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**China and the International Arms Trade**

*By John S. Van Oudenaren and Yani Najarian*

**Introduction**

As the Russian military struggles to make headway in its invasion of Ukraine, U.S. and European Union officials have cited intelligence reports that Moscow has solicited military assistance from Beijing ([South China Morning Post](#), March 15). In addition to sorely needed supplies like ration packs, Russia requested weapon systems including surface to air missiles (SAMs), combat drones, and armored vehicles. People’s Republic of China (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Zhao Lijian vigorously denied reports that Moscow had asked Beijing for such assistance as “U.S. disinformation targeting China” ([PRC Embassy in the US](#), March 14).

Nevertheless, Russia has been interested in purchasing military technology in areas where China is a leader for some time including the Pterodactyl II (翼龙, *yi long*) combat drone, which is produced by the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC) ([Alexander Gabuev Twitter](#), March 15). However, negotiations will take time and such a deal is unlikely to rapidly materialize. If Russia does end up acquiring weapons from China it will be a major role reversal of the traditional pattern in the Sino-Russian arms trade. China has of course been a major buyer of Russian armaments, and increased its purchases when Moscow lifted its moratorium on sales of advanced weaponry following its military intervention in Ukraine in 2014; such curbs had previously been in place to forestall reverse engineering by China. In light of this major possible pendulum swing, what then is the state of China's arms export industry?



**(Image: A Pterodactyl II drone on display the 2021 Zhuhai Airshow in Guangdong Province (Source: [Xinhua](#))**

According to new data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China's arms exports from 2017 to 2021 registered a substantial decline of 31 percent on the previous five-year period with the PRC accounting for 4.6 percent of global arms sales after the U.S. (39 percent), Russia (19 percent), and France (11 percent) ([SIPRI](#), March). Until relatively recently, China had a reputation as a supplier of affordable and workable (but not state-of-the art) weapon systems including armored vehicles, light vessels, artillery, warplanes, and short-range missiles, many of which are based entirely or in part on reverse-engineered Russian or Soviet designs ([Nikkei Asian Review](#), December 20, 2019). However, in recent years, China has begun to export indigenously developed technologies such as the J10-C fighter jet to Pakistan and the aforementioned Pterodactyl II drones to several countries, starting with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2017 ([Global Times](#), February 20).

As sources in the Chinese defense community have noted, the UAE's use of the Pterodactyl II to conduct strikes in the Libyan Civil War highlights its combat effectiveness ([Sina](#), October 13, 2020). Although China has had some success in moving up the value chain in the global arms industry, its export still generally still lag topline competitors from the U.S. and Europe, and as result require greater after-sales service support than those from other suppliers ([VOA](#), October 21, 2021).

This piece surveys the Chinese defense industry's armaments exports to two of its primary international customers: Pakistan and Algeria. From 2017 to 2021, Pakistan increased its longtime stake as the large buyer of Chinese arms accounting for nearly half of all purchases. However, Algeria, which has historically been a major buyer, registered declining purchases over the same period, but there are signs that sales may rebound.

### **Pakistan**

Pakistan, which is among the PRC's closest strategic partners, accounted for 47 percent of China's total arms exports over the past half-decade. The PRC has increasingly supplied high-end military equipment to Pakistan, including JF-17 fighter jets, LY-80 SAMs and accompanying systems, A-100 multiple rocket launchers (MRLs), and both armed and unarmed UAVs. In terms of joint production, the two countries make anti-tank missiles, portable SAMs, missile boats, and tanks, among other weapons ([SCMP](#), July 4, 2021). Pakistan has also purchased eight type-041 submarines from China, which are the PRC's first air-independent propulsion submarines and considered among quietest diesel-electric submarines in service ([SIPRI Trade Register](#)). The acquisition of these eight new attack submarines, which are expected to be delivered from 2023-2028, will significantly increase the Pakistani Navy's ability versus the much larger Indian navy.

In February, images showing Chinese J-10C fighter jets with Pakistani air force markings circulated online ([Global Times](#), February 20). The People's Liberation Army (PLA) confirmed the reports, claiming the China-built J-10C fighter jets, "will give a significant boost to the Pakistan Air Force's combat compatibility and diversify its operational portfolio" ([China Military](#), March 14). Thus far, Pakistan has reportedly deployed six of the 25 J-10C fighter jets purchased from the PRC, as part of a \$1.4 billion deal ([SIPRI Trade Register](#)). Notably, the jets appeared to be equipped with China's domestically made WS-10B Taihang turbofan engines, making it the first Chinese export to use these engines- an alternative to the Russian AL-31F engine used in the J-10A and J-10B versions ([The Drive](#), February 15). Chinese military analysts described the J-10C fighter jets as more powerful than the JF-17, which was developed jointly between China and Pakistan, and is currently in service with the Pakistan Air Force.

The newly-inducted fighter jets participated in the annual military parade to celebrate Pakistan Day, held in Islamabad on March 23 ([Daily Pakistan](#), March 23). Attendees of the parade included not only Pakistani officials, but also members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), who are in Islamabad for the 48<sup>th</sup> Council of Foreign Ministers ([Dawn](#), March 23). As a special guest representative in the OIC, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also attended the event, as part of his regional tour, and met with Pakistani Prime Minister

Imran Khan the day prior. At the meeting, Wang claimed Beijing “stands ready to provide assistance within its capacity for Pakistan to overcome difficulties and recover its economy and push for more results in bilateral practical cooperation in all fields” ([PRC Embassy to the US](#), March 23). Beijing clearly seeks to increase defense cooperation with Pakistan, particularly as U.S.-Pakistan and China-India relations have worsened in recent years.

## **Algeria**

In comparison to the steady increase in sales to Pakistan, Chinese arms exports to Algeria have recently declined, accompanying an overall drop in Africa’s imports of Chinese arms. According to SIPRI data, Algeria—one of the top arms importers in Africa—accounted for 44 percent of Africa’s arms imports and 2.6 percent of the global amount in 2017-2021. This is a steep 37 percent decrease from its arms import levels in 2012-2016 ([SIPRI](#), March).

Over the past decade, Algeria has sought military equipment from Beijing to improve its position vis-a-vis its rival and North African neighbor Morocco, with whom it is engaged in a proxy conflict in Western Sahara and which is also a major importer of Chinese weaponry ([MEI](#), November 10, 2021). In recent years, Algeria has imported frigates, anti-ship, anti-tank, and surface-to-air missiles ([SIPRI Trade Register](#)). Algeria has also bought CH-4A UAVs, which are similar to the American Predator 2, and in January 2022, purchased six of the new CH-5 UAVs, which are China’s largest strike-capable drone reportedly able to counter the American MQ-9 Reaper UAV. Both types of drones are produced by the China Aerospace Science and Technology Cooperation (CASC) and illustrate China’s success exporting drones both to Algeria and Africa, which are “cheap and well designed to meet the demands of their potential clients” ([SCMP](#), January 29). Considered the PRC’s strongest partner in North Africa, Algeria has bolstered its relationship with China in order to increase defense and security cooperation amidst intensifying tensions with Morocco. In July 2021, the two agreed to deepen cooperation under the Belt and Road (BRI) Framework and began construction of Algeria’s El Hamdania Central Port, which will be the country’s largest, and Africa’s second, deep-water port ([Xinhua](#), July 19, 2021).

