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**No Choice but to Lie Flat: Youth Unemployment Surges in China**

*By John S. Van Oudenaren*

Pity the class of 2022. The job market in China has long been a gauntlet for college graduates as the country’s largely industrial economy does not generate sufficient opportunities in the knowledge industries to satisfy the career aspirations of its growing number of college graduates. However, prospects for the current crop of jobseekers are particularly grim with a record 10.76 million college students graduating this year ([Wuhan Evening News](#), May 24). Recent graduates must navigate an intensely competitive labor market where demand for jobs greatly outstrips supply due to the negative ramifications of the dynamic clearance zero-COVID policy, which has led to mass hiring freezes and layoffs. Regulatory crackdowns on private businesses, which reached a crescendo last year, have fostered uncertainty in the technology and private education industries, sectors

where many graduates had previously found work ([South China Morning Post](#), March 20). According to the annual “College Student Employability Survey Report” released by the recruitment firm Zhaopin (招聘), only 46.7 percent of graduating college students had received job offers as of mid-April, which is down from 62.8 percent last year ([Hangzhou Daily](#), April 28). Not only have fewer graduates found work, but those that have, are earning less this year with an expected monthly salary of 6,295 yuan (\$939), a six percent decrease from 2021.

After a devastating April marred by the mass lockdown in Shanghai, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) released several positive indicators that the economy has “recovered momentum” in May. For example, industrial production, which fell 2.9 percent in April, rebounded by 5.9 percent in May. On the employment front, the urban unemployment rate fell slightly to just under six percent, but youth joblessness remains high with 18.4 percent of 16-24 year-olds out of work ([NBS](#), June 15). Youth unemployment is typically cyclical in China. As large numbers of high school and college graduates hit the market in late spring, joblessness rates tend to peak in the summer, and then gradually subside. A recent Bank of America report predicts this dynamic will be quite severe this year, and estimates that youth unemployment could spike to 23 percent in July and August ([Asia Financial](#), June 6).



(Image: College students visit a booth at a career fair at Anhui University of Science and Technology, source: [China Daily](#))

### More Than an Economic Issue

The specter of high youth unemployment is clearly on the minds of China’s leaders. During a recent inspection tour of government ministries, Premier Li Keqiang stressed the imperative to undertake “urgent efforts” to

stabilize employment and emphasized the need to increase available job opportunities through the market and social employment programs ([China Daily](#), June 29).

On his inspection tour of Sichuan Province last month, General Secretary Xi Jinping visited Yibin University where he expressed serious concern over the employment situation facing current college graduates. Falling back on his carefully cultivated every-man image, Xi held frank conversations with university students with one new graduate saying “the general secretary talks to us like family” ([Sichuan Province Department of Education](#), June 13). During the discussions, Xi expressed his conviction that “employment is the basis of people’s livelihoods” and told the assembled students that “a happy life is created through labor” (幸福生活是靠劳动创造的, *xingfu shenghuo shi kao laodong chuangzao de*) ([Yibin University](#), June 17). These remarks sound like avuncular advice, but Xi’s mediations on the inherent value of hard work are both a recantation of the China’s Communist Party’s (CCP) focus on the key role of youth in striving to bring about a “new era”, and a subtle rebuke of the generation-Z and millennial backlash against China’s round-the-clock work culture, which has intensified over the last several years.

Last year, the idea of “lying flat” or doing the bare minimum to get by at work went viral on Chinese social media. David Bandurski, who co-directs the China media project at Hong Kong University, describes this new philosophy as a rejection by many younger Chinese people of the Party’s unrelenting emphasis on struggle and a “deeply engrained culture of overwork without the promise of real advancement” (i.e. the “996” culture championed by Jack Ma and other tech executives, wherein workers are expected to work 9 AM-9PM, six days a week) ([Brookings](#), July 8, 2021). The combination of zero-COVID limitations on movement and social interaction, along with the intense pressure of a hugely competitive labor market could induce more young Chinese to embrace a “lying flat” mentality toward work. This is problematic for the CCP because the development of early career human capital is essential to achieving nearly every aspect of Xi’s vision of national rejuvenation: becoming a fully modernized socialist economy, boosting domestic technological innovation, and building a world class military.

### **Youth in the New Era**

In April, the State Council Information Office (SCIO) published a White Paper on the “Youth of China in the New Era” (新时代的中国青年, *xin shidai de zhongguo qingnian*), which idealizes the young generation of Chinese as “confident, aspirant and responsible” patriots, who are wholeheartedly committed to the leadership of the CCP, and driven to pursue “lofty ideals with a firm belief in Marxism, communism and socialism with Chinese characteristics” ([SCIO](#), April 21). In short, China’s youth are the “pioneers and pacesetters” of national development, who “ceaselessly strive to realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.” However, if Chinese youth are to fulfill their assigned role as the vanguard of the CCP in a new era, employment is obviously essential in order for them to make positive contributions to national development. Employment is also politically important in another way, as enterprises are one of the primary mechanisms through which the CCP seeks to instill the proper ideological mindset among the population.

The classroom and the workplace play a key role in legitimizing the CCP's political dominance as they are the primary institutions in which new generations are inculcated through ideological and political work. A hallmark of Xi's time in power has been to restore the central place of political ideology in the workplace, a process which began with state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and then expanded to private businesses ([Gov.cn](#), September 20, 2020; [Xinhuanet](#), October 23, 2016). The increasing centrality of ideology in the workplace is exemplified by the promulgation of the “five adherences” (五个坚持, *wu ge jianchi*)- the first of which is absolute loyalty to the leadership of the party, which were initially announced by Xi in May 2014 as a code of conduct for cadres ([CPC News](#), December 18, 2014). These guidelines apply not only to party members with inherently political responsibilities, but also to employees of SOEs, who are engaged in business or technical activities. Last year, the Party Committee of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), which is responsible for overseeing SOEs, published an essay entitled “Adhering to the party's leadership and strengthening party building are the ‘root’ and ‘soul’ of SOEs” ([Qiushi](#), September 16, 2021). Individual SOEs have also consistently taken care to assert the centrality of ideological and political work in their undertakings. For example, Sichuan China Tobacco Industry Company recently published an announcement highlighting its unshakable commitment to the five adherences, pledging to strengthen ideological and political work, which it describes as major task that is an essential part of its duties ([Renmin Luntan](#), April 25).

Under Xi, ideological work has also assumed an increasingly central role in China's higher education system. In 2019, the State Council released its China Education Modernization 2035 Plan, which sets forth the “study and implementation of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era as the primary task that runs through the entire process of educational reform and development and hence, must be dutifully implemented in all fields and links of educational modernization” ([Gov.cn](#), February 23, 2019).

