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**Can Beijing be Flexible on U.S. Policy?**

*John S. Van Oudenaren*

General Secretary Xi Jinping did not mention “America” in his opening report to the 20th Party Congress ([Xinhua](#), October 16). Nevertheless, Xi made clear that China faces a difficult international environment, precipitated in large part by the U.S. challenge, which threatens the realization of national rejuvenation. For Xi, the threat appears particularly acute in two areas: technology and Taiwan. He called for winning the “battle of key core technologies” by building on breakthroughs in areas such as supercomputing and quantum computing, space exploration, nuclear energy, satellite navigation and biomedicine ([Xinhuanet](#), October 16). On Taiwan, Xi issued a thinly veiled ultimatum to Washington, stating that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) will strive for “peaceful reunification” to incorporate Taiwan into the Motherland, which he called “an inevitable requirement for realizing the great rejuvenation.” Should this approach fail, Beijing reserves the right

to employ military force to counter “interference by external forces” and “Taiwan independence” separatists ([Central Committee Taiwan Work Office](#), October 16).



*(Image: PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets with business executives of member companies of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NCUSCR), the US-China Business Council and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on September 19 in New York, Source: [NCUSCR](#))*

Earlier this month, the U.S took two actions that would have elicited a more vociferous response from Beijing had the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) not been enmeshed in the run-up to the 20th Party Congress. On October 7, the Department of Commerce passed sweeping export controls on high-performance chips and machinery that will hamper the PRC’s ability to develop its domestic semiconductor industry. A spokesperson for the PRC Ministry of Commerce lamented the move as “technology bullying” ([Xinhua](#), October 10). On October 12, the Biden administration released its National Security Strategy (NSS), which identifies the PRC as America’s only strategic competitor “with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective” ([The White House](#), October 12). Nevertheless, the Biden administration’s approach, both in practice and as laid out in the NSS, cannot be characterized as solely focused on strategic competition with China. The new NSS expresses a willingness to “work with the PRC where our interests align,” asserting that disagreements cannot obstruct cooperation on transnational challenges such as “climate, pandemic threats, nonproliferation, countering illicit and illegal narcotics, the global food crisis, and macroeconomic issues.” For better or for worse, the Biden administration has sought to make the case to Beijing that strategic competition need not obstruct cooperation on shared transnational challenges.

These moves put the ball in Xi’s court following the 20th Party Congress. Does he leverage the Biden administration’s desire to collaborate on transnational challenges to seek to reduce the competitive dynamics in relations and entice Washington to pare back its economic and technological curbs? Or does Xi double down on his current hardline approach to the U.S. of linking transnational cooperation to strategic accommodation? Although it is possible that Xi might opt for the first approach, there is no guarantee that he will do so. On the

plus side, achieving a limited thaw with Washington would provide time to achieve greater self-sufficiency in finance, technology, food, energy and other key areas ([China Brief](#), June 17). However, much of Xi's domestic political legitimacy is bound up in his reputation for standing up to America, which could incentivize him to embrace strategic competition in spite of the enormous risks that it carries ([China Brief](#), October 4).

### **Crossed Signals**

The term “wolf warrior” has almost become a cliché to describe Chinese diplomats in the Xi era. One reason that PRC diplomats often sound irascible to western audiences is that their primary audience is their superiors back home. In the U.S., the PRC's public diplomacy has both irritated relations and strengthened the very “anti-China” forces that Beijing blames for its poor international image ([Xinhua](#), January 15). For example, shortly after assuming his new post in Washington last year, Ambassador Qin Gang made an address to the Carter Center and the George H.W. Bush Foundation for US-China Relations on the PRC's “whole process democracy” ([PRC Embassy in the U.S.](#), September 22, 2021). In his remarks, he likened the CCP to the most venerated American president: “Isn't it obvious that both China's people-center philosophy and President Lincoln's ‘of the people, by the people, for the people’ are for the sake of the people?”

Last month, the PRC Embassy in Washington sent a letter to former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo “expressing concern” over “groundless accusations” that he made in a Hudson Institute video series on the CCP ([VOA Chinese](#), October 12). The video series directly addresses ordinary Chinese, which is surely irksome to Beijing ([YouTube](#), September 4). The letter was an immediate public relations boon for both the Hudson Institute and Pompeo, who tweeted a screenshot of it along with a promise not to be silenced by the CCP. Missives such as the Pompeo letter are clearly designed to appeal to the top leadership at home, but they are also indicative of the PRC's diplomatic rigidity, which makes managing what the Embassy routinely calls “the most important bilateral relationship in the world” even more difficult ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) (FMPRC) September 28).

After its fury over Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan finally subsided in September, Beijing, seeking to avoid major flareups in relations with the U.S. heading into the Party Congress, conveyed some limited openness to a resumption of diplomacy, albeit largely on its terms. Last week, Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng held discussions with Scott Kennedy, a senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in a rare in-person meeting with an expert from an American think tank ([FMPRC](#), October 9). During the meeting, Xie Feng called for deepening U.S.-China expert exchanges to “enhance mutual understanding.”

In late September, Foreign Minister Wang Yi traveled to New York to attend the UN General Assembly (UNGA) meetings. During his visit, Wang also sought to reinvigorate ties with the U.S. expert and business communities ([PRC Embassy](#), September 22). On the New York think tank circuit, he stressed that strong U.S.-China ties are essential to global peace and stability, but also repeatedly stressed that the relationship has hit a breaking point. In his speech to the Asia Society, Wang quoted its president (and former Prime Minister of Australia) Kevin Rudd's analogy of U.S.-China relations as “a workshop with exposed wires and cables lying everywhere, water on the floor and sparks flying” ([FMPRC](#), September 23). However, Wang blamed the deterioration of relations entirely on Washington for miscasting China as an authoritarian rival. He said the U.S. has “made repeated provocations on issues involving China's core interests and development rights and interests, yet on

the other, expressed a desire to keep the bilateral ties stable and prevent conflict and confrontation. This is self-contradictory in both logic and reality.” In other words, Beijing cannot accept a relationship with Washington that allows for selective cooperation in the broader context of strategic competition.

### **Dashed Expectations**

When President Biden entered office, there was considerable hope in official Chinese circles that his administration would adopt a more accommodating policy. In a January 2021 *Global Times* interview, Wang Yi stated that “we hope that the next U.S. administration will return to a sensible approach, resume dialogue with China, restore normalcy to the bilateral relations and restart cooperation” ([Global Times](#), January 2, 2021). This highlights a prevailing belief in Beijing that the U.S.’s adoption of a more competitive China policy beginning in late 2017 was driven by the Trump administration’s ideological orientation and not by a more broad-based shift in American attitudes toward China. However, Beijing was disabused of these notions early on. Taiwan’s de facto ambassador to the U.S. Hsiao Bi-khim attended Biden’s inauguration, a first since Washington switched relations from Taipei to Beijing in 1979 ([Taipei Times](#), January 21, 2021). Moreover, Biden opted not to immediately repeal the Trump administration’s tariffs on China.