Despite this decline in arms sales to Algeria, SIPRI cites several pending deliveries of major arms, such as the corvettes, that could see China return to its strong position. Furthermore, in 2017-2021, Russia supplied 81 percent of Algeria’s global arms imports, providing an opportunity for China to fill the gap created by the Russia-Ukraine conflict ([SIPRI](#), March). Given Wang Yi’s recent visit with Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ramtane Lamamra, in which they confirmed “mutual support to issues inherent to their fundamental interests and concerns” ([Sahara Press Service](#), March 20), this decline is likely temporary.

## **Conclusion**

Sweeping international sanctions and export bans are likely to cut into Russia’s \$13 billion share of the international arms trade, which was about 19 percent of the global export market over the past half-decade

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([SIPRI](#), March). Given Russia's clientele of authoritarian or hybrid regimes in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, China would seem a logical candidate to fill in the gap. Notably, Algeria is only the country that both China share as a major arms export destination (see below chart). Upon closer examination, however, many of the major buyers of Russian arms appear unlikely to replace these purchases in favor of Chinese imports. Firstly, major Western arms exporters such as the U.S. and France have shown little compunction about exporting advanced military technology to authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and Africa, and are likely to capture much of any market share lost by Russia.

<b>China Top Arms Export Destinations (2017-2021): 4.6% of Total Global Sales</b>		<b>Russia Top Arms Export Destinations (2017-2021): 19% of Total Global Sales</b>	
<b>Country</b>	<b>Percent Total</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Percent Total</b>
<i><b>Pakistan</b></i>	46.7%	<i><b>India</b></i>	27.9%
<i><b>Bangladesh</b></i>	15.6%	<i><b>China</b></i>	21.1%
<i><b>Thailand</b></i>	4.9%	<i><b>Egypt</b></i>	12.6%
<i><b>Myanmar</b></i>	4.9%	<i><b>Algeria</b></i>	11.2%
<i><b>Morocco</b></i>	3.1%	<i><b>Vietnam</b></i>	4.0%
<i><b>Saudi Arabia</b></i>	3.1%	<i><b>Kazakhstan</b></i>	4.0%
<i><b>Nigeria</b></i>	2.2%	<i><b>Iraq</b></i>	2.9%
<i><b>Qatar</b></i>	1.9%	<i><b>Belarus</b></i>	2.8%
<i><b>Uzbekistan</b></i>	1.7%	<i><b>Angola</b></i>	1.5%
<i><b>UAE</b></i>	1.7%	<i><b>Turkey</b></i>	1.4%
<i><b>Algeria</b></i>	1.7%	<i><b>Syria</b></i>	1.2%
<i><b>Other</b></i>	12.6%	<i><b>Other</b></i>	9.5%

**Source:** [SIPRI Arms Transfers Database](#), 2017-2021

Almost half of all Chinese arms exports are destined for Pakistan, but its archrival India accounts for over a quarter of Russian arms exports. Vietnam is also a major customer of Russian armaments, but does not purchase Chinese arms due to the Sino-Vietnamese strategic competition over rival claims in the South China Sea. Consequently, neither India nor Vietnam will be able or willing to replace their Russian imports with Chinese alternatives and as a result will likely increase exports from European suppliers, or even the U.S. This process is already partially underway, especially India, which from 2017 to 2021, cut its imports of Russian arms by 47 percent and increased its imports from France tenfold ([SIPRI](#), March). Furthermore, continued concerns over the performance of Chinese-made weapon systems may put a damper on sales. As a result,

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where Chinese arms manufacturers may be able to capture some of the anticipated falloff in Russian exports to countries where China has already exported large amounts of arms such as Algeria and Myanmar, but will not necessarily capture new markets because of Russia's struggles.

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**Xi Jinping Ponders Aid to Russia even as Beijing Reaffirms its Quasi-Alliance with Moscow**

*By Willy Wo-Lap Lam*



**(Image: Russian President Vladimir speaks with his counterpart Xi Jinping via videoconference on December 15, 2021**  
**(Source: [TASS](#))**

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership has subtly changed the tone of its characterization of the Russian war against Ukraine. It is highly doubtful, however, that supreme leader President Xi Jinping will alter the substance of his basic Russian policy, which is to build a Sino-Russian axis against the eastward expansion of the U.S.-led Western coalition in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific theaters. Yet the kind and degree of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) economic and other types of assistance to Russia will not be finalized pending President Vladimir Putin's maneuvers as he seeks to overcome the failure of Russian forces to vanquish Ukrainian resistance one month into the war. The Xi leadership's wait and see approach to the conflict might change if a desperate Putin were to use chemical or biological weapons in Russia's "special military operations" against Ukraine. Chinese reactions will also be influenced by the outcomes of U.S. President Joe Biden's meetings with leaders of NATO, the EU, and the Group of Seven nations in Europe this week.

After the summit with Biden, NATO issued a statement calling on China "to uphold the international order including the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity... to abstain from supporting Russia's war effort in any way, and to refrain from any action that helps Russia circumvent sanctions" ([NATO](#), March 24). NATO members also discussed possible sanctions against China if it provides military support to the Kremlin. At the press conference after his meeting with NATO leaders, Biden doubled down on the fact that China would face

severe repercussions if it were to help Russia. Biden said he had made sure Xi “understood the consequences of him helping Russia.” Referring to the number of Western corporations that had pulled out of Russia due to its “barbarous behavior,” Biden added that Xi would be “putting himself in significant jeopardy” and that China’s economic relations with the U.S. and Europe would be endangered if it were caught supporting the Russian war effort. Additional measures against Russia announced on March 24 included sanctions on more than 400 Duma members, oligarchs, and Russian defense companies. NATO and EU leaders also considered kicking Russia out of the G20 group ([Global Net](#), March 25; [United Daily News](#), March 25; [The White House](#), March 24). A statement from G7 leaders meeting on the same day made no direct reference to China, but said: “We urge all countries not to give military or other assistance to Russia to help continue its aggression in Ukraine. We will be vigilant regarding any such assistance.” The EU leadership is also expected to issue a severe warning to China against bailing out Putin at an EU-China virtual summit on April 1 ([HK01.com](#), March 24; [Politico.eu](#), March 24; [VOA Chinese](#), March 12). Should the U.S. and its allies decide to deploy even more crippling sanctions against Russia, Xi might also reconsider scaling up China’s assistance to Moscow due to the heightened risk of secondary sanctions ([Ming Pao](#), March 24; [Cn.NYTimes](#), March 21; [HK01.com](#), March 21).

### **Beijing’s Balancing Act**

While adamantly refusing to label Moscow’s military actions in Ukraine as an “invasion,” Chinese cadres have focused their talking points on the PRC’s potential contribution to Russian-Ukraine peace talks as well as its role in providing the war-ravaged nation with humanitarian relief. In his interview with the American TV network CBS on March 20, Chinese Ambassador to the U.S. Qin Gang said: “we are against wars and we will do everything to de-escalate the crisis.” Qin also disclosed that in his conversation with Putin one day after the start of the military conflict, Xi urged the Russian side to begin peace talks with Ukraine. The ambassador repeated Beijing’s stance that “the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, including Ukraine, should be respected and protected;” ([Chinadiplomacy.org](#), March 21; [Radio Free Asia](#), March 21) Chinese Ambassador to Ukraine Fan Xianrong even went so far as to say that he “respects the path chosen by Ukrainians” and that he was impressed with “the unity of Ukrainians” ([Global Times](#), March 17). The Ukrainian media also quoted Fan’s remarks that “China will forever be a good force for Ukraine, both economically and politically.” The Chinese Foreign Ministry confirmed Fan’s “pro-Ukraine” statements ([Sohu.com](#), March 17; [Zaobao.com](#), March 17).

