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Xi Seeks to Accelerate China's Drive for Self-sufficiency

By John S. Van Oudenaren

One of the defining themes of General Secretary Xi Jinping's first decade in power has been to promote self-sufficiency to insulate the People's Republic of China's (PRC) economy and political system from external shocks. These efforts have assumed added urgency as a result of the combined economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which have precipitated price spikes in global food and energy markets. According to China's official Consumer Price Index figures, from April 2021 to April 2022, fresh vegetable prices rose by 24 percent, fresh fruit by 14.1 percent, eggs by 13.3 percent, and potatoes by 11.8 percent ([National Bureau of Statistics \(NBS\)](#), May 11). Meanwhile, the prices of gasoline, diesel and

liquefied petroleum increased by 29.0 percent, 31.7 percent and 26.9 percent respectively. In seeking to tame runaway prices, the PRC must also overcome a domestic externality of its dynamic clearance zero-COVID policy, which is panic buying of food and other essentials. People are naturally driven to stockpile food to safeguard against the shortages that have occurred due to the logistical difficulties of sustaining home deliveries to tens millions of urban residents during the recent mass lockdowns in Shanghai, Xi'an and other cities (China Brief, [April 8](#); [January 14](#)). This dynamic played out again last week in Shanghai when another round of mass testing was announced for about half of the population, which sparked fears that the city was on the verge of a return to the sort of draconian lockdown it had endured in April and May ([VOA Chinese](#), June 10). Despite government reassurances that a city-wide lockdown was not imminent, panic buying ensued at many supermarkets with shelves stripped of vegetables and instant noodles ([NetEase](#), June 12, 2022).



(Image: A photo from the “great country ‘grain’ policy” (大国 “粮”策, daguo “liang”ce) campaign rollout, source: CCTV)

Sichuan Shakeup

On June 8 and 9, Xi traveled to Sichuan province for an inspection tour ([Xinhua](#), June 8). The visit was notable for several reasons. First, it comes at the height of China's political season amidst suppositions that Xi has been forced to cede ground to rivals on economic policy and personnel appointments ahead of the 20th Party Congress this autumn. Xi used the occasion to highlight his role in guiding the disaster response to the 6.1-magnitude earthquake that struck Ya'an City, Sichuan on June 1, which was proclaimed a success because mass casualties were largely averted with four total deaths reported ([Xinhuanet](#), June 9). Xi also conveyed full confidence in his policy agenda emphasizing that “the country's dynamic zero-COVID approach must be unswervingly continued,” while also citing other policy prerogatives: stable economic growth, green development, poverty alleviation, youth employment, scientific and technological innovation, and rural revitalization. Throughout the inspection tour, Xi and most of his entourage went without masks. Last month, Xi's longtime political rival, Premier Li Keqiang opted not to wear a mask during a tour of Yunnan University in Kunming at the height of the Shanghai lockdown— a move that attracted considerable attention, with some

seeing it as an implicit rebuke of the zero-COVID policy championed by Xi ([Creaders.net](#), May 19). However, Xi's decision to go without a mask during his Sichuan tour suggests not so much a tit-for-tat with Li, but an effort to convey health and confidence at a moment when long suppressed frustration with his leadership is increasingly evident.

On a visit to an advanced rice farm in Meishan City to learn about experimental rice planting and breeding, Xi emphasized that he attaches great importance to food safety and production ([Dangjian](#), June 13). Based on Xi's remarks, state media ran a series of pieces announcing a new "great country 'grain' policy" (大国“粮”策, *daguo "liang"ce*). The significance of putting the word “粮” (*liang*) in quotes is in substituting the first character of 良策 ("good policy," a common term) with the homonym 粮, a double entendre with the implication being that this agricultural policy is indeed a "good" one. Hence, the policy stresses the key role of agriculture in attaining a more prosperous and productive society, emphasizing the application of advanced technology including planting high-yield grain strains, and effective agricultural management business practices to achieve bumper harvests ([Xinhua](#), June 15). The 14th five year plan (2021-2025) already emphasizes boosting domestic agricultural production through implementing supply-side structural reform, ensuring effective sustainment of national farmland of at least 120 million hectares, and fostering technological innovation ([Fujian Provincial Government](#), August 9, 2021). Nevertheless, the new grain policy provides additional impetus as the PRC closes in on its longstanding goal of achieving self-sufficiency in key grains such as wheat and rice. A 2021 report by the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences and International Food Policy Research Institute found that China will be 99.3% self-sufficient in the production of staple grains including wheat and rice by 2025 ([Jingji cankao bao](#), May 25, 2021).

A Doctrine of Self-Reliance

Efforts to achieve self-sufficiency in the agricultural sector are part of a broader series of policy measures that seek to make China more self-sufficient, and to rely primarily on the domestic economy as the engine of growth. The current five year plan formalizes Xi's dual circulation policy to reorient China's economy to become more self-reliant on its domestic market not only to provide resources and technology, but also to stimulate demand ([China Leadership Monitor](#), September 1, 2021). Dual circulation dovetails with other efforts to achieve greater self-reliance including the push to internationalize the Yuan and create a digital currency so as to reduce dependence on the international financial system; promotion of indigenous technological development and innovation through the Made in China 2025 Initiative in order to obviate reliance on foreign technology; and leveraging of domestic enterprises to achieve a world class military through Military Civil Fusion.

In addition to seeking to boost domestic agricultural production, the push for self-reliance appears focused on two other areas this year: leveraging internal infrastructure development to foster indigenous technological development and boost domestic demand; and developing domestic energy production in pursuit of energy security and independence. At a Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission on April 26, Xi announced a new "all-out" push to increase construction of infrastructure, which he asserted is essential to bolstering economic and social development. According to Xi, this is because infrastructure construction is vital to "ensuring national security, smoothing domestic circulation, facilitating the 'dual circulation' of domestic and overseas markets, expanding domestic demand and promoting high-quality development" ([CCTV](#), April 27).

Energy production is another area where the PRC has sought to bolster its self-sufficiency due to high global demand and tight supply, and concerns about threats to its energy security and international supply lines. For now, the PRC appears to be addressing this problem by stockpiling coal (Beijing has pledged that its coal usage will peak in 2025), and seeking new sources of energy by developing both its extractive and renewable energy capacities ([CGTN](#), March 30; [Global Times](#), November 30, 2021). On the former front, China has substantially increased its offshore drilling activities and currently manages 61 platforms that operate at water depths exceeding 3,000 meters ([CGTN](#), June 12). Earlier this month, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) announced it had made two new breakthroughs in offshore drilling — setting up Asia’s highest deep-water offshore jacket in the South China Sea, and laying over 100 kilometers of pipeline for Bangladesh’s first offshore project, which was undertaken through the Belt and Road Initiative ([Sina](#), June 11).

Mouths to Feed

Over the last two years, global food prices have risen approximately 55 percent ([Deloitte](#), May 31). China, which emerged at the end of the last decade as the world’s largest purchaser of agricultural products with imports totaling \$133.1 billion in 2019, is particularly vulnerable to these rising food costs ([U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), September 29, 2020). As a result of skyrocketing food prices due to the war in Ukraine, China has even had to temporarily stall its efforts to diversify away from U.S. agricultural imports and has recently increased its corn and soybean purchases ([South China Morning Post](#), April 25). This underscores that the current supply shocks in the global food market have imposed difficult choices on Beijing and highlights the importance of boosting domestic agricultural production.

The announcement of the new “great country ‘grain’ policy” was accompanied by a China Central Television (CCTV) video that tells the story of a genetically modified “tiny [wheat] seed” (小小的种子, *xiao xiao de zhongzi*) ([CCTV](#), June 14). The seed goes from research laboratory to farm and becomes wheat that is transformed in to noodles, which make their way to restaurants, kitchen tables, and even the distant Chinese space station. The propaganda video then turns metaphorical, likening the Chinese people to the “tiny seeds” that become great stalks of wheat in a bountiful harvest, providing a broader vignette of the intimate connection between food production and national prosperity. The video closes on a common theme espoused under Xi that China’s current relative prosperity has only been accomplished through great effort, self-reliance and striving, which must be sustained: “We can live in this age of abundance, free from hunger only because generations of Chinese have watered the earth with painstaking efforts.”

On June 14, *Sichuan Daily* carried an editorial that was widely shared by other state media outlets entitled “Thoroughly study and implement the spirit of key instructions during General Secretary Xi Jinping’s visit to Sichuan, keep the bottom line of food security and make every effort to stabilize economic growth” ([People.cn](#), June 15). The article notes that the Deputy Party Secretary and Provincial Governor of Sichuan Huang Qiang (黄强) recently inspected soybean and corn farms in Anyue county to learn how to better implement Xi’s directives, and pledged to take measures to “resolutely curb” the “de-agriculturalization” (非农化, *fei nonghua*) of farmland.

On June 15, the Ministry of Agriculture issued a statement that although winter and fall planting got off to a poor start, a strong recovery has been made this spring, and the situation has improved dramatically with a strong harvest in store for this summer and fall ([People.cn](http://www.people.cn), June 15). The Ministry of Agriculture credited the turnaround to: 1) effective scientific disaster prevention and mitigation, which helped to overcome the damage caused by unprecedented autumn flooding last year; 2) effective implementation of central directives at all levels, such as increasing the application of green fertilizer; and 3) planting and cultivation of high-quality wheat varieties — Zhongmai 578, Zhengmai 379, and Xinong 511 — in order to achieve high-yield production levels on par with advanced European producers.

Conclusion

The immediate drivers of the PRC's efforts to attain greater self-sufficiency in food and energy are the imperatives to ensure steady supply, and safeguard economic and political stability at a moment of intense international upheaval. However, over the longer-term, decreasing the PRC's reliance on foreign food and energy sources helps to insulate the Chinese economy from potential sanctions and interruptions to its supply lines, which could occur if the geopolitical struggle with the U.S. and its allies continues to escalate.

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Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning: New Trends in Xinjiang's Coercive Labor Placement Systems

By Adrian Zenz



(Image: Laborers at an embroidery factory in Xinjiang, source: CGTN)

Introduction

In mid-2019, the first efforts to systematically research and conceptualize state-sponsored forced labor systems in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) took place ([Journal of Political Risk](#), December 2019). First, this research examined the placement of detainees in Vocational Skills Education and Training Centers (VSETCs, 职业技能教育培训中心, *zhiye jineng jiaoyu peixun zhongxin*), which function as re-education camps; and second, the findings detailed the transfer of rural surplus laborers (农村劳动者转移就业, *nongcun laodongzhe zhuanyi jiuye*) into secondary or tertiary sector work – referred to as Poverty Alleviation through Labor Transfer (脱贫转移就业, *tuopin zhuanyi jiuye*). In addition to general evidence for coercive labor placements into labor-intensive manufacturing, scholars uncovered evidence of coercive labor transfers for specific economic sectors such as cotton and tomato picking, as well as the production of polysilicon for solar panels ([Newlines Institute](#), December 2020; [CBC News](#), October 29, 2021; [Bloomberg](#), April 2021).[1] Much of the evidence implicating these industries came from publicly available government data, media or company reports, typically dating from between 2017 and 2020. Unfortunately, since then,

such evidence has become much sparser. This examination argues that this falloff in information is not just due to government censorship. Rather, it also reflects systemic and concerning changes to the ways that coercive labor placements in Xinjiang are being consolidated.

After the successes of the highly mobilizational labor placement efforts between 2016 and 2020, Xinjiang's current (14th) Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) focuses on consolidating and maintaining these outcomes through unemployment and poverty prevention and surveillance mechanisms. Individuals who were coercively mobilized into work placements are now effectively prevented from leaving them. Since 2021, hundreds of thousands of cadres are conducting real-time monitoring of rural Uyghurs' employment and income status. This general shift away from mobilizational to more institutionalized and monitored forms of labor placement simultaneously reduces the publication of specific evidence (propaganda texts) that typically accompany such campaign-style experimental efforts, while intensifying and institutionalizing the risk of coercion. Despite the decrease in concrete publicly available evidence, the new developments are increasing both the scale and the scope of coercive labor, expanding it to higher-skilled sectors. This has profound implications for researchers and policymakers.

This report analyzes new and highly authoritative sources – Xinjiang's official Five-Year Plans – to pinpoint the first half of 2017 as the juncture when labor transfers became highly coercive, which is concurrent with the mass internment campaign in Xinjiang. Additionally, this is the first examination to draw on evidence from internal speeches by central government leaders (the "Xinjiang Papers") in 2014 that set the stage for a foundational policy shift. Thereby, the primary objective of Xinjiang's labor placements has become even more political than before. Understanding the unique nature and Beijing's ultimate objectives of these coercive labor systems is crucial for developing effective countermeasures.

The evidence and analysis presented below concerns only coercive labor through the transfer of rural surplus laborers ([Jamestown Foundation](#), March 2021). Since 2019, virtually no new documentary or conceptual evidence on forced work placements of VSETC detainees has emerged, and it is unclear if significant new developments on this front can be expected (most VSETC detainee work placements occurred between 2018 and 2020; see *Journal of Political Risk*, [December 2019](#); [February 2020](#)). Additional witness testimony has been important, but has not unveiled new conceptual or other developments. The forced work placement of likely hundreds of thousands VSETC detainees continues to implicate many labor-intensive manufacturing sectors, especially textiles and garments. Rural surplus laborers who refuse state-mandated labor transfer placements remain at risk of penalization through internment in re-education camps.