### **Reality Hits Home**

The CCP's preferred image of the patriotic, politically correct, constantly striving young person is jarringly at odds with the reality and daily frustrations that many Chinese in their late teens and twenties faced even before the zero-COVID policy scrambled an already difficult job market. According to official statistics, 30 percent of Chinese ages 14-35 are at risk of depression ([People's Daily Online](#), April 12, 2019). By far the main stressors cited by young workers and students, respectively, are financial and educational pressures. The prevalence of mental health issues among young people in China is likely to intensify as many struggle to obtain work at the same time that they have less access to leisure activities outside the home due to strict epidemic prevention restrictions. One blogger from Fujian province expressed dismay at the situation noting that they dropped their monthly salary requirements from 7,500 to 6,000 to 4,500 yuan (\$1,119 to \$896 to \$672), but still could not obtain employment. “I don't want to ‘lie flat’ at home after graduation, but why is it so difficult to find a job outside the house?” ([Baijiahao](#), June 16). Another blog post noted the irony that the promise of a 3,000 yuan (\$447) per month salary cannot recruit a migrant worker, but can employ a college student ([Sina](#), June 21). This underscores an ironic reality in China's labor market, there are many jobs available, but most of these are “blue collar” (蓝领, *lanling*) versus the “white collar” (白领, *bailing*) opportunities usually sought out by college graduates.

Despite the immense difficulties facing college graduates searching for employment, China's economy is actually experiencing a job crunch in one area—skilled manual labor. A recent report from *Caixin* notes that this year, a majority of vocational school students received job offers even before they had graduated. The director of the Shenzhen Institute of Technology's laser department stated each of this year's class had received between two to four job offers by graduation ([ThinkChina](#), April 29). The government's recent decision to stimulate the economy through mass domestic infrastructure spending could further exacerbate this shortage of skilled laborers ([Xinhua](#), April 28).

### **Conclusion**

For the CCP, a large unemployed youth population poses not only major economic issues, but also presents serious social and political challenges. Leaders such as Xi, who were in government during the late 1980s student protest movement that culminated in the Tiananmen massacre, are no doubt doubly cognizant of the danger posed by disillusioned yet educated youth. However, a greater and more immediate impediment to Xi's designs is apathy taking hold among China's young people. This is exemplified by the CCP's simultaneous disdain and frustration with the "lying flat" phenomenon. In seeking to address this lack of enthusiasm for a new era, Xi would do well to remember that it was not ideological work, but the promise of material prosperity that induced the previous generation of young, educated Chinese not only to abandon their dream of political liberalization in the 1990s and 2000s, but also to work hard for China's national development.

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**Divergent Economic and Ideological Visions Contend Ahead of 20th Party Congress**

*By Dominik Mierzejewski*



*(Image: Premier Li Keqiang at a State Council meeting in Beijing, source: Xinhua)*

**Introduction**

As the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) approaches its 20th National Congress, the economic downturn in China has opened a Pandora's box of theoretical debates on how to manage this crisis. Premier Li Keqiang recently suggested that the nation's economic performance has been weak and may not meet its GDP growth targets as the problems facing the economy are more serious than they were in 2020 ([Gov.cn](http://Gov.cn), May 26). In China's political arena, theoretical discussions have always been key to guiding the country's future development, especially at a time of social and economic disruption. This dynamic is particularly marked at present in light of the recent revelation about a possible policy divergence between General Secretary Xi

Jinping and Li Keqiang over China's future economic development model. While the principal contradiction remains unchanged, the questions of how to deliver common prosperity and how to manage policy direction, defined seven years ago, remain unanswered.

### **Xi's Way of Seeing Contradictions**

The concept of contradictions (矛盾, *maodun*) is embedded in the CCP's rhetorical foundation and plays an important part in China's domestic theoretical debates. Furthermore, Marxist doctrine, which the Party follows, states that only by identifying and solving the "general contradiction" can a society peacefully develop, while failure to do so will push society toward chaos and revolution. In the history of the CCP, this discussion started with Mao's paper "On contradiction" (August 1937), and twenty years later, his writing "On the correct handling of contradictions among the people" (February 1957). [1] Verbs that connote conflicts, such as fight and struggle (斗争, *douzhen*) occur frequently in party documents. In the Maoist period, this was reflected in the party's intense focus on class contradictions that sparked the modern Chinese revolution, as well as a three-sided conflict between imperialism, feudalism, and the Chinese nation that constituted a modern society.

In contrast to the Maoist era, under Deng Xiaoping, the CCP focused less on the contradictions between the working class and the bourgeoisie, and instead saw capital as a vehicle for generating material well-being. The reasoning of "the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people" prevailed and allowed Deng to conduct his policy of reform and opening up ([People.cn](http://People.cn), October 24, 2017). However, nothing lasts forever, and Xi's tenure started with a redefinition of domestic contradictions. Xi has summarized all of the past contradictions, considers them fulfilled, and has now established a new one – unbalanced development and the people's need for "a better life" (美好生活, *meihao shenghuo*) ([Xinhuanet](http://Xinhuanet), October 24, 2017). "What we now face is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life," Xi said in his 19th Party Congress report ([Gov.cn](http://Gov.cn), November 3, 2017). In order to achieve what it sees as a better outcome for the Chinese population, the CCP has set its goals for a "people-centric philosophy of development" and common prosperity. In this way, the party not only creates new narratives and alters political discourse, but also presents itself as an institution that takes care of its citizens and their changing needs. However, Mao stated in 1957 that in peaceful times and "ordinary circumstances, contradictions among the people are not antagonistic." [2] As China now faces an economic downturn that may lead to social turmoil, the question of resolving contradictions among the people is apparently at the top of Beijing's agenda.

### **Can Common Prosperity be achieved through Introverted Institutional Changes?**

Five years ago, Xi declared that China had entered five sub-eras under the New Era that marked the new leadership period in China's history. The sub-eras are an era of securing a great victory, an era of building a great modern socialist country in all respects, an era of achieving common prosperity for everyone, an era of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and an era of moving to the center on the world stage. However, in order to achieve common prosperity and the status of a modern socialist country, existing contradictions among the people need to be effectively managed ([Gov.cn](http://Gov.cn), November 27, 2017).