Even before the Biden-Xi video conference on March 19, Beijing had signaled that it would not provide economic or military aid to Russia. For example, the PRC has refused to limit the devaluation of the ruble in trading with the renminbi. The CCP leadership has also balked at converting some \$90 billion worth of Russian central reserves that are held in renminbi into U.S. dollars. Moreover, Beijing has apparently desisted from selling fighter jet components and other hardware to the Russian military ([Business-standard.com](#), March 23; [China Times](#), March 18; [BBC Chinese](#), March 15). At the same time, the People’s Bank of China and other Chinese financial institutions reportedly may have helped Moscow stash dollar-denominated securities and other reserve assets in off-shore tax havens ([Foreign Affairs](#), March 21). The Xi leadership is still weighing the



extent to which it will boost China's purchase of oil and gas as well as other commodities such as coal and wheat from its quasi-ally.

That adoption by Beijing of a more flexible policy toward Russia is evidenced by shifting narratives concerning the Ukraine war in state media and elite policy circles. Although official media has maintained a solidly pro-Russian editorial line, one branch of Beijing's CCTV reported on March 16 that the Ukrainian military had destroyed 1,700 Russian tanks and armored personnel carriers ([CCTV.com](https://www.cctv.com), March 16). Moreover, the government-controlled social media has allowed a number of key opinion leaders to post pro-Ukraine messages, if only for two to three hours. Influential personalities who have expressed opposition to the Russian invasion include third-generation princelings Ke Lan and Yi Qiwei; advisor to the State Council Hu Wei ([South China Morning Post](https://www.southchinamorningpost.com), March 14; [163.com](https://www.163.com), March 1); actresses Jiang Xin and Yuan Li ([qq.com](https://www.qq.com), March 25); and a dozen-odd academics such as Tsinghua University professor Sun Liping ([China Digital Times](https://www.chinadigitaltimes.com), March 2; [VOA Chinese](https://www.voachinese.com), March 1). Sun wrote in a post on his Weibo account that "Russia has already dropped out of the center of the world" and that "China must avoid being trapped" in its dealings with the Putin regime. Sun also warned that Beijing must beware of the fact that the world's supply chains have changed and that Russia and its supporters would be penalized ([Sunliping Weibo](https://www.sunliping.com), March 18). While no longer available online, these messages have been widely re-circulated in China's social media.

Due to Xi's personal closeness with Putin—and the fact that Beijing still considers Moscow a key partner with which to counter alleged efforts by the U.S. to build an "Asian NATO"—the Chinese leadership is unlikely to abandon the quasi-alliance with Russia. President Xi, who is the ultimate arbiter of foreign policy, has long been known as a hawkish figure who wants China to re-assume its status as the Middle Kingdom. Xi sees in Putin's Russia a natural ally to counter first the Trump, and now the Biden Administration's efforts to forestall China's transformation into a superpower by the mid-to-late 2030s ([Radio French International](https://www.radiofranceinternational.com), February 8; [Reuters](https://www.reuters.com), February 4). In his video conference with Biden on March 18, Xi imputed that the war in Ukraine stemmed from valid Russian concerns about the aggressive behavior of the U.S. and NATO. The Chinese media quoted Xi as telling Biden that "the U.S. and NATO should have a dialogue with Russia" so as to "ease the security concerns of both Russia and Ukraine." As the Western alliance has been the biggest supporter of Ukraine, there can be no mistaking Xi's basic attitude that NATO bears primary responsibility for the crisis. Xi also added that "it takes two hands to clap," thus showing his disagreement with the view that Russia was solely to blame for its Ukraine misadventure ([CGTN.com](https://www.cgtn.com), March 18).

### **Reasons for Caution**

The determination by Beijing over the degree of economic and even military assistance it will extend to Moscow depends partially on its risk perception of "secondary sanctions." The U.S. and its allies may opt to take such measures against the PRC if its assistance to Russia significantly diminishes the impact of international sanctions on the Putin regime. Despite Foreign Minister Wang Yi's claim that Beijing's policies toward Russia and Ukraine show that "China is on the right side of history," he indicated on March 11 that "China is not a party to the crisis, still less [does it] want to be affected by the sanctions" imposed on Russia ([China Daily](https://www.chinadaily.com), March 20;

[Xinhua](#), March 15). However, Biden's crucial European trip underscores the possibility that China might incur secondary sanctions for its ties to Russia. It is understood that Biden's discussions with U.S. allies will include possible joint measures to punish China should it come to Russia's rescue—or persevere with aggressive tactics in Indo-Pacific flashpoints such as Taiwan and the South China Sea. The White House is also working on a bipartisan “innovation” bill (also known as the “semiconductor bill”), which would provide tens of billions of dollars to help American firms attain goals including outcompeting their Chinese rivals in the high-tech sector, most of which have close connections with the People's Liberation Army ([SCMP](#), March 22; [BBC Chinese](#), February 9).

Beijing may also adopt a cautious attitude toward aid to Russia so as to gauge the kind of action the Western Alliance may take against the PRC in the event it deploys military means to absorb Taiwan. The linkage between Ukraine and Taiwan—and other Indo-Pacific flashpoints—was made clear when Biden sent a delegation of retired senior military and national security officers to visit Taiwan on March 1. During her talks with the delegation, which was led by retired Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen, Taiwan president Tsai Ing-wen expressed confidence in the “rock solid” ties between Taipei and Washington ([VOA Chinese](#), March 2; [Taiwannews.com](#), March 2). On March 20, Indo-Pacific commander Admiral John C. Aquilino expressed grave concerns about China's “full militarization” of three South China Sea islands. More sightings of U.S. naval vessels in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea have been reported of late ([SCMP](#) March 21; [Radio Free Asia](#), March 21). The navies of the U.S. and Philippines will also conduct one of their largest war games ever on March 28. Close to 9,000 personnel from both sides are due for two weeks of joint training in areas including maritime security, amphibious operations, and mock live-fire battles ([PNA.gov.ph](#), March 22). The Philippines is a major ASEAN country that has territorial disputes with the PRC.

### **Competing Priorities**

While stopping short of immediately providing massive economic and other kinds of aid to Russia, Beijing could also work on widening the split between the Western Alliance, and non-Western countries that have refused to condemn the invasion, on the other. India, Brazil, and South Africa, which are members of the BRICS bloc (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) have desisted from either condemning Moscow or supporting anti-Russian sanctions. In Asia, Vietnam, which, like India, depends on Russian arms imports, has also failed to join the U.S. and NATO's punitive actions against Moscow. A number of countries in Africa and the Middle East, particularly those which have benefited from either Chinese economic aid or Russian military hardware, have adopted Beijing's ambiguous stance on the Ukraine conflict ([Wall Street Journal](#), March 21; [Radio French International](#), March 5). The Chinese government has also tried to undermine international solidarity in condemning Russia, for example by lobbying Indonesian authorities to exclude Ukraine from discussion at the G20 meeting to be held in Bali later this year ([Chinanews.com](#), March 15; [Singtao Daily](#), March 15).