Coercive Labor Transfers in Xinjiang: A Side Product of Beijing's Political Goals

Any analysis of coercive labor and related countermeasures must consider the shift in political priorities mandated by the central government in 2014. The Xinjiang Papers, a set of classified internal state documents, contain confidential speeches by central government leaders from 2014 that outline Beijing's political objectives for employment-creation ([Uyghur Tribunal](#), December 9, 2021).

In 2014, General Secretary Xi Jinping stated that ethnic groups should undertake enterprise work. He argued that large numbers of unemployed persons will "provoke trouble"; in contrast, enterprise employment is

“conducive to ethnic interaction, exchanges and blending” and makes ethnic groups “study Chinese culture.” [2]

Premier Li Keqiang argued that “people without land, employment or a fixed income have nothing to do and wander all day; ... they will also be easily exploited by evildoers.” Therefore, Xinjiang must “transform [people’s] way of thinking about employment” and “vigorously develop labor-intensive industries that absorb more employment.”

Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) Member Yu Zhengsheng stated economic development “must absolutely be subservient to [the goals of] social and long-term peace and stability.” He noted that Xinjiang’s “requirements for the development of labor-intensive industries are particularly urgent,” not because these industries were likely to “contribute more to economic growth,” but because “they are particularly important for employment and for promoting exchanges and the integration of various ethnic groups.”

These statements all highlight the primacy of political over economic drivers – a clear departure from the region’s prior policy focus of achieving social stability through economic growth. Research clearly shows how after 2014, Xinjiang’s labor transfers increased in scale and became progressively more coercive ([Jamestown Foundation](#), March 2, 2021).

In addition to seeking cultural assimilation and greater state control, Beijing also pursues labor transfers in order to alter ethnic population structures. The Nankai Report, a crucial Chinese research document outlining the securitized transfer of Uyghurs to other provinces, states that labor transfers help “reduce Uyghur population density in Xinjiang.” Based on the Nankai Report, an independent legal analysis concluded that Xinjiang’s labor transfers meet the criteria of the Crimes Against Humanity of forcible transfer and of persecution as defined by the International Criminal Court ([Jamestown Foundation](#), March 2, 2021). Labor transfers of Uyghurs from southern Xinjiang to regions dominated by Han Chinese populations feature prominently in Chinese academic and state discourses on “population optimization” – attempts to reduce Uyghur population density and alter ethnic population distributions (increasing Han populations) for national security purposes ([Central Asian Survey](#), 2021).

Since the goal of stability maintenance has been achieved, the regional government is now focusing on long-term economic development. However, Xinjiang’s continued social stability is predicated upon ensuring that ethnic minority citizens remain in state-controlled and economically productive factory settings. Therefore, the region’s coercive labor systems remain necessary for the ongoing achievement and consolidation of political goals.

“Train all who should be trained”: The Highly Mobilization Labor Transfer Phase 2016 to 2020

These new priorities were directly reflected in Xinjiang’s macro-level planning documents. Xinjiang’s 12th Five-Year Social and Economic Development Plan (2011-2015) hardly mentioned labor transfers and in both instances described them as a “voluntary” process ([Shihezi University](#), January 18, 2011). In contrast, the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) strongly emphasized labor transfers and state-led employment. It verbatim repeated Xi Jinping’s demand from 2014 to “systematically expand the scale of [relocating] Xinjiang’s ethnic minorities to other parts of China to receive education, employment, and residence,” and for the first time outlined annual labor transfer targets (of at least 2.2 million) ([National Development and Reform](#)

[Commission \[NDRC\]](#), May 2016). Local governments were to assign work to urban “zero job households” within 24 hours.

The point at which Xinjiang’s labor transfers became highly coercive coincided with the beginning of the mass internment campaign in the first half of 2017.

Xinjiang’s 13th Five-Year Poverty Alleviation Plan from June 2017 first adopted the new central government concept of Poverty Alleviation through Labor Transfer (转移就业脱贫, *zhuanyi jiuye tuopin*) ([XUAR Government](#), May 19, 2017). The plan noted that poor people’s “labor and employment willingness and abilities are insufficient.” Relying heavily on employment creation and labor transfers, it repeated five times that locals’ “inner motivation” is insufficient and must be “stimulated.” People’s outdated mindset of “waiting, relying, wanting” must be “eradicated.” The Plan reiterated that “curing poverty means to first cure ignorance and backwardness.” Every household without (a form of state-approved) employment must have at least one person “realize employment.”

Also in mid-2017, the XUAR published a more targeted Regional Development and Poverty Alleviation Implementation Plan for southern Xinjiang. It specified all-out social mobilization efforts to “stimulate [people’s] drive and determination to change [their] situation of poverty [and to] change [people’s attitude] from ‘I am wanted to get rid of poverty’ to ‘I want to get rid of poverty’”.

This sharp turn towards more coercive mobilizational approaches coincided with Chen Quanguo’s ascent as Xinjiang party secretary in 2016. In January 2018, the government then initiated a special plan to transfer laborers from poor counties in southern Xinjiang to other regions ([PRC government](#), June 9, 2018). Imitating language from the concurrent mass internment campaign, the plan mandated to “train all who should be trained” (应培尽培, *yingpei jinpei*). Other reports described the effort as “transfer all who should be transferred” (应转尽转, *ying zhuan jin zhuan*; [Xinjiang Minsheng Net](#), April 8, 2019).

Between 2016 and 2020, Xinjiang had planned to annually transfer 2.2 million rural surplus laborers. It exceeded this goal by over 30 percent, transferring 2.87 million workers per year. In 2021, the region set a record by transferring a staggering 3.2 million surplus laborers, 15.4 percent more than planned ([XUAR government](#), February 7). This new record is not a coincidence, but a result of Xinjiang’s current intensified approach to Poverty Alleviation through Labor Transfer.

Monitoring and Prevention: New Trends in Labor Transfers and Employment-Based Poverty Alleviation 2021 to 2025

After the successes of the highly mobilizational labor transfer campaigns (2016 -2020), Xinjiang’s current (14th) Five-Year Social and Economic Development Plan (2021-2025) focuses on consolidating, maintaining and expanding these outcomes. In short, those who were coercively mobilized into work placements are now effectively prevented from leaving them.

Xinjiang's key regional and local Five-Year Plans (2021-2025) reflect the following significant new developments:

- A new full employment requirement whereby all persons able to work are to work (previously, this extended to only at least one person per household)
- Strong focus on preventing people from returning to poverty through decreased income, through an Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning System” (失业监测预警机制, *shiye jiance yujingji*). [3]
- Expanded vocational training, increasing average annual training volumes from 1 million to 1.5 million person-sessions ([XUAR government](#), December 14, 2021).
- Large-scale promotion of “order-oriented employment skills training” (订单式就业技能培训, *dingdan shi jiuye jineng peixun*) wherein companies place orders for workers, and the state takes, trains and delivers them to these companies.

Xinjiang's 14th Five-Year Social and Economic Development Plan orders officials to “persist in combining local nearby employment and transfer and [labor] export employment, causing every able-bodied person to achieve stable employment” ([NDRC](#), June 11, 2021). Similarly, the 14th Five-Year Employment Promotion Plan states the need to “diligently cause every single person who is able to work to realize employment” ([XUAR government](#), December 14, 2021). This expansion is concerning, as those who are currently not in full-time employment often have other duties, including familial responsibilities; shifting mothers and working-age persons in caretaking roles into such work runs a high risk of coercion. The Xinjiang's Women's Development Plan (2021-2025), which outlines detailed targets for the “development” of the female population, specifies an expansion of rural women's labor transfers ([National Working Committee](#), January 24).

Xinjiang's current development plans lack some of the highly coercive mobilizational language that was commonplace in the 2016-2020 period. This is because the remarkable successes in mobilizing rural surplus laborers are now being consolidated through a normalization of labor transfer and employment mechanisms. The 14th Five-Year Employment Promotion Plan warns that “a large number of rural laborers need continuous and stable employment.” In southern Xinjiang, particularly, the “comprehensive quality of rural laborers...is not high,” resulting in a mismatch between the economic need for higher-skilled workers and an abundance of low-skilled labor. The plan cautions this mismatch is becoming the most prominent problem in Xinjiang's labor market. Therefore, the region must promote the “institutionalization of medium- and long-term employment work” to create an “institutionalized development pattern.” The state's solution to this challenge is more institutionalized control and surveillance of the surplus workforce, along with intensified vocational training efforts. For 2021-2025, the XUAR plans to increase training intensity from 1 million to 1.5 million person-sessions per year ([XUAR government](#), December 14, 2021). This will ensure that persons subjected to coercive labor transfers gradually enter more highly skilled employment, increasing the scope of Xinjiang's forced labor issue. In 2021, Xinjiang achieved this new goal by conducting 1.48 million vocational training sessions ([PRC Central Government](#), February 25). The state's new mantra here is “high-quality development” (高质量发展, *gao zhiliang fazhan*), an increasingly ubiquitous concept in state planning documents.

The Xinjiang 13th Five-Year Poverty Alleviation Plan from June 2017 first mandated the creation of the Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning System to support the achievement of employment targets. The 14th Five-Year Employment Promotion Plan mandates that this system be “improved.” Governments at “county and township levels” must “comprehensively analyze the specific reasons for the decline in [a particular household’s] income,” and the first listed countermeasure is labor transfer. Therefore, this system prevents households from exiting labor transfers for work with decreased measurable incomes. State media reports confirm the implementation of a four-color early warning code for all administrative levels, who must dynamically provide “timely assistance” if a household’s income threatens to fall below the poverty threshold ([Xinjiang Daily](#), March 31, 2020). At the Third Central Xinjiang Work Forum (第三次中央新疆工作座谈会, *di san ci zhongyang Xinjiang zuotan hui*), Xi himself ordered the region to improve and complete its Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning System ([PRC Embassy in Sweden](#), November 12, 2020).

Xinjiang’s 13th Five-Year Social and Economic Development Plan noted three times the need to increase “inner motivation” (内生动力, *neisheng dongli*) of those who, according to the state, lack the drive for gainful employment in state-sanctioned settings. Xinjiang’s 14th Plan only mentions this term once. Local plans indicate how recently implemented coercive training and transfer programs have “succeeded” in addressing this “inner motivation” problem to inculcate desired qualities in ethnic laborers. Hotan County’s 14th Five-Year Social and Economic Development Plan lauds the fact that:

[T]he scale of industrial workers who understand the national language, know technology, and observe discipline is constantly expanding, providing strong human support for accelerating the construction of a modern industrial system...([Hotan County Government](#), January 14, 2021)

As this achievement has been largely based on coercive skills training involving military drill, political indoctrination, and assimilation, it is safe to say that in Uyghur regions, the past several years of Xinjiang’s forced labor training and placement practice now form the bedrock of the region’s future industrial and economic policy.

These changes have significant consequences for how coercive labor is discussed in state media. During the previous highly mobilizational phase, the state frequently documented purported successes of coercive labor mobilization through boastful propaganda stories from the ground. These accounts, which serve the important political purposes of disseminating the results of policy experimentation and signaling local governments’ active involvement to their superiors, usually gave specific local examples of coercion that implicated particular companies. In the current institutionalization phase, such sources are less relevant and have already become much less common (also due to state censorship). Instances of coercive mobilization continue per current policy priorities, but they are no longer the primary policy enforcement mechanism.

Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning: Examples from Uyghur Regions

Local Five-Year plans in key southern Uyghur-majority regions frequently use stronger, more specific language when describing these systems. Hotan County’s 14th Five-Year Social and Economic Development

Plan speaks of “resolutely holding the bottom line of no large-scale returns to poverty” ([Hotan county](#), January 14, 2021). Instead of emphasizing labor transfers, it stresses the need to “consolidate” poverty alleviation gains by “perfecting monitoring and assistance systems and mechanisms that prevent a return to poverty.” This includes implementing “income monitoring” as a mechanism for “early detection, early intervention, [and] early assistance.” Karakax County’s identical plan mandates “monitoring of households with a sudden decrease in income” ([Karakax county](#), December 2020). Kashgar City’s plan exhorts officials to “resolutely prevent a return to poverty” ([Kashgar City Development and Reform Committee](#), February 9). Kashgar’s Bachu County describes this monitoring mechanism as an employment-related “emergency response system” ([Bachu county](#), October 11, 2020).

Xinjiang’s Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning System uses several mechanisms that also enforce the region’s preventative policing and societal securitization mechanisms. Big data analysis is provided by the Poverty Alleviation Big Data Platform (脱贫攻坚大数据平台, *tuopin gongjian da shuju pingtai*), grid management, mass mobilization of cadres, and village-based work teams – the same entities identifying persons for internment in re-education camps ([Xinhua](#), September 22, 2020). In 2021, Xinjiang sent 400,000 cadres to investigate and monitor the poverty and income situations of 12 million rural households through an “early prevention, early intervention, early assistance” campaign that identified 774,000 households for “real-time monitoring” ([China Daily](#), January 11). The goal is to undertake full quarterly monitoring campaigns using grassroots cadres and village work teams together with big data analysis ([State Council Information Office](#), February 26).