In order to realize common prosperity, Gong Yun, a professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, reiterated Xi Jinping's thoughts in the CCP's theoretical journal- *Qiushi* (Seeking Truth). Per Gong, Xi's emphasis on greater party involvement in the nation's economy is central: "the party must adhere to the basic economic system, unswervingly consolidate and develop the public ownership economy, and unswervingly encourage, support, and guide the healthy development of the non-public ownership economy to play an active role in the process of realizing common prosperity" (Qiushi, [March 25](#); Qiushi, [October 24, 2019](#)). From a general perspective, this centralization model ensures effective management of contradictions in society. This approach is exemplified by the anti-corruption campaign, and the crackdown against the technology industry with Alibaba founder Jack Ma serving as the symbol for "individualistic" and "capitalistic" paths. The central government's intervention in the economy is also evident in Xi's recent announcement of major infrastructure projects, which will invariably be largely undertaken by state-owned enterprises ([Xinhua](#), April 27).

Apart from this ongoing overall centralization, what is less known is the institutional dimension of lead CCP theorist and Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Huning's approach, which is evidenced throughout the country in the form of mediation centers (矛盾中心, *maodiao zhongxin*). In June 2021, the Central Committee and the State Council issued a special document on Zhejiang province's pilot demonstration zone for common prosperity based on the mediation centers at the county level ([Gov.cn, June 10, 2021](#)). Data analysis from the China Academic Journal Database illustrates that Zhejiang has taken the lead in reforming institutions responsible for appeasing public tensions. This should come as no surprise as Zhejiang, in particular its capital city Hangzhou, is regarded as a national leader in social innovation.

An example of a mediation center, reported by the National Public Complaints and Proposals Administration (NPCP) can be found in the city of Ruian in Zhejiang province. According to Yu Liequan, executive deputy secretary of the Ruian Political and Legal Committee, as soon as the Mediation Centre opened it began to resolve disputes between citizens. Since 2020, the mediation center has resolved 1,830 cases of various contradictions and disputes, which according to local authorities, has brought about common prosperity wherever it is possible. It is also notable that local authorities stated that Ruian has always adhered to and followed people-centered policies and promised that the mediation center is the perfect solution to keep contradictions under control and to manage social stability and resolve disputes among people ([NPCP](#), January 19, 2021).

### **Can Common Prosperity be Achieved by Keeping the Door Open?**

As Deng's definition of domestic contradictions aligned with his policy of reform and opening up, the current definition of contradiction has illuminated possible future scenarios for how to balance growing domestic contradictions and interdependence with the outside world. As the central leadership has continuously signaled, the global economic structure is experiencing what the CCP sees as structural and institutional disruption, typified by unbalanced, uncoordinated and unsustainable development. As a remedy for these challenges, CCP leaders have promoted, especially to international audiences, global trade and investment liberalization. For example at this year's World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Xi advocated liberalization

and facilitation of trade and investment, developing a global network of the free trade zone, e.g. with the Hainan Free Trade Port, the promotion of institutional opening up of rules, regulations, management, as well as standards, and pledged to develop a larger and more comprehensive opening-up approach ([WEF YouTube](#), January 17).

However, what looks good on paper may be more difficult to implement in reality. With this in mind, the CCP is seeking a third way. In the past, the policy of isolation has led to escalating tension as well as competition between local authorities for limited resources. How far along plans are for compulsory self-isolation of key economic sectors is debatable. It is puzzling that Premier Li, who is still responsible for economic development, assured the assembled press at the last Chinese National People's Congress that no one "wants or can close the door" to the world ([State Council](#), March 11). In contrast, Xi seemed to question the policy of "opening up" in a virtual meeting with U.S. President Joseph Biden, saying that "the prevailing trend of peace and development is facing serious challenges. The world is neither tranquil nor stable" ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), March 19).

Since March, *People's Daily*- the party mouthpiece in which official positions are disseminated to domestic and global audiences, has presented two different views. On the one hand, the paper runs editorials characterized by intense anti-Americanism, which are no doubt supported by Beijing hardliners. However, its pages have also included more conciliatory viewpoints advocating for an open China that is part of the global economy. The former view, which is often espoused through the commentary of the "China voice" (钟声, *zhongsheng*) penname, has accused the United States of being an imperialistic hegemon, and a troublemaker in international security affairs, which has a detrimental impact on global stability and development. The war in Ukraine is also seen as part of, what hardliners assert are a pattern of hegemonic actions by the U.S. However, these anti-American sentiments in *People's Daily* are countered by other perspectives that still cherish Deng's "reform and opening up" and who adopt a fairly positive image of the European Union, and its member states. Even more significantly, a recent commentary entitled "Voice of harmony" (和音, *heyin*) likened China's economy to a big ocean for all and praised global trade's interdependence calling for more remain openness and inclusivity as had occurred previously under Deng (*People's Daily*, [March 1](#); [March 7](#)).

It is notable that after Premier Li hosted a video meeting with 100,000 cadres that focused on the economy, *People's Daily* published an article under the series "Face to Face with the Party at 100" (百年大党面对面, *bainian dadang mian dui mian*) entitled "How is reform, opening up, and socialist modernization being carried out?" ([People's Daily](#), May 27; [Caixin](#), March 25). Interestingly, the article fails to mention Xi as core leader and exclusively discusses Deng's approaches to reform and opening. The article also begins with a big bang question: "What is socialism?" Between the lines, the article defines China's stage of development as being in the initial stage of socialism and warns against seeing China as a soon-to-be communist country.

Afraid of repeating the past mistakes of the Great Leap Forward, *People's Daily* admitted that Chinese society is already socialist, although socialism in China is still in its infancy. Another striking aspect of the article was its proposed solution to the dilemma of how to deliver common prosperity arguing that "the essence of socialism is to *liberate the productive forces, develop the productive forces, eliminate exploitation,*

*eliminate polarization, and ultimately achieve common prosperity.*” This statement goes against the centralization process that is in progress under Xi, and instead praises Deng's economic decentralization that for bringing so many benefits to China over the last 40 years. The opinion piece went on to urge the party-state not to intervene in the economy, while shaping the political control in the party, and to follow the previous path of development with the “four cardinal principles” ([The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping](#), March 30, 1979). The article stated that “some things must be changed and not changed, and some things must not be changed and cannot be changed, and if they are changed, they will lose their roots and lose their direction”.

What is even more striking about the May 27 *People's Daily* article on reform and opening is its reference to former leader Jiang Zemin's “theory of three represents” (三个代表, *san ge daibiao*), which gave businesspeople a voice in the economic reforms taking place within the party ([People's Daily](#), May 27). Moreover, the article stresses support for close relations with the outside world and active participation in the international community based on Deng Xiaoping's “peace and development” approach. It is also noteworthy that the article quotes philosopher Wang Anshi (1021-1086) who advocated for reforms during the Northern Song dynasty. As is commonly known, the reforms that Wang Anshi proposed created political tension between his faction, which was known as the reformers, and conservative ministers led by historian and Chancellor Sima Guang (1019–1086). In other words, the May 27 *Peoples' Daily* article gave voice to the opinion of technocrats aligned with Premier Li.