One overriding reason for why Xi may adopt a cautious attitude toward helping his old friend Putin is the former's eagerness to preserve economic stability in the run-up to the pivotal 20th Party Congress scheduled for this autumn. An exacerbation of the sanctions already imposed by the U.S. on wide swathes of the Chinese

economy—together with the possibility of a decoupling of supply chains between China and the Western alliance—could jeopardize Beijing’s goal of reaching a 5.5 percent increase in GDP growth this year. Steady economic performance and an improvement in the urban unemployment rate would go a long way toward justifying Xi’s ambition to be granted an unprecedented third (or even fourth) five-year term as the country’s supreme leader. Apart from issues such as Russian reluctance to sell top-of-the-line military technology to China and Moscow’s fear of Chinese colonization of the Russian Far East, there are areas where the core national interests of these two quasi-allies diverge. Despite Russia’s geopolitical importance to China’s efforts to fend off Washington’s “encirclement” policy, Xi must assess an array of domestic and other foreign-policy concerns when deciding the extent to which Beijing links its fate to an erstwhile superpower whose weaknesses have been fully exposed by its dictatorial leader’s atrocious miscalculations.

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**Using the Enemy to Train the Troops—Beijing’s New Approach to Prepare its Navy for War**

*By Ryan Martinson and Conor Kennedy*



(Image: The aircraft carrier Liaoning and other PLA surface ships at sea, source: [CGTN](#))

## Introduction

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has quietly changed the way it interacts with U.S. military forces in the Western Pacific. Instead of just tracking and monitoring U.S. ships and aircraft, demanding they leave sensitive areas, the PLA has embraced an approach that favors hostile encounters as preparation for future conflict with the United States. In PLA parlance, it is “using the enemy to train the troops”—*nadi lianbing* (拿敌练兵).

This is not a new approach. The term *nadi lianbing* has appeared in PLA sources since 2014. However, recent statements by the Ministry of National Defense (MoD) indicate that it has become enshrined as doctrine. At the MoD’s press conference on January 22, Senior Colonel Wu Qian highlighted the key aims of PLA training. The first is to “vigorously promote the deep coupling of operations and training.” Specifically, forces operating on the “front line in the military struggle” should “use the enemy to train the troops” ([PRC Ministry of Defense](#), January 27).

For the PLA, the front line in the peacetime “military struggle” is located along China’s maritime periphery: the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, South China Sea, and Philippine Sea. As a result, it is the air, surface, and

undersea forces of the PLA Navy (PLAN) that are chiefly tasked with implementing this new approach. What does *nadi lianbing* mean for the PLAN, and what are the implications for PLAN-U.S. Navy interactions at sea?

### **From Concept to Doctrine**

The notion of “using the enemy to train the troops” was first applied in undersea warfare. An August 2014 essay in *People’s Navy*, the PLAN’s official newspaper, highlighted the submarine force’s special function in “countering the powerful enemy” (应对强敌, *yingdui qiang di*), a common euphemism for the U.S. The author emphasized that the force should train like it will fight, which means it must “go to the battlefield of the future and boldly approach the opponent of the future...using the enemy to train the troops.” In his words, “training must be a rehearsal for war.” [1] In a January 2015 article, the political commissar of a submarine unit urged PLAN submariners to “take aim at the operational opponent,” recognizing that peacetime “confrontation with the powerful enemy is the most realistic training form.” The force should embrace a culture that favors “competing with the enemy, and using the enemy to train the troops.” [2]

The PLAN expanded this approach to the rest of the service following a November 2020 Central Military Commission (CMC) meeting on military training. In his remarks, President Xi Jinping called for the PLA to realize a “transformation in military training.” This precipitated a greater emphasis on training in general, with a particular focus on “realistic” training that better approximates the conditions of actual combat with a likely adversary ([Xinhua](#), November 25, 2020). Subsequently, the PLAN issued a document called “Decision on Accelerating the Promotion of Transformation of Navy Military Training and Constructing a New-Type Navy Military Training System.” The Decision took the concept of *nadi lianbing* from the shadowy world of undersea warfare and made it service doctrine. Henceforth, all components of the service would regard encounters with the “powerful enemy” as opportunities to bolster warfighting capabilities. [3]

### **Why Now?**

According to PLAN leaders, *nadi lianbing* is a direct response to an uptick in provocative U.S. behavior along China’s maritime periphery. The PLA has long complained about U.S. naval operations within the first island chain, but the Chinese military believes that U.S. activities have become more aggressive in recent years. According to the (unnamed) head of PLAN Training Bureau, “some countries have sharply increased their hostility towards China.” In the maritime realm, they have “continuously strengthened their targeted military deployments, frequently sent air and maritime forces to conduct close-in provocations, and have even organized air and maritime forces to ‘use China to train their troops,’ drilling warfighting methods and tactics.” [4]

Zhang Tianjing, a senior officer in the PLAN Operations Bureau, echoes these points in an August 2021 essay. Specifically, Zhang asserts that “ships and aircraft are frequently infringing the territorial waters and airspace of Chinese islands and reefs in the name of ‘freedom of navigation and overflight,’ warships have transited the Taiwan Strait multiple times, and military aircraft have conducted high-intensity flights adjacent to China’s near seas.” He describes these as “abnormal activities.” [5]

### **Approaches to *Nadi Lianbing***

*Nadi lianbing* is a “special training form” that exploits opportunities created by close encounters with the putative enemy. The head of the PLAN Training Bureau explains that this approach has two forms, one passive and one active (see note 4 for source information). With the passive approach, PLAN forces respond to provocative behavior by the enemy (因敌而动, *yin di er dong*), such as tactical exercises aimed at Chinese forces, taking steps short of kinetic force to defend against them. This approach likely involves all the skills required to thwart an attack, short of using force: e.g., intercepting inbound aircraft, maneuvering for tactical advantage, and perhaps jamming and other forms of electronic warfare.

The second form involves proactively seeking out (依我而动, *yi wo er dong*) nearby enemy forces during regular missions and using interactions to serve training purposes. That is, deployed PLAN forces would target enemy ships, aircraft, and submarines to complete required individual training, platform training, group (module) training, and combined group training. According to Zhang Tianjing, PLAN forces will “conduct real reconnaissance, real transmissions, real tracking, real aiming, and simulated attack, treating the enemy as a live target.”

*Nadi lianbing* is not limited to PLAN forces operating at sea in the Western Pacific. Escort task forces also now refer to the approach during training operations in the Indian Ocean. So too do coastal defense missile units, including those deployed to Chinese outposts in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.[6]

### **Benefits for the PLAN**

PLAN leaders believe that *nadi lianbing* can help bolster PLAN capabilities in a number of ways. [7] First and foremost, it ensures that training is realistic. In the words of one PLAN officer, the service gets to take on a “real blue team” (真实的蓝军, *zhenshi de lanjun*), instead of the poorly-simulated rendering of the enemy that is common in other forms of training. For example, *nadi lianbing* can bolster the PLAN’s ability to compete across the electromagnetic spectrum, that is, to ensure the performance of its reconnaissance and communications systems despite enemy efforts to degrade them, and to use electronic warfare to impair the enemy’s systems. According to one front page article in *People’s Navy*, the PLAN must “fully exploit scenarios in which the enemy engages in electromagnetic confrontation against China to conduct countermeasures, test the boundary capabilities of China’s various types of weapons and equipment, and let front-line sailors practice synergizing their efforts and practice their technical skills in a near realistic environment of counter-interference, counter-attack, and counter-reconnaissance.”