State propaganda accounts outline several instances of such early interventions, often focusing on families that suffered external shocks (e.g., decreased income or increased expenses). However, both local testimonies and descriptions of the mechanisms involved indicate that the Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning System promotes even greater levels of state-mandated labor among rural populations. In one instance, a construction worker with high blood pressure was assigned less strenuous work in a garment factory. The previous employment status of his wife, who suffers from a kidney disease, is unclear. However, after this household’s return to poverty was prevented, she was also made to work – as a cleaner. The somewhat surprising measure of assigning physically demanding work to an apparently chronically ill person is possibly because this household includes seven persons. Without both adults working, the household’s per person income would likely fall below the poverty line.

Moreover, full employment has become a region wide target. A village party secretary emphasizes that “to prevent a return to poverty, we cannot rely on giving money to support people, to prevent falling into the welfare trap, and policies to support lazy people” ([China Daily](#), January 11). This reasoning mirrors that of Xi, who in a December 2021 address argued that China must not go down the path of “welfarism” (福利主义, *fuli zhuyi*), which he referred to as an erroneous strategy pursued by populist Latin American regimes that produced “lazy people” (懒人, *lanren*; [Qiushi](#), May 15).

Consequently, poverty prevention mechanisms involve creating a “stable mental foundation” in those who are “lazy.” A state account from Jiashi County gives the example of a “lazy” man who “could not even do a full

day's work" ([Xinjiang Daily](#), April 12). However, the man notes how village cadres "fundamentally changed my thinking" and gave him a "new life" – language that is very similar to the forced testimonies of former re-education detainees. Interviewed officials emphasize that locals who "lack ambition" to work are targeted with "various methods" that "stimulate their inner motivation." While Xinjiang's current job placement efforts are on the whole less reliant on large-scale mobilization campaigns, they continue to specifically target households and persons whose income is near the state's poverty line, and where full employment is unrealized.

Similarly, another state media account argues that to prevent a return to poverty, officials must "stimulate [people's] inner motivation so that the poverty-stricken households can continue to increase their income," and that this is a key area of focus for disciplinary inspection and supervision organs at all administrative levels ([People.cn](#), August 2, 2020). The article notes that in Yingjisha County, the Commission for Discipline Inspection and Supervision visited 2,165 households and investigated 489 households that had been alleviated from poverty in order to assess their employment situations. Government reports indicate that households with declining incomes receive "targeted assistance measures," most notably, industry-based development and public welfare jobs are allotted to those whose skills are too low for labor transfers ([Hotan Prefecture Government](#), December 15, 2021). Only those who are literally "unable to work" are eligible for social security benefits instead of employment.

Another report describes how "in the process of monitoring the prevention of a return to poverty," an ethnic minority region successfully completed the task of putting all 1,872 able villagers into employment ([China Daily](#), January 11). This again indicates how anti-poverty monitoring mechanisms and work processes are used to intensify potentially coercive labor placements in predominantly ethnic regions.

Overall, Xinjiang's approach to prevent people from returning to poverty appears to have intensified state-mandated labor placement measures. The new system implements the recently adopted full employment requirements. Coercive mobilizational campaigns may still be used, especially in regions where employment rates are lagging, but the overall emphasis has shifted to institutionalization and monitoring mechanisms.

New Developments in Labor Transfers to Other Provinces

Since 2020, the Xinjiang government has stopped publishing annual figures on transfers of rural surplus laborers to other provinces. The so-called Nankai Report, a frank internal assessment of such transfers by Chinese academics, documented the securitized and potentially coercive nature of such transfers ([Jamestown Foundation](#), March 2021). The report estimates that 76,000 laborers were transferred between 2017 and 2019, approximately 25,000 annually. Xinjiang's September 2020 white paper on employment rights noted that between 2014 and mid-2020, 117,000 surplus laborers were part of such transfers ([Xinhua](#), September 17, 2020). . For 2020, a transfer of 20,000 laborers was planned ([CCTV](#), May 13, 2020).

Xinjiang's 13th Five-Year Social and Economic Development Plan first established an annual quota of 10,000 cross-provincial labor transfers. The 14th plan makes a rather general mention of the concept, which indicates the practice has continued. In fact, it appears to be very much alive. In 2020, Hotan officials suggested their prefecture alone should transfer 20,000 rural surplus laborers annually to eastern China. Similarly, the 14th Five-Year Social and Economic Development Plans in Hotan and Qiemo counties, both ethnic regions, call for "increased expansion of the intensity of organized labor export" to other prefectures and provinces

([Hotan county](#), January 14, 2021; [Qiemo county](#), March 22). The plan for Bachu county, a Uyghur majority population region in Kashgar prefecture with a high share of ethnic rural laborers, specifies an expansion of “employment channels for labor transfers inside and outside Xinjiang” ([Bachu County](#), October 11, 2021). These mandates are consistent with wider political goals of assimilation and population optimization that are important to the central leadership in Beijing, and therefore are unlikely to be easily abandoned.

In sum, despite the discontinuation of official reporting, it is safe to assume that Xinjiang’s annual labor transfer volume to other provinces continues at volumes comparable to previous years (approximately 20,000 to 25,000). However, these transfers are now undocumented and therefore more difficult to track.

Estimating the Current Scale of Coercive Labor in Xinjiang

Based on figures from 2019 of 2.59 million rural surplus laborers for all of Xinjiang and 1.65 million for the southern Uyghur majority regions, the author previously estimated that up to 1.6 million ethnic citizens in Xinjiang are at risk of coercive labor through state-mandated transfers ([Jamestown Foundation](#), March 2021). In addition, at least several hundred thousand former VSETC (vocational re-education camp) detainees are also estimated as at risk of forced labor.

In 2021, Xinjiang transferred 3.17 million surplus laborers (some multiple times), an increase of 10.5 percent or 300,000 over 2019 ([Tianshan Net](#), October 10, 2020). [4] Initial evidence from Xinjiang’s increasingly pervasive Unemployment Monitoring and Early Warning System indicates these additionally-transferred laborers are at significant risk of coercion. Chinese academic studies previously analyzed by the author indicate that those who had previously chosen not to participate in such transfers or in full-time wage labor generally had reasons to do so ([Jamestown Foundation](#), March 2021). However, these are population groups or household members that the state labels “idle” – an unacceptable condition, especially under the new full employment target.

Consequently, the number of transferred rural surplus laborers at risk of coercive labor likely approaches two million. Together with former VSETC detainees sent to work in factories, between two to two and a half million persons in Xinjiang are estimated to be at risk of coercive labor.

Recent Trends in Xinjiang’s Foreign Trade: Soaring Export Volumes in Southern Xinjiang

In 2021, Xinjiang’s direct trade with other countries increased 5.8 percent. Of the total export value, 51.4 percent comprised labor-intensive products, especially textile and garment production, which is concerning as these sectors are those most likely to involve Uyghur forced labor ([Urumqi Customs](#), 2021). The export volume of such products grew 31 percent in 2021. In the first four months of 2022, the value share of exported labor-intensive products among all exports continued to grow even faster at 63.4 percent year-on-year, outpacing the region’s total export volume which grew 45.4 percent during that time ([China Daily](#), May 14). These figures reflect the success of Beijing’s intensified coercive labor strategy in the region. This directly contradicts a reported statement by Madelaine Tuininga, head of the European Commission Directorate for Trade’s sustainable development department, who in the context of this issue implied that “goods produced with forced labor only represent a small part of all the goods produced in a region” ([South China Morning Post](#), May 13).

In 2021, direct trade between XUAR and the United States declined 61.3 percent to \$372 million, likely as a result of supply chain divestments and sanctions ([Xinjiang Government](#), 2022). However, Xinjiang's trade with the European Union (EU) rose 13.6 percent to \$1.24 billion ([Urumqi Customs](#), 2021). Trade with Vietnam grew by a stunning 108.9 percent to \$408 million. This is noteworthy, Xinjiang could be using Vietnam to circumvent U.S. import sanctions, especially for cotton textile products.

State reports about growing Xinjiang-EU trade relations are boastful, highlighting both increased volumes and the large number of trains connecting the two regions ([China Daily](#), March 21). The reports invariably underscore that this directly aligns with the political aims of Xi's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the Xinjiang Papers, Xi stated that Xinjiang needed to be pacified due to its geostrategic significance for the BRI. Increased trade between Xinjiang and the EU is therefore not just an economic but also a directly political objective, and as a result, Beijing can be expected to deploy measures that promote and increase such trade if the EU fails to take effective countermeasures.

In the first four months of 2022, Xinjiang's total foreign trade volume (exports and imports) rose 33.7 percent over the previous year ([China Daily](#), May 14). However, the foreign trade volume of key Uyghur majority population regions in southern Xinjiang that are core targets for coercive poverty alleviation and labor transfers grew much faster. Foreign trade volumes of Kashgar, Hotan, Kizilsu and Aksu prefectures soared by 105.7, 273.6, 273.7 and 99 percent respectively during the same time ([China Daily](#), May 14). This trend is troubling but not unexpected, given that in December 2021, Beijing replaced Xinjiang's party secretary Chen Quanguo with Ma Xingrui, a technocrat from Guangdong with extensive experience promoting economic development ([Reuters](#), December 29, 2021). During his first visits to southern Xinjiang's Uyghur regions (Hotan prefecture), Ma emphasized that following the "victory in poverty alleviation," the region must "vigorously develop labor-intensive industries" ([Tacheng Prefecture Government](#), January 10). In line with Ma's technocratic and development-oriented outlook, Xinjiang is said to be developing a distinctly "export-oriented economy" (外向型经济; *waixiangxing jingji*; [China Daily](#), May 14).

Previously, Hotan Prefecture, similarly a core part of the Uyghur heartland regions, experienced an expansion of foreign trade by 235.6 percent in 2019 and by a further 51.4 percent in the first 11 months of 2020 ([Aksu News](#), January 6, 2021). Hotan's key export products are all linked to labor-intensive manufacturing or agricultural processing, and include hair products, footwear, textiles, clothing, agricultural products, luggage, toys, and small appliances. Available data indicates a likely further increase of exports of products linked to labor-intensive manufacturing that rely heavily on coercive Poverty Alleviation Through Labor Transfer mechanisms.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Just as the upscaling of Xinjiang's most coercive labor transfers broadly coincided with the campaign of mass internment, both the re-education drive and this labor placement system have now shifted from highly mobilizational and experimental to more institutionalized forms. Chen Quanguo oversaw both of these campaigns. His core expertise was the use of high-powered mobilizational drives – both for re-education

internment and for labor placements. Chen's successor appears to have been tasked to render the results of both campaigns sustainable in the long term. In April 2022, Ma Xingrui asserted that "people deceived by extremist ideology" would still be "rescued" (a euphemism for re-education). He also emphasized that the region will "never allow the hard-won situation of [social] stability to be reversed" (China.com.cn, April 22). To this end, Xinjiang will "promote the normalization" of "counterterrorism and stability maintenance," and "optimize [its] counterterrorism and stability maintenance policies." This indicates a shift from campaign-style mobilizational forms of mass internment to a more institutionalized way of continuing what will likely be more targeted (rather than highly indiscriminate) forms of re-education and internment.

The implications of these trends are three-fold.

First, the prevalence of coercive forms of labor placements in Xinjiang is pervasive and large-scale. Recent trends only reinforce these developments as the scope and scale of coercive labor transfers increased in 2021. Through intensified vocational training and ongoing state-led economic development efforts, coercive labor is likely to expand from predominantly low-skilled into increasingly more high-skilled industrial sectors.

Second, the systemic nature of coercive labor in Xinjiang is the product of political objectives that can only be reached by shifting millions of Uyghur laborers from rural to industrial livelihoods, breaking up traditional communities, and transferring ethnic minorities to Han majority regions. This explains why Beijing considers western countermeasures on Xinjiang a red line. In early 2021, state-orchestrated smear campaigns and consumer boycotts targeted western companies that had divested from Xinjiang. In summer 2021, China passed a countersanctions law that punishes companies who comply with western sanctions. As a result, companies who proactively adjust their supply chains and take due diligence seriously are liable to be penalized by the Chinese state. This could reduce their incentives to proactively perform due diligence. It has also certainly made companies far less likely to publicly commit to divesting from Xinjiang-linked supply chains and to increase the transparency of their due diligence efforts.

Third, Xinjiang's recent shift from highly mobilizational to more institutionalized and monitored forms of managing labor placements has further reduced the availability of on-the-ground propaganda and state media reports. This shifting evidence situation has made research far more challenging, if not impossible. At the same time, in-person supply chain auditing in Xinjiang is not feasible, as the ever-expanding surveillance state severely punishes those who speak out. Such auditing has also become much more challenging in China in general (Wall Street Journal, September 21, 2020; Axios, June 23, 2021).

All three of these trends and developments point toward the same policy implication: rather than placing the responsibility for countering coercive labor linked to Xinjiang on individual companies, governments need to create a rebuttable presumption that any products originating from Xinjiang, especially those made with lower-skilled, labor-intensive manufacturing (or related agricultural harvesting and processing), are tainted with coercive labor.

On April 20, 2022, China formally ratified the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Forced Labor Convention and Abolition of Forced Labor Convention from 1930 and 1957 (Bloomberg, April 20). The 1957 convention explicitly forbids "mobilising and using labour for...economic development" and "as a means of

racial...or religious discrimination” ([ILO](#), 1957). As China’s own foreign ministry has stated that “[t]here is no ‘forced labor’ in Xinjiang, only voluntary employment and free choice in the labor market,” Beijing clearly has no intention of abandoning its crucial political goals in the region that are directly dependent on the continuation of coercive labor schemes ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), May 19, 2021).