### **Conclusion**

In the eyes of CCP leaders, a proper understanding and definition of contradictions is essential to securing the party's political position and ensuring stability in the country. Certainly, a consensus exists that the government should be a guarantor of common prosperity. However, when it comes to determining optimal methods to implement this approach, the debate is far from over. Watching the domestic discussions there are two camps that are ready to do battle. The first group is the more anti-globalist movement, which is driven by anti-American sentiment and whose preferred way forward is to manage the domestic contradiction behind a closed door with a strict zero-COVID policy. In the opposite corner is an internationalist-oriented group, which hopes to keep China's door open or at least ajar. Should the first group emerge from the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in the driver's seat it may seek to explain away policy deficiencies by utilizing anti-foreign rhetoric that portrays China as a besieged fortress with the ultimate goal of securing Xi's central position. The “open-door” group, which prefers collective leadership, while also proactively managing an economic downturn and de-globalization, sees China as part of global value chains and a member of the international economic community. As far as China's economic stance is concerned, the die is not yet cast.

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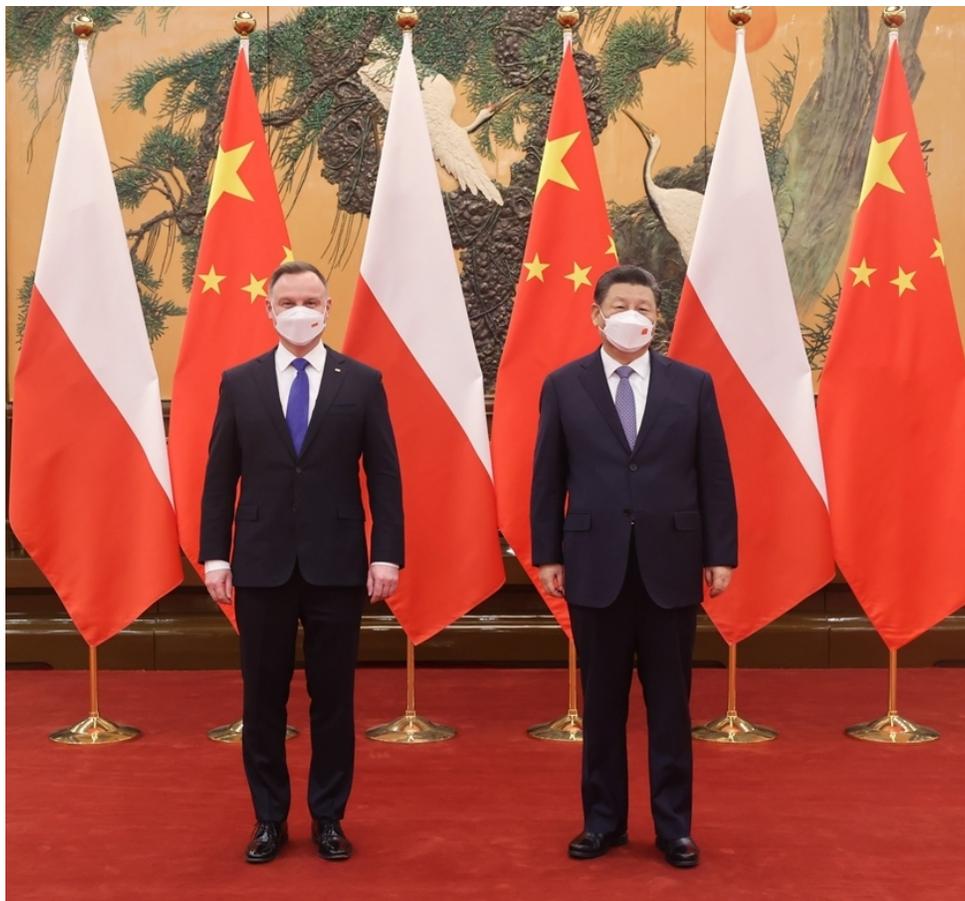
**Notes**

[1] Mao Tse-tung, "On Contradiction," *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Foreign Languages Press" (Peking, 1967), Vol. I, <https://cmpa.io/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/02/MAO-ON-CONTRADICTION.pdf>

[2] Mao Tse-tung, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," February 27, 1957, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol. V*, [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5\\_58.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_58.htm)

## 16 + 1: China's Push Into Central and Eastern Europe Loses Momentum

*By Filip Jirouš*



**(Image: Polish president Andrzej Duda with Xi Jinping at the Beijing Olympics in February 2022, source: PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs)**

### Introduction

Since its inception in 2012, the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC; 中国—中东欧国家合作, *Zhongguo—Zhong Dong Ou Guojia Hezuo*), better known as the 16+1 or 17+1 initiative, has often been described as a security risk with the potential to divide European structures and make them serve the interests of the People's Republic of China's (PRC). The 16+1 is a Sinocentric economic cooperation initiative comprising China and 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, which share only a mutual Communist past as a common denominator (in 2019, Greece, which is heavily indebted to China, joined, and the platform was briefly renamed to 17+1). Apart from several different formats such as inter-party dialogues and think tank conferences, the 16+1 holds annual summits attended by state heads, with Premier Wen Jiabao (温家宝) and then Li Keqiang (李克强) the official highest-ranking PRC representatives in attendance. In comparison, two other, similar, Sinocentric regional platforms — China-CELAC Forum (中国-拉共体论坛, *Zhongguo-Lagongti Luntan*); and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

(FOCAC: 中非合作论坛, *Zhongfei Hezuo Luntan*) — are regularly attended by President and General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平) ([China-CELAC Forum](#), March 1, 2018). Thus far, FOCAC has generated the greatest level of interest from participating regional countries ([China Brief](#), December 3, 2021). By contrast, several CEE countries have distanced themselves from the 16+1 platform: in 2021, Lithuania quit the group and this May, a Czech parliamentary committee urged the government to consider making the same move.

European countries are showing frustration with the 16+1 initiative due to a lack of access to the PRC market and China's failure to deliver on promised investment. However, an examination of the PRC's approach to the initiative and the agencies and cadres involved in its interactions indicate that its present functions are to coopt CEE elites and legitimize the PRC regime, all under the guise of economic cooperation.

Despite the current low point, the 16+1 is not yet a spent force. Poland, the largest economy on the European side, has renewed its outreach to China. Additionally, Beijing dispatched two fact-finding missions to the region this spring to measure CEE attitudes toward the platform and explain China's position on the Russia-Ukraine war. Given that the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine could be China's prize in the region, 16+1 and especially Poland, Ukraine's closest ally, might play a key role in that undertaking.