But *nadi lianbing* is about more than just training technical skills. The PLAN believes that hostile encounters with the enemy will help strengthen the “fighting spirit” of PLAN sailors. PLA commentators often highlight the

existence of a “peace disease” (和平积弊, *heping jibi* or 和平病, *heping bing*) within the ranks, and they see close contact with the enemy as one way of treating this malady. CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia amplified this point in a November 2021 essay, citing the value of using *nadi lianbing* as a means to instill the “martial courage” (血性, *xue xing*) needed to fight and win a great power conflict ([People’s Daily](#), November 30, 2021). *Nadi lianbing* provides opportunities to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the adversary. As the head of the PLAN Training Bureau describes, hostile encounters allow the PLAN to “discover the ins and outs of the enemy’s combat capabilities.” By provoking a response, the service can gauge the enemy’s “principled red lines” (原则底线, *yuanze dixian*) and analyze the command styles and response speed of individual enemy commanders. The political commissar of the PLAN’s Type-055 cruiser *Nanchang* highlights the importance of collecting, analyzing, and using data collected during at-sea confrontations with U.S. forces, in order to develop a “brain trust” (智囊团, *zhinang tuan*) of PLAN experts specializing on the “powerful enemy” (强敌通, *qiang di tong*). According to Zhang Tianjing, effective use of *nadi lianbing* sheds light on current U.S. operational concepts, such as distributed lethality and mosaic warfare, which he describes as “posing a fairly large challenge” to the PLAN. With this knowledge, the Chinese military can develop plans to counter likely U.S. approaches in the event of a real conflict.

*Nadi lianbing* also helps the PLAN learn about its own shortcomings. Some of these “weak links”—as Zhang Tianjing describes them—are already apparent to the PLAN. In his words, the PLA’s reconnaissance and early warning capabilities remain “fairly weak,” its target identification capabilities are “inadequate,” the challenge of configuring kill chains for long-range precision strikes remains “fairly difficult,” PLAN tactics are “comparatively simplistic and meager,” and “precise coordination” between services is still a problem when conducting joint operations. Zhang writes that these problems must be remedied so that the PLAN can effectively support the types of integrated joint operations the PLA intends to conduct against the U.S.: multi-domain precision warfare (多域精确战, *duo yu jingque zhan*), cross-domain joint operations (跨域联合战, *kua yu lianhe zhan*), and area-denial warfare (区域拒止战, *quyu ju zhi zhan*).

### **No Risk, No Reward**

PLAN leaders fully acknowledge that *nadi lianbing* carries risk. According to one surface warfare officer, when PLAN forces deploy to the front line, the “battlefield” and the “training field” overlap. As a result, although *nadi lianbing* provides a valuable learning opportunity, it also heightens the risk of an “inadvertent armed clash” (擦枪走火, *ca qiang zouhuo*). [8] In a 2020 article, a senior PLAN submarine unit leader highlighted the need for balance in *nadi lianbing*: “if things are pushed too hard, there is a concern about exceeding the scope of ‘training’; but if things are pushed too soft, then the ‘training’ aims cannot be achieved.”

In his guidance, the head of the PLAN Training Bureau prescribes methods to “avoid friction and conflict” when applying the new approach. The PLAN should, for example, “strictly control the use of weapons” and take special care when organizing live fire exercises. However, he suggests ambiguity about using the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), a 2014 agreement designed to reduce risky encounters between signatory countries (including the U.S. and China). In his June 7 guidance, he stated the service must “strictly obey” CUES and other such regulations. However, the following day he called for the “flexible application” of CUES, implying that PLAN forces would abide by the Code only when it suited their needs.

PLAN leaders perceive risk through the lens of the global balance of power, which is changing in a way “not seen in a hundred years.” That is, they see China as rising, while the U.S. is declining. In his August 2021 article, Zhang Tianjing cites the damaging impact of COVID-19 on the U.S. economy and concludes the U.S. is looking for a “strategic opening” to arrest its descent and maintain its status as a global hegemon. Thus, the PLAN “could not rule out” that the U.S. might manufacture an incident to cause a conflict or even a regional war. Despite these concerns, PLA leaders clearly believe that the potential rewards of hostile encounters with the U.S. military outweigh the risks.

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*This article reflects the personal opinions of the authors and not the official assessments of the U.S. Navy or any other U.S. government entity.*

### **Notes**

[1] 王红理 [Wang Hongli], 能打胜仗是最大的担当 [“Being Able to Win Battles is the Biggest Undertaking”], 人民海军 [People's Navy], August 29, 2014, p. 4.

[2] 李云平 [Li Yunping] 把握使命任务特点持续培育战斗精神 [Grasp the Characteristics of the Mission to Continue to Cultivate the Combat Spirit] 政工学刊 [Zhengong Xuekan], no. 1, 2015, p. 51.

[3] 敢打善拼制强敌 [“Bold Enough to Take on the Powerful Enemy”], 人民海军 [People's Navy], September 7, 2021, p. 1.



[4] 王世建 [Wang Shijian], 进一步提高部队训练质效和打赢能力 [“Do More to Improve the Quality and Effectiveness of the Force’s Training and Ability to Fight and Win”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], June 7, 2021, p. 1.

[5] 张天敬 [Zhang Tianjing] 拿敌练兵主要“练什么” [“The Gist of ‘What We Train’ When We Use the Enemy to Train the Troops”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], August 10, 2021, p. 3.

[6] Information on escort task forces and *nadi lianbing* is derived from 刘冬冬, 石小强, 王宗洋 [Liu Dongdong, Shi Xiaoqiang, Wang Zongyang], 第38批护航编队开展实际使用武器训练 [“38th Escort Task Force Conducts Weapons Training”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], August 11, 2021, p. 1; 孙飞, 方智坤 [Sun Fei, Fang Zhikun], 薪火传承 激发打赢热情 – 南部战区海军某岸导团利用红色资源提升教育质效 [“Continuing to Fuel the Fire to Inspire Enthusiasm for Winning – A Shore-to-Ship Missile Regiment of the Southern Theater Navy Uses Red Resources to Improve the Effectiveness of Education”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], July 21, 2021, p. 2.

[7] Information in this section on how *nadi lianbing* may bolster the PLA’s capabilities is derived from the following sources: 本报评论员 [Anonymous Columnist] 坚持战训一致助力训练转型 [“Persist with the Unity of Operations and Training to Support a Transformation in Training”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], June 4, 2021; 刘志刚 [Liu Zhigang], 立足实战实案, 紧盯新质新域求突破 [“Ground Ourselves in Real Combat and Real Cases, Focus on New Qualities and New Domains to Seek Breakthroughs”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], June 22, 2021, p. 1; 张校邦 [Zhang Xiaobang] 破“心中之敌”, 深入纠治和平积弊 [“Destroy the ‘Enemy in the Heart,’ Rectify Peace Disease”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], June 5, 2021, 1; 赵宝石 [Zhao Baoshi], 把握关键环节 提升打赢能力 [“Grasp the Key Links and Improve Our Ability to Win in War”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], June 8, 2021, p. 1; 陈维工 [Chen Weigong], 深化强敌研究, 培养知彼胜彼的“智囊团” [“Deepen Research on the Strong Enemy and Cultivate ‘Think Tanks’ that Can Understand the Enemy to Defeat The Enemy”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], July 16, 2021, p. 1; Zhang, “The Gist of ‘What We Train’ When We Use the Enemy to Train the Troops.”