While Xinjiang’s labor transfers directly violate these prohibitions, the region’s consolidation of its coercive labor mechanisms during 2016 to 2020, together with a focus on monitoring and surveillance, will make it easier to pretend that ILO standards are met. Put differently, Beijing’s ratification of these conventions is likely a calculated strategy to allay criticism. Actual policies in Xinjiang indicate that intrusive and coercive labor placement and retention mechanisms are being intensified rather than dismantled.

The extent of state-sponsored forced labor in Xinjiang requires a comprehensive political response. The rebuttable presumption defined in the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) enacted by the United States, which stipulates that all goods produced in Xinjiang are potentially tainted by forced labor unless proven otherwise, is one of the only effective solutions to the region’s coercive labor problem. As a compromise, governments could limit the rebuttable presumption to products made with low-skilled, labor-intensive manufacturing, especially in sectors such as cotton, textile and garment production, the processing of tomatoes, of polysilicon, and related fields. However, Xinjiang’s pursuit of “high-quality development” and intensified vocational training means that sectors requiring higher skills levels will in the future increasingly be at risk of coercive labor as well.

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Editor’s Note: This piece exceeds the standard length for *China Brief* articles, but is being published due to its timeliness and reader interest.

Notes

[1] See also Laura T. Murphy and Nyrola Elimä, “In Broad Daylight: Uyghur Forced Labour and Global Solar Supply Chains.” Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Hallam University Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice,” May 2021, <https://www.shu.ac.uk/helena-kennedy-centre-international-justice/research-and-projects/all-projects/in-broad-daylight>; Ana Swanson and Chris Buckley, “Chinese Solar Companies Tied to Use of Forced Labor,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/business/economy/china-solar-companies-forced-labor->

[xinjiang.html](#); “China’s ‘tainted’ cotton”, BBC, December 14, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/nz0g306v8c/china-tainted-cotton>.

On coercive transfers of Uyghurs to other provinces, see Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, et al, “Uyghurs for Sale,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 1, 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>. On the ongoing use of forced labor in the processing of cotton, see “Laundering Cotton: Laundering Cotton: How Xinjiang Cotton is Obscured in International Supply Chains,” Sheffield Halam University, April 4, 2022, <https://www.shu.ac.uk/helena-kennedy-centre-international-justice/research-and-projects/all-projects/laundered-cotton>

[2] Quotes in sections from- Adrian Zenz, “The Xinjiang Papers: An Introduction” The Uyghur Tribunal, November 27, 2021, p. 20, 39, 40; document no.2, p.65

[3] This system is also being implemented in other regions in China through Targeted Poverty Alleviation (精准扶贫, *jingzhun fupin*). However, implementation in these regions is typically not conducted with the same intensity and level of coercion compared to Xinjiang.

[4] Although transfers are measured in “person-times” (人次, *ren ci*), one person may be transferred more than once in a given year, there are no indications that the ratio of persons to transfers has substantially changed. In fact, institutionalization of stable employment through such transfers would indicate a reduction in the frequency of annual transfers for some people (typically for seasonal work). This means that it is safe to assume a net increase of approximately 300,000 persons in the labor transfer system between 2019 and 2021.

Beijing's Propaganda Support for Russian Biological Warfare Disinformation, Part 1: Accusations Concerning the War in Ukraine

By John Dotson



(Image: “Biological Crisis: America’s Overseas Biological Laboratories.” A graphic accompanying a Chinese state media article supporting an ongoing Russian disinformation campaign, which accuses the U.S. of operating secret biological warfare programs out of medical research facilities abroad, source: [Peng Pai News](#), May 22)

Introduction

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in late February, People’s Republic of China (PRC) officials and state media have promoted and amplified key elements of Moscow’s narrative that the war has been provoked by the United States and its NATO allies in Europe. At several PRC foreign ministry press conferences this spring, spokespeople lent credence to Russian disinformation that U.S.-sponsored biological laboratories had been “discovered” in Ukraine, and implied that the U.S. is in contravention of its obligations under the Biological Weapons Convention (PRC Foreign Ministry [FMPRC]), [March 16](#); [April 14](#); [April 19](#)). These same themes have also been actively promoted in state-controlled media. This article examines the origins of this Russian disinformation effort concerning alleged U.S. biological facilities in Ukraine, and analyzes some of the means by which Beijing has helped to amplify this narrative.

Russian Allegations Regarding Biological Warfare Labs in Ukraine

Amidst the extensive propaganda and disinformation spread by the government of the Russian Federation in relation to its war of aggression in Ukraine, one of the most prominent narratives invoked to justify the invasion—aside from the bizarre assertion that the invasion is intended to liberate Ukraine from “drug addicts

and neo-Nazis”—is the conspiracy theory that the U.S. has been funding and sponsoring biological warfare laboratories in Ukraine (TASS, [February 25](#); [March 9](#)). One of the most prominent spokesmen for this disinformation campaign has been the commander of the “Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Protection Forces of Russia” Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, who has actively pushed the allegation in a series of public statements since mid-March.

On March 17, Kirillov gave a media briefing in Moscow in which he asserted that “components of biological weapons were being made on the territory of Ukraine,” involving the “direct participation of the Pentagon in the financing of military biological projects.” Kirillov insinuated that these biological weapons programs were connected to the appearance of an unnamed “mosquito-borne parasitic disease” in the vicinity of Kherson in 2018; to “drug-resistant tuberculosis... among the citizens of the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics,” also in 2018; and to outbreaks of avian flu in Russia and the European Union in 2021. He asserted that such outbreaks “may indicate a deliberate infection, or an accidental leakage of the pathogen from one of the biological laboratories located on the territory of Ukraine,” and vowed that “we will continue to examine the evidence and inform the global community about the illegal activities of the Pentagon and other U.S. government agencies in Ukraine” ([Russia Today](#), March 17).



Image: A graphic from a presentation delivered on March 17 by Lieutenant-General Igor Kirillov, alleging that the U.S. had been collaborating with Ukrainian officials to operate secret biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. (Image source: [Russia Today](#), March 17)

Longstanding Russian Disinformation Efforts Directed Against U.S.-Supported Disease Research Facilities

These Russian disinformation themes focus on either the insinuation or outright assertion that U.S.-supported disease research laboratories—which do exist in many countries around the world, often connected to advocacy and funding promoted by the late U.S. Senator Richard Lugar—are actually disguised bio-warfare facilities. One such facility that has

long been a target of Russian state-sponsored conspiracy theories is the Lugar Center for Public Health Research, which was established in 2011 in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Russian state-controlled media has for years made accusations that this site is a bio-weapons facility, as in a 2016 article that asserted:

What we have in Tbilisi is as clear as a bell on all counts. This \$30 million dollar facility actually cost more than \$100 million, houses a network of secret labs and closed areas and is... run by the secret police. Then we have its history, the trail of sick employees and the well-timed outbreaks of “researched diseases,” as the bacteria which cause them are “weaponised”... We also have a history of Turkish and Ukrainian security service personnel treating the Lugar lab like a WMD “cash and carry,” to service their terrorist clients in Syria and Iraq. [1]

The disinformation theme that all such U.S.-supported facilities are covers for biological warfare programs has been mirrored in supporting PRC propaganda, as may be seen in the material presented in this article series.

Kirillov spoke again in mid-May, promoting a spin-off conspiracy theory that Ukrainian officials, with American backing, had intentionally spread a “highly pathogenic strain of tuberculosis” (TB) in 2020 in Luhansk (an eastern Ukrainian region under the partial control of a Russian-sponsored separatist client state). According to Kirillov, “leaflets made in the form of counterfeit banknotes were infected with the causative agent of tuberculosis and distributed among minors in the village of Stepovoe,” with the intention of fostering an outbreak of drug-resistant TB in the region ([Russia Today](#), May 11).

Such Russian accusations are evocative of the “active measures” undertaken by the KGB and allied Soviet Bloc intelligence services during Cold War era—such as “Operation Denver,” a highly successful disinformation campaign in the 1980s to spread the false narrative that the AIDS virus was produced by a U.S. military biological weapons program based out of Ft. Detrick, Maryland. [2] These time-tested, made-to-order conspiracy theories have been dusted off in the service of Russian information operations connected to the war in Ukraine—and this time around, the diplomatic and propaganda systems of the PRC have consistently acted as a megaphone for repeating and amplifying this Russian state disinformation.

PRC Support for Russian Biological Warfare Disinformation

The diplomatic messaging and propaganda systems of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have refrained from explicitly endorsing the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but have consistently offered informational support on two levels: first, by repeating and amplifying Russian state messages; and second, by promoting a steady stream of anti-Western propaganda that identifies America and NATO as the real causes of the war ([U.S. State Department](#), May 2). One of the clearest themes within this process has been the PRC effort to hype Moscow’s active disinformation related to alleged U.S.-Ukrainian collaborative biological warfare programs. In this, the PRC has generally followed a two-track approach: one directed to international audiences, in which the PRC publicizes Russian narratives in a sympathetic fashion, while avoiding an explicit endorsement of the claims; and another directed to Chinese-speaking audiences both domestically and abroad, in which the Russian claims are presented uncritically as fact.

Amplifying Russian Claims for International Audiences

An example of the former, internationally-focused approach could be observed in official channels as early as March 16, when PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian (赵立坚) engaged in a scripted exchange with state broadcaster CCTV, which referenced accusations from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that the U.S. was maintaining “hundreds of such [military biological] laboratories, including almost 30 just in Ukraine alone.” In response, Zhao replied that “We have noted [Lavrov’s] remarks. Biological security bears on the common interest of all humanity... the international community has long-held severe concerns about the biological military activities conducted by the U.S. at home and overseas” ([FMPRC](#), March 16).

Similar exchanges have followed on subsequent dates, with an additional theme being the accusation that the U.S. is in violation of its responsibilities as a signatory to the U.N. Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). [3] In one such example from April 14, Zhao conducted another scripted exchange with a reporter from the state-run *China Daily*, who asked about Russian accusations that the U.S. was attempting to “divert the international community’s attention from the biological laboratories discovered in Ukraine.” In response, Zhao stated that “the U.S. has not yet given any convincing explanation for its bio-military activities. Undertaking consultation and cooperation to address concerns is a requirement of the [BWC]... How many biological samples did the U.S. ship out of Ukraine [and] for what purpose?... Did the US conduct dangerous research overseas that is prohibited in the U.S.?” ([FMPRC](#), April 14).



Image: A still image from PRC state media, showing Vladimir Putin’s May 16 speech before representatives of the CSTO in Moscow. The captions read: “America Is Concealed in the Biological Laboratories,” and “Putin: American Laboratories in Ukraine Are Fundamentally for Researching Biological Weapons.”

(Image source: [Peng Pai News](#), May 19).

Such statements have not been limited to diplomatic channels, but have also been promoted in state media—once again, normally amplifying Russian claims in a sympathetic fashion, rather than making novel accusations. For example, the state broadcaster CGTN—with coverage copied in the CCP’s official mouthpiece, *People’s Daily*—echoed Russian President Vladimir Putin’s May 16 speech in Moscow before representatives of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), writing that “President Putin pointed out that the Pentagon has established a number of biological laboratories in Ukraine... Documentary evidence

obtained suggests that these laboratories were engaged in producing components that could be used to create biological weapons” ([People's Daily](#), May 18).

Assertions of Russian Claims as Fact for Chinese-Speaking Audiences

A more full-throated endorsement of Russian claims has appeared in Chinese-language media intended for a domestic audience—in which accusations against the U.S. are presented as fact, without the legerdemain of re-publicizing Russian state sources. In one such example from March 17—the same day that Kirillov presented his press briefing, in an apparent display of coordinated propaganda between the two governments—a state-produced news video announced that "Russia has discovered 30 biological labs subordinate to America inside Ukraine." The video further insinuated that American-sponsored bio labs were responsible for producing the SARS CoV-2 virus that caused the COVID-19 pandemic, opining that:

America's biological laboratories in Ukraine have attracted high-level international attention, many countries in succession have expressed apprehensions; previously there have been many people who have linked America's biological laboratories with the novel coronavirus, but America has refused to give a direct response, and has even sought to 'shake the pot at' [i.e., blame] other countries ([Jisu Guanacha Shipin](#), March 17).

This same pattern is maintained in Chinese-language media directed towards the global ethnic Chinese diaspora. The CCP has invested a large-scale effort in recent years to establish control over the content of diaspora media, in order to ensure that it will "transmit well China's voice" (传播好中国声音, *chuanbo hao Zhongguo shengyin*)—that is, to mirror the content of the PRC's state-controlled domestic media. [4] In such outlets, the conspiracy theory about biological weapons labs in Ukraine is similarly reported as established, objective fact (see accompanying map image).

