama,

must comply with Chinese laws and regulations and follow religious rituals and historical conventions” ([India Today](#), November 11, 2019). Geng was referring to legal measures passed by the Chinese government in 2007, authorizing itself to determine which Buddhist lamas were “eligible to reincarnate” ([The State Council of the People’s Republic of China \(PRC\)](#), July 18, 2007).

The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) sudden enthusiasm for reincarnation is puzzling given its longstanding hostility to religion. Observers have ridiculed the incongruity of a staunchly atheist regime participating in Buddhist reincarnation affairs. But the irony runs deeper: Beijing has long maligned the Dalai Lama as a “criminal” and a “wolf in monk’s robes” who seeks to “split the motherland” ([China Daily](#), March 7, 2011; [PRC’s Embassy in the U.S.](#)). Images of the Dalai Lama are banned in Tibet, and any reference to him online or offline is strictly prohibited and promptly punished. Chinese leaders have called him a “separatist” and a “terrorist,” placing him among what the Chinese government labels the “[three evil forces](#)” of “terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism” ([Deccan Herald](#), September 1, 2011).

Given Beijing’s animosity toward the Tibetan leader, why would the Chinese government want him to reincarnate at all? Why perpetuate an institution it has so persistently vilified? This article argues that the colonial nature of China’s rule over Tibet and the hegemonic nature of its geopolitical ambitions in Asia combine to make the institution of the Dalai Lama potentially valuable for Beijing.

Legitimizing Colonial Rule in Tibet

No institution holds greater command over the Tibetan people’s loyalty than that of the Dalai Lamas, who ruled Tibet from 1642 to 1951. After the PRC’s invasion prompted the current Dalai Lama to flee to India in 1959, he set up a Tibetan government in exile, which he led until 2011, when he transferred political authority to a democratically elected prime minister. Still, for most Tibetans in Tibet as well as those in exile, devotion to the Dalai Lama remains a central feature of their faith. As such, the question of who selects the next Dalai Lama is of great political consequence for Beijing.

The issue of the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation is even more significant as Tibetans generally see Chinese rule as foreign and illegitimate. After seven decades of political repression and ideological indoctrination, Beijing has “failed to win the hearts and minds” of the Tibetan people ([ANI News](#), September 2, 2021). Tibetans are *subjects* rather than *citizens* of China, and the Chinese government’s relationship with Tibet remains colonial in many respects. A key feature of colonial rule is the role played by local intermediaries who help make the central government more legitimate to the periphery while making the periphery more “legible”—to borrow a concept from James C. Scott—and therefore more manageable, to the state. [1] For Beijing, the death of this Dalai Lama represents an opportunity to groom a new and more pliable intermediary who will work to legitimize Beijing in the eyes of the Tibetan people.

Generally, there are three types of legitimacy that keep a regime afloat: 1) popular endorsement through democratic elections; 2) economic performance; and 3) charismatic authority. The first kind of legitimacy is

unavailable to Beijing unless it democratizes. The second type of legitimacy is weak in Tibet: the Communist Party's economic performance, though impressive in the capital-intensive and labor-driven coastal cities, has been lackluster on the Tibetan plateau, where nomads and farmers comprise most of the population. Since the first two sources of legitimacy are largely inaccessible to Beijing, the third—charismatic authority, particularly that of religious figures—becomes indispensable to legitimizing PRC rule in Tibet.

In fact, Beijing has historically tapped into the religious charisma of lamas and used Buddhism as a political instrument in its western frontiers. The historian Gray Tuttle has argued that the Republican-era Chinese government, having lost the Sino-Tibetan battle of 1918 and failed to annex Tibet by force, “actively attempted to use Buddhism to incorporate Tibet in the modern Chinese nation-state.” [2] The Chinese Nationalist leaders, who were trying to persuade an independent Tibet to join the Chinese nation-state at the time, searched for a unifying rhetoric that could link Tibetan and Chinese identities. In 1933, Nationalist Party leader Dai Jitao argued that Buddhism “was the one unifying feature” that could be exploited to bridge the racial, cultural, and linguistic gap between the two “estranged peoples.” [3]

During that era, when nations in the rest of Asia were struggling to establish their independence, the Chinese government recruited high-ranking Tibetan lamas and charged them with the task of persuading Tibet to give up its sovereign status. The Ninth Panchen Lama, according to his biographer Fabienne Jagou, helped the Nationalist Party of China portray itself as a Buddhist regime whose polity Tibetans and Inner Mongolians would do well to join. He advocated the unification of Tibet and China, arguing that “the union between Tibet and China is doubly profitable, while their separation harms both parties.” [4] In the Chinese leadership's vision, this is precisely the legitimating role that a Beijing-appointed Fifteenth Dalai Lama might play in the future—with far greater effectiveness than the Panchen Lama. [5] Helping to dampen dissent in China's wild west, though, is hardly the only use Beijing envisions for a Buddhist puppet pope.