[8] Information on the PLA’s risk versus reward calculus on *nadi lianbing* is derived from the following sources: 杨黎明 [Yang Liming], 以战载训砥砺胜战刀锋 [“Use Operations to Advance Training and Sharpen the Blade of Victory”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], April 29, 2020, p. 3; 徐杰 [Xu Jie], “以敌为师”漫谈 [“Ramblings on ‘Using the Enemy as a Teacher’”], 政工学刊 [Zheng Gong Xue Kan], no. 5, 2020, p. 75; Wang, “Do More to Improve the Quality and Effectiveness of the Force’s Training and Ability to Fight and Win;” Zhao, “Grasp the Key Links and Improve Our Ability to Win in War;” Zhang, “The Gist of ‘What We Train’ When We Use the Enemy to Train the Troops.”

## The Beijing Olympics in Retrospect: An Anti-Human Rights Politics Machine

*By Christelle Genoud*



(Image: Dinigeer Yilamujiang (left), a skier of Uyghur ethnicity, serves as torchbearer at the opening of the Beijing Olympics on February 4, Source: [China Daily](#) )

### Introduction

As the U.S. and other Western nations announced diplomatic boycotts of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the People's Republic of China (PRC) frequently exhorted the international community to keep politics out of the games ([People's Daily](#), December 8, 2021). Spokespersons of the Beijing Organizing Committee also objected to the "politicization" of the Olympic Games, and claimed that the closed loop Olympic bubble was solely a COVID-19 containment measure necessitated by growing concerns over the spread of the Omicron variant in China ([Global Times](#), January 5). Although, the creation of a closed loop bubble was ostensibly undertaken for epidemic prevention purposes, it also had the impact of isolating athletes and journalists, and forestalling unwanted international focus on poor human rights conditions in China.

The PRC was not alone in promoting an apolitical Olympics. The President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Thomas Bach has repeatedly insisted that sports are not about politics. Indeed, Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter bans any form of political protest, stating, "no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas" ([IOC](#), November 2021). While

the rule is controversial and has been the subject of numerous debates, the IOC reiterated its relevance in the context of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. Furthermore, as strongly underscored by Chinese state media, other countries joined China and the IOC's calls to keep sports and politics separate. Russian President Vladimir Putin, Czech President Milos Zeman, the Cambodian government, and the national Olympic Committees of Cyprus and Montenegro have all described politics as staining the purity of sport and impeding its broader unifying purpose ([Global Times](#), January 16; Xinhua, January [21](#), [26](#), and [30](#); [China Daily](#), January 27). Even French President Emmanuel Macron suggested that politics ought to be separated from sport, when he announced that France would not participate in the diplomatic boycott of the Beijing games ([LeMonde](#), December 9, 2021). The United Nations Secretary General also stated that the Olympic message of unity and peace is more relevant than political circumstances in the host nation ([IOC](#), February 5).

Of course, in the context of the Beijing Olympics, politicization meant raising human rights issues, such as the plight of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, which some countries including the U.S. cited as their reason for not sending official delegations to the opening ceremony ([The White House](#), December 6, 2021). Chinese authorities warned that athletes whose words and actions contravene domestic laws may be punished, prompting fears of repercussions for speaking out on sensitive issues ([South China Morning Post](#), January 19). In addition, all participants in the Olympics were required to use MY2022, an app that includes features for users to report “politically sensitive” content and imposes a censorship keyword list containing a variety of political topics including issues such as Xinjiang and Tibet ([The Citizen Lab](#), January 18). In this context, athletes overwhelmingly stayed quiet during the games, with only a few raising concerns over human rights on their return back home ([China Digital Times](#), February 23; [Straits Times](#), February 9).

### **The CCP's Human Rights Narrative and the Utopia of an Apolitical Games**

Although it has pressured others not to “politicize” the Olympics, Beijing has hardly abstained from using the Games to send political messages on human rights. For example, a Uyghur skier was chosen to light the cauldron at the Olympics opening ceremony ([China Daily](#), February 7). This episode illustrates the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) tendency to use human rights to enhance its legitimacy. For instance, the CCP's White Paper on “human rights protection,” which was published on its centenary, claims that “for a hundred years, the CCP has always put people first, applying the principle of universality of human rights in the context of the national conditions,” twisting facts not only pertaining to its historical record, but also on the very concept of human rights set forth by former Chairman Mao Zedong ([State Council](#), June 24, 2021).

In fact, since the international backlash following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the CCP has spared no effort to present its narrative to the world through its White Papers on human rights. [1] A common feature of these White Papers is to focus on economic development as the best way to promote human rights. For example, in touting Beijing as the first city to successfully host both the Summer and Winter Olympics, Chinese state media adopts a triumphalist tone calling the “Beijing Winter Games a victory for humanity” ([China.org](#), February 4).

Recently, Beijing has been very active in the U.N. Human Rights Council seeking to advance the concept of “human rights with Chinese characteristics,” which some Western countries oppose on the grounds that the PRC erodes such rights by denying universalism, privileging the State over the individual, and enforcing a restrictive vision of development. [2] The Olympics provided the Chinese government with the opportunity to further contextualize human rights within broader ideological frameworks such as the CCP’s vision of building a “shared future for mankind.” [3] For example, state-run media made repeated claims such as “the Winter Olympics has highlighted the common values of peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy and freedom, which are essential to build a community with a shared future for mankind” ([China Daily](#), February 19).

China’s alternative conception of human rights challenges the liberal principles that have prevailed since 1945. Importantly, debate over human rights is occurring amidst the broader transformation of the world order, wherein China is asserting an increased role commensurate with its economic and demographic weight. In this vein, following the announcement of the U.S. diplomatic boycott, the pro-Beijing China Society for Human Rights Studies published a report that not only criticizes the politicization of human rights, but more broadly aims to legitimize its understanding of appropriate human rights governance. “Measures taken purposely to politicize human rights issues could prove fatal to global human rights governance. This has become a fundamental consensus reached by the international community on human rights,” it claimed ([China Society for Human Rights Studies](#), December 27, 2021). Consequently, not speaking about human rights during the Olympics and allowing China to conduct the games on its own terms are the very political choices that enhance Beijing’s capacity to promote its vision of human rights.

### **Rights Become Political When They Are Denied**

Academics working on the politics of human rights highlight how the effective and meaningful defense of these rights is inseparable from daring political stances. In contrast to the common idea that human rights are mainly moral and legal instruments, these researchers underline that human rights are political claims from the moment that they are denied, and this denial is contested. [4] For Balibar, human rights are political because they always suppose that an existing social order is questioned. [5] In this sense, political approaches are essential to put human rights into practice. [6] To ensure implementation, it is necessary to think beyond the impasse of contemporary “anti-politics.” [7] As a result, the idea that remaining silent on human rights avoids politicization of the Olympics not only constitutes an essential part of the maintenance of the current status quo of ongoing human rights violations, but is also the very political stance that allows China to maintain its legitimacy as a powerful stakeholder on the international scene.