The Trump administration’s adoption of a tougher line on China in 2017-2018 was a shock to Beijing. However, the Biden administration’s decision to sustain many of its predecessor’s policies was perhaps equally jolting as it underscored that shifts in U.S. China policy stem largely from bipartisan threat assessments rather than U.S. domestic political divisions. In a recent U.S. media interview, the PRC’s Deputy Chief of Mission in Washington Xu Xueyuan acknowledged this shift: “It’s been two years... since the Biden administration came into office, but the China policy of the U.S., to be frank, has not stepped out of the shadow of the previous administration...the root cause lies in the big problem of the U.S. mentality toward China. The U.S. side takes China as the most serious competitor and the most serious long-term challenge” ([The China Project](#), September 29). By the time that China’s top foreign policy officials, State Councilors Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi met with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Alaska in March 2021, Beijing’s frustration was palpable. The PRC foreign ministry meeting readout stated that “the previous U.S. administration went against the trend of the times, and carried out highly erroneous anti-China policies, which seriously damaged both China’s interests and China-U.S. relations.” As a result, “China urges the U.S. side to eliminate the impact of the previous administration’s wrong policy towards China and avoid new problems” ([FMPRC](#), March 20).

### **List Diplomacy**

Since mid-2021, Beijing has shifted from urging that Washington take steps to repair ties to demanding that it do so. In July 2021, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman traveled to Tianjin, where she was presented with “two lists” of demands that Beijing said the U.S. must fulfill before relations can move forward: the List of U.S. Wrongdoings that Must Stop and the List of Key Individual Cases that China Has Concerns with ([Xinhua](#), July 26, 2021). Beijing’s action items for Washington included the revocation of sanctions on CCP officials; ceasing the “suppression” of Confucius Institutes; and revocation of the registration of PRC state media entities as foreign agents.

In the interim, Beijing has doubled down on its list diplomacy. When Wang and Blinken met on the sidelines of the G-20 foreign ministers' meeting this July, the PRC Foreign Minister reiterated that relations are "still not out of the difficulties caused by the previous U.S. administration and [are] even facing mounting challenges" ([FMPRC](#), July 9). Moreover, Wang presented Blinken with two new lists: "Acts in the 117th Congress of high concern to China" and the "list of cooperation proposals in eight areas," including climate change and public health. Implementing the final list is contingent on the U.S. making progress to address the other three lists of Chinese concerns.

## **Conclusion**

Beijing has made rhetorical ultimatums to withhold cooperation on transnational issues unless Washington abandons strategic competition with China. However, through the NSS and semiconductor export controls, Washington has responded with its own tacit ultimatum to Beijing: accept a US-China relationship that is a mix of managed strategic cooperation and guarded competition, or be prepared for one that is defined wholly by competition. Xi should think carefully about which route he chooses.

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## The Zhejiang Model: Old-New Tools for Managing Contradictions and Creating Win-Win Outcomes in Center-Local Governance

*Dominik Mierzejewski*



(Image: Students visit the Fengqiao Experience Exhibition Hall in Zhuji, Zhejiang province, **source:** China Youth Daily)

### Introduction

In the midst of an economic downturn, with the World Bank rather pessimistically predicting 2.8 percent year-on-year economic growth, the challenge of managing the growing tensions and contradictions within Chinese society remains at the top of Beijing's agenda ([South China Morning Post](#), September 27). In this context, this article examines the recently promoted model for managing contradictions, namely the “Fengqiao Experience” and the institutionalization-digitalization of social tension governance. In his work report to open the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress on October 16, General Secretary Xi Jinping discussed the optimal ways for resolving contradictions in society and cited “Fengqiao Experience” (枫桥经验, *Feng Qiao jingyan*) as the model solution ([CCTV](#), October 17). Hence, the importance of the Maoist style experiences of Fengqiao, a small village in Zhejiang, have reached the top level. However, throughout this year, *People's Daily* has promoted the “Fengqiao Experience” as the most important model to follow for the lower level bureaucrats.

In his 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress report, Xi announced a newly introduced understanding of the general contradiction *between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing need for a better life* ([China Daily](#), November 4, 2017). This was supported by Mao Zedong's views on social contradictions which he regarded as class struggle. It was then exemplified by the "common prosperity" (共同富裕, *gongtong fuyu*) campaign launched by Xi in mid-2021 ([Qiushi](#), October 15, 2021). The induction of commonality should be read between the lines as an attempt to limit the increasing stratification in Chinese society. Also noteworthy is that Xi has continued to advance institutional changes across the country with local authorities not only participating in the "common prosperity" campaign but also opening mediation centers as well. This institutional shift should not be perceived in the traditional manner but through the prism of the Chinese government's digitalization process. As stated in the national regulations issued by the State Council in June, digital governance should mitigate issues such as conflict resolution (contradiction resolution), social security prevention and control, public security and grassroots social governance ([Gov.cn](#), June 23). Furthermore, the State Council promoted Zhejiang's "Fengqiao Experience"—the Maoist style campaign resolving contradictions and the "Xueliang project"—a public security big data platform.

Of course, the central government instructs people, sets goals and provides directions, while actual policy implementation largely falls to local authorities. The central government can then, through its dominant position, select the most effective solutions based on the initial local outcomes. However, this is largely the case only in theory, as this process is also inherently political. Reshaping the definition of general contradictions and calling for more institutionalized and digital development allows the core leader to strengthen his political power base and incentivizes local governments to compete in China's political system. This logic is illustrated by quantitative analysis of 35 articles on "managing contradictions" (化解矛盾, *huajie maodun*) published in *People's Daily* (January-September 2022), which suggests that Zhejiang, the most frequently mentioned province, won out in the competition to become the testing ground for implementing Common Prosperity at the local level (46 times; see table one). Zhejiang, which is Xi's political powerbase, was followed by some provinces that offered their own "in house" solutions to resolving contradictions.

### **Are Zhejiang's Digital Solutions Plus the Maoist Model a Remedy for Tensions?**

In June 2021, when the central authorities issued the "Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Supporting Zhejiang's High-quality Development and Construction of a Demonstration Zone for Common Prosperity," Zhejiang Province was selected as the pilot and demonstration zone for the promotion of shared prosperity across the country through mediation centers at the county level ([Gov.cn](#), June 10, 2021). Zhejiang hopes to develop its superior model of managing contradictions, which can then be rolled out across the country. The provincial capital, Hangzhou, utilizes new technologies and old Maoist solutions to manage contradictions. The Hangzhou government uses digital infrastructure to empower grassroots social governance. By opening the "Digital Intelligence Governance Center" (数智治理中心, *shu zhi zhili gongxin*), it hopes to effectively deal with residents' complaints and rapidly resolve conflicts through an early warning system. As *People's Daily* explains, the quick process of receiving problems through the mechanism of "one-click completion" allows the government to efficiently manage and resolve problems and contradictions between the city's inhabitants. In this regard, the collecting and controlling of large volumes of data is seen as critical. Since August 2021, the Zhejiang Provincial Government Service APP "Zhe li Office" (

浙里办, Zhe li ban) has successively launched and utilized a digital application, "Intelligent Quick Handling of Key Minor Matters of People's Livelihood in Zhejiang" ("浙里民生关键小事智能速办" *zhe li minsheng guanjian xiaoshi zhineng su ban*). As of May, the application had handled an average daily volume of 39,000 cases. The average resolution time was 66 percent faster in comparison to the traditional channels ([People's Daily](#), June 3).

Local authorities also need to meet specific quotas for the Chinese evaluation system. When reporting on Xi's visit to Anji County, Zhejiang in March 2020, *People's Daily* reported that the Anji County Social Conflict and Dispute Mediation and Resolution Center had accepted more than 27,000 petitions and conflicts and disputes, and had a resolution rate of 97.2 percent; the province's county-level social conflicts and dispute mediation and resolution centers had accepted in 2021 a total of 1.96 million petitions with a settlement rate of 93.1 percent ([People's Daily](#), June 3).