**俄發現美在烏生化武器實驗室！
烏代表團：不再致力於申請加入北約**

俄羅斯國防部舉行新聞發布會，通報了俄羅斯對烏克蘭軍事行動的最新進展。通報稱，俄軍已基本解除了烏克蘭武裝力量空軍的戰鬥力，並警告地區鄰國不要為烏克蘭戰機提供機場作為基地。

俄方：發現美國在烏生化武器實驗室曾有鼠疫、炭疽等病毒

俄國防部表示，俄方在軍事行動中發現了由美國資助的、在烏克蘭境內實施的軍事生物計劃。鑒於俄羅斯邊境的幾個烏克蘭生物實驗室曾從事生化武器研發。俄羅斯對烏克蘭軍事行動開始後，這些實驗室緊急銷毀了能夠引發鼠疫、炭疽和霍亂的病毒。目前，俄方已經公布了相關材料。

烏方代表團成員：
烏方不再致力於申請加入北約

當地時間3月6日，俄烏談判烏方代表團成員、烏克蘭人民公仆黨議會黨團主席阿拉哈米亞表示，未來5到10年間，北約並不准備討論烏克蘭加入該組織這一問題。

他表示，烏方不會再致力於提交加入北約的申請，而是將討論某種“非北約模式”。在這一問題上，烏方必須與之開展

歐盟委員會主席稱
烏克蘭加入歐盟需要時間

當地時間3月6日，歐盟委員會主席馮德萊恩在德國柏林接受媒體採訪時再次就烏克蘭加入歐盟一事闡述了自己的觀點。

她表示，歡迎烏克蘭提出加入歐盟的申請，“毫無疑問，勇敢的烏克蘭人民屬於歐洲大家庭”。

但與此同時，馮德萊恩指出，加入歐盟有明確的規定和流程“無法繞過”，並不是一朝一夕的事情。

她也並沒有就這一進程最早何時能取得成果給出明確答覆。

馮德萊恩強調，眼下，最重要的是在當前的衝突中盡可能多地向烏克蘭提供支持。

此前，馮德萊恩曾多次表態說，如今最重要的任務是結束衝突，烏克蘭加入歐盟應該是下一步討論的事情。

輿論普遍認為，除了表達聲援和意向之外，歐盟其實並不能在烏克蘭入盟一事上有過多作為。

由於烏克蘭在政治、經濟以及社會發

展各個方面與歐盟所要求的標準都相差太遠，其入盟之路注定還很遙遠。

還有學者指出，當前必須要對烏克蘭入盟的預期進行管理，不能讓外界對此抱有太大期待，歐盟方面也不應該做出太多不切實際的承諾。

中國駐烏克蘭大使館：
在烏中國同胞絕大部分已撤離

目前，在烏克蘭的中國同胞絕大部分已撤離。當前，烏緊張形勢還在不斷惡化，且有急劇升溫之勢。中國駐烏克蘭使館在此謹提醒尚在烏的中國同胞盡快自烏撤離。

Image: “Russia Has Found American Biological Weapons Labs in Ukraine!” A March 11 headline in Washington Chinese Daily News (華府新聞日報, Huafu Xinwen Ribao), a Chinese-language newspaper in the Washington, DC area (author’s photograph).

Conclusion

The effort to legitimate the invasion of Ukraine by invoking a national security threat from alleged U.S.-sponsored biological warfare laboratories is consistent with a long pattern of Russian state disinformation, one that extends from the present day through the past decade, and all the way back to the Soviet era. In fact, as will be discussed in the second article in this series, there are echoes of such biological warfare conspiracy theories going as far back as the Korean War. However, in contrast with Cold War “active measures” such as “Operation Denver,” in the present Ukrainian conflict these Russian disinformation efforts are being reinforced and trumpeted by the diplomatic and media messaging apparatus of the PRC—a state with far greater informational clout than the Russian Federation, especially in terms of influence in the developing world. The historical legacy of past Soviet-PRC disinformation campaigns concerning biological weapons, and Beijing’s latter-day motivations for involving itself with the disinformation efforts pertaining to Ukraine, will be discussed in the follow-up article in this series.

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Editor’s Note: This is the first article in a two-part series that addresses a prominent Russian Federation disinformation campaign related to the war in Ukraine—namely, the assertion that the Russian invasion was justified due to the alleged presence of U.S.-sponsored biological warfare research facilities in Ukraine—as well as the ways in which this conspiracy theory has been supported and amplified by the state-controlled media system of the People’s Republic of China. This first article provides details of this Russian disinformation effort, as well as examples of the ways in which Beijing has backed up Russian narratives. Part 2 of this article series will seek to place this coordinated disinformation campaign in broader context—both by providing historical parallels for these contemporary biological warfare allegations, as well as analyzing Beijing’s motivations for providing informational support for Moscow’s war effort in Ukraine.

Notes

[1] See: Henry Kamens, “Lugar Bio Laboratory in Tbilisi Latest: It’s Getting Worse by the Day,” *New Eastern Outlook*, January 31, 2016, <https://journal-neo.org/2016/01/31/lugar-bio-laboratory-in-tbilisi-latest-it-s-getting-worse-by-the-day/>. This publication, which has published a steady stream of material supporting this conspiracy theory, was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department in March 2022 as a disinformation outlet controlled by Russia’s leading civilian foreign intelligence agency, the SVR. See: U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Russians Bankrolling Putin and Russia-Backed Influence Actors,” March 3, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0628>.

[2] For more on “Operation Denver” and other Cold War era KGB “active measures,” see: Mark Kramer, “Lessons From Operation ‘Denver,’ the KGB’s Massive AIDS Disinformation Campaign,” *MIT Press Reader*, May 2020, <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/operation-denver-kgb-aids-disinformation-campaign/>; and *Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986-87* (U.S. Department of State, August 1987), <https://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/library/reports/1987/soviet-influence-activities-1987.pdf>.

[3] The formal name of the agreement is the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction*. The U.S. signed the agreement in April 1972, and it was fully ratified and entered into force in March 1975. Full text available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/bw/c48738.htm>.

[4] For a discussion of the efforts made by the CCP to pursue control over the Chinese diaspora, see: Anne-Marie Brady, submission to the New Zealand Parliament’s Justice Select Committee Inquiry into Foreign Interference (May 2019), <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2019/05/08/575479/anne-marie-bradys-full-submission>. For an example of CCP discussion on the need to “speed up assimilation and transformation” (加快融合与变革, *jiakuai ronghe yu biange*) of overseas Chinese media in order to make it “tell China’s story well and transmit well China’s voice” (讲述好中国故事, 传播好中国声音 / *jiangshu hao Zhongguo gushi, chuanbo hao Zhongguo shengyin*), see: “Make Overseas Chinese New Media Great and Strong” (把海外华文新媒体做大做强, *Ba Haiwai Huawen Xin Meiti Zuo Da Zuo Qiang*), *People’s Daily*, July 10, 2019, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1638616254700785697&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

Who Will Hold "The Barrel of a Gun" in Xi's Third Term?: Recent PLA Promotions and the Outlook for the Next Central Military Commission

By Eli Y. Huang and Reginald Y. Lin



(Image: General Secretary Xi Jinping greets delegates at a Central Military Commission (CMC) meeting on Party building in 2018, **Source:** China Daily)

Introduction

On January 21, General Secretary and Central Military Commission (CMC) chairman Xi Jinping promoted seven senior People's Liberation Army (PLA) military and armed police officers to the rank of general: Political Commissar (PC) of Northern Theater Command Liu Qingsong, Commander of Central Theater Command (TC) Wu Ya'nán, PC of Central TC Xu Deqing, PC of Army Qin Shutong, PC of Navy Yuan Huazhi, Commander of Rocket Force Li Yuchao and PC of the People's Armed Police (PAP) Zhang Hongbing ([Xinhua](#), January 21). The personnel changes were the latest in a spree of promotions by Xi, who has elevated a record 38 officers to the full general rank since 2019. Xi's rapid promotion of so many generals is extraordinary as it breaches long-standing military convention. In the past, the CMC chairman has normally presided over only one round of promotion of full generals per year, usually around Army Day on August 1 (八一, *bayī*) ([China Brief](#), January 25)

Uncertainty surrounding the promotion process for PLA generals has increased since Chinese military reforms kicked off in 2016. Such developments triggered a discussion of whether objective qualifications have been replaced with Xi's subjective preferences. Since judging the candidates' relations with Xi and the level of subjective preference is difficult, this article argues that basic qualifications – age, seniority and experience, and other indicators for advancements such as key positions, leader's preference and party involvement – remain key considerations for promotion. Nevertheless, as some observers have suggested, changing patterns of generals' promotion may also reflect Xi's efforts to ensure he retains his core leader status at the 20th Party Congress in late 2022.

Basic Qualification - Age, Seniority, Experience

Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) launched sweeping military reforms in November 2015, the organizational structure of the CMC has not only been reshaped and the hardware of the PLA upgraded, but the military officer grade and rank system has also been restructured to strengthen joint operation capabilities. The reorganization has altered promotion patterns in the military ranks, and the qualifications of some generals promoted by Xi have broken with past convention. The intersection of lengthy reform processes and potential underlying political motives increase the difficulty and uncertainty of assessing the significance of the promotion of PLA generals. Many are of the opinion that as Xi has consolidated control of the military that previous objective qualifications for promotion have been superseded by Xi's subjective preference for personal loyalty. For example, generals that Xi knew when he worked in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces from 1985 to 2007 have received more promotion opportunities. [1]

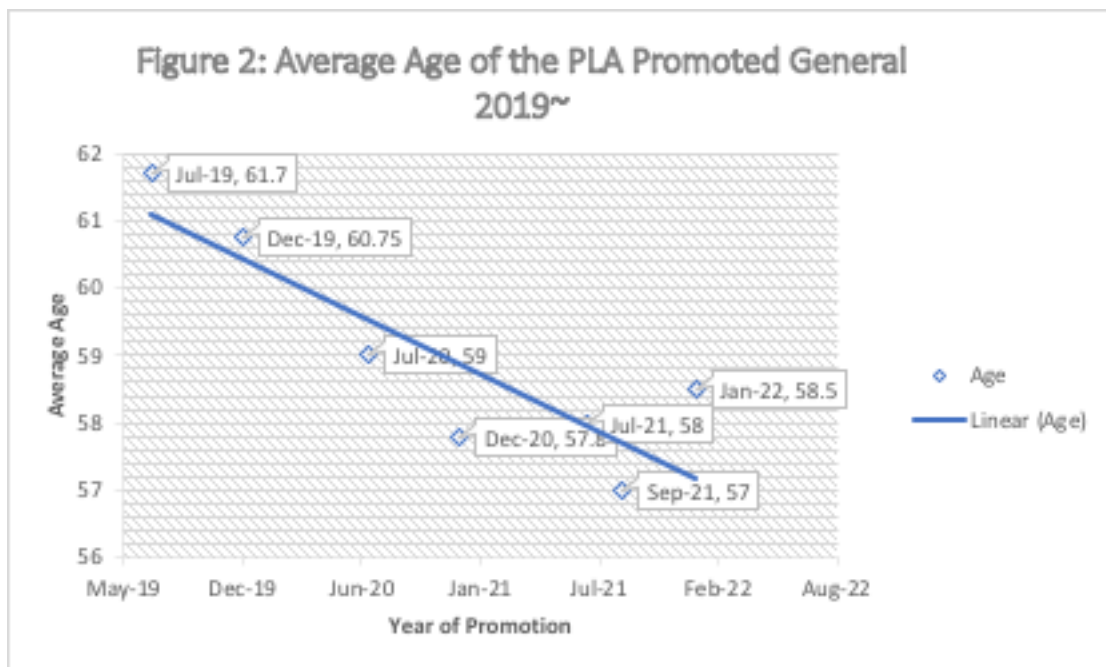
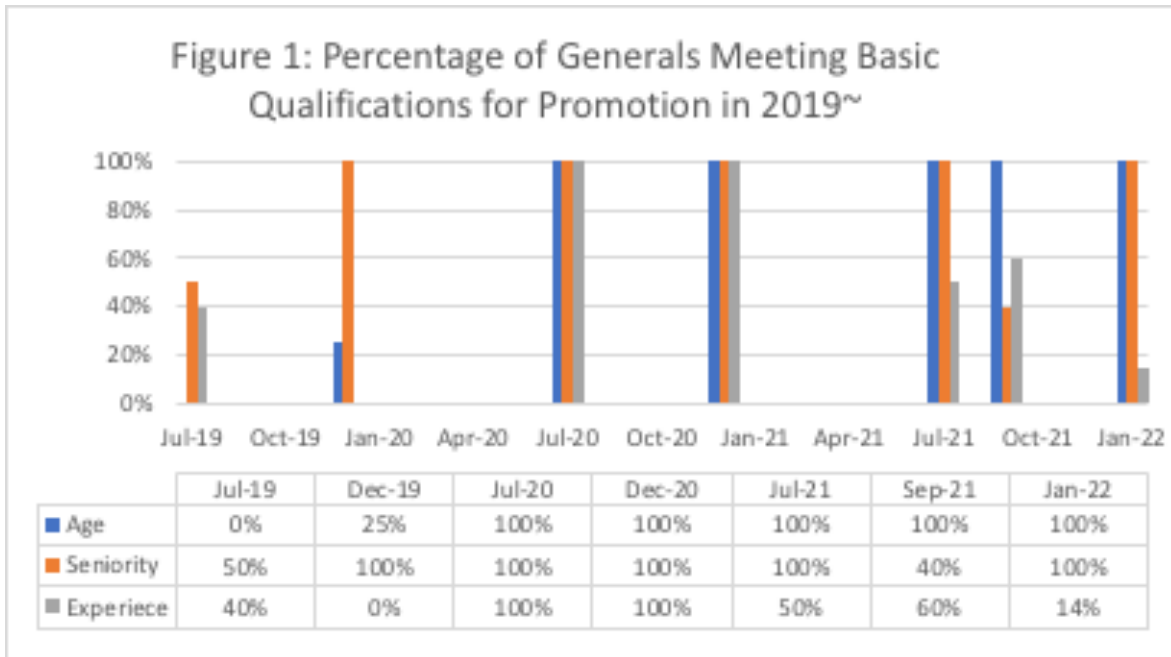
However, building a modern military still requires regulation and standardization of education, training, assessment and promotion processes to manage and cultivate talent in key leadership positions. It is also difficult to judge the candidates' relations with Xi and the level of subjective preference. Therefore, this article argues that age, seniority, and experience are still important qualifications for generals in the promotion process. We have assigned the following scoring system for these three qualifications in the promotion process (See Table 1):

- 1. Age:** The most basic public personnel information, more consistent with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) personnel operation "age line." In the crucial year of 2022 for the CCP's "20th National Congress" and the year 2027 for "21st National Congress", age is a key criterion for promotion.
- 2. Seniority:** Candidates who have served in the sub-theater position for 2-4 years have more opportunities for promotion. Candidates who served for more than 4 years are secondary, but are more likely to be promoted than candidates who have served less than 2 years, since it is not appropriate to reassign them in such a short time.
- 3. Experience:** The position of the theater deputy leader shows the diversity of the experiences of the CCP generals and brigades, and those with diverse experiences are likely to have an advantage in being considered for promotion.