Facilitating Regional Hegemony in Asia

Beyond Tibet, the institution of the Dalai Lama extends its spiritual authority to several Buddhist countries in Asia. Key among them is Mongolia, where his Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism has predominated the religious landscape for centuries and his moral influence can be converted into political power in times of crisis. Similarly, in Taiwan, where the CCP is viewed with suspicion and hostility, the Dalai Lama remains highly respected, especially among the island's Buddhist population.

Most significantly, the Tibetan leader is revered by the Buddhist indigenous populations of Ladakh, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh, located along the sensitive 2,100-mile Sino-Indian border separating the world's two most populous nations. The geopolitical importance of these border regions in the southern Himalayan belt cannot be overstated. [6] As China and India compete for military supremacy in the Himalayas and regional hegemony in Asia, both sides are aware of the strategic benefits that would accrue to whoever can harness the Dalai Lama's unparalleled soft power in the region ([DeepStrat](#), July 13, 2021).

In the nuclear age, when the risk of minor incidents escalating into full blown nuclear war makes military action irrational and unattractive even to belligerent regimes, conflict outcomes may hinge on the ability and willingness of states to exploit non-military sources of power. In this light, it is easy to see why Beijing is interested in exploiting the Buddhist institution of reincarnation as an alternative tool for pursuing regional hegemony. In a future Sino-Indian conflict, a pro-Beijing Dalai Lama could be the ace in China's pocket.

Conclusion

The most likely future scenario is one where there are two rival claimants to the throne—one recognized by Dharamshala and the other by Beijing ([The Guardian](#), July 31, 2021). While there is little doubt that the Tibetan people will accept Dharamshala's candidate as the current Dalai Lama's genuine successor, it will be difficult to dismiss the pro-Beijing claimant as entirely irrelevant. The exile candidate will carry greater moral authority and internal legitimacy, but the PRC-backed puppet will enjoy greater financial resources and political access. China will use its economic leverage and political clout to open doors for its own candidate and raise his profile on the highest stages, while working to marginalize the exile candidate in the global arena. For example, Beijing has over the years successfully pressured dozens of countries to deny visas to the current Dalai Lama—a Nobel laureate no less—and has effectively rendered him a political pariah in parts of Asia and Africa ([Human Rights Watch](#), June 19, 2006; [The Guardian](#), September 4, 2014).

Even so, grooming and deploying a pro-Beijing Fifteenth Dalai Lama is bound to be more complicated in practice than in theory. Clearly, Tibetans, and much of the Buddhist world at large, will reject a reincarnation selected by a communist regime that does not subscribe to their faith in the first place. More interestingly, a central but often overlooked reason behind the current Dalai Lama's godlike standing among Tibetans is the defiance he mounted against China after the fall of Tibet. From his base in India, the young Dalai Lama founded the Tibetan government in exile and launched a sustained international campaign that discredited the PRC. In defying the Chinese government, he became the face of Tibetan resistance and the symbol of pan-Tibetan nationalism. In other words, the exalted status of the current Dalai Lama in the Tibetan community is a result of his early political opposition to Chinese rule as much as his ecclesiastical position within Tibetan Buddhism. This means, somewhat paradoxically, that the only way in which a Beijing-appointed Fifteenth Dalai Lama might be able to earn Tibetan public support will be by defying Beijing.

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Notes

[1] See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

[2] Gray Tuttle, *Tibetan Buddhism in the Making of Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 11.

[3] Ibid., 12.

[4] Fabienne Jagou, *The Ninth Panchen Lama: A Life at the Crossroads of Sino-Tibetan Relations* (Ecole Francaise D'extreme-Orient, 2011), 85.

[5] The current incarnation of the Panchen Lama is a boy named Gendun Choekyi Nyima, the tenth incarnation in the lineage, who has been in Beijing's captivity since 1995 after being recognized by the Dalai Lama. The Chinese government abducted and made him disappear at the age of six and installed its own puppet candidate, a boy named Gaincain Norbu.

[6] See P. K. Gautam, Jagannath P. Panda, and Zakir Hussain. *Tibet and India's Security: Himalayan Region, Refugees, and Sino-Indian Relations* (New Delhi, India: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses), 2012.

For additional information, see Gilley, Bruce. *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009; Norbu, Dawa. *China's Tibet Policy*. Richmond, VA: Curzon Press, 2001.

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All Eyes on the Ministry of Veterans Affairs

By Kenneth W. Allen and Marcus Clay



(Image: MVA headquarters in Chaoyang District, Beijing Municipality, Source: MVA)

Introduction

On March 19, 2018, the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) ratified the establishment of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs (MVA) (中华人民共和国退役军人事务部, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo tuiyi junren shiwu bu*) as an element of the State Council Organization Reform Plan (国务院机构改革方案, *Guowuyuan jigou gaige fang'an*) ([PRC State Council](#), March 17, 2018). The MVA officially opened a month later with Sun Shaocheng (孙绍骋) appointed as its inaugural minister ([Xinhua](#), July 31, 2018). On January 1, 2021, China's first Veterans Support Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (中华人民共和国退役军人保障法, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo tuiyi junren baozhang fa*) came into effect ([China Military Online](#), November 27, 2020). While western observers widely believed that the MVA was created in response to a series of veteran protests prior to 2018, its broader administrative and political functions are not sufficiently understood. [1] This article serves as a primer on the MVA's organization and mandate, provides a preliminary assessment on its performance over the past four years, and analyzes future trends of its development.