### **Selling the CCP Narrative**

The 16+1 initiative was initially accepted enthusiastically by the European countries. However, by 2019, regional patience with China's "economic diplomacy of empty promises" was already wearing thin ([Synopsis](#), March 11, 2019). At that time, the Czech Republic, once a staunch supporter of the initiative, began to voice concern over the lack of substantial investments ([Aktuálně](#), April 12, 2019; [Česká televize](#), January 12, 2020). The PRC views the 16+1 chiefly as a platform for investment in Eastern European politicians. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has tapped into old networks of former Communist cadres and their immediate successors in the region in an effort to recreate the Eastern Bloc, which are then leveraged to support its policy goals in Europe ([China Brief](#), May 9, 2019).

The initiative also serves as a channel for CCP propaganda to legitimize the PRC both domestically and abroad. This is evidenced by the involvement of high-level propaganda cadres, including the former propaganda system chief, in 16+1 events ([China-CEEC Think Tanks Network](#), August 7, 2017; [People's Daily](#), July 20, 2017). In 2019, according to rumors, Wang Huning (王沪宁), the current head of PRC propaganda and ideology, was to attend the canceled China Investment Forum (CIF), a 16+1 sub-event in Prague targeting Czech and neighboring political and business elites ([Synopsis](#), October 24, 2019).

### **Links to PRC Intelligence and Influence Operations**

Often semi-covertly, PRC influence and intelligence organs have played key roles in 16+1-affiliated activities, particularly in their less glamorous aspects. The Ministry of State Security (MSS, 国家安全部, *Guojia Anquan Bu*) is involved in the platform's structure and events. The 16+1 initiative is coordinated by a PRC-staffed Secretariat in Beijing ([China-CEEC](#)). Among its member units such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA),

the Communist Youth League (共青团, *Gong Qing Tuan*), and the influence organ China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (贸促会, *Cu Mao Hui*); one agency stands out — the International Liaison Department (ILD, 中联部, *Zhong Lian Bu*) ([Synopsis](#), November 20, 2021). The ILD, which is the Central Committee's influence organ, was involved in supporting pro-CCP Marxist-Leninist revolutionary movements during the Cold War ([Open Source Center](#), May, 2007). The ILD is not only listed second on the secretariat member unit list (no such lists are arranged randomly), but is also cited as the sole or main organizer of 16+1 “dialogues” and other events that aim to coopt both senior and junior politicians ([SCIO](#), July 15, 2017; [China-CEEC](#), October 23, 2013).

The true nature of 16+1 engagement and the ILD's involvement is exemplified by CEE countries' experience with the CIF (2013-2018). Beginning, no later than 2015, The China Economic Cooperation Center (中国经济联络中心, *Zhongguo Jingji Lianluo Zhongxin*), an ILD unit, co-organized the high-profile CIF event and according to a Czech media investigation its role was not to foment economic cooperation, but to profile and approve guests ([Seznam zprávy](#), February 26, 2020; [Development Research Center of Shenzhen Municipal People's Government](#), May 11, 2017; [Zhongjie Industrial Zone Management Committee](#), November 14, 2015). The Czech elites who participated were unaware of the ILD's role in the 16+1 events, and believed that they had interacted with MFA diplomats ([Seznam zprávy](#), February 26, 2020).

PRC intelligence services have also shown increasing interest in CEE academia, something local counter-intelligence agencies have begun to warn against in recent years ([SIS](#), June, 2022; [Radio Prague International](#), November 26, 2019; [BIS](#), October 11, 2020; [Kaitsepolitseaimet](#)). Last year, the region experienced the first proven case of a scientist spying for China in Estonia ([ERR](#), March 19, 2021). The 16+1 “think tank network” (China-CEEC Think Tanks Network, 中国—中东欧国家智库交流与合作网络, *Zhongguo-Zhong Dong Ou Guojia Zhiku Jiaoliu yu Hezuo Wangluo*) engages Eastern European think tankers, including government-sponsored institutions ([Twitter](#), Jun 29, 2018). The network is now chaired by Feng Zhongping (冯仲平), a former vice-president of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR, 中国现代国际关系研究院, *Zhongguo Xiandai Guoji Guanxi Yanjiu Yuan*), the MSS's 11th Bureau, an outward-facing unit targeting foreign academic and think-tank circles ([China-CEEC Think Tanks Network](#), September 18, 2021; [CICIR](#); [DNI Open Source Center](#), August 25, 2011). Feng, while still at the MSS, held a position on the network's council ([China-CEEC Think Tanks Network](#), November 16, 2017). Feng also currently heads the Budapest-based China-CEE Institute (中国-中东欧研究院, *Zhongguo-Zhong Dong Ou Yanjiu Yuan*), which has already been examined in this journal ([China Brief](#), December 3, 2021). This entity exploits Eastern European scholars for open-source research and elite access, including the utilization of a PRC propaganda node based in the Czech Republic involving former Communist secret police agents.

### **The Polish-Lithuanian Dilemma and the Ukrainian Prize**

European countries had already begun inching away from the 16+1 platform in 2019, but the initiative reached its lowest point in 2021. Although Xi Jinping attended a 16+1 event for the first time last February, the heads of state of six CEE countries opted not to attend the virtual forum ([China-CEEC](#), February 9, 2021). In particular, Beijing warned Romania to send its president to the meeting, or else risk damage to bilateral relations ([Politico](#), March 3, 2021). Additionally, several attending European representatives complained of China's failure to open its markets, especially for agriculture products ([Politico](#), February 9, 2021).

In May 2021, Lithuania officially left the 17+1, reducing it back to 16+1 ([LRT](#), May 24, 2021). The decision came after Lithuania elected a new center-right government in 2020, which upgraded the country's relationship with Taiwan, including renaming the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (as is the standard in states that do not diplomatically recognize the Republic of China) to the Taiwanese Representative Office, which angered Beijing and led it to eventually impose an unofficial trade embargo on Lithuania ([LRT](#), January 11; [Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania](#)).

The Czech Republic, which is also governed by a new center-right coalition that favors Taiwan over China, is now considering following Lithuania's example after a parliamentary foreign affairs committee unanimously adopted a resolution critical of the PRC's recent behavior, in which the MPs asked the government to "review" participation in the platform (see the full English version here: [Asia Explained](#), May 24).