In the context of promoting the Zhejiang technological model for resolving contradictions, *People's Daily* recalled the Maoist period of the early 1960s. Needless to say, the central government and Xi support the model and emphasize "the Fengqiao experience" as the key to applying best practices for managing contradictions in all local and provincial governments throughout China. During the Mao era, the cadres and masses of Fengqiao Town, Zhuji City shaped the "Fengqiao Experience" by "mobilizing and relying on the masses, insisting that contradictions should not be handed over, but resolved at the grass roots level, through arresting minor groups and enhanced security" (发动和依靠群众, 坚持矛盾不上交, 就地解决, 实现捕人少, *Fadong he yikao qunzhong, jianchi maodun bu shang jiao, jiu di jie jue, shixian bu ren shao*). Notably, the local authorities at the lower levels of government in Zhejiang have adopted the "Fengqiao model." They hope to resolve contradictions at the most local level of government—the village level: "Small things do not leave the village, big things do not leave the town, and contradictions do not turn over." Zhou Qiang, Chief Justice and President of the Supreme People's Court of China, argued that this solution is an effective social governance plan rooted in Chinese culture, which aligns with China's unique conditions, and "has become a valuable experience created by our party's leadership of the people in correctly handling conflicts among the people" ([People's Daily](#), March 3).

### **Studying the "Fengqiao Model" and Other Approaches**

Following an article written by Zhou Qiang, the People's Court took responsibility for implementing the "Internet+Fengqiao Experience" solution to improve the "world-leading Internet judicial model with Chinese characteristics which strives to create a higher level of "digital justice" (数字正义, *shuzi zhengyi*) for the masses" ([People's Daily](#), July 6). As *People's Daily* declared in July, people's courts play the role of "outposts" and "fortresses" in preventing and mediating conflicts and disputes, which are literally on the doorstep ("家门口" 纠纷解决站点, "*jia menkou*" *jiufen jie jue zhandian*), by not allowing them to be escalated further up the judicial administration structure. Moreover, as the campaign has ramped up across the country, 8,429 people's courts have been established on the mediation platform to connect online with comprehensive treatment



centers, mediation centers, judicial offices, police stations, trade unions, women's federations, and townships. There are 43,033 grassroots governance units such as townships (streets) and villages (communities) that “by effectively activating the grassroots dispute resolution service, a large number of conflicts and disputes can be resolved on the spot promptly according to law” ([People's Daily](#), July 6).

In implementing the Zhejiang model, it is important to note that the *People's Daily* has also reported the positive approaches of the Anhui, Yunnan, Shanghai and Hunan governments in managing contradictions. The “Fengqiao experiences” allow the local authorities to show their effectiveness and demonstrate their commitment to follow this “old-new” model. However, the Fujian, Ningxia and Henan provincial governments have promoted their own solutions.

As reported in January, the Anhui government developed the “Fengqiao Experience” for the new era, designed a comprehensive management mechanism for social conflicts and promised to maintain people’s safety. By developing the model, the local government standardizes channels for expression of public demands, coordination of interests, protection of rights and interests, establishment of a comprehensive social conflict governance mechanism for prevention and control, investigation as well as categorizing, dispute resolution, and emergency response ([People's Daily](#), January 25). The Yunnan provincial government boasts exceptional results in that the number of conflicts and disputes, which have been resolved, have increased year by year. Since 2016, the province's public security organs have resolved more than 900,000 conflicts and disputes, tackling various hidden dangers at the source and effectively maintaining social stability ([People's Daily](#), August 4). In Shanghai, the “Fengqiao Experience” falls under the city's Higher People's Court, with reconciliation and mediation being given priority. The critical thing, for Liao Yongan, as cited by the *People's Daily*, is that the model detects disputes early on and reduces social disruptions ([People's Daily](#), August 18). The Zhejiang model was followed in Changsha, Hunan where 172 “Fengqiao-style police stations” adopted various methods to resolve conflicts and disputes as well as to promote the prevention and control of social security with targets of zero accidents and zero crimes. In 2021, local authorities proudly announced the number of incidents in Changsha had hit a 10-year low ([People's Daily](#), August 28).

As Fan Yu, a professor at the Law School of the Renmin University of China, suggested, local law and regulations have significant similarities but should also highlight their respective advantages. The similarities are mainly embodied by the narratives regarding the role of law and establishing people's mediation centers. The understanding of the promotion of the peculiarities and comparative advantages, at least, was followed by the Fujian, Ningxia, Liaoning and Henan governments (*People's Daily*, [March 23](#); [August 18](#)). The Fujian government gave full rein to technological solutions but controlled them from the upper level. By introducing this process, the government in Fuzhou follows the national petition system and promotes an “Internet + petition” system. Fujian has built a three-dimensional and information-based social security prevention and control system of “service + prevention and control” as well as “civil air defense + technical defense”— as the province is critical for China’s Taiwan policy. Through measures such as nipping conflicts and disputes in the bud, efficiently utilizing police resources, as well as other resources through technology, the government underpins the safety of the people and stability at the very local level from social disruptions such as crime and disputes ([People's Daily](#), August 18).

In the case of Ningxia, the principal contradiction was related to water supply and water management. Due to the lack of water, the local authorities' main task in this case was to patrol the canals and prevent villagers from "stealing water." In other words, the main goal of limiting the negative impact of contradictions was environmental regulation. Through special regulations with the help of farmland restoration, many places implemented water-saving technologies such as sprinklers and drip irrigation ([People's Daily](#), July 7). Liaoning province established a mechanism of "five-star secretaries catching petitions," which underscored that secretaries at all levels have primary responsibility for resolving contradictions at the local level. Moreover, provincial cities like Benxi, introduced the concept of "red housekeeper" (红色管家, *hongse guanjia*), which refers to building the party so that it can take the lead in safety matters ([People's Daily](#), [January 19](#); [May 25](#)).

Cai Qinliang, director of the Law and Regulations Division of the Legislative Work Committee of the Standing Committee of the Henan Provincial People's Congress, blames rapid growth for growing tensions and argues that Henan will resolve the problems through strict regulations. As a local regulation highlighted by *People's Daily* says, the critical factor in resolving contradictions above the county level is the coordination and information system ([People's Daily](#), August 18). Moreover, the people's courts should give full rein to the critical role of judicial functions in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and disputes; improve the mechanism for resolving conflicts and disputes by linking non-litigation and litigation, and carry out guidance, mediation, and judicial confirmation for resolving conflicts and disputes following the law ([Zhengzhou Peoples' Court](#), July 7).

**Table One: Top ten provinces resolving contradictions in China (January-September 2022)**

Province	Number of mentions	Overall frequency %	Number of articles	Follow the „Fengqiao experiences”
Zhejiang	46	25.41	8	YES
Fujian	17	9.39	4	NO
Beijing	15	8.29	9	YES
Anhui	13	7.18	7	YES
Ningxia	12	6.63	1	NO
Shanghai	10	5.52	5	YES
Henan	10	5.52	5	NO
Liaoning	10	5.52	6	NO
Sichuan	9	4.97	6	NO
Hunan	9	4.97	5	YES
Other	30	16.57	21	N/A

**Source:** author's own calculations with support of software for text analysis based on 35 articles on contradictions published in *People's Daily* (January-September 2022).