Under Title 38 of the United States Code (Veterans' Benefits), a veteran is defined as a "person who served in the active military, naval, air, or space service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable" ([Law for Veterans](#), December 1, 2021). The Chinese equivalent of a "veteran" directly translates as "demobilized military service member" (退役军人, *tuiyi junren*), and carries almost an identical definition as the U.S. term. [2] However, while the U.S. government has a long history of managing veteran affairs tracing back to the 1776 Continental Congress that has continued through each subsequent conflict, the management of "veterans affairs" is a somewhat novel concept for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ([VA](#)

[History Office](#), Updated May 21, 2021). The U.S. Veterans Administration, created in 1930, became the cabinet-level Department of Veterans Affairs in 1989. Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, the state has largely relied on non-legally binding orders to local governments to provide basic welfare to its veterans.

The MVA's mandate is to provide a “centralized and unified” (集中统一, *Jizhong Tongyi*) management and support system for 57 million People's Liberation Army (PLA) veterans, including those who served in the Red Army prior to 1949 ([PRC MVA](#)). The MVA seeks to “protect and advance the legitimate rights and interests of military personnel and their families, improve the service and management system of demobilized military personnel, and make military service an occupation that enjoys public respect” ([State Council](#), March 13, 2018). It has since consolidated responsibilities previously dispersed in the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, as well as the Central Military Commission's (CMC) Political Work Department (PWD) and Logistic Support Department. According to Vice Premier Sun Chunlan (孙春兰), the sole female member of the politburo who serves as the top CCP supervisor of MVA work, the MVA is as much about taking care of veterans as motivating more young talent to join the PLA ([State Council](#), April 18, 2018). Despite initial fanfare, the newest addition to China's massive state bureaucracy is treated differently from other ministries. Almost all of China's ministries under the State Council are located in Xicheng or Dongcheng Districts in central Beijing, yet the MVA was placed in Chaoyang District, outside the fifth ring road of the city ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), September 24, 2005; [MVA](#)). This may be a deliberate decision to help direct future mass protests away from the city center and politically-sensitive city landmarks—out of the public scrutiny.

Furthermore, the MVA was not made completely independent from the CMC's PWD at its establishment. Major General Fang Yongxiang (方永祥) was appointed as a uniformed vice minister of the MVA while being dual-hatted as an Assistant to the Director of the CMC's PWD, suggesting the PLA's continued involvement in the management of veteran affairs ([State Council Information Office](#), July 31, 2018). Fang was promoted to a Lieutenant General in December 2021 to serve as the political commissar of the Southern Theater Command Army, and is no longer listed on the leadership page of the MVA ([Taihainet](#), January 6). A native of Xiamen, Fang has deep ties to the 31st Group Army, a unit that focuses on a Taiwan contingency and produced a large number of top military leaders under President and CMC chairman Xi Jinping ([Xinhua](#), April 28, 2017; [U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission](#), January 27). Fang likely served in a transitional role to ensure the MVA's launch was successful, although it remains unclear if such a dual-appointment arrangement will continue following his departure. This dual-appointment arrangement appears to be continued. On March 11, Major General Yang Youbin (杨友斌) reportedly has been appointed as Fang's replacement ([Caixin](#), March 11, 2022).



Figure 1: Fang Yongxiang has been promoted to Lieutenant General as of January 2022, source: Sohu

Sun Shaocheng currently serves as the Minister of the MVA. Sun is a career politician, who previously served as a Vice Governor of Shandong (2012) and Shanxi (2016). Prior to the MVA, he also served for 25 years in the Ministry of Civil Affairs, including as a Vice Minister (2017) ([China Vitae](#)). As of 2022, the MVA has three Vice Ministers: Qian Feng (钱锋), Chang Zhengguo (常正国), and Ma Feixiong (马飞雄), none of whom served in the military. [3]



Figure 2: Sun Shaocheng in 2022, source:MVA)

The MVA consists of a general office, eight functional departments, two information centers, and an office for party committee affairs/personnel department ([MVA](#)) (See organizational chart below). It works closely with provincial, city, and county level veterans affairs administrations to provide services to demobilized service

members. Each Chinese province and municipality now has its own VA known as either a VA bureau (局, *ju*), e.g. Beijing Municipal VA Bureau (北京市退役军人事务局, *Beijing shi tuiyi junren shiwu ju*), or department (厅, *ting*), e.g. VA Department of Zhejiang Province (浙江省退役军人事务厅, *Zhejiang sheng tuiyi junren shiwu ting*) ([Beijing Municipal VA Bureau](#); [Zhejiang Provincial VA Department](#)). Local VA organizations play a key role in providing assistance to PLA conscripts who have recently completed their two-year enlistment periods ([Chengyang.gov.cn](#), December 11, 2020).