Table 1: Scoring Formula

Age	63 years-old in 2022	Under 63 in 2022	Under 63 in 2027
		0	+1
Seniority	Served as deputy theater or above for less than 2 years	Served as deputy theater or above for more than 2 years to less than 4 years	Served as deputy theater or above for more than 4 years
	+0	+2	+1
Experience	Served as only 1 position in the deputy theater or above	Served as more than 1 position in the deputy theater or above	
	+0	+1	

The PLA promotion cycle has been irregular since the Chinese military reforms got underway in 2016 ([China Daily](#), January 1, 2016). No promotions were held in 2018, so the timeframe starts from 2019 until January 2022. After observing the promotions after 2019 (See Appendix), it is apparent that basic qualifications still matter. While seniority is the most important qualification, there appears to be an increasing emphasis on age whilst ignoring experience at the same time. For example, among ten promoted generals in July 2019, no one qualified in age and only four generals (40%) qualified in terms of experience. However, among the seven promoted generals in January 2022, all of them are qualified in age (100%) but less than 20% (only one general) are qualified with regard to experience. (See Figure 1, (See Appendix one for statistics). The average age of promoted generals dropped significantly from almost 62 years old in July 2019 to nearly 58 years old in January 2022. (See Figure 2). [2] Since the timeframe in this article is short (2019-2022), and many officers were rapidly promoted to general during this period, there are many variables that affect the metric of experience. As experience likely remains an indispensable and important criterion in the long-term observation of the promotion of CCP generals, it is still considered a basic qualification.



Advanced Indicators

On the grounds of basic qualifications, three factors – key position, leader preference and party involvement – are used as advanced indicators to assess the possibility of candidates’ promotion.

1. Officers in key positions, which refers to the typical branch of service or force, traditionally crucial positions and new positions after military reform. Lieutenant Generals who are from the Ground Force have been more likely to be promoted. Since Xi launched military reforms in late 2015, he has promoted 52 senior officers to full-general rank: 24 (52.17%) from the Ground Force, Six (13.04%) from the navy and 10 (21.74%) from the air force. There may be more vacancies in the army and air force because they assist other forces such as the

People's Armed Police (PAP) and the Strategic Support Force (SSF). Most PAP generals come from the army, and SSF generals tend to have air force backgrounds (See Appendix 2)

LGs who occupied traditional key positions have been more likely to be promoted. For example, the Deputy Chief of Joint Staff (DCJS) of the CMC was the Deputy Chief of Staff (DCS) in the General Staff Department and served by the rank of General before military reform. LG Yi Xiaoguang, who became DCS in November 2015, was not only promoted in July 2016 to be youngest General in any full service, but was also appointed Central TC commander and is the first PLA Air Force senior officer to head a TC ([Global Times](#), October 1, 2019) Since military reforms got underway in 2016, DCJS started to be staffed mainly by officers holding LG rank ([CRNTT](#), January 18, 2017). Before military reforms, this role was only filled by full Generals. Therefore, the LG who occupied the position of DCJS could be a viable candidate for becoming a PLA General (See Table 2).[3] One reason that this position has been opened up to lower-ranked generals is that in 2019 it was downgraded from TC leader to TC deputy leader grade.

Table 2: Deputy Chief of Joint Staff Appointed after 2016

Name	Rank	Birth	Dates of Service	Follow-up
Ma Yiming	LG	1957.08	2017.01—2020.12	Retired (Dec. 2020)
Shao Yuanming	MG	1956.12	2017.01~	Promoted to LG (Jul. 2018)
Chang Dingqiu	MG	1967.01	2017.12—2021.08	Promoted to LG (Jul. 2018) Promoted to Gen. (Sep. 2021)
Li Jun	LG	1963.09	2020.12~	
Wu Yanan	LG	1962.08	2020.12—2022.01	Promoted to Gen. (Jan. 2022)
Jing Jianfeng	LG	1966	2021.12—	

Following the initiation of military reforms, Major Generals (MG) or LGs in new positions have also received more opportunities for promotion. For example, among the commander and PC of the 13 group armies which were formed in 2017, 53.8 percent (14/26) were promoted to LG. Among the promoted LG from 13 group armies, 50 percent (7/14) were promoted to General. (See Table 3) [4]

Table 3: Leadership of New group Armies in 2017

Group Army	Position & Name		Birth/ Age	Rank		
				Maj. Gen	Lt. Gen	Gen.
71 st	C	Wang Yinfang	Sep. 1962/ 59yr	◎		
	PC	Xu Deqing	Jul. 1963/58yr	◎	◎(2019.06)	◎(2022.01)
72 nd	C	Zhe Xiaohui	N/A	◎		
	PC	Wang Wemquan	Dec. 1962/59yr	◎	◎(2020.06)	
73 rd	C	Hu Zhongqiang	Jan.1967/55yr	◎	◎	
	PC	Yang Cheng	Dec. 1964/57yr	◎	◎(2020.07)	
74 th	C	Xu Xianghua	May. 1965/57yr	◎		
	PC	Liu Hongjun	N/A	◎		
75 th	C	Gong Maodong	N/A	◎		
	PC	Qin Shutong	Nov. 1963/58yr	◎	◎(2019.06)	◎(2022.01)
76 th	C	Fan Chengcai	Jan.1964/58yr	◎	◎(2019.06)	
	PC	Zhang Hongbing	Jan. 1966/56yr	◎	◎(2019.12)	◎(2022.01)
77 th	C	Lin Huomao	Nov. 1963/58	◎		
	PC	Li Zehua	N/A	◎		
78 th	C	Wu Yanan	Aug. 1962/59yr	◎	◎(2020.04)	◎(2022.01)
	PC	Guo Xiaodong	Nov. 1960/61yr	◎		
79 th	C	Xu Qiling	Jul. 1962/ 59yr	◎	◎(2019.12)	◎(2021.07)
	PC	Yu Yonghong	May. 1963/59yr	◎	◎(2019.12)	
80 th	C	Wang Xiubin	Mar. 1964/58yr	◎	◎(2019.12)	◎(2021.07)
	PC	Zhu Yuwu	Mar. 1962/60yr	◎		
81 st	C	Huang Ming	Apr. 1963/59yr	◎	◎(2019.12)	
	PC	Fang Yongxiang	Aug. 1966/55yr	◎	◎(2022.01)	
82 nd	C	Ling Xiangyang	Oct. 1964/ 57yr	◎	◎(2020.04)	◎(2021.08)
	PC	Zhang Mengbin	1962/60	◎		
83 rd	C	Xie Zenggang	N/A	◎		
	PC	Lu Shaoping	Oct. 1961/60yr	◎		

Following the initiation of military reforms, Major Generals (MG) or LGs in new positions have also received more opportunities for promotion. For example, among the commander and PC of the 13 group armies which were formed in 2017, 53.8 percent (14/26) were promoted to LG. Among the promoted LG from 13 group armies, 50 percent (7/14) were promoted to General. (See Table 3)

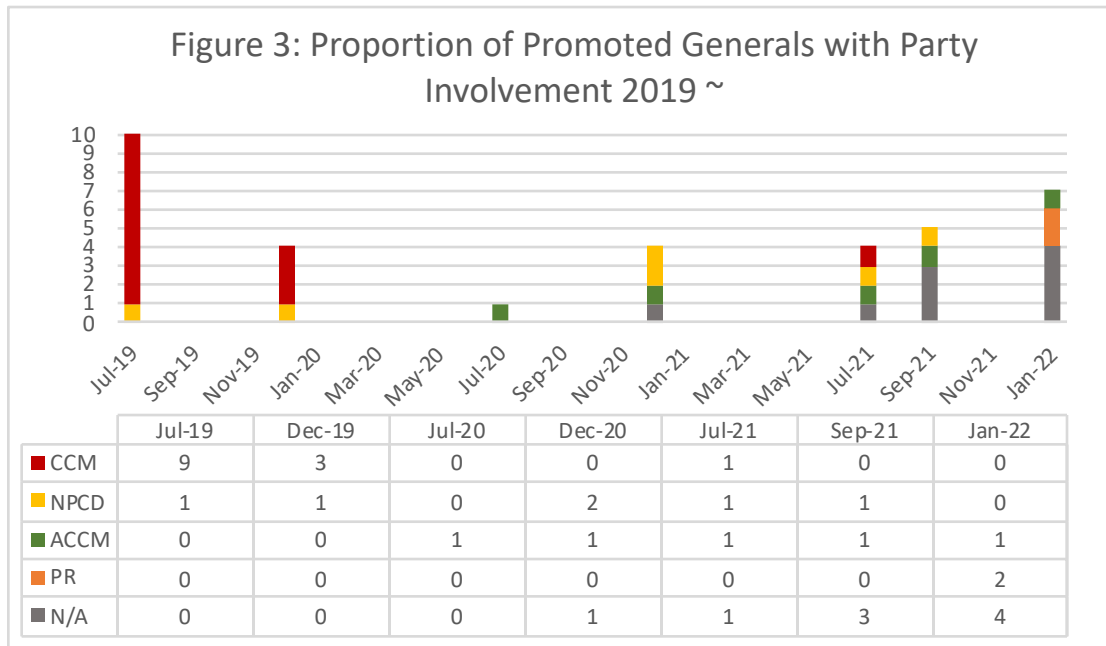
2. CMC Chairman's Preferences: Chairman Xi's preferred candidates can be broken down in to two kinds: 1) those officers he knew when he worked in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, and 2) those officers who have occupied crucial positions focused on stabilizing restive regions. Army PC Qin Shutong can be classified as the first type of candidate typically preferred by Xi as he served as a regiment PC in the Nanjing Military Region in 2003, when Xi also worked in Zhejiang Province ([China Military](#), July 7, 2003). Candidates who have experience in the Western TC – the unstable region that includes Xinjiang and Tibet – may have greater

opportunities to strengthen their capabilities and demonstrate loyalty, which could result in opportunities for promotion. ([China Military Watch](#), October 1, 2021). For example, Central TC PC Xu Deqing served as PC of the 47th Group Army, which was part of the former Western TC Lanzhou Military Region during 2015-2017 ([ifeng](#), September 27, 2015). The PC of the Rocket Force Xu Zhongbo was the first PC of the Western TC Ground Force in 2016 ([epaper](#), February 2, 2016). Xu Deqing took over this position in 2018 ([Sina](#), June 10, 2016).

3. Involvement in Party Leadership: Party involvement has always been one of the most important indicators of promotion. According to the political practices of the PLA, the two CMC vice-chairmen are members of the Political Bureau (Politburo) of the Central Committee of the CCP. [5] “Theater command-level” officers, commanders, and PCs are all members of the CPC Central Committee.

However, CCP promotion—especially promotion to the Central Committee and higher—is subject to the election of the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (NCCCCP) i.e. the Party Congress, which is held every five years. However, appointments of alternate members are made during plenary meetings of the Central Committee. In the past two years, the generals and officers who have been promoted to the "Theater-Command-level" are also expected to be promoted to members of the CCP Central Committee at the "20th National Congress" in Autumn 2022.

Figure 3 shows promoted generals’ party involvement from 2019 to 2022. Most of the promoted generals before 2021 have been members of the Central Committee Member (CCM), or at least alternate members of the Central Committee (ACCM). However, since 2021, for the upcoming CCP’s "20th National Congress", many generals who have been promoted had not yet served even in alternate positions of the CCM due to the rapidity of the promotion process.



CCM - Central Committee Member

ACCM – Alternate Member of the Central Committee

NPCD – National People's Congress Deputy

PR – Representative for CCP Party Congress

Implications

After examining the dynamics of PLA general officer promotion patterns through surveying basic qualification and advanced indicators, three implications appear as follows:

1. Institution First: So far, Xi's personnel transfers to senior generals ahead of the 20th Party Congress still prioritize the PLA's organizational needs. Since basic qualifications - age, seniority and experience - still matter in the promotion of Generals, this not only reflects that institutionalization still exists but also implies that, while focusing on choosing the candidates by his subjective preference, excessive politicization is also one of Xi's major issues impeding PLA reform.