## Conclusion

Paraphrasing the old Chinese saying, "there is a heaven above, and Suzhou and Hangzhou below" (上有天堂下有苏杭, *Shang you tiantang, xia you su hang*), we can say "there is a central committee above, and Zhejiang below" (上有中央下有浙江, *Shang you Zhongyang, xia you Zhejiang*). Needless to say, the Propaganda Department's support of Zhejiang is not without reason. For political purposes, promoting the "Fengqiao Experience" follows the simple logic of supporting the current leader's political powerbase through implementing his ideas of the institutionalization-digitalization of the contradiction management process.

Furthermore, with problems and tensions remaining at the local level, the central government has all the necessary conditions in place for a successful 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. The Central Committee likes silence, but it is not only the central government that wins. In fact, this is a win-win between central and local bureaucrats as the contradictions will remain and be resolved at the lower level, allowing local networks to sweep the problems “under the rug”, which in turn results in only positive messages being sent to the higher level. However, Lou Yiwei, the former Minister of Finance, laments that all data from the provincial level is, frankly speaking, far from accurate, and the situation remains unchanged ([Bloomberg](#), December 11, 2021). On the other hand, as not all local authorities follow the Zhejiang model, the central government does shape the ideological platform for horizontal competition. In the long term, it seems to have secured its central position for the single-person leadership.

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**The 20th Party Congress is Underway: Will Xi's Men Dominate the Next Politburo?**

*James Yifan Chen and David Hau Feng*



(Image: General Secretary Xi Jinping delivers his report at the opening of the 20th Party Congress in Beijing on October 16, source: Xinhua)

## Introduction

The Communist Party of China (CCP) convened its 20th Party Congress on Sunday ([Xinhua](#), October 16). When the proceedings conclude, a new Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) will be revealed ([China Brief](#), September 20). General Secretary Xi Jinping is expected to continue his third term as party chief and paramount leader and will also retain the key role of Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman. Although the continuation of Xi's tenure undermines former supreme leader Deng Xiaoping's efforts to institutionalize the CCP's top-leadership succession, the unwritten rule of "seven up, eight down" (七上八下, *qi shang, ba xia*) still heavily affects the selection process of the other twenty-four politburo members ([China Times](#), October 19). Within the Politburo, those who have reached the age of 68 are required to retire from their positions and duties. With several PSC and Politburo members headed for retirement, many are wondering who will take their place.

Since the beginning of the 19th Party Congress in late 2017, China has faced numerous domestic and international challenges. Under the ruling CCP, the Party-state has grappled with reducing the wealth gap and eliminating extreme poverty; rooting out monopolies in the technology industry; cracking down on official corruption; managing the needs of an aging population and numerous other economic and social challenges.



In 2021, the overleveraged property sector, which was epitomized by Evergrande Group's debt struggles and the Henan bank default protest, forced the CCP to take extensive measures to stave off an economic implosion ([China Brief](#), September 20).

The liquidation problem that happened earlier this year have drawn the CCP's attention to the risk of potential financial turmoil. Last but not least, the "Zero-Covid" policy has forced cities and provinces to go through strict quarantines and lockdowns, disrupting supply chains and resulting in underperforming economic progress. ([China Times](#), September 16; [Voice of America](#), September 18).

China has also experienced growing pushback from the international community due to the human rights situations in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, as well as Beijing's pressure campaign against Taiwan. Even though China has adopted a "neutral" stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the perception in the West is widespread that Beijing has provided Moscow with at least tacit support. Meanwhile, the U.S.-China relationship remains dominated by competition on trade, military, technology and many other areas. Relations soured further when U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August.

Since 2021, China had been underscoring the importance of "stability" (稳定, *wending*) in all policy areas ([Economic Daily](#), May 25). This emphasis has undoubtedly sought to lay the groundwork for Xi's third leadership term ([The News Lens-FBC2E](#), March 16). It further explains why most sensitive topics, such as Taiwan, the North Korea nuclear crisis, or even Russia-Ukraine War, are rarely mentioned during sensitive times to prevent international awareness and misinterpretation that would leave China in the spotlight.

### **New Faces in the Politburo**

The CCP has preserved the unwritten retirement regulation for senior leaders since Jiang Zemin. The upcoming 20th Party Congress will also elect new members under the age of 67 into the Politburo, while those who have exceeded 68 or above will be retired-*qi shang ba xia*. However, people speculate that some, who have not reached 68, will be disposed of from power for various reasons. Xi's ability to abrogate *qi shang ba xia* in order to place his supporters on the Politburo is a key test of his clout in the system.

Through observations, we predict there will be 15 new members elected to the 20th Politburo when the curtain rises at the end of the Party Congress next week. The following senior cadres are likely to be promoted: He Lifeng (Minister of the National Development and Reform Commission), Miao Hua (Military Commission and PLA Navy Admiral), Wang Xiaohong (Minister of Public Security), Zhang Jun (Procurator-General of the Supreme People's Procuratorate), Ying Yong (Deputy Procurator-General of the Supreme People's Procuratorate), Jiang Xinzhi (Executive Deputy Head of the Organization Department of the Communist Party of China), Zhang Shengmin (Military Commission and PLA Rocket Force), Liu Jieyi (Director of Taiwan Affairs Office), Jiang Jinquan (Director of Central Policy Research Office), Ma Xingrui (Communist Party Secretary of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region), Chen Wenqing (Minister of State Security), Chen Xiaojiang (Executive Deputy Head of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party), Liu Haixin (Deputy Director of National Security Commission of the Chinese Communist Party), Li Shulei (Executive Deputy Head of the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist

Party), Liu Jianchao (Director of the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party). He Lifeng's background and close relationship with Xi is likely to earn him membership on the PBSC. He Lifeng would presumably be in charge of the economic issues once Li Keqiang moves on from the Premiership and Liu He steps down.

*South China Morning Post* has postulated that current State Councilor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, could enter the Politburo ([South China Morning Post](#), September 5). Although Wang is already 68, foreign policy may well become a major priority following the 20th Party Congress. With Yang Jiechi, the Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission General Office, over seventy and almost certain to retire, Wang could provide continuity in the top foreign policy leadership roles of State Councilor and Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission General Office. Furthermore, Le Yucheng, who is purportedly a staunch supporter of the Sino-Russian "no limits" partnership and was once considered a potential candidate to succeed Wang, is now out of the running. He was reassigned from the role of deputy foreign minister to become deputy director of the National Radio and Television Administration earlier this year ([Xinhua](#), June 14). In addition, the vice ministers of foreign affairs, Ma Zhaoxu and Xie Feng are less experienced in comparison to other hopefuls. Hence, the current Director of the CCP International Liaison Department, Liu Jianchao, may be the best option to succeed Wang as the PRC's next Foreign Minister.

Regarding military personnel, two members of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin, have the chance to take over as the Deputy Chairman of the Central Military Commission, replacing Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia ([China Brief](#), September 9). At the same time, other members, such as Wei Fenghe and Li Zuocheng, will also reach the age limit of 67 and are expected to retire, but there is potential that Xi would keep one of them as CMC vice chairman. If an exception is made for Wang Yi, the chances of Li Zuocheng remaining would be feasible, as the People's Liberation Army highly evaluates the Army versus other services. Lin Xiangyang (Commander of the Eastern Theater Command), Li Shangfu (Head of Equipment Development Department), Xu Xueqiang (President of PLA National Defense University), Li Qiaoming (Commander of PLA Ground Force), Wang Qiang (Commander of the Northern Theater Command), and Liu Zhenli (Former Commander of PLA Ground Force) are also thought to be candidates for the CMC. ([United Daily News](#), September 15; [Central News Agency](#), September 23; [Jiangsuwanxin](#), September 30; [Caixin](#), October 2.)