MVA

General Office (办公厅, *Bangongting*)

Policy and Regulations Dept (政策法规司, *Zhengce fagui si*)

Ideology and Rights Protection Dept (思想和权益维护司, *Sixiang zhengzhi he quanyi weihu si*)

Planning and Finance Dept (规划财务司, *Guihua caiwu si*)

Transition Management Dept (移交安置司, *Yijiao anzhi si*)

Employment and Entrepreneurship Dept (就业创业司, *Jiuye chuangye si*)

Mil Retirement Dept (军休服务管理司, *Junxiu fuwu guanli si*)

Mil Support and Preferential Treatment Dept (拥军优抚司, *Yongjun youfu si*)

Commendation and Commemoration Dept (褒扬纪念司, *Baoyang jinian si* (国际合作司) *Guoji hezuo si*)

Party Committee (Personnel Department) (机关党委, *Jiguan dangwei* (人事司, *Renshi si*))

Martyrs Memorial Facility Protection Center (Martyr's Remains Search and Identification Center) (烈士纪念设施保护中心, *Lieshi jinian sheshi baohu zhongxin* (烈士遗骸搜寻鉴定中心, *Lieshi yihai souxun jianding zhongxin*))

Veterans Information Center (退役军人信息中心, *Tuiyi junren xinxi zhongxin*)

Assessment

Veteran affairs management is a politically sensitive issue to any military. This is particularly true for China as President Xi Jinping advances his signature “building a strong military” agenda. The MVA’s key mandate to

make the military a respectable profession directly links to this official narrative. More specifically, the MVA has focused on two key areas over the past four years: improving the veteran support system, including pension, healthcare, and career transition services, along with complaint management services, and increasing supervision and coordination of local VA service agencies to execute commendation and commemoration activities.

Support System

As a critical component of the CCP's overall effort to boost the military's social standing, the PLA has significantly increased the pay and benefits for active-duty personnel since the major organizational reform started in 2015-16 ([China Aerospace Studies Institute](#), August 10, 2018). Yet the veteran's pension and benefits, historically managed and funded by local governments with ambivalent central government support, appear to have lagged behind. The pension gap between service members who separated from the military before and after the reform has likely increased, as the PLA pension level is partly decided by active-duty base pay. Xi's sweeping military reform also resulted in the downsizing of military personnel by 300,000 people (50 percent officers and 50 percent enlisted personnel), which only exacerbated pressure over the VA pension system ([State Council](#), October 9, 2015). Thousands of veterans organized a quiet sit-in outside the headquarters of the CCP anti-corruption watchdog, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection in October 2016. This was followed by hundreds of veterans staging two days of demonstrations in February 2017 outside the Commission's headquarters, demanding unpaid retirement benefits.

Addressing the issue of Veterans' benefits was clearly the top priority during the MVA's initial years. Since 2018, the MVA has worked with several central government departments and military authorities to respond to specific requests from veterans. It has offered central government subsidies to help local governments cover retroactive basic and certain occupational pensions from October 2014 ([State Council](#), October 9, 2015). The MVA also signed contracts with ten state-owned banks to offer preferential loans, fee reductions, and exclusive bank card services for veterans ([Beijing Review](#), March 22, 2019). A "petition management mechanism" to direct veterans to petition for their rights "rationally and moderately" was also moderated ([Reuters](#), July 31, 2018). Before the MVA suspended its in-person grievance management service in January 2020 due to the pandemic, it reportedly had successfully resolved more than 168,000 cases via both online and in-person services by June 2019 ([National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration](#), August 8, 2019). Finally, since the CMC transferred all PLA retirement homes (干休所, *Gan xiu suo*) to provincial Military Districts at the end of 2017, the MVA's Military Retirement Management Department continued to work with local VA authorities to ensure smooth transitions ([Renmin Net.cn](#), May 27, 2018; [MVA](#)).

Commendation and Commemoration

Another key line of effort for the MVA is to advance the commendation and commemoration mechanisms to help improve the social standing of veterans in Chinese society. In addition to the *Veteran Support Law*, the NPC also wrote and passed the *Hero and Martyr Protection Law* (英雄烈士保护法, *Yingxiong lieshi baohu*

fa) in 2018, which dedicated September 30 as China's Memorial Day ([MVA](#), April 27, 2018). It was followed by the State Council's issuance of the *Regulation on Martyr Commendations* (烈士褒扬条例, *Lieshi baoyang tiaoli*) in 2019 ([MVA](#), August 9, 2019). Unlike the United States, which has been involved in continuous wars over the past two decades and endured actual combat casualties, China's modern martyrs are largely man-made heroes who died undertaking law enforcement, peacekeeping, disaster relief, and weapon research and testing activities ([chinamartyrs.gov.cn](#); [MVA](#), August 9, 2019). The commendation and commemoration work is closely linked to the CCP's patriotic education and historic narrative building to justify its legitimacy. Notably, the MVA, in collaboration with 12 other government agencies, including the CCP's Central Political and Legal Work Commission, the Central Propaganda Department, and the Supreme People's Procuratorate, developed a joint action mechanism to prosecute violations of martyr protection laws and regulations ([MVA](#), September 29, 2021).