2. Connections and Position Second: Although they still need to meet the basic qualifications, candidates who have occupied crucial positions or who have worked with Xi possess advantages when it comes to promotion, as they have accumulated credibility with the CMC chairman and have proven their loyalty to him.

3. Xi's Timetable: The decreasing average age of promoted generals, especially those who do not have a party leadership position, implies Xi's eagerness to firmly grasp military power in order to successfully navigate the 20th Party Congress and continue his tenure as the top leader. It is also in line with the traditional thinking of the CCP that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Hence, an obvious "metabolism" among the top generals exists in the CCP. These new generals will be promoted to high-level party positions by Xi Jinping at the 20th Party Congress of the CCP, and become the main leaders of the army during his third term.

Conclusion

Ahead of China's 20th Party Congress, there are two key developments to watch with regard to the next round of promotion of generals and determining the composition of the next CMC.

According to CCP conventions on retirement age, the two CMC vice-chairmen, Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia, and two CMC members, Wei Fenghe and Li Zuocheng, are all due to retire at the 20th Party Congress. As a result, CMC members Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin will be the only two members of the CMC of the CCP who are expected to be re-elected to the Military Commission after the 20th National Congress, which means they have a higher chance of taking over as the CMC vice chairman. The vacancies in the CMC will go to generals who are under age 65, currently serving, or have just stepped down from "Theater-Command-level" positions. However, it is still possible that Xi makes unexpected and untraditional military personnel arrangements during the 20th Party Congress. First, while Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin are most likely to take over as CMC vice chairmen due to their age and qualifications, not only is their expertise overlapping, but they also lack the experience in command and general staff. Miao came up in the navy and served in the political system of the Communist Army for a long time, and Zhang is from the Disciplinary inspection system services. This will be an unprecedented situation for the CCP and the PLA. In the past, there was at least one of the CMC vice chairman who was either a founding father of the country, outstanding in technological

development such as strategic weaponry, or had the background of operational command or candidate of CCP leader. However, both Miao and Zhang do not meet these qualifications. Secondly, several generals who have close ties with Xi have been rapidly promoted in recent years. For example, after serving as the commander of the Central TC for less than half a year, Lin Xiangyang was transferred to the Eastern TC in January 2022. It is worth watching whether he will be promoted directly to the CMC during the 20th Party Congress to "escort" Xi's third term. In addition, Xu Deqing, PC of the Central TC, Qin Shutong, PC of the Army, Zhang Hongbing, PC of the PAP, Wu Yanan, commander of the Central TC, and Wang Xiubin, commander of the Southern TC, were all born after 1962 and were all promoted from lieutenant general to general in about 3 years. Moreover, they were recently transferred to the Commanders or PC of the theater-level. They are also candidates for becoming new members of the CMC.

Table 4: Promotion of Political Commissars 2016~

Theater Command (TC) Political Commissar	
Eastern TC	He Ping (2019.12)
Southern TC	Wang Jianwu (2019.12)
Western TC	Zhu Fuxi (2016.07), We Shezhou (2019.07), Li Fengbiao(?)
Northern TC	Fan Xiaojun (2019.07), Liu Qingsong (2022.01)
Central TC	Zhu Shengling (2019.07), Xu Deqing (2022.01.21)
Service Political Commissar	
PLA Army	Liu Lei (2017.07), Qin Shutong (2022.01)
PLAN	Qin Shengxiang (2019.07), Yuan Huazhi (2022.01)
PLAAF	Yu Zhongfu (2017.07.28), Guo Puxiao (2022.01)
Rocket Force	Wang Jiasheng (2017.07), Xu Zhongbo (2020.07)
SSF	Li Wei (2020.12)
PAP	An Zhaoqing (2019.07), Zhang Hongbing (2022.01)

In regards to the next General promotion, should it be held in the summer as has occurred in the previous three years, it will be the last chance for Xi to elevate trusted personnel in the brass before the 20th Party Congress. In such a situation, it is reasonable that Xi would prefer younger candidates born after 1962, who could serve until 2027. The current Deputy Commander of the PAP Hu Zhongqiang, the Army Commander of the Central TC Fan Chengcai, the Army Chief of Staff Huang Ming, the PC of the Xinjiang Military Region Yang Cheng, and the deputy PC of the Southern TC Fang Yongxiang, have been promoted to LG have the relevant qualifications, and would be expected to be promoted to general in the future. The PC of the 79th group army Yu Yonghong was recently promoted to LG and was also born after 1962. As all the PC positions in Theater level have been filled (See Table 4), it is difficult for PLA officials to spare a vacancy for Yu. While current discussion among China military watchers concerns the PLA's capabilities and the potential conflict in Taiwan Strait, it is important to realize that the most pressing issue for CMC chairman Xi is to ensure his leadership for his third term in 2022 and possibly even a fourth term in 2027 ([China Brief](#), May 27). On the other hand, the

dynamics of top PLA personnel promotion provide insights into CCP leaders' priorities for military affairs. The possibility of putting the Taiwan issue into priority cannot be ignored once the PLA general promotion has been settled and institutionalized

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Editor's Note: *This piece was edited slightly on June 28, 2022.*

Notes

[1] Shen Mingshi, "Observation on the recent transfer of PLA generals and personnel arrangements" (近期解放軍將領調動及人事安排觀察), Monthly Brief of ROC Mainland Affairs Council, 2018.09, <https://ws.mac.gov.tw/Download.ashx?u=LzAwMS9VcGxvYWQvMjk1L2NrZmlsZS82MWEwNjc3Yi1IM2MzLTQ2MzItYTBlYy1lYmRjOTgxODZiYjUucGRm&n=MjAxODA5MDUucGRm>

[2] Statistics on officers' qualifications are drawn from the following state media outlets: [81.cn](#), [China Military](#), Xinhua, [Guancha](#))

[3] Ibid

[4] Ibid

[5] See Reginald Lin, Eli Yin-shan Huang, "China Military Watch", *The Strategist*, October 1, 2021. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-military-watch-11/>

Appendix 1: List of PLA General Promotions since 2019

Name	Position	A	S	E	Total		
2019							
Jul. 31 st	Li Shangfu	CMC Equipment Development Department Director	0	2	1	3	CCM
	Yuan Yubai	Southern TC Commander	0	1	0	1	CCM
	Wu Shezhou	Western TC PC	0	2	1	3	CCM
	Fan Xiaojun	Northern TC PC	0	1	0	1	CCM
	Zhu Shengling	Central TC PC	0	1	1	2	CCM
	Shen Jinlong	Navy Commander	0	2	0	2	CCM
	Qin Shengxiang	Navy PC	0	1	0	1	CCM
	Ding Laihang	PLAAF Commander	0	1	0	1	CCM
	Zheng he	President of NDU	0	2	1	3	CCM
	An Zhaoqing	PAP PC	0	2	0	2	NPCD
Dec. 12 th	He Weidong	Eastern TC Commander	0	2	0	2	NPCD
	He Ping	Eastern TC PC	0	2	0	2	CCM
	Wang Jianwe	Southern TC PC	0	2	0	2	CCM
	Li Qiaoming	Northern TC Commander	1	2	0	3	CCM
2020							
Jul. 29 th	Xu Zhongbo	Rocket Force PC	1	2	1	4	ACCM
Dec. 18 th	Guo Puxiao	CMC Logistic Support Department PC	2	2	1	5	NPCD
	Zhang Xudong	Western TC Commander	1	2	1	4	N/A
	Li Wei	Strategic Support Force (SSF) PC	1	2	1	4	NPCD
	Wang Chunning	PAP Commander	1	2	1	4	ACCM
2021							
Jul. 5 th	Wang Xiubin	Southern TC Commander	2	1	0	3	ACCM
	Xu Qiling	Western TC Commander	1	1	1	3	NPCD
	Liu Zhenli	Army Commander	2	2	1	5	CCM
	Ju Qiansheng	SSF Commander	1	1	N/A	2	N/A
Sep. 6 th	Wang Haijiang	Western TC Commander	1	0	1	2	NPCD
	Lin Xiangyang	Central TC Commander	2	0	0	2	N/A
	Dong Jun	Navy Commander	N/A	0	1	1	N/A
	Chang Dingqiu	PLAAF Commander	2	1	1	4	ACCM
Xu Xueqiang	NDU President	1	1	0	2	N/A	
2022							
Jan. 22 nd	Wu Ya'nan	Central TC Commander	1	2	1	4	PR
	Li Yuchao	Rocket Force Commander	1	2	0	3	ACCM
	Liu Qingsong	Northern TC PC	1	2	0	3	N/A
	Xu Deqing	Central TC PC	1	1	0	2	PR
	Qin Shutong	Army PC	1	1	0	2	N/A
	Yuan Huazhi	Navy PC	1	2	0	3	N/A
	Zhang Hongbing	PAP PC	N/A	2	0	2	N/A

Appendix 2: PLA General promotions by service, 2016 to 2022

	Army: 24 (52.17%)	PLAN: 6 (13.04%)	PLAAF: 10 (21.74%)
CMC	2 *Director of Equipment Development Department: Li Shangfu(2019.07) * Secretary of Commission for Discipline Inspection: Zhang Shenmin (2017.11)		1 *Deputy Chief of Joint Staff: Yi Xiaoguang (2016.07)
Theater Commander	9 *Central: Han Weiguo (2017.08), Lin Xiangyang (2021.09), Wu Yanan (2022.01) *Northern: Li Qiaoming (2019.12) *Eastern: He Weidong (2019.12) *Southern: Wang Xiubin (2021.07) *Western: Zhang Xudong (2020.12), Xu Qiling (2021.07), Wang Haijiang (2021.09)	1 *Southern: Yuan Yubai (2019.07)	
Service Commander	2 *PAP Commander: Wang Chunqing (2020.12) *Army Commander: Liu Zhenli (2021.07)	2 *Navy Commander: Shen Jinlong (2019.07), Dong Jun(2021.09)	3 *PLAAF Commander: Ding Laihang (2019.07), Chang Dingjiu(2021.09) *SSF Commander: Li Fengbiao (2019.12)
Political Commissar (PC)	9 *Army PC: Liu Lei (2017.07), Qin Shulong (2022.01) *Central Theater Command PC: Zhu Shengling (2019.07), Xu Deqing (2022.01.21) *Western Theater Command PC: Wu Shezhou (2019.07) *Eastern Theater Command PC: He Ping (2019.12) *Southern Theater Command PC: Wang Jianyu (2019.12) *SSF PC: Li Wei (2020.12) *PAP PC: Zhang Hongbing (2022.01)	3 *Navy PC: Qin Shengxiang (2019.07), Yuan Huazhi (2022.01) *Northern Theater Command PC: Liu Qingsong (2022.01)	5 * CMC Logistic Support Department: Guo Puxiao (2020.12) * PLAAF PC: Yu Zhongfu (2017.07.28) *PAP PC: An Zhaoping (2019.07) *Western Theater Command PC: Zhu Fuxi (2016.07) *Northern Theater Command PC: Fan Xiaojun (2019.07)
Military Academies and Research Institutions	2 *President of National Defense University: Zheng He (2019.07) *President of Academy of Military Science: Yang Xuejun (2019.12)		1 *President of National Defense University: Xu Xueqiang (2021.09)
	Rocket Force: 4 (8.70%)	SSF: 3 (6.52%)	PAP: 3 (6.52%)
Service Commander	2 *Rocket Force Commander: Zhou Yaning (2019.12), Li Yuchao (2022.01)	2 *SSF Commander: Gao Jin (2017.07), Ju Qiansheng (2021.07)	1 *PAP Commander: Wang Chunqing (2020.12)
Political Commissar (PC)	2 *Rocket Force PC: Wang Jiasheng (2017.07), Xu Zhongbo (2020.07)	1 *SSF PC: Li Wei (2020.12)	2 *PAP PC: An Zhaoping (2019.07), Zhang Hongbing (2022.01)

The Enemy of My Friend Remains My Friend: China's Ukraine Dilemma

By Horia Ciurtin



(Image: A statue of the eighth century Chinese poet Du Fu is unveiled at the Embassy of Ukraine in Beijing last year, Source: [China Daily](#))

Introduction

State media in China remains equivocal about the level of destruction and mayhem caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, the Chinese government has stated it will meet the challenge of overcoming strained global supplies resulting from the conflict, and has emphasized that the nation's food security will be ensured ([People's Daily](#), June 2; [China News Service](#), May 27). Nevertheless, given Ukraine's position as a global agricultural supplier, China has not fully appreciated the scope of the problem.

At a broader level, the war is a litmus test for China's ability to navigate geopolitical troubles along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Thus far, the conflict has underscored the difficulties facing China in moving beyond convenient cordialities to play the role of a benign 'balancer' in global politics. In its relationships with Moscow

and Kyiv, Beijing is entangled financially with both sides. Furthermore, China is now exposed to secondary sanctions due to its economic entanglement with Russia. At the same time, its investments, construction projects and supply chains that traverse Ukraine risk destruction as the war drags on.

The Strategic Perils of Not Picking Sides: “An Objective and Impartial Position”

For much of the last decade, China has cultivated its bilateral relationship with Ukraine, increasing its trade in goods, supplying (unspectacular, but still relevant) investment, and undertaking construction projects to develop industry and infrastructure. This pattern of cooperation between Beijing and Kyiv continued unfettered, even as tensions between Russia - another crucial BRI partner - and Ukraine intensified. Not even the annexation of Crimea in 2014, or the initial war in Donbas altered Beijing's political 'agnosticism' concerning the divisions emerging within the ranks of its partners along the BRI's winding - and troublesome - path to the European Union. In an effort to sustain its economic and strategic efforts in the region, Beijing professed neutrality in the conflicts among its partners.