### **Change and Continuity in the Politburo and the Politburo Standing Committee**

Most, if not all of the members, who have not yet surpassed age 68, will remain on the Politburo in some capacity, including Wang Yang (Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), Hu Chunhua (Vice Premier), Li Hongzhong (Party Secretary of Tianjin), Cai Chi (Party Secretary of Beijing), Li Xi (Party Secretary of Guangdong), Huang Kunming (Head of Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the CCP), Li Qiang (Party Secretary of Shanghai), Chen Min'er (Party Secretary of Chongqing), and Ding Xuexiang (Director of the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party). Among these politburo members, Hu Chunhua and Ding Xuexiang have the opportunity to be promoted to the PBSC replacing Li Zhanshu and Han Zheng who are both over the unwritten retirement age. Wang Yang may also remain on in his position as a standing committee member and could get promoted to Premier

The futures of two current PBSC members, Wang Huning and Zhao Leji, have aroused considerable speculation. Reading through *People's Daily*, the Party mouthpiece, both Wang and Zhao's public appearances significantly decreased following the annual Beidaihe leadership conclave this August. Zhao Leji is suspected of being involved in corruption scandals, including one of involving his younger brother Zhao Leqin ([China Brief](#), August 12). If Zhao is "forced" to retire, in exchange for being not prosecuted or even jailed, Wang Huning, who is slightly older than Zhao, could also come under pressure to quit. Regardless, Taiwan's *United Daily News* points out that both Zhao and Wang could remain on the Politburo Standing Committee. If that occurs, Zhao is likely to be assigned to duty in the United Front and take over from Wang Yang as head of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which would elevate him to the number four position (officially) in the CCP hierarchy.

The incumbent Premier, Li Keqiang, stated in May 2022 that he would be stepping down. The announcement raised eyebrows on who the potential successor of the premier is. Prime candidates for premier would have experience as Vice Premier and have membership in the Politburo and/or the PBSC. Under these circumstances, both Wang Yang, Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and Hu Chunhua, the incumbent Vice Premier, are the most suitable candidates, although Wang currently outranks Hu,

According to Taiwan's Central News Agency, Wang Yang tends to be more opinionated than others, which Xi might not appreciate. However, considering Wang Yang's age, he would most likely have a one-term premiership, which would allow Xi to arrange the next successor and not feel any challenge from a rising star in the number two position. Comparably, current Vice Premier Hu Chunhua's younger age gives him an opportunity to serve two terms if the premiership. Therefore, he is also considered to be a potential candidate for the PBSC. However, Hu Chunhua joined the party through the Communist Youth League under the tutelage of Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao and these factional divisions may cost him ([Central New Agency](#), September 13).

Li Keqiang's term as Premier will not be extended, but he could still retain his position on the PBSC. In doing so, Li may emulate his predecessor Li Peng, retiring from premier position but serving out his tenure as chairman of either the National People's Congress or the CPPCC. Otherwise, Li could replace Wang Qishan's current position as PRC Vice President. Some also believe that Li will not receive a new position at all and could be forced into early retirement ([Central News Agency](#), September 20)

## Conclusion

The bottom line, playing it safe for the election of seven standing committee members of the 20th Party Congress, the seven standing members will consist of Xi Jinping, Li Keqiang, Wang Yang, Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Ding Xuexiang, and Hu Chunhua ([United Daily News](#), September 22). This would represent a small shift to cope with major events. However, in July 2021, Xi mentioned the term "Whole-process people's democracy" during his speech for the 100th Anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party ([Xinhuanet](#), July 15, 2021). Likewise, in December 2021, the State Council's Information Office released the white paper titled "China: Democracy That Works" ([State Council Information Office](#), December 4, 2021)

If the term of “Whole-process people's democracy” is fully practiced, then more of the standing committee members may be reshuffled, including Xi Jinping, Wang Yang, Hu Chunhua, Ding Xuexiang, Li Qiang, Chen Min'er, and He Lifeng. All of which have been close colleagues with Xi during his tenure in Fujian, Zhejiang, Shanghai, forming the so-called “Jiangnan Faction” with their work experience in China's southeast coastal provinces.

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## The Life and Death of United Front Promises From Revolution to (Re)-Unification Past, Present and Future

Gerry Groot



(Image: Police subdue a protester during the September 29, 2019 “anti-totalitarianism” rally in Hong Kong source: Wikipedia)

### Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) dramatic show of military force in the Taiwan Straits between August 4-6, ostensibly in retaliation for the visit to Taipei by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the highest-ranking American visitor in decades, while impressive in many respects, was also a sign to the rest of the world of a key Chinese weakness ([81.cn](http://81.cn), August 6). Xi Jinping, as General Secretary of the CCP and state president, has few options left for gaining direct control over Taiwan other than by force. This is despite a decades-long offer under the banner of “One-Country, Two-Systems” (1C2S) and a “peaceful unification” deal proffered by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s as part of United Front Work to bring Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan under direct CCP control ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](http://PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs) [FMPRC]). Under this proposal, Taiwan would, in theory, be able to retain its systems of government and institutions and even military, *if* it recognized the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) as sovereign over it.

## Lessons from Hong Kong

The promise of One-Country, Two-systems is probably the best known CCP assurance made in the context of its contemporary United Front Work because it was crucial to the ultimately successful negotiations with Britain and Portugal, which brought first Hong Kong and then Macau, under direct CCP sovereignty in 1997 and 1999, respectively ([FMPRC](#), November 17, 2000). In both cases, the CCP promised that the status quo would be upheld for fifty years. While the integration of Macau has gone relatively smoothly, the eruption of dissent and open unrest in Hong Kong, including mass demonstrations, resulted in the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the PRC passing a set of *National Security Laws* to cover Hong Kong in mid-2020 ([China Brief](#), July 29, 2020). This direct intervention by the PRC and the nature of the laws themselves, as well as the return to using British colonial-era sedition laws, meant the clear and effective end of Hong Kong's judicial independence and thus a key plank of the One-Country, Two-Systems promise —twenty-seven years ahead of schedule!

This abrogation was noted in Taiwan, where it made the work of the tiny minority of pro-unification activists even harder and reinforced the skepticism of others regarding the value of CCP promises. The events in Hong Kong aided the election of the Democratic Progressive Party's Tsai Ing-wen in 2020, while the CCP's pronouncements on the IC2S seemingly undermined the otherwise sympathetic Kuomintang Candidate Han Kuo-Yu ([Taiwan News](#), January 8, 2020).

While some lawyers might have been surprised by the turn of events in Hong Kong, scholars of CCP history would not have been. While united front promises have often played important, even crucial roles in helping the Party achieve its ends, they have rarely, if ever, ended when those who succumbed to them expected. Instead, such promises are always contingent ones, dependent on the shifting needs and circumstances of the party and often made cynically and with a clear view to the ultimate casting aside, if not elimination, of those who have helped the Party once the need for help has passed or the Party is strong enough to do without assistance.