Even the PRC appears uncertain about the platform's sustainability, but it nevertheless remains invested. This year, the MFA sent two lower-level representatives to the Balkans and several EU member states that participate in 16+1, respectively, to assess whether interest remains in the platform ([China-CEEC](#), April 21). The EU-bound mission, which was led by Huo Yuzhen (霍玉珍), former PRC ambassador to the Czech Republic and Romania, also had the goal of explaining China's position on the Russian war in Ukraine ([China-CEEC.org](#), May 18). The overall tone of Huo's embassy heralds China's likely future goals for the platform or at least the participating countries—which includes enlisting their help to secure involvement in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. This would significantly improve China's standing across Europe, where its image has been tarnished due its handling of the pandemic, its heavy-handed diplomacy and its close relationship with Russia.

In contrast, countries that use the 16+1 and their ties with the PRC as a means to counterbalance the West and the EU in particular, such as Hungary, Serbia and Poland, are likely to remain active proponents of the initiative. Poland, which may strike some as perhaps an unexpected friend of China, was the only EU country to send its president to the Beijing Olympics, despite the European political boycott ([TVP](#), February 6). In 2021, Warsaw even took a fiscally-unsound loan from Beijing amid a spat with EU institutions over a Polish judicial reform ([Synopsis](#), November 18, 2021). The decision to re-orientate itself toward the PRC comes as U.S.-Poland relations, which were amiable during President Trump's term, have suffered from tensions between the ruling coalition government in Warsaw and the Biden administration ([Synopsis](#), November 18, 2021). Although Poland complained about the limited access to China's market at the last 17+1 summit, it is seeking to achieve its economic goals through intensified bilateral interaction ([Gov.pl](#), June 10).

### **Conclusion**

Much of Eastern Europe is now wary towards the PRC to some degree, but this could easily change. China's recent actions, as well as the renewal of American interest in Eastern Europe, might push the 16+1 countries to gravitate even more toward the West. However, pragmatism (or miscalculation) could send them back into China's embrace in a way that is similar to Poland's recent foreign policy shift. Beijing's attempt to play the role of mediator and peace advocate in Ukraine is received well by some European elites including in Ukraine. Thus, with the help of the remnants of 16+1, and Western European countries like Germany and France, China could greatly expand its economic and political clout in the largest EU candidate country.

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**Despite Threats, New Survey Data Reveals Few in Taiwan Pay Much Attention to China**

*By Timothy S. Rich, Madelynn Einhorn and Josie Coyle*



(Image: Election campaign banners cover a bridge in Taipei, Source: [Wikimedia](#))

## Introduction

How often do Taiwanese people think about China? Given growing evidence that Beijing could use military force against Taiwan, and with President Tsai Ing-wen stating that the threat from China grows “every day,” it would be reasonable to expect the public to be increasingly focused on their much larger neighbor ([Taipei Times](#), June 24, 2022; [Taiwan News](#), February 2, 2020). However, our original survey data finds that the vast majority of Taiwanese citizens rarely think about China, with only 11.56 percent stating they think of China every other day or more often. Low levels of attention may be a result of desensitization to frequent media coverage of China, or they could be due to public preoccupation with pressing domestic issues.

## Media Coverage, Domestic Politics Shape Public Opinion on China

Media framing theory suggests that media focus and tone shape public beliefs. [1] During times of warmer cross-strait relations, China was able to expand its influence in the Taiwanese media. [2] In 2019, reports emerged of China paying for positive media coverage in Taiwan in an attempt to influence public opinion ([South China Morning Post](#), August 9, 2019). A 2021 U.S. State Department report claimed that Beijing sought to

pressure Taiwanese media with parent companies in China over critical content, and reports of skewed media coverage continue today ([Taiwan News](#), March 31, 2021; [Taipei Times](#), June 22, 2022). Taiwan's hyper-competitive news media environment often encourages sensationalism, which would presumably magnify the threat from China. That foreign media frequently speak of Taiwan's vulnerability, including connecting the Russian invasion of Ukraine to cross-strait relations despite many fundamental differences between the two cases, would seem to further exacerbate domestic concern over China ([Taipei Times](#), May 28, 2022; [United States Institute of Peace](#), March 4, 2022; [New Bloom](#), March 2, 2022).

Conversely, desensitization theory connotes that this saturation of media coverage about China may lead Taiwanese people to view escalatory rhetoric as ignorable noise. [3] This is despite analysis from Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense and other sources that China's increased military capabilities make an invasion possible within the next five years ([Focus Taiwan](#), June 4, 2022). Generations of Taiwanese are familiar with China's claims to Taiwan and are cognizant of the potential for military conflict. Meanwhile, past surveys indicate that the majority of Taiwanese citizens would prefer to maintain the current status quo in cross-strait relations, with little support for Beijing's desired outcome of unification under its rule ([National Chengchi University \[NCCU\] Election Study Center](#), January 10). Nor are Taiwanese indifferent in their views of China, with a majority of respondents citing negative views of their neighbor in surveys ([Pew Research Center](#), May 12, 2020 ). Nevertheless, despite China's increased capabilities and rhetoric about unification as inevitable, there has not been a major military flashpoint since the 1995-1996 missile crisis, which may have influenced many Taiwanese to pay little heed to the threat ([Taiwan Insight](#), January 26, 2019; [The National Interest](#), March 10, 2017).

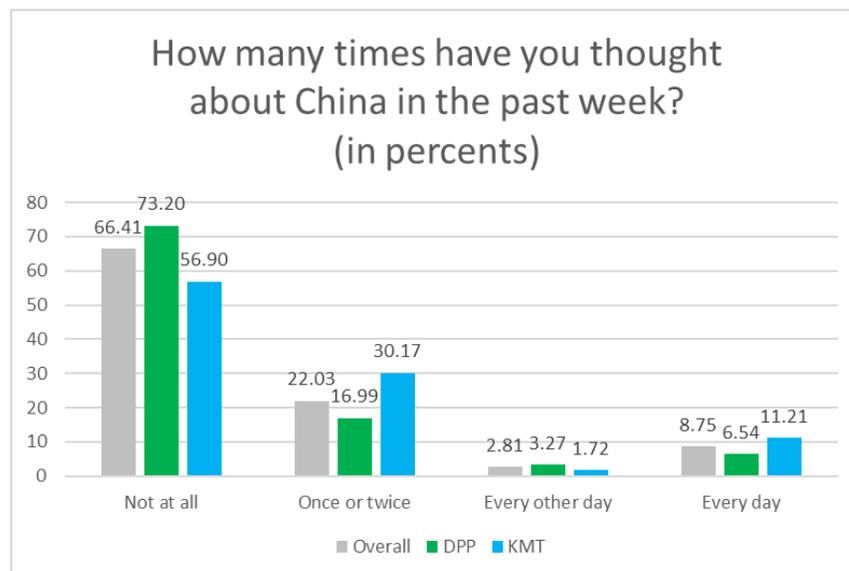
It is widely assumed that a threatening nation will invariably attract a great deal of public attention in the neighboring countries or country that it targets. However, analysts have rarely gauged this assumption empirically and when measured, public opinion often fails to conform to conventional wisdom. For example, recent surveys of South Koreans on how often they think about North Korea, a country with a similarly long history of bellicose rhetoric and behavior, have found they simply do not pay as much attention to the threat from their northern neighbor than is often expected ([North Korea News](#), April 1, 2022; [38 North](#), November 13, 2020; [The North Korea Review](#), Fall 2020).