One of the most notable activities implemented by the MVA's Commendation and Commemoration Department, also known as the "International Cooperation" Department, is its effort in facilitating the highly-publicized repatriation of the remains of Chinese soldiers who died during the Korean War ([Xinhua](#), September 27, 2020). As other scholars have pointed out, the "politics of bones" certainly serves as a useful propaganda opportunity to appeal to veterans and to boost military morale and nationalistic support for the CCP ([Xinhua](#), October 14, 2019). [4] In 2019, the MVA, with the technical support of the PLA's Academy of Military Medicine Sciences (军事医学院, *Junshi yixueyuan*), established China's first DNA database for Korean war dead soldiers ([Xinhua](#), October 14, 2019). In 2020, the MVA subsequently created a Martyr Commemoration Facility Protection Center (Remains Search and Identification Center), possibly modeled after the U.S. military's Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency ([MOD](#), October 21, 2021; [DPAA.mil](#)).

Conclusion

The significance of the MVA cannot be overstated. Xi Jinping has highlighted his own identity as a "demobilized cadre" (军转干部, *jun zhuan ganbu*) on various occasions, and has provided consistent support for China's VA work ([CPC News](#), May 30, 2014; [CCTV](#), July 26, 2019). Judging from the absence of large scale protests since the establishment of the MVA, the financial, legal, and ideological means the MVA has employed to advance veteran's rights and social standing have been largely effective. Over the four years since it opened for business, its bureaucratic outreach has expanded and it has evolved from an agency to respond to veteran protests to become an effective executor of the CCP's propaganda agenda. The PLA watching community should continue monitoring the various initiatives and programs undertaken by the MVA.

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Notes

[1] For an excellent study on the impact of PLA reform and downsizing and its implications for social stability, see Ma Chengkun and John Chen, “Chapter 17: System Overload, The 2015 PLA Force Reduction, Military-Locality Relations,” NDU Press, 2018, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/Chairman-Xi/Chairman-Xi_Chapter-17.pdf?ver=2019-02-08-112005-803. For specific discussion about veteran protests and MVA, see: Eugene K. Chow, “How Chinese Veterans Could Derail President Xi’s Plans,” *The Diplomat*, May 1, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/how-chinese-veterans-could-derail-president-xis-plans/>.

[2] For a detailed explanation of Chinese terms associated with veteran and other personnel issues, see: Marcus Clay, The “People” of the PLA, China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI), August 10, 2018. pp.11-13. https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/Books/Understanding_the_People_of_the_PLA.pdf

[3] Fang Yongxiang became one of the Vice Ministers in March 2018, but he also served concurrently as an Assistant to the Director of the CMC Political Work Department at the same time. He previously served as the Political Commissar for the Central Theater Command Army’s 81st Group Army in Zhangjiakou, Hebei Province. In December 2021, he became the Political Commissar for the Southern Theater Command Army and a concurrent Deputy Political Commissar for the Southern Theater Command.

[4] Sungmin Cho and Jennie Jin, “The Politics of Bones: The Political Motives behind the Repatriation of Remains of Chinese Soldiers Killed in the Korean War,” *The China Journal*, Volume 87, January 2022.

An Iron Idol Turns to Clay: Xi Faces Neo-Dengist Opposition

By Ben Lowsen and David Knox



(Image: Pedestrians walk by a picture of the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. The poster includes Deng’s famous quote: “adhere to the party’s basic line for a hundred years, with no vacillation, Source: SPH)

Introduction

Late last year, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) re-invoked a phrase that first appeared five years earlier: the “Two Establishes” (两个确立, *liang ge queli*) to establish General Secretary Xi Jinping as the “core of the whole party” and to enshrine “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era” as the CCP’s guiding philosophy. ([Guangming Daily](#), December 24, 2021; [China Media Project](#), February 6). Given his ostensible centrality in the CCP, common wisdom within the foreign China-watching community holds that Xi is firmly in command. Citing the historic resolution at the recent Sixth Party Plenum, China watcher Bill Bishop says, “CCP leaders don’t get historical resolutions passed because they are ‘weak’” ([Gov.cn](#), November 16, 2021; [Sinocism](#), October 18, 2021). Former Australian prime minister and China hand Kevin Rudd asserts, “Given the president’s control over much of the party’s security apparatus and personnel files, and his gifts for the dark arts of internal Chinese politics, Mr. Xi is likely to continue in power come November” ([Wall Street Journal](#), January 22).

Despite major hurdles such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Xi's dominance has apparently continued unabated. Behind the political pageantry, however, some cracks below the surface are becoming clearer. In particular, some elites have recently published perspectives that seem to challenge Xi's position within the CCP by harkening back to Deng Xiaoping's policy of Reform and Opening. In isolation, these statements might be considered outliers, but taken together in the context of tight political control, they suggest that Xi's political position is less secure than is often assumed. Thus, the question is not whether Xi is being challenged, but how seriously. Xi's power may be sufficient to take on all comers, but these murmurs of opposition bear monitoring.