Nonetheless, the scale and intensity of the current Russia-Ukraine war has deeply challenged this tenet of Chinese foreign policy. Outright political assistance to Russia in its act of aggression toward an independent and sovereign state would make Beijing an accomplice in Moscow's invasion, triggering reprisals from the international community (including key BRI partners) and, thus, negatively impact business. On the other hand, a circumstantial decoupling from Russia would lead to the deliberate estrangement of a vital BRI partner, cause troubles in Central Asia and precipitate difficulties in ensuring steady and affordable energy supply.

Beijing is thus caught between an (economic) rock and a (geopolitical) hard place, keeping its stance of assumed 'neutrality', while sending myriad contradictory messages. Furthermore, the People's Republic of China (PRC) government's creation of distinct narratives on the Ukraine War for internal domestic consumption and for the larger global audience, have increased the confusion around China's position and intentions. At the beginning of the invasion, the official line was that the PRC “advocates respecting and safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries”, this being “equally applicable to the Ukraine issue”, but simultaneously declared the need to respect Russia's “legitimate security appeals” concerning NATO's eastward expansion ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) (FMPRC), February 26). Later messaging failed to shed further light on this issue. In terms of internal consumption, an overarching leitmotif of various hawkish press outlets such as *PLA Daily* or the *People's Daily*, in their respective pen named pieces by “Jun Sheng” (钧声) and “Zhong Sheng” (钟声), is to denounce the U.S. and NATO for “provoking” or “escalating” the conflict for their own benefit ([PLA Daily](#), April 28; [People's Daily](#), April 7).

On the international scene, Beijing has taken a different approach, but has similarly obfuscated the main issue, which is the actual invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Chinese officials continue to promulgate a diffuse narrative about “upholding an objective and impartial position” on the matter and claim that “China always stands on the side of peace” stating that “a fundamental solution is to accommodate the legitimate security concerns of all relevant parties” (FMPRC, [April 1](#), [April 6](#)).

At a strategic level, China's tacit endorsement of its Russian partner provides little additional structural advantage aside from discounted prices for oil, gas and coal. In fact, lending support to Russia may actually damage the PRC's geostrategic position, as it reinforces Western, particularly transatlantic unity, thereby bringing Europe and the U.S. closer on an ever-increasing range of issue. For China, the situation could worsen further, should Putin's regime collapse or an armistice is reached that sidelines Beijing. In such a scenario, China would face a coherent Western bloc while tied to a partner that lacks either sufficient leverage on the global scene or the necessary purchasing power to absorb Chinese exports

The equivocal positions taken by China have already negatively impacted its relations with both NATO and the European Union. In April, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that Beijing "has been unwilling to condemn Russia's aggression and has joined Moscow in questioning the right of nations to choose their own path" ([NATO Press Conference](#), April 5). The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell declared: "in practice, Beijing's attitude has been one of pro-Russian neutrality. China does not condone Russia's behaviour [...] but it does support Russia's justifications of the war" ([EEAS](#), April 6).

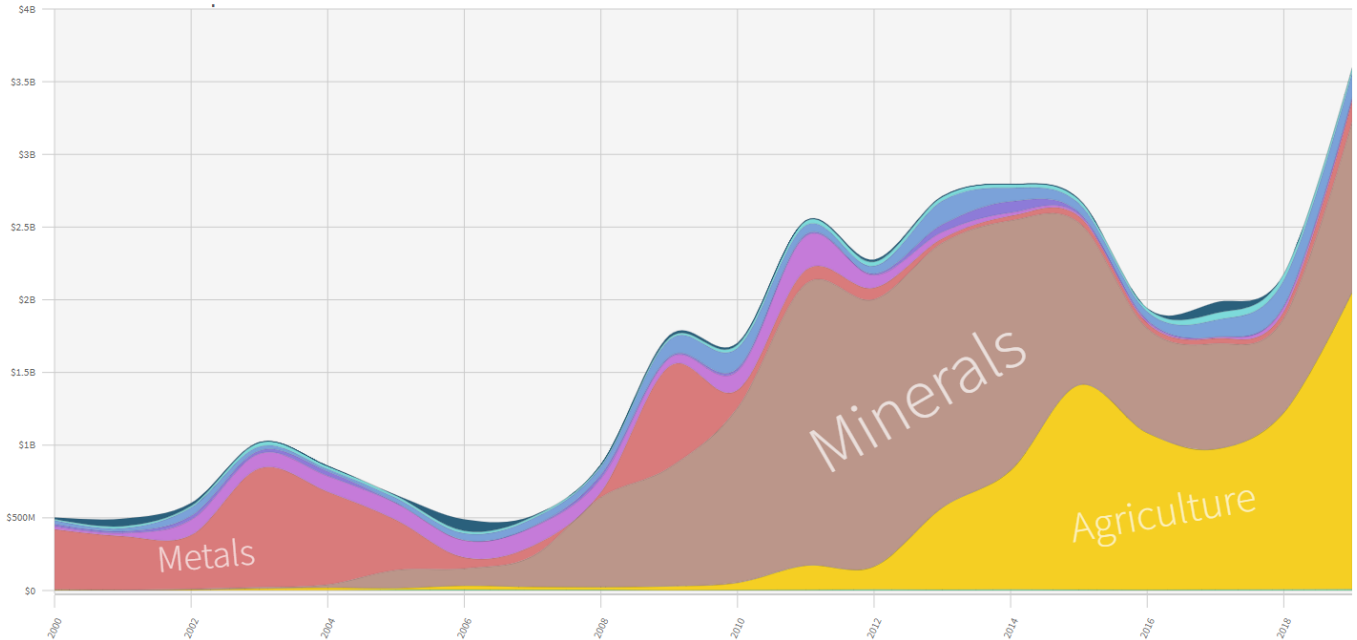
Trade (at Risk): Iron, Grain and Weapons

Even if growing international impatience with China's ambiguous refusal to take a decisive stance has generated some reputational damage across key BRI constituencies, the costs of this stance are hardly insurmountable at present. Nonetheless, China is experiencing a more tangible kind of loss, which is the disintegration of much of its previously expansive economic footprint in Ukraine. The China-Ukraine relationship has been carefully constructed over the years and is integral to supply chains in fundamental sectors, such as grains and agricultural products, iron ore and military equipment.

The China-Ukraine relationship attained increased significance in the last years of the 2000s, during Viktor Yushchenko's presidency and Viktor Yanukovich's time as Prime Minister and later continuing during the latter's mandate as the head of state. During that time significant increases in export volumes occurred. Ukraine's exports to China rose constantly in the 2010s, reaching a peak of \$7.26 billion in 2020, during the COVID pandemic ([Observatory of Economic Complexity](#)).

Bilateral trade might seem fairly irrelevant given China's overall trade volume, but China imports several strategically important goods from Ukraine. In theory, some of these imports - such as agricultural products and iron ore - are fungible, but the remaining volumes on the international markets are insufficient to meet global demand if the Ukrainian supply is excluded. This is especially the case in the short- and medium-term. China can devise new logistical arrangements for agricultural imports, but they are likely to be costlier due to Ukraine's importance to the global food market. For example, China imports 20 percent of its total cereals from Ukraine including 70 percent of its corn and 60 percent of its sunflower seed oil ([UN Comtrade](#), 2019). Over the past half-decade, China deepened its reliance on Ukrainian corn imports in order to diversify away from dependence on U.S. supplies due to the trade war with Washington and concerns over food security ([China Brief](#), January 28).

Figure 1 - Ukraine's Exports to China



[Source: [The Atlas of Economic Complexity](#)]

Switching food suppliers in a limited global market that is highly exposed to uncontrollable natural phenomena is no easy feat. Furthermore, competition for limited goods is intensified by export limitations and interdictions by producer countries concerned about ensuring their own food security ([IFPRI](#), April 13). Moreover, existing investments in port terminals and local silos are hard to replicate swiftly elsewhere. Thus, significant inconveniences are to be expected by China in this sector if the Russian blockade of the Black Sea gateways continues to block Kyiv from proceeding with its exports.

For example, COFCO International, a Chinese food processing and trading company, maintains its third most critical global operation in Ukraine (after those in Brazil and Argentina); manages its own port terminal in Mykolayiv, four grain silos along the Dnieper; and operates a sunflower seed crushing plant near Mariupol ([COFCO International](#), August 5, 2021). The latter installation had already been reported as damaged by Russian shelling, while the port terminal is under blockade, rendering it inoperable ([Bloomberg](#), April 5).

At the same time, for the last several decades, cooperation between China and Ukraine in the military industry demonstrated that Beijing was hedging its bets in relations with Moscow and limiting its dependence on the supply of Russian technology. Starting with the landmark acquisition of the Ukrainian aircraft-carrier *Varyag* (purchased in 1998), refitted and launched as the *Liaoning* by the PLA Navy, the relation has been steady over the years, with Ukraine as the third largest weapons supplier to the PRC after Russia and France.

In recent years, military exports from Ukraine to China have included gas turbines for Chinese destroyers (such as the DT-59, sold with licence and becoming UGT-25000 and QC-280); “Bizon” landing craft; Kolchuga sensor systems, aircraft turboprop engines, tank diesel engines and several Il-78 transport planes ([SIPRI](#), Trade Registers, 2022). As a result, Ukraine was a steady and reliable supplier of key defense technology to China. In addition to continuing to increase its domestic capacity to develop indigenous alternatives, China will need to find different means to procure key dual use or military technology, particularly as Russia’s (increasingly

limited) offerings are tainted by sanctions, with a potential for retaliation if Beijing enhances cooperation in this particular sector.

Investments (Lost): Ports, Roads and Economic Footprints

In addition to the bilateral trade ties that are imperiled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, another dimension of long-term economic connection on the brink of being physically destroyed or immensely devalued are China's indirect and direct investments in Ukraine, as well as Chinese companies' extensive construction business in Ukraine.

Ukraine has attracted very little Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI). Beijing's share of total FDI stock in falls far below 1% (for comparison, EU countries maintain a 72% share) totalling only \$111 million at the end of 2021 ([National Bank of Ukraine](#), International Investment Position, December 31, 2021). However, when looking beyond the macroeconomic dimension, the picture looks slightly different. Many Chinese companies that operate and invest in Ukraine are registered in other jurisdictions and make use of their regional hubs in Europe or Central Asia in order to acquire shares or entire businesses. Therefore, Beijing's private presence and level of FDI is considerably higher than that reflected in official statistics, given special investment vehicles proceeding through proxy jurisdictions and tax havens. Chinese state-owned enterprises have also won lucrative contracts in Ukraine for public infrastructure projects (roads, port terminals, railways, metro lines, power stations) and private industrial plants, which are worth over \$7 billion since 2011 ([American Enterprise Institute](#), CGIT, 2022). For example, in 2017, China Road and Bridge Corporation began building a road to connect the port cities of Odessa and Mykolaiv ([EIU](#), March 22, 2018). That same year, the city of Kyiv awarded a consortium of Chinese companies the contract to develop a fourth subway line. Moreover, in 2018, China Harbor Engineering Company completed a project to deepen the harbor of Ukraine's largest international sea port, Yuzhny ([Xinhua](#), January 31, 2018).

As many of the aforementioned projects are financed through credit agreements offered by Chinese banks, they are not without long-term strings attached. As a result, Beijing's actual losses go beyond merely the immediate financial damages, but extend to Beijing seeing its entire economic footprint in Ukraine evaporate, along with its political influence.

Outlook: Friends in Need (After the War)

In the larger picture, Russia's war of aggression is a "spoiler" for Beijing's self-professed foreign policy principles based on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-intervention in third states' internal affairs, as well as its long-stated opposition to "unilateral measures." However, Beijing finds itself in the worst of both worlds with its contorted and ambiguous public message of not condemning the invasion, despite the attack on Ukraine amounting to an obliteration of every tenet of its rule book for international diplomacy.

China derives only modest material benefits from its existing relationship with Russia, primarily cheaper oil and gas, commodities whose price, even at a discount, is now much higher than before the war. However, Beijing has sacrificed considerable international standing with its refusal to criticize Russia. Complete disengagement,

which is portrayed as “neutrality,” is unfeasible for a major world power like China, and has resulted in a loss of political and economic influence.

At the same time, nobody in Kyiv will soon forget which partnership mattered during the war and which was simply a paper dragon. When the war ends, a clearer delineation of geopolitical blocs will have taken shape, irrespective of Beijing’s arguments to the contrary. And Ukraine will be even less inclined to play any role in advancing BRI, particularly given EU and U.S. objections to the initiative.

In the long run, China’s inconclusive position may well prove a stumbling block to the BRI’s designs. Given China’s passivity on Ukraine, participant countries may begin to hedge their security (and political) bets as little backing can be expected from China, which may not even be able to play the role of a constructive mediator in the event of a conflict. In addition to the war’s effective elimination of Ukraine as a key link in the BRI, the risk of sanctions damages economic relationships that are crucial for China’s economy. Structural changes in the international system often accelerate in a crisis when an aspiring world-power has the opportunity to heighten its position. However, in the case of the current crisis, China has chosen to play on the margins for all the world to see and acknowledge.

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