If all politics are local, it is perhaps unsurprising that domestic factors weigh more heavily on the minds of Taiwanese than external threats. For example, Taiwan's sluggish economy, coupled with increasing inflation and supply chain concerns would presumably lead to increased attention to its economic vulnerability ([Taipei Times](#), June 24, 2022; [South China Morning Post](#), June 14, 2022). In addition, concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic persist, despite initial success at limiting its spread, and Taiwan has experienced an increase in cases and a record-high number of deaths over the last few months ([South China Morning Post](#), June 11, 2022; [Radio Taiwan International](#), June 9, 2022; [Nikkei Asia](#), June 2, 2022). The magnified impact of the pandemic and troubled economy could lead to greater focus on more immediate livelihood concerns over the more distant threat from China.

### **How Often Does the Taiwanese Public think about China?**

In order to gauge the level of public attention given to China, we surveyed 640 Taiwanese respondents from May 18-20, via a web survey administered by PollcracyLab at National Chengchi University's (NCCU) Election Study Center. We asked respondents the following question: How many times have you thought about China in the past week? Respondents could answer not at all, once or twice, every other day, or every day.

As the figure below illustrates, 66.41 percent selected not at all, 22.03 percent once or twice, 2.81 percent every other day, and 8.75 percent every day. Despite the assumption that recent Chinese threats would motivate Taiwanese to devote greater attention to China, relatively few seem to think about China at all. Moreover, when responses were broken down by partisan identification, no clear cut indicators emerged that levels of public attention to China are particularly polarized. Nevertheless, supporters of the historically pro-unification Kuomintang (KMT) were more nearly twice as likely to think about China every day (11.21 percent versus 6.54 percent for DPP supporters).



Additional statistical analysis controlling for gender, age, income and education, find only a weak statistic correlation between identifying with the KMT and thinking of China, with none of the other variables statistically significant. Moreover, a measure of evaluations of Taiwan's relations with China also failed to reach statistical significance. In other words, those who rated cross-strait relations negatively did not think about China more frequently.

Our survey data is admittedly just one point in time, conducted prior to President Biden's statement about the U.S. coming to Taiwan's defense against Chinese aggression. Furthermore, the public would likely quickly reengage in the event that military conflict was imminent. However, if inattention is the norm, regardless of whether it is due to desensitization or the perceived primacy of livelihood issues, this potentially creates several challenges for Taiwan. A public focused elsewhere is unlikely to support the tax increases necessary to enhance Taiwan's defense capabilities, or conversely, to push leadership towards greater engagement with China. Inattention may also lead the public to support indefinite maintenance of the ambiguously defined status quo, despite China's claims that the current situation is untenable and its rapid military modernization largely designed to alter this status quo.

## Conclusion

The Tsai administration may wish to seek means to frame pressing domestic concerns such as economic growth and pandemic policies within the context of a growing Chinese threat, although remain cognizant that kneejerk efforts to focus public attention on China risk both exacerbating cross-strait tensions and appearing as a means to deflect criticism from domestic concerns.

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## Notes

[1] For an example of how media messaging shapes public opinion, e.g. on race, see Christopher Campbell (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Media and Race*, Routledge, December 10, 2019, <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Companion-to-Media-and-Race/Campbell/p/book/9780367869533>

[2] For an examination of how warming cross-strait relations provided China with opportunities to influence Taiwan's media landscape, see Chien-Jung Hsu, "China's Influence on Taiwan's Media," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (May/June 2014), pp. 515-539, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/as.2014.54.3.515?seq=1>

[3] See for example, Jeanne B. Funk, et al, "Violence exposure in real-life, video games, television, movies, and the internet: is there desensitization?," *Journal of Adolescence*, Volume 27, Issue 1, February 2004, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140197103000939?via%3Dihub#!>

**With Macron's Return to Elysée, What's Next for China-France Relations?**

By William Yuen Yee



(Image: President Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan with French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte Macron, Source: [Wikimedia](#))

## Introduction

On April 24, President Emmanuel Macron won reelection with 58 percent of the vote, becoming the first French leader in nearly a generation to win a second term ([France 24](#), April 24). Much has already been written about the implications of Macron's victory for the liberal democratic world. However, the potential implications of a second Macron term and Paris's continued pursuit of strategic autonomy for relations with Beijing and U.S.-China geopolitical competition are less clear.

A tongue-in-cheek title from China's state-backed *Global Times*, "Macron's victory a 'relief' for EU and U.S., for now," sheds light on Beijing's view of France under Macron ([Global Times](#), April 25). Some Chinese experts believe that Paris will continue to maintain a level of distance from Washington despite the boost to transatlantic unity amid the war in Ukraine. Foreign Minister Wang Yi once told his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian that he appreciated France's "independent diplomatic style" ([South China Morning Post](#), April 23, 2020). Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian praised Macron for France's decision not to join the U.S.-led diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics over Xinjiang ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's](#)

[Republic of China](#), December 20, 2021). In his congratulatory message to the French leader on his reelection, Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized that both China and France share a “tradition of independence,” and expressed Beijing’s hopes for a continued “sound and stable development” of bilateral relations ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China](#), April 25).

Under Macron’s leadership, France has positioned itself as an independent leader of the European Union, which has been aided by Britain’s withdrawal from the bloc in 2016 and German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s retirement in 2021. While Germany remains the largest economy in the EU—and other members like Italy, Spain, and Poland wield significant influence—Macron has no doubt relished his newfound leadership role in Brussels. After his reelection, various newspapers crowned him “Europe’s most powerful politician” and “Europe’s standard-bearer” ([Financial Times](#), April 25; [Prospect Magazine](#), April 27).