## United Front Work's Revolutionary Roots

The nature of United Front Work is that of the CCP reaching out to individuals, groups, classes or even countries it needs to achieve its goals at any given time and for periods ranging from months to years or decades. This was once framed as reaching out to classes outside the Party's "natural" constituencies, like workers, peasants and soldiers as determined by Marxist-Leninist and later Maoist ideology. Because the goal of the Party was the full socialization of the means of production and thereby eliminating the basis of classes and the achievement of communism, to win the support or at least acquiescence of other classes with useful assets (money, knowledge, influence, etc.) who would be the eventual target of elimination, concessions would be made to their material interests under the banner of greater altruistic causes which seemingly justified the CCP compromising if not hiding their revolutionary principles. [1]

The greater cause of eventual revolutionary success justifies concessions in the here-and-now. Failure to make such concessions, when necessary, would be in in Lenin's words, a leftist infantile disorder. [2] However,

concessions are only good for as long as is necessary to overcome the weaknesses that required them or if they have become a greater threat to the Party than a help. In most cases, this means when the Party is strong enough to do without its allies or can replace them from within its own ranks. What this means in practice is that any promises made in united front context by a revolutionary communist party, such as the CCP are always conditional and contingent on Party needs and circumstances and/or the degree to which the Party's goals have been met or become endangered.

The CCP was not keen to embark on its first united front with the then rising revolutionary anti-imperialist Kuomintang (KMT) in the early-1920s but having only just been founded in 1921, it was a small, disparate party lacking in numbers and organizational experience. The bloody end of the “First Period of Nationalist – Communist Cooperation” (第一次国共合作, *di yi ci guogong hezuo*) in April 1927 has mostly been remembered in the West as an absolute disaster for the CCP. [3] Nevertheless, the CCP emerged from this struggle much stronger and with the needed experience to survive into the future. The key lesson the Party drew from their expulsion and subsequent purge from the united front with the KMT was the absolute need to maintain organizational independence and leadership in any setting and this remains a cardinal principle of the CCP.

By the mid-1930s, the KMT had come close to finally eliminating the CCP even in its remote rural strongholds. The CCP needed all the help it could muster in the cities to fend off the Nationalist threat. Therefore, the CCP called for a united front against a common enemy, Japan which was stepping up its invasion of China proper, having expanded out of Manchuria. To better secure its place in the countryside and minimize support for the KMT, the CCP moderated its then radical left revolutionary program and actions, such as killing landlords and radical land redistribution, by clothing itself in reformist garb and appropriating the moderate language of the KMT's late founder, Sun Yatsen. The CCP had not disowned its ultimate program as revealed in its radical agenda. Rather, the Party was under existential pressure and Stalin's Soviet Union also wanted it to again work with the Nationalists to fight Japan.

The period between 1936 and 1945, which is often called the era of the second KMT-CCP united front, is more accurately described in Chinese as the second period of GMD-CCP cooperation that was just one part of a much broader Anti-Japanese United Front for the CCP. In 1940 subsequent concessions were justified in ideological terms by party leader Mao Zedong's work, “On New Democracy.” [4]

New Democracy was even more explicitly aimed at assuaging the fears of urban Chinese by promising them a future in which China's different classes and their forms of capitalist and bourgeois forms of property ownership would coexist as part of a “New China.” How long this coexistence would last was never clear, but it was going to be for “a long time.” This program became more important after the CCP learned of Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7 1941. At this point, the CCP came to believe that Japan's defeat was now inevitable, so preparations should be made to pivot to the subsequent eventual showdown with the KMT. In the interim, the party was so successful in promoting its new image, one far removed from the Red Terror of 1927-1930, that many foreign visitors, like Edgar Snow, often came away convinced that the Party was one of “agrarian reformers” and painted a very rosy picture of the Party for foreign audiences. Tellingly, the CCP still holds up Snow as a model for foreign journalists, who cover China today (CGTN, March 22, 2021).

The CCP's adoption of moderate policies in the countryside, notably rent reductions for tenants rather than confiscation from landlords, the institution of the so-called three thirds systems of local representation (one-third Communists, one-third Left progressives, and one-third middle-of-the-roaders and other elements) came under strain after 1945, when the long simmering civil war between the GMD and CCP resumed. As the need for soldiers increased, the CCP resorted to promising to entice peasants to volunteer. Meeting these promises, required the CCP to abrogate its previous tolerance of landlords in favor of land confiscation and redistribution. At the same time, the CCP was reassuring those in the cities that little would change should they win, and that all rights would be protected under the banner of New Democracy while it pursued final victory through military means. Other promises made to numerous minor political parties and groups, KMT-allied armies and individuals during the course of the civil war and in the context of United Front Work were immediately put to the test after the CCP won victory. A key tactic united front tactic undermining the Nationalist government in the cities was the CCP's "Second Front Line" (第二条战线, *di er tiao zhanxian*)—the use of mass demonstrations protesting inflation, unemployment, civil war and the subsequent crackdowns on those same protests. [5]

The founding of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) by the CCP in October 1949 ushered in the era of New Democracy in a "New China" and its much heralded long-term coexistence of different forms of ownership and classes. However, the length of this coexistence for a "very long time" was hard to pin down. Roundups of politically suspect individuals, including former KMT officials started immediately and before long, political re-education was being imposed on key groups like teachers, academics and professionals. United Front Work in cities was stepped up to both mobilize and "educate" key classes using the CCP's "democratic parties and groups (民主党派, *minzhudangpai*)" and independent democratic personages (无党派人士, *wudangpai renshi*) with "red" capitalists like Rong Yiren becoming very prominent as symbols of acceptance of CCP rule. [6] United Front Work among overseas Chinese was aimed at encouraging those with money, talent and skills to return to the Motherland and help build this new nation.

It is worth remembering that the persuasive element of United Front Work present in these efforts, was backed by a series of much more punitive and complementary campaigns such as the Three (三反运动, *san fan yundong*) and Five-Anti (五反运动) campaigns in towns and cities, as well as the Suppression of Counter Revolutionary Campaigns (镇压反革命运动, *zhenya fangeming yundong*), the latter of which resulted in hundreds of thousands of executions across China. [7] Persuasion and coercion went hand in hand. The long-term coexistence of classes and forms of ownership then, was under threat from almost from the moment of the CCP's victory. The political campaigns were used to push the socialization of industry and commerce and by 1956 Mao was so confident he felt the first stage in the transition to socialism had already been achieved. Few businesses remained in purely private hands and few people escaped the experience of coercive forms of political education.

The next big political campaign, the Hundred Flowers, was largely aimed at asking United Front allies to make constructive criticisms of the Party in order help overcome bureaucratism and inertia. However, these groups were already so cowed by their experiences that it took considerable effort by CCP leaders like Li Wei-han to instill any confidence in them. Once the dam broke though, the criticisms of the Party and lack of fulfilment of



United Front promises were soon joined by criticisms of even Mao himself. In response, Mao changed his attitude and instead launched the even more brutal Anti-Rightist Campaign (反右运动, *fan you yundong*), which many of the former allies did not survive. Now securely in power, the CCP had little use for its former allies and many were now labelled as class enemies, usefully rolled out as targets with each new political campaign. New Democracy, such as it was, had lasted a mere seven years.