From a genuine implementation perspective, the real issue with human rights criticisms is not that they risk politicizing the games—the Olympics have always been very political throughout history. Rather, such criticisms underscore the downsides of partial, risk-averse, and incoherent human rights advocacy. [8] In light of official positions taken by Olympic stakeholders, all parties have shirked responsibility for Beijing’s ability to host the games absent any significant improvement in China’s human rights record. For example, the IOC President

has equivocated, claiming that “Neither awarding the Games, nor participating, are a political judgment regarding the host country,” while simultaneously maintaining that “at all times, the IOC recognizes and upholds human rights” (IOC; [The Guardian](#), October 24, 2020). When asked to divest from the Beijing Olympics, sponsors such as Airbnb and the watchmaker OMEGA have argued that their agreements are long-term deals with the IOC that extend beyond single games ([Airbnb](#); [OMEGA](#)). Those governments conducting diplomatic boycotts of the games have also explained that full boycotts would hurt athletes for naught, with some commentators citing the unsuccessful 1980 Moscow Olympics boycott as a cautionary example. Governments who opted out of mounting any kind of boycott against Beijing claimed they did so because the diplomatic impact of such moves would be limited. Around 2,700 athletes accepted censorship restrictions in order to participate in the games, and some have spoken their minds on the very uncomfortable situation that the IOC has put them in. However, in the end, fulfilling their Olympic dream supersedes promoting human rights. And no clear sign of disapproval came from the audience who vibrated with the magic of sport. [9] Yet, as no individual bears responsibility, everyone is partially complicit.

### **Conclusion**

No solid ground exists to believe that not raising human rights would allow the Olympics to remain apolitical. In addition, there is a paradox in paying lip service to human rights while calling for apolitical games, because genuine implementation of human rights demands political involvement. Similarly to Ferguson’s observation—that depoliticizing development and poverty strengthens state power—the Olympics are a telling example of how trying to depoliticize sports and human rights has only reinforced the power of the CCP, both in China and abroad. [10]

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### **Notes**

[1] Since 1991, following the increasing international criticism of China’s human rights record and cumulating with the crackdown of peaceful protest on Tiananmen square, the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China has issued White Papers explaining its vision of various human rights issues. As these White Paper target the foreign audience, they are accessible in English: <http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper>.

[2] See Rana Siu Inboden, *China and the International Human Rights Regime: 1982-2017* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Rosemary Foot, *China, the UN, and Human Protection: Beliefs, Power, Image* (Oxford, UK: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2020); Sophie Richardson, "China's Influence on the Global Human Rights System: Assessing China's Growing Role in the World," *Brookings Institution*, September 2020, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FP\\_20200914\\_china\\_human\\_rights\\_richardson.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/FP_20200914_china_human_rights_richardson.pdf).

[3] For an example of how the Chinese government uses the concept, see the White Paper "China: Democracy that Works" available at: [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202112/04/content\\_WS61aae34fc6d0df57f98e6098.html](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202112/04/content_WS61aae34fc6d0df57f98e6098.html). For further explanation of the Chinese language on human rights, see [https://rwi.lu.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Decoding-China-Publication\\_FINAL.pdf](https://rwi.lu.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Decoding-China-Publication_FINAL.pdf).

[4] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[5] Etienne Balibar, "On the Politics of Human Rights," *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory* 20, no. 1 (March 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1111/cons.12018>.

[6] James D. Ingram, "What is a 'Right to have Rights'? Three Images of the Politics of Human Rights," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 4 (November 2008): 401-416, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055408080386>.

[7] Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012).

[8] Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[9] These lackluster reactions contrast the current sanctions imposed by numerous sport organizations against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. It is worth noting that the anti-war speech of the Paralympic Committee President Andrew Parsons during the Paralympic opening ceremony was censored by CCTV.

[10] James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

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## Organized Crime on the Belt and Road

*By Martin Purbrick*



**(Image:** *Police remove a woman arrested for internet fraud from a charter plane following her extradition to China from Southeast Asia* (**Source:** China.org.cn)

### Introduction

The continued rapid economic growth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the past decade has brought greater commerce and investment to Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, as China's overseas economic footprint has grown, Chinese organized crime groups have also expanded their activities to become a regional problem. President Xi Jinping first introduced the BRI in 2013 when he proposed to Asian leaders jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, both of which PRC officials later commonly came to call the BRI. The expansion of Chinese organized crime across Asia encompasses multiple areas of activity: online fraud (including pyramid schemes), online gambling, human trafficking (for slavery and prostitution), animal or animal parts trafficking (for use in traditional Chinese medicine), and money laundering (of the proceeds of crime from the PRC).

Online fraud has been a particular concern for Beijing due to its massive scale. In May 2021, Chinese state media published announcements from the senior state leadership highlighting concerns over the extent of online fraud, much of which is conducted by Chinese criminals operating outside the country ([Xinhua](#), May 8, 2021). Xi reportedly called for further efforts to prevent telecommunications and online fraud at the source, mobilize efforts from all relevant departments and the public, and fully implement all prevention and crackdown

measures. Premier Li Keqiang reportedly instructed that efforts should be continued to consolidate the country's achievements in cracking down on telecom and online fraud in order to better safeguard the safety of people's property and their legitimate interests. This was in response to data from the Ministry of Public Security showing that in 2020, authorities took action on 322,000 cases related to telecom and online fraud, arresting 361,000 suspects and saving the public approximately 187 billion yuan (\$28.53 billion) in economic losses ([Ministry of Public Security](#), April 10, 2021).

Illegal online gambling has grown to extraordinary levels across Asia, fueled by a huge market in the PRC. The Asian Racing Federation (ARF) has identified a "New Golden Triangle" of illegal betting (on sports) and gambling (games of chance) established first in the Philippine and then moving to Cambodia with illicit operations now shifted to Myanmar ([Asian Racing Federation](#), May 2021). The ARF Council noted that the People's Bank of China estimated that as much as CNY 1 trillion (a staggering \$150 billion) in illicit proceeds flows out of China annually due to illegal betting. As *China Brief* previously chronicled, the Ministry of Public Security announced in January 2021 that over 600 suspects involved in illegal online gambling were repatriated by Chinese police in collaboration with counterparts in countries including the Philippines, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Vietnam over the course of 2020 ([China Brief](#), February 25; [State Council](#), January 6, 2021). Per the Ministry of Public Security, Chinese police investigated 17,000 cross-border gambling and related cases, arrested 110,000 suspects, and took action against 3,400 online gambling platforms and over 2,800 illegal payment platforms and underground banks ([State Council](#), April 8, 2021). Clearly the scale of the criminal problem was also an economic problem, especially since gambling is often used to circumvent China's strict controls on capital outflows.

Although the operation of Chinese organized crime groups has spread across Asia, the vast majority of victims and targets of their criminal activities are invariably within the borders of the PRC, which has become a significant problem for authorities. Substantial levels of organized crime activity are present in multiple countries across Asia where growing Chinese expatriate communities are present due to the PRC's economic expansion across the region. The most notable locations are Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and the Philippines.

### *Cambodia*

In Cambodia, recent evidence indicates that Chinese organized crime groups engaged in online fraud, internet gambling, human trafficking, and money laundering, all of which are standard areas of business for criminal groups. Sihanoukville has experienced fast economic growth largely because of its position as the only deep-water port in Cambodia, which is of strategic importance to the BRI, but amidst this rapid development, large numbers of Chinese criminals have gravitated to the city operating casinos, online gambling, and online fraud.

The most shocking recent case, which was publicized in the PRC news media, concerns a Chinese man who responded to a job advertisement on recruitment platform 58.com to work as a security guard in Guanxi Zhuang autonomous region. He was kidnapped, taken to Cambodia, and sold to a gang that was operating online



fraudulent gambling targeting Chinese nationals ([Caixin](#), February 21). Once in Cambodia, the victim was allegedly detained and used as a “blood slave” ([PRC Embassy in Cambodia](#), February 16).