Xi's Push

Even before Xi took charge in 2012, his muscular brand of policy was evident in stepped up military adventurism and his role in the arrest of one-time rival and Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai ([People's Daily](#), September 22, 2013). Soon after taking charge, Xi launched a massive anti-corruption campaign and continued to purge officials. Notable early targets included internal security chief and former Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member Zhou Yongkang, United Front chief Ling Jihua, and Central Military Commission members Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou. [1] After downing these "Four Tigers," Beijing, in a bizarre incident in 2018, recalled Meng Hongwei from his position as head of Interpol without notice, only to arrest and imprison him ([Xinhua](#), January 21, 2020). Clearly, Xi prioritizes control over the CCP's internal and external security apparatus.

In 2020, Xi began a larger-scale purge, which netted two Shanghai "tigers": Public Security vice minister Sun Lijun and Shanghai vice mayor and police chief Gong Dao'an ([SCMP](#), January 13; [Xinhua](#), September 16, 2021; [WSJ](#), August 18, 2020). Notably, both Sun and Gong are considered part of the "Shanghai Gang" (上海帮, *Shanghai Bang*), a faction of officials with roots in Shanghai associated with former leader Jiang Zemin that is known for representing the interests of coastal elites and businesses ([China Leadership Monitor \(CLM\)](#), spring 2006). Prominent Pekingologist Cheng Li explains, "The first coalition, which was born from the Jiang era and is currently led by President Xi Jinping, can be named the Jiang-Xi camp." [2] It would seem that Xi has purged members of his own coalition, among others. If the Tiananmen Movement and collapse of Soviet Communism taught Beijing's leaders one thing, it is that to remain in power they must maintain control of the "organs and functions of dictatorship" (专政机关和专政职能, *Zhuanzheng jiguan he Zhuanzheng zhineng*).

[3]

Attorney Gao Guangjun highlights the arrests of Sun and Gong as part of an attack on former security czar and Politburo member Meng Jianzhu, who appears to retain influence in the all-important internal security apparatus ([VOA](#), January 18). In CCP culture, it is common to attack an official's lieutenants before moving on to the higher-level target themselves ([CLM](#), December 1, 2020). Ironically, commentator Yang Zhongmei identifies Meng (along with Jiang Zemin) as part of Xi's inner circle, while scholar Wu Guoguang places Meng in the

“pan-Shanghai Gang.” [4] This may be another case of Xi attacking “his own coalition,” but it is notable that Meng has yet to be arrested.

In the private sector, Ren Zhiqiang, a prominent real estate tycoon with close ties to CCP elites, was arrested in March 2020 after publicly criticizing Xi’s Covid response. Ren nominally called Donald Trump “a clown who stripped naked and insisted on being reelected,” but the context made clear that he was actually referencing Xi ([BannedBook.org](#), March 28, 2020; [BBC](#), September 22, 2020). For this affront, he was sentenced to 18 years in jail for “anti-Communist Party thoughts.” His downfall is indicative of how under Xi, the government conflates anti-Xi thought with corruption.

So then, is Xi’s anti-corruption campaign genuinely aimed at rooting out corruption, or does it center on neutralizing political enemies? In practice, these motives may be indistinguishable. Regarding Mao’s approach to purges, PRC historian Gao Hua wrote: “since the sluice of terror had already been opened, it made sense for him to seize the opportunity to crush all declared and potential opposition.” [5]

A Dengist Coalition?

Scholar Willy Lam provides a note of caution concerning Xi’s strength: “Xi’s control of the political-legal (政法, *zhengfa*) apparatus (the police, secret police, and judicial departments) has continued to be cast in doubt by the repeated replacements of senior cadres in the Ministry of Public Security.” Of the historic resolution, he points out: “Analysts are surprised that after the release of the Document on party history, which uses hagiographic language to glorify the strongman’s spectacular exploits—only a relatively small number of regional and PLA leaders have taken up the tradition of *biaotai* (“express fealty in public”) to sing Xi’s praises” ([China Brief](#), December 14, 2021).

In light of the obviously high cost of criticizing the regime (or even displaying insufficient loyalty), it is remarkable that multiple criticisms have emerged from official sources in recent months. On December 9, the *People’s Daily* carried an article by Qu Qingshan (曲青山), a member of the 19th Central Committee and president of the CCP’s Central Committee Party History and Literature Research Institute ([People’s Daily](#), December 9, 2021). In a clear slight, Qu fails to mention Xi even once while lavishing praise on Deng Xiaoping for modernizing China (e.g., [Twitter](#), January 5). Instead of echoing the resolution and focusing on Xi’s achievements, Qu fixates on a single line from the document: “Reform and Opening Was the Party’s Great Awakening,” which is headline the article appeared under. Reform and Opening was Deng’s program for the Chinese economy, which Qu refers to as a “great revolution,” a clear passing over of Mao, and by extension, Xi.

Qu also praises each previous paramount leader, even Hu Jintao, but not Xi. He claims that this “great Party awakening is based on *deep insight* into strategic trends,” pointing to Deng’s famous geostrategic assessment at the beginning of the reform era: “There will be no big wars, don’t be afraid, there is no strategic risk, we must be able to capture this opportunity and wholeheartedly focus on economic development.” Qu’s implication is

subtle—the international community was *and is still* friendly to China, and therefore the CCP should not make unnecessary enemies. Moreover, Xi has failed to grasp this key strategic insight.