### **Hong Kong Subdued**

In the early 1980s, when the CCP under Deng Xiaoping was seeking to incorporate Hong Kong into the PRC system, Party theorists came up with the idea of One-Country, Two-Systems to be implemented when British colonial rule terminated in 1997. However, the framework was also formulated with a clear eye on incorporating Taiwan into the PRC. The proposed duration of this arrangement in Hong Kong was put to Deng Xiaoping who vacillated between twenty, thirty-five or fifty years, finally settling on fifty. Deng's decision was a purely arbitrary one. [8]

In many ways though, the PRC's takeover of Hong Kong after 1997, at least initially, went smoothly, helped by large numbers of CCP agents already in what was now a Special Administrative Region, rather than a British colonial outpost ([Hong Kong Government](#), 1999). It was only when the beginnings of the same pattern of assimilation into PRC/CCP norms began to be instituted in overt ways that resistance arose. In response, CCP leaders defaulted to externalization of blame and began the counter-productive spiral of calling for more "education" to overcome "misunderstandings" and "external interference" such as the protests against the first attempt to force through a *National Security Law* in 2003 and the attempts to begin "moral and national education" in 2012 ([South China Morning Post](#), October 8, 2013). In the meantime, pressure from an increasingly radicalized public, especially Hong Kong youth with their calls for more democracy from 2006, led Beijing in 2007 to promise direct elections for the Chief Executive in 2017 and for the Legislative Assembly in 2020 ([CECC](#), July 14, 2010).

Such promises were unlikely to be kept. However, the rise of mass protest movements including the 2014 "Umbrella Revolution," the 2016 "Fish ball Revolution" and "Rally for Hong Kong Independence," and not least, the annual June 4 Tiananmen Commemorations with their clear shades of color revolutions and separatism, which had brought down communist and other dictatorships elsewhere, meant such promises had been rendered meaningless ([People.cn](#), August 15, 2019). Hong Kong's trajectory had changed beyond all recognition from Beijing's point of view. Moreover, those promises had been made under Hu Jintao while much of the increasing unrest occurred after the 2012 accession to power of Xi Jinping, a man with both extensive United Front experience and a powerful desire to impose ever more direct Party control.

There is a pattern of the CCP making promises in a United Front context, sometimes with vague, albeit implied, timelines, sometimes with explicit ones. However, these timelines are not, as many Westerners might expect, approaching anything legally binding, even if some of the targets may have been persuaded that they were. When Mao judged the CCP strong enough in 1956 to begin dismantling the New Democratic United Front and stepping up political campaigns against erstwhile former allies, past promises were simply abandoned. In Hong Kong, the CCP and leaders like Xi see no problem or alternative to winding back past concessions, stepping

up coercive control of all suspected of disloyalty to the PRC and using the new National Security Laws, intensifying political education in the education systems now that resistance to moral and national education has been crushed.

### **Conclusion**

These precedents have clear implications for the CCP's increasingly less believable claims that it seeks "peaceful unification" with Taiwan under the 1C2S framework ([Xinhuanet](#), January 2, 2019). For example, recent statements by PRC diplomat abroad have cast doubt on just how peaceful such a reunification would be. The PRC ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, stated that when unification occurred, there would have to be re-education of Taiwanese, to make them patriotic, a point restated by Xiao Qian, Ambassador to Australia, in August 2022 when he declared, "There might be a process for the people in Taiwan to have a correct understanding of China about the motherland" ([Taiwan News](#), August 5; [Taipei Times](#), August 11). This is no slip of the tongue, but rather indicates recognition that after first making a clear delineation between the CCP's enemies and friends, the next step is to "educate" those not locked away (or executed) in order to teach them to "think" the way that the CCP expects its subjects to think. This dynamic has been demonstrated most starkly in Xinjiang, where hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs have been interned while the Sinicization of their culture and religion intensifies outside of the camps. For the people of Taiwan this not make peaceful unification an attractive prospect and nothing in the 2022 White Paper on Unification does anything to make the prospect more appealing ([Xinhua](#), August 10).

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### **Notes**

[1] Gerry Groot, [Managing Transitions, The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism and Hegemony](#) (Abingdon, Routledge, 2004).

[2] Vladimir Lenin, "[Left-Wing](#)" Communism: an Infantile Disorder," 1920.

[3] Harold Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1938).

[4] Mao Tse-Tung, "On New Democracy," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1967 vol II, pp.339-384

[5] Groot, 2004, pp.49-53

[6] See Groot, 2004, pp.76-81; Neil Thomas, "[The Red Capitalist](#)," *Wired*, January 10, 2021.

[7] Kuisong Yang. "Reconsidering the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries," *The China Quarterly*, Cambridge Vol. 193, (Mar 2008).

[8] Didi Kirsten Tatlow, in discussion with a united front researcher in Beijing as told to Graeme Smith and Louisa Lim in the podcast, “Cheongsams and Coppers: Beijing’s stealth infiltration of Hong Kong,” The Little Red Podcast, June 30, 2022, <https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/cheongsams-and-coppers-beijings-stealth-infiltration/id1136685378?i=1000568228848>

## The Ukraine Crisis and China-India Relations

*Amrita Jash*



(Image: Foreign Minister Wang Yi and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in New Delhi this March, source: FMPRC)

### Introduction

On March 25, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a surprise visit to India after stopovers in Pakistan and Afghanistan ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China](#) [FMPRC], March 25). The visit was the first by a high-level Chinese official to India since December 2019 and the ongoing border standoff that broke out in May 2020 along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh. The sudden stopover, which was not announced in advance, generated speculation over Beijing's intentions, particularly as it occurred in the immediate aftermath of Russia initiating its "special military operation" against Ukraine on February 24. This resulted in international condemnation and boycotts, and the imposition of economic sanctions by the U.S., the European Union, Japan and others on Russia. However, countries such as China and India, made an exception by choosing neutrality in condemning Russia. But did this shared position make any difference in improving China-India ties? Hitherto, relations have not substantively improved, notwithstanding the modest progress in the recent border talks. Following the 16<sup>th</sup> round of Corps Commander level talks on July 17, China and India stressed the "four-point consensus" they had reached on the resolution of the border issues ([Xinhuanet](#), July 29). This "consensus" was further cited as the reason for the

disengagement of troops from Patrolling Point-15 in Gogra-Hot Springs ([Global Times](#), September 9). Notably, the disengagement followed a year-long impasse in the talks process and coincided with both countries' participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit.

### **Misinterpreting Indian Neutrality on Ukraine**

Both India and China abstained on the UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution condemning Russia's aggression and demanding a full withdrawal of its forces from Ukraine ([UN](#), March 2). However, unlike New Delhi, Beijing castigated the U.S. as the main culprit in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, whose actions "pouring oil on the flame" are "irresponsible and immoral" ([FMPRC](#), February 23). In China's Five-Point Position on the Ukraine crisis, Wang Yi stated that the PRC views the conflict as an outcome of "complex historical context" and that Russia has "legitimate security concerns" ([FMPRC](#), February 26). Moreover, Beijing also backed Moscow's accusations that the U.S. has operated bioweapons facilities in Ukraine ([China Brief](#), June 17; [FMPRC](#), March 8). Most saliently, a few days prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin affirmed that their friendship has "no limits" and stressed that "there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation" ([President of Russia](#), February 4). Despite this overlap, Beijing failed to distinguish the differences between its own professed neutrality in the conflict and that of New Delhi. Whereas the PRC's approach to the conflict is largely characterized by its reactive posture toward the U.S. and the West, New Delhi has maintained a position it considers principled by opting for diplomacy and dialogue over choosing a side.