The large number of casinos that appeared in Sihanoukville appear to have been a major part of development of the criminal hub in the city. A 16-year-old girl, also from Guanxi, recounted how she was recruited while gaming online and asked to take a job further south in China, but was taken via Vietnam to Sihanoukville where she was imprisoned in a casino and forced to conduct online fraud that targeted other Chinese nationals. The fraud involved using *Douyin*, the Chinese version of TikTok, to convince internet users that they would be paid for liking content on the social networking platform after paying an advance fee ([South China Morning Post](#), January 30).

The boom in Chinese organized crime in Cambodia since 2016 has spurred authorities in both countries to undertake joint law enforcement action. As of August 2019, almost one thousand Chinese nationals had been arrested, including 115 suspected of telecom fraud and 335 suspected of illegal online gambling operations. In January 2020, the Cambodian government banned all online gambling ([Caixin](#), March 4).

### *Malaysia*

Malaysia has been a hub for Chinese organized crime outfits engaged in online fraud and phone scams. In November 2019, the Malaysian Immigration Department arrested 680 suspected Chinese nationals in a raid on a facility in Cyberjaya town, Selangor state. The location was the call center run by a criminal group that had been operating for six months targeting victims in the PRC with advance fee frauds that use Chinese banks and WeChat mobile payments for their transactions ([China Daily](#), November 23, 2019).

Chinese organized crime activity in Malaysia includes criminals from the Republic of China (Taiwan), which has produced a remarkable number of fraudsters in the past several decades. Geopolitical relations are intertwined with law enforcement as the Malaysian authorities have in the past extradited ROC (Taiwanese) nationals to the PRC. In November 2016, the Mainland Affairs Council of the ROC protested against the extradition of 21 Taiwanese nationals from Malaysia to the PRC after they were sought in connection with telecommunications fraud and money laundering ([Mainland Affairs Council](#), November 2016).

Online fraud gangs are not the only organized crime activity in Malaysia; more organized criminal groups belonging to triad societies—secret societies originating in Southeast China that function as transnational criminal organizations—are present as well. In November 2021, the Royal Malaysian Police arrested 68 people alleged to be members of a gang led by Nicky Liow, a wanted fugitive, for suspected money laundering and other offences ([Royal Malaysian Police](#), March 30, 2021). Liow is also wanted for bribing officers of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, and reported to be vice-chairman of the “World Hongmen History and Culture Association” (世界洪门历史文化协会, *Shijie hongmen lishi wenhua xiehui*) ([South China Morning Post](#), October 5, 2021).

Wan Kuok Kui, a convicted leader of the Macau faction of the 14K triad, founded the “World Hongmen History and Culture Association” in March 2013. The Association has the defined purpose “To love the nation, organize cultural exchange activities in various places, and pass on the history and culture of the Revolution of 1911,” and membership is for “Anyone who loves to study the history of the Revolution of 1911 and can actively participate in the event and is willing to abide by the chapter and be approved by the board of directors” ([Macau SAR Government](#), April 3, 2013).

In February 2018, Wan said he planned to establish a “Hongmen Security Company” for Chinese merchants on the “One Belt One Road” initiative and that the motto of the Association is “loving and supporting the country, Macau, and Hong Kong” ([Macau Business](#), February 23, 2018). Wan said in his speech, leaked in a video clip, that “I will do my utmost to promote the national policy and assist in whatever way for peaceful and united cross-straits relations.” Later in 2018, Wan announced that the headquarters of the Association were located in Cambodia, that it would issue “Hongmen cryptocurrency” as part of its e-commerce business, and establish schools for ethnic Chinese living in other countries to learn Chinese culture.

Wan’s malign influence has recently attracted international attention. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Treasury added his name to the list of “Specially Designated Nationals” who are subject to “Magnitsky sanctions” ([U.S. Department of Treasury](#), December 9, 2020). U.S. authorities stated that Wan “is a member of the Communist Party of China’s (CCP) Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, and is a leader of the 14K Triad, one of the largest Chinese organized criminal organizations in the world that engages in drug trafficking, illegal gambling, racketeering, human trafficking, and a range of other criminal activities. In addition to bribery, corruption, and graft, the 14K Triad has engaged in similar illicit activities in Palau” ([U.S. Department of Treasury](#), December 9, 2020).

### *Myanmar*

Following pressure from authorities, first in the Philippines and later in Cambodia, many organized crime groups that operate online gambling rings have migrated to Myanmar. The *Saixigang* Industrial Zone Project in Karen state involves Wan Kuok Kui heading the Dongmei Group Company, the key investor in the Saixigang Zone. *Saixigang* was reportedly established to accommodate Chinese businesses forced out of Cambodia by the crackdown in cooperation with the PRC authorities ([United States Institute for Peace](#), April 20, 2020).

Yatai New City in Karen state is funded by Hong Kong registered company “Yatai International Holdings Group.” The chairman of the company is Mr. She Kailun, reportedly a fugitive in China who is wanted on illegal gambling related charges ([Caixin](#), October 26, 2020). Yatai City is promoted as an industrial and entertainment complex that will accommodate services including tourism, commerce, logistics, finance, and technology development that is part of China’s wider BRI. In reality, Yatai City hosts online gambling facilities that are invariably intended for the PRC gambling market.

The Huanya International City Project, which is located in Karen National Union (KNU) controlled territory in the city of Myawaddy, involves KNU officials partnering with Chinese investors from the Huanya Company. The project includes construction of a large casino, which has already started, and is almost certainly targeted at customers from the PRC ([United States Institute for Peace](#), April 20, 2020). These projects publicly claim to be operating as part of the BRI, although in reality this is likely to an attempt at boosting their legitimacy and would not carry any weight with PRC law enforcement agencies.

### *The Philippines*

The Philippines was the main hub for online illegal betting operators in Asia from the mid-2000s, but a report in 2020 highlighted the financial crime risks associated with this business, stating that more than a quarter of the approximately \$1 billion in annual online gambling operator-related transactions were linked to suspicious criminal activity ([Philippines Anti-Money Laundering Council](#), March 2020). The report also flagged substantial criminal risks, including 63 gambling-related kidnapping cases from 2017 to 2019, which involved Chinese businessmen engaged in online gambling.

The PRC has acted against Chinese criminals active in the Philippines. The PRC Embassy in Manila announced in February 2020 that the Ministry of Public Security had obtained a list of Chinese nationals suspected of committing telecommunication fraud abroad whose passports were cancelled so that they could no longer leave the PRC ([Embassy of the PRC in the Philippines](#), February 24, 2020). The problem of Chinese criminality in the Philippines has also been driven greater law enforcement cooperation between both sides.

In September 2021, the PRC Embassy in the Philippines announced it would work with local authorities to jointly crack down on cross-border gambling, telecom and internet fraud, kidnapping, robbery, homicide, and other criminal activities through conducting regular meetings and further enhancing technical cooperation in drug control, counter-terrorism, and law enforcement capacity building ([Embassy of the PRC in the Philippines](#), September, 27 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and the Philippines are only four countries out of the over 130 nations that are involved in the BRI. Nevertheless, the scale of Chinese organized crime activities in these four countries raises the critical question on the impact on the other countries in the BRI. According to the PRC State Council, the BRI aims to “promote the economic prosperity of the countries along the Belt and Road and regional economic cooperation, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning between different civilizations, and promote world peace and development” ([Belt and Road Forum](#), April 10, 2017). The BRI also may be a highway for Chinese organized crime to spread and have a global impact.

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