Qu is not alone in raising questions about Xi's leadership. Wang Xiaodong (王小东), a well-known Chinese nationalist, publicly warned against Xi's bellicose foreign policy toward the United States ([Weibo](#), December 19, 2021). He stated that China would pay great costs and fall into strategic isolation should it unnecessarily antagonize the U.S. Wang continued, "We must prevent the world from reaching a consensus with the US to drive China out of the international circle, and we must also prevent such a consensus within the US, even if it means we have to pay a certain price, or even endure humiliation." Wang states outright what Qu alluded to: China must remain open to the world. A graduate of Beijing University, Wang is a prolific writer on Chinese politics and is considered "the banner" of contemporary Chinese nationalism by some. His warning suggests that Xi's policies face pushback on even from more hawkish voices in China.

In their criticisms of Xi, Qu and Wang notably focused on Deng's legacy of Reform and Opening. Under Xi, the CCP has revived once defunct Maoist practices such as "self-criticism" (自我批评, *ziwo piping*) ([People.cn](#), January 10, 2017). In many ways, Xi embodies the opposite of Deng's pragmatism and opening to the world. Within the CCP pantheon, Deng stands out as an antidote to Mao. For these writers to hearken back to Deng shows a search for alternatives to Xi.

One of the most remarkable criticisms of Xi came anonymously during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. The article, titled "Evaluate Xi Jinping Objectively," cites a number of Xi's failures and heralds his removal in 2022, or at the latest 2027 ([RFI](#), February 4).

Even more mainstream PRC voices are calling for greater moderation in China's conduct of its foreign policy, see for example, Tsinghua University Professor Yan Xuetong ([Tsinghua IIR](#), January 10; [Twitter](#), since removed), former ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai ([Sohu](#), December 24, 2021; [Nikkei Asia](#), January 13), senior foreign policy advisor Jia Qingguo ([Journal of International Security Studies](#), January), and political scholar Hu Wei (republished from [Liberation Daily](#), December 21, 2021). This resistance puts Xi's recent pact with Russia and support for Moscow in its war with Ukraine in a new light ([PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), February 4). It is possible that his opponents have painted him into a corner and, unable to pursue an opening to the West, he now sees Russian President Vladimir Putin as a troubled but nevertheless essential partner.

Mao's horrific Great Leap Forward and subsequent famine precipitated strong internal elite dissent and forced him to retire to the "second front" from 1962 to 1966 (退居二线, *tuiju erxian*). [6] If the "Great Helmsman" had to yield to internal criticism and temporarily accept a diminished role in the governance of China, Xi cannot be immune.

Xi's Power in Context

Xi's rule has produced several crises over the past two years, each arguably of his own making, including the failure of power generation in northeast China; a real estate crisis; pursuit of "Common Prosperity," a program of intensified state control over—and even elimination of—major industries, especially tech; botched attempts to pressure Australia economically and politically; the drag of "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy on the PRC's international reputation; the outbreak of Covid in Wuhan and the PRC's subsequent zero-COVID policy approach; and the emergence of an atmosphere of increased general repression. Propaganda can conceal many of these ills, but the Chinese government and public cannot have failed to notice the lacuna between their leader's words and deeds. Those hoping for a different future have ample ammunition against Xi, but is it enough? The operative example would be the (largely) bloodless 1976 coup that eliminated the radical Gang of Four from the leadership, paving the way for Deng's assumption of the core leadership position the following years Deng's victory over the radicals required a fair amount of luck and military support, but public desire to repudiate and move on from the Cultural Revolution made conditions ripe for success. [7]

The current PBSC consists of seven members: Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, Li Zhanshu, Wang Yang, Wang Huning, Zhao Leji, and Han Zheng. Cheng Li argues that this PBSC power distribution is six to one in Xi's favor, naming Li Keqiang as the sole member outside Xi's coalition. [8] However, PRC dissident and former CCP party member Cai Xia claims no more than ten percent of China's leadership class are part of the "Xi family army" (习家军 *Xi jia jun*), Xi's associates from past positions in Zhejiang, Fujian, Shanghai, and at Tsinghua University ([RFA](#), September 18, 2020). Cai is a well-known party academic and former professor in the CCP Central Party School who came to the U.S. from China in 2019. In 2020, the CCP expelled her for criticizing Xi ([SCMP](#), August 18, 2020).

Among the six PBSC members other than Xi, arguably only two are part of this "family army": Li Zhanshu and Zhao Leji. [9] According to Lam, Li Keqiang and Wang Yang belong to the Youth League faction ([China Brief](#), May 11, 2016). Han Zheng is a key member of the Shanghai Gang (or faction) and ideology czar Wang Huning maintains close ties with previous CCP leaders such as Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, Zhu Rongji, and Zeng Qinghong, elders who faithfully followed Deng's program for decades.