Of course, Wang's March visit to India must be understood in the context of the Ukraine crisis and specifically the opening ostensibly created by India's adoption of a neutral stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict in a break with fellow Quad members Australia, Japan and the U.S. As both China and India abstained from the UNGA resolution condemning Russian aggression, Beijing interpreted New Delhi's shared stance as an opportunity to build diplomatic solidarity, which could help offset bilateral differences over the unresolved border. In the Chinese view, the Ukraine crisis reflects China-India common interests. As a *Global Times* editorial stated: "What happened in Ukraine recently has offered the international community, especially non-Western countries, a new inspiration, and unveiled the biggest consensus in China-India ties more clearly. This provides an opportunity for China-India ties to warm up" ([Global Times](#), March 26). Besides, China has also endorsed India's neutral stance as emblematic of New Delhi's strategic autonomy, which, unlike Beijing, Washington fails to respect. Li Haidong, a professor at the China Foreign Affairs University, stated that India has refused to serve as a "hatchet man" for the U.S. in the international pressure campaign against Russia ([Global Times](#), March 22).

Likewise, Zhao Gancheng, a South Asia expert at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, noted that "similar stances" on the war had "opened a window for the two neighbors to adjust their relations" ([South China Morning Post](#), March 28). According to noted China scholar Taylor Fravel, Wang's trip to New Delhi indicated China's desire to return to the "diplomatic status quo" with India in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war and an altered international landscape ([The Print](#), April 22). However, the visit failed to jumpstart substantive diplomatic progress, either in repairing fraught relations or in achieving a breakthrough in the ongoing border standoff. In contrast to Beijing's efforts to achieve a broader improvement in ties on the basis of shared neutrality, India only saw common ground in promoting resolution of the Russia-Ukraine war. In his March 25 meeting with Wang, Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar stressed that both sides agreed "on the



importance of an immediate ceasefire, as well as a return to diplomacy and dialogue” between Moscow and Kyiv ([Ministry of External Affairs](#), India, March 25). In light of their interaction over the Russia-Ukraine war, it is worth briefly surveying the fundamental differences between the Chinese and Indian approaches to the border dispute as a major issue in their bilateral relationship. While China tries to work around the issue, India has increasingly maintained a tough stance.

### **For Beijing, Border Should Not Be a ‘Precondition’ for Renewed Ties**

In China's perception, India tends to believe that as long as the border dispute is not settled, there is little room for cooperation in other fields. However, Beijing maintains that even if the border dispute is not fully addressed, the two countries can still find common ground on areas of shared interest ([Global Times](#), September 9). Consequently, in its outreach to New Delhi, Beijing has largely sought to sidestep the border dispute by emphasizing mutual agreement on the Russia-Ukraine war. In his meeting with India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, Wang categorically stated that: “China and India should adhere to their two leaders’ strategic judgement that China and India should not be a threat to each other, but an opportunity for each other’s development, and put their differences over the border issues at a proper position in the bilateral relations” ([Global Times](#), March 26). More specifically, Wang advanced a three-point proposal for China-India relations, which called on both sides to view the bilateral relations from a long-term perspective, to view one another’s development with a win-win mindset and finally to adopt a cooperative posture to actively participate in multilateral processes ([Xinhuanet](#), March 26). The three-point proposal was foreshadowed by Wang’s National Party Congress press conference on March 7, wherein he stated that the relations have “encountered some setbacks,” which do not serve the “fundamental interests of the two countries” ([FMPRC](#), March 7).

In this regard, Wang's proposition is indicative of the idea advanced by Beijing that the border issue should not be treated as a precondition for improving bilateral ties. However, India sees thing differently. At the Munich Security Conference this February, Jaishankar categorically declared that “the state of the border will determine the state of the relationship, that’s natural. So, obviously relations with China right now are going through a very difficult phase” ([Hindustan Times](#), February 20).

Notably, India’s official readout of the meeting between Wang and Jaishankar made no mention of the “three-point proposal”, which signals that New Delhi does not accept Beijing’s dictates. In his media briefing after the meeting, Jaishankar stated: “I was very honest in my discussions with the Chinese Foreign Minister, especially in conveying our national sentiments on this issue. The frictions and tensions that arise from China’s deployments since April 2020 cannot be reconciled with a normal relationship between two neighbors. Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke about China’s desire for a return to normalcy...But restoration of normalcy will obviously require a restoration of peace and tranquility” ([Ministry of External Affairs, India \[MEA\]](#), March 25). Hence, the Indian side has very clearly stated that there is no quick fix for bilateral relations, which have been disrupted due to Chinese actions since April 2020. As a result, Wang’s less than 24-hour stopover in New Delhi was not just brief, but was also received with little warmth.

**For India the Relationship is Defined by the State of the Border and the "Three Mutuals"**

On August 29, S. Jaishankar reiterated that “the state of the border will determine the state of the relationship” and also clarified that a “positive trajectory” in relations is based on the “three mutuals” of mutual sensitivity, mutual respect and mutual interest ([MEA](#), India, August 29). While India firmly maintains that the two sides should toe the line on the “three mutuals,” China often fails to do so. For example, prior to visiting India, FM Wang made remarks on the Kashmir issue at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) meeting in Islamabad. India condemned these remarks stating that: “other countries including China have no locus standi to comment. They should note that India refrains from public judgement of their internal issues” ([The Economic Times](#), March 23).

In July, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a phone call to the Dalai Lama to wish the Tibetan spiritual leader a happy 87<sup>th</sup> birthday—a clear shot across the bow to Beijing on sovereignty issues ([The Indian Express](#), July 7). In doing so, Modi solidifies a new precedent of Indian leaders officially sending well wishes to the Dalai Lama on his birthday, which in a significant departure from previous policy, he did for the first time last year. Beijing reacted by stating that the Indian side should “understand the anti-China and separatist nature of the 14th Dalai Lama” and “abide by its commitments to China on Tibet-related issues, act and speak with prudence and stop using Tibet-related issues to interfere in China’s internal affairs” ([FMPRC](#), July 7). An MEA spokesperson retorted that it has been India’s “consistent policy” to treat “his holiness the Dalai Lama” as an “honored guest” who “enjoys a large following in India and is “accorded due courtesies and freedom to conduct his religious and spiritual activities” ([The Times of India](#), July 8; [Hindustan Times](#), July 7).

Furthermore, despite Beijing’s objections, New Delhi facilitated the Dalai Lama’s month-long visit to Ladakh beginning July 15, which coincided with border tensions in Eastern Ladakh. The Indian Air Force even deployed a Dhruv helicopter to fly the Dalai Lama from Leh to a remote village in Lingshet; and he was also honored with the “dPal rNgam Duston” award—the highest civilian honor of Ladakh ([The Hindu](#), August 6). This marked the Dalai Lama’s first visit to Ladakh after the revocation of Article 370 and creation of the Union Territory of Ladakh in 2019.

India’s high-level treatment of the Dalai Lama, as well as its hosting of the Tibetan Government in Exile that operates from Dharmashala in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, is seen by China as a critical challenge to its sovereignty over Tibet. Hence, New Delhi’s message to Beijing is firm and clear, both sides need to toe the line to prevent further deterioration of relations.

**Conclusion**

On the border issue, China professes support for peace and stability in the abstract, but its actions demonstrate its intention to change the status quo in its favor. While India calls for early resolution, Beijing is reluctant to take the substantive steps necessary to settle the boundary issue. As its inability to use shared neutrality on the Russia-Ukraine war demonstrates, China is unlikely to be able to find a quick fix to reset overall bilateral relations.

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