Macron has previously urged Europe to make its “single, powerful voice heard” and “build a new security and stability order,” ([French Presidency of the Council of the European Union](#), January 19). The world has glimpsed this with Macron’s tireless—although hitherto mostly unproductive—“shuttle diplomacy” between Russia and Ukraine amid Europe’s largest armed conflict since World War Two ([France 24](#), February 22). During France’s recent, six-month leadership of the Council of the European Union (which concluded on June 30), the bloc successfully negotiated a landmark Digital Services Act, requiring Big Tech companies like Google and Meta to more strictly police their platforms for hate speech, disinformation, and other harmful online content among other accomplishments ([Council of the European Union](#), April 23). The question now, with Macron set to serve another half-decade in power, is what the likely continuation of France’s increased leadership role in the EU will mean for its relations with China and the United States.

### **Economic Relations with China**

China and France enjoy robust trade and economic ties. China is France’s second-largest import supplier behind Germany, with a 9.26 percent market share as of 2019 ([World Bank](#), accessed April 28). Total bilateral trade exceeded \$80 billion in 2021, and over 1,100 French companies with some 570,000 employees are present in mainland China ([Xinhua](#), February 17; [Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs](#), accessed April 28).

Under Macron, France has forged ahead in signing new contracts and agreements with Beijing despite escalating China-EU political tensions over issues like human rights in Xinjiang and Chinese economic coercion against Lithuania ([China Brief](#), January 28). When Xi visited Macron at the Elysée Palace in 2019, France signed 15 business contracts with China worth billions of dollars, including a 300-plane order for Airbus aircraft and a contract for France’s state-owned electric utility company EDF to construct an offshore wind farm in China ([Xinhuanet](#), March 24, 2019; [France 24](#), March 25, 2019). Two years later, after the much-hailed EU-China investment agreement stalled (despite Macron’s initial support for the agreement) over tit-for-tat sanctions related to Xinjiang, Macron and Xi pledged to enhance cooperation across areas including agricultural technology, aviation, aerospace, as well as to allow French banks to use renminbi-payment systems ([Xinhua](#), October 26, 2021).

Despite France’s increased economic collaboration with China, Macron has stayed true to his independent foreign policy line, and not shied away from criticizing Beijing. In 2019, he proclaimed the end of “European

naivete” on China ([Nikkei Asia](#), March 23, 2019). In his aforementioned October call with Xi, he expressed his concerns about the ongoing situation in Xinjiang, urged China to lift its sanctions on EU lawmakers, criticized its coercive tactics against Lithuania, and asked Xi to make stronger pledges to counteract climate change ([Elysée Palace](#), October 26, 2021).

### **AUKUS and U.S.-France Relations**

Last fall, the Biden administration’s “clumsy” diplomacy in signing the Australia-UK-U.S. (AUKUS) agreement shook U.S.-France relations and reinforced Macron’s view that Paris cannot rely on Washington. French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described the AUKUS security deal, under which America and Britain will share advanced nuclear submarine technology with Australia, as a “stab in the back” ([France 24](#), September 16, 2021; [China Brief](#), November 19, 2021). Macron said that Europe “must stop being naïve” when it comes to building its own defense capacity and took the unprecedented step of temporarily recalling France’s ambassadors to Australia and the U.S. for the first time in history. Shortly after AUKUS, France inked a \$3.51 billion strategic defense pact with fellow EU member state Greece, highlighting Macron’s push for strategic autonomy across Europe ([France 24](#), [September 28, 2021](#); [September 17, 2021](#)).

Despite its chagrin over AUKUS, Paris has nevertheless joined Washington’s efforts to counter Beijing’s coercive assertions of its South China Sea claims. France has joined America, Britain, and Japan in arguing that Chinese activities in the contested region violate the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and has dispatched naval firepower to back up its rhetoric. Last May, France joined the U.S., Japan, and Australia in a first-ever joint military drill in southwestern Japan ([France 24](#), May 5, 2021). France also sailed a frigate and an amphibious assault ship near the disputed Spratly Islands to surveil illicit ship transfers involving North Korean-flagged vessels that contravene UN sanctions—the third such deployment by the French Navy since 2019 ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan](#), May 6, 2021).

Still, Macron has made clear his lack of interest in joining some sort of U.S.-led alignment against China. “A situation to join all together against China, this is a scenario of the highest possible conflictuality. This one, for me, is counterproductive,” the French leader said in a video interview with the Washington, D.C.-based Atlantic Council last year ([Elysée Palace](#), February 5, 2021).

Macron views the Indo-Pacific—home to 1.5 million French nationals, 8,000 soldiers, and over 90 percent of France’s maritime exclusive economic zone—as a critical region and released an Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2018. The strategy notably identifies India, Australia, Japan, and the United States as France’s key military partners in the region ([Embassy of France in the United States](#), accessed April 28). But the strategy promotes a European Union-centric framework that also includes closer relations with China—what Paris describes as charting a “third path” in the region ([Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs](#), April 2021). Washington’s newly released Indo-Pacific Strategy evinces a rather different set of objectives with respect to Beijing. The strategy underscores the importance of “competing with the PRC” as Beijing “pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world’s most influential power” ([The White House](#), February 2022).

### **Conclusion**

In many respects, Macron is following in the footsteps of a preeminent predecessor, Charles De Gaulle, who often irked U.S. presidents like John F. Kennedy and Dwight D. Eisenhower with his unabashed critiques of American foreign policy. In fact, with his reelection victory, Macron became the first president of France's Fifth Republic since de Gaulle to return to office via a direct popular vote while also maintaining a majority in Parliament. Despite his conservative, anti-Communist streak, de Gaulle disliked the dominance of the U.S. dollar in international finance and stridently pursued strategic autonomy for his beloved France, famously to the point of withdrawing it from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's integrated military command structure in 1966.

To this day, de Gaulle remains revered by the French public. One 2016 poll ranked him as the most important figure in French history, ahead of Napoleon Bonaparte and King Louis XIV ([BVA](#), March 5, 2016). Historian Julian Jackson partly attributes this admiration to "a nostalgia for the 1960s, when France still counted for something in the world thanks to Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean-Luc Godard and Brigitte Bardot" ([Politico EU](#), November 9, 2021).

Today, many in Beijing and Washington seem to project their divergent aspirations onto France's uncertain foreign policy slate. China is hopeful that a second Macron term bodes well for its relations with the new, independent leader in Europe. America is hopeful that France's shared democratic values and status as America's "oldest ally," as well as some overlapping interests in the Indo-Pacific, will facilitate increased cooperation despite past diplomatic fumbles like AUKUS.

However, Macron might have different ideas. He continues to draw inspiration from de Gaulle's at-times mercurial, at-times divisive policy playbook. He has described France as a "vassal of neither China nor the United States" ([Nikkei Asia](#), April 20). For now, both Washington and Beijing must wait and see the course that President Macron charts next for France.

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