Certainly, Xi and the Shanghai faction have overlapping interests in many areas, but do not see eye-to-eye on every issue, especially economic matters. Cai Xia explains that "Li Keqiang and Wang Yang are working very hard to attenuate the damage [caused by Xi's policies] and manage the current crisis" ([Youtube](#), August 19, 2020). Cai's comment, coupled with her deep party connections, provides another perspective on the ongoing elite power struggle at the top echelons of the CCP. Given the evident high-level dissatisfaction with Xi's policies and rallying around Deng's Reform and Opening legacy, the support of the Shanghai faction so critical to Xi's coalition now comes into question. Xi's moves against security officials suggests his position is growing no firmer. The 20th Party Congress and events leading up to it should provide some clues. Is pushback continuing or even growing? Is Xi cracking down even harder?

After the Party Congress, a smaller PBSC of five members would demonstrate Xi's increased control. Increased representation from his "family army" would also be a sign of a more absolute level of control. Xi's longtime political rival, Premier Li Keqiang, will reach his two-term limit this year, although he may continue in a less critical position such as chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee. If Li Keqiang does not step down, or if Youth League representation holds steady after Li's departure (e.g., if Hu Chunhua is promoted to PBSC), this would indicate Xi's diminished power. Whether this would represent a temporary setback or a retreat would depend on what comes next.

Xi has pushed his agenda under the rubric of bold slogans like "China Dream," "the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese People," and "Community of Common Destiny." In reality, he has been leery of any influence that comes from outside the Party, including foreign capital and ideas [10] Xi would like China to continue to attract investment, but his insistence that foreigners publicly condone the CCP regime and its repressive policies will increasingly isolate China. The irony is that as much as the democratic world is struggling to decouple, Beijing is doing a better job at accelerating the process. As the democratic world rallies to cut off investment in China, the U.S. Congress's Uyghur Protection Act must seem an ominous harbinger of the pain Xi's policies are threatening to bring. It may even be that the dissenting officials have financial interests informing their stances, although the authors uncovered no direct evidence of such .

In sum, Bill Bishop's view remains the standard:

...it is even harder now than it was a few years ago to envision how any group can coalesce to do more than grumble...Xi is a terrific student of Mao and his methods of taking and maintaining power, and he has spent the last 9 years purging officials far down in the political and military systems... ([Sinocism](#), January 4).

Conclusion

As U.S. strategists, the authors believe that Xi's program of isolation will keep the U.S. and its network of allies and partners relatively stronger than the People's Republic, both worldwide and in the Indo-Pacific region. The CCP's belligerence has alienated countries around the world. Xi's collapsing international support will hem him in for the time being while his enforced isolation should prevent China from creating serious long-term challenges.

In the Mao era, questions swirled as to who would succeed the Chairman. Unlike Mao, Xi now faces questions about whether he will be able to maintain his own position. Growing resistance presages a succession crisis around the 20th Party Congress in the fall. Leadership selection had been more stable since Jiang Zemin, telegraphed by the selection of a younger vanguard prior to major changes. But the Party Congress remains a dangerous time. As with the 11th Central Committee in 1977, if Party leaders reach a consensus, changes are possible ([gov.cn](#) and [gov.cn](#), June 20, 2008).

Prime Minister Zhou Enlai once asked a visiting American, “Do you think China will ever become an aggressive or expansionist power?” When the American politely replied in the negative, Zhou retorted, “It is possible. But if China were to embark on such a path, you must oppose it. And you must tell those Chinese that Zhou Enlai told you to do so!” ([China Daily](#), September 2, 2011). Like Zhou, Deng represented a cure for Mao’s madness. If that curative power holds to the present day, China may yet see a new leader this year.

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The views expressed here are the authors’ own.

NOTES

[1] Shi Xunxuan, *四老虎密事：周永康、徐才厚、令計劃、郭伯雄* [Mystery of the Four Tigers: Zhou Yongkang, Xu Caihou, Ling Jihua, and Guo Boxiong] (Neimu Chubanshe (Mingjing), 2015).

[2] Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, October 18, 2016).

[3] “政法（中国共产党领导下国家的专政机关和专政职能） [Politics and Law (CCP-Led National Dictatorship Organs and Dictatorship Functions)],” *Baidu Baike*, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/政法/8804825>; Yuhua Wang and Carl Minzner, “The Rise of the Chinese Security State,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 222 (June 2015), 339-359; Guoguang Wu, “Continuous Purges: Xi’s Control of the Public Security Apparatus and the Changing Dynamics of CCP Elite Politics,” *China Leadership Monitor*, December 1, 2020.

[4] Yang Zhongmei, *中國即將發生政變* [China’s Impending Coup] (Taipei: Shibao Wenhua, 2011), 64

[5] Gao Hua (Stacey Mosher and Guo Jian, trans.), *How the Red Sun Rose: The Origin and Development of the Yan’an Rectification Movement, 1930–1945*, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2019), 19-20,

[6] Lowell Dittmer, *China’s Continuous Revolution: The Post-Liberation Epoch 1949-1981* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 36-37.

[7] Roderick MaFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006) Kindle Edition, location 6407.

[8] Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics*, 19.

[9] *Ibid.*, 53.

[10] See “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation,” *ChinaFile*. November 8, 2013.
